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Futurist Book Group Discussion

The Progress Paradox

By Gregg Easterbrook
Random House, ISBN 0-679-46303-B

Synopsis of the March 2005 Futurist Book Group Meeting; summarized by Ken Harris

On March 2, The Futurist Book Group discussed *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. Readers of *Future Takes* will find this book both an entertaining and an uplifting read because it is an effective counter to the impression one can get from the popular press or television news that things are getting worse every day. The fundamental question of the book is why people in the Western world, which Easterbrook defines as North America, the European Union, Japan and Australia, don't feel happier when they are demonstrably better off materially than they ever have been. Easterbrook makes a convincing case that we in the West are better off than ever. He says we have more than enough to eat, more living space per person (often in dwellings we own), freedom to get around in private automobiles, and more personal living. Societal trends too are mostly positive, the environment except for accumulation of greenhouse gases is getting cleaner, and crime is down. Even in the developing world outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, things are getting better.

Easterbrook offers a number of explanations why we may feel things are getting worse while they are really getting better. The mass media stress bad news and cover it continually worldwide, and thereby create the wrong impression of how things are really going. Then too, people can have "collapse anxiety," which Easterbrook says is the notion that our good fortune cannot last and stems from the fact that world trends have really only dramatically improved within the living memory of many people (i.e., since World War II). Another possible explanation Easterbrook calls "the revolution of satisfied expectations," the notion that we already have all we could possibly need and cannot hope for much more. Finally, Easterbrook theorizes that women, for whom many life choices have opened only in the last generation, may suffer from "choice penalty," which is the idea they have only themselves to blame if things turn out badly for them.

Easterbrook also delivers a strong social message in *The Progress Paradox* – an argument against the materialistic culture that North Americans see all around them. He says we have way more stuff than we need and cites as examples carpeted steps to help your dog climb on to the couch and an automated wrist that keeps winding your watch when you are not wearing it. Nevertheless, he concludes that it is better for people in the West to have too much than too little and wishes more people could be so

fortunate, even though gains in material wealth do not bring happiness. And, he remembers the poor in the West and the developing world. In particular, he finds it terribly wrong that many Americans don't have access to health insurance and terribly wrong that many Americans cannot live decently on the minimum wage. The one flaw this reviewer found in Easterbrook's social message is that creation of the excess wealth of which he is so critical gave many people the jobs that let more people become better off.

Bottom line: *Future Takes* readers should read this book to gain a different perspective on the present in order to gain better insight into the future.