

# IS LIFE GETTING BETTER?

## How long and happy people live in modern society<sup>1</sup>

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Human society has changed much over the last centuries and this process of 'modernization' has profoundly affected the lives of individuals; currently we live quite different lives from those forefathers lived only five generations ago. There is difference of opinion as to whether we live better now than before, and consequently there is also disagreement as to whether we should continue modernizing or rather try to slow the process down.*

*Quality-of-life in a society can be measured by how long and happy its inhabitants live. Using these indicators I assess whether societal modernization has made life better or worse. Firstly I examined findings of present day survey research. I started with a cross-sectional analysis of 90 nations and found that people live longer and happier in today's most modern societies. Secondly I examined trends in 10 modern nations over the last 30 years and found that happiness and longevity have increased in most cases. Thirdly I considered the long-term and review findings from historical and comparative anthropology, which show that we lived better in the early hunter-gatherer society than in the later agrarian society.*

*Together these data suggest that societal evolution has worked out differently for the quality of human life, first negatively, in the change from a hunter-gatherer existence to agriculture, and next positively, in the more recent transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society. We live now longer and happier than ever before.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **Contrary views on the quality-of-life in modern society**

The human species has lived for most of its time in simple hunter-gatherer societies. Agrarian societies developed less than 5.000 years ago and it is only in the last 200 years that a 'modern' industrial society has come into being. Today this industrial society is rapidly transforming into a global information society.

Is this societal evolution a change for the better? There has always been much controversy over this question, and currently the dispute seems more intense than ever, possibly for the reason that we are more aware today that society is of our making and because social change is taking place at an ever increasing rate. One of the issues in this ongoing debate is the quality-of-life in modern society<sup>2</sup>. Progress optimists believe that we live better now than earlier generations, while pessimists argue that life is getting worse.

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## 1.1 The positive view

The idea that life is getting better draws on several achievements of modern society. One is the unprecedented rise in the material standard of living; the average citizen lives more comfortably now than kings did a few centuries ago. Another improvement that strikes the eye is that the chance of an untimely death is greatly reduced; ever fewer people die in accidents and epidemics and fewer are murdered. A number of social evils been abated, such as poverty, inequality, ignorance and oppression. A recent statement of this view can be found in 'Its getting better all the time' by Moore and Simon (2000).

This notion of improvement is typically part of an evolutionary view, in which society is seen as a human tool that is gradually perfected. This idea developed during the period of Enlightenment in the 18th century and lives today. The idea that we can improve society by 'social engineering' is part of this belief and it forms the ideological basis of many major contemporary institutions, such as the welfare state and development aid organizations.

The idea that life is getting better breaks with the traditional religious view of earthly life as a phase of penance awaiting paradise in the afterlife. It is deemed possible to reduce suffering by creating a better world and societal development is seen to head in that way, be it with some ups and downs.

## 1.2 The negative view

The view that life is getting worse is typically fuelled by concern about contemporary social problems. One kind of problems is deviant behavior, such as criminality, drug use and school refusal. Another group of problems seen to reduce the quality of life is social conflicts, such as labor disputes, ethnic troubles and political terrorism. The decline of the influence of the church, the family and the local community are also seen to impoverish the quality of life of modern people, as are the rising divorce rates.

This notion of decay is often part of the idea of society drifting away from human nature, because society has changed a lot, while human nature has not. In this view society is not a piece of equipment, but rather an uncontrollable force that presses humans into a way of life that does not really fit them.

The idea that life is getting worse fits a long tradition of social criticism and apocalyptic prophecies. In this view paradise is lost and is unlikely to be restored.

## 1.3 Dominance of the negative view

The negative view prevails in most discussions and, in particular, in social scientific discourse. This appears both in classic theory and in social reporting, and it is probably for that reason the negative view has also gained the upper hand in public opinion.

### 1.3.1 Themes in classic social theory

Many renowned social theorists were typically not very positive about the quality-of-life in modern society. For instance, Karl Marx (1871) prophesied that the blind forces of capitalism would result in a process of 'Verelendung' (misery), the working class getting ever poorer and becoming even larger. In this line Braverman (1974) argued that mechanization and specialization degraded work in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1897) was also not very positive and observed growing moral disorientation, which he called 'anomie'. In his view, the modernization

















































