

It's Time for Good News

2023 edition

If it bleeds, it leads...

- The news media tends to focus on negative things
 - War
 - Disease
 - Terrorism
 - Disasters
 - Crime
 - Political unrest
 - Economic problems
 - Social problems
 - And on and on...

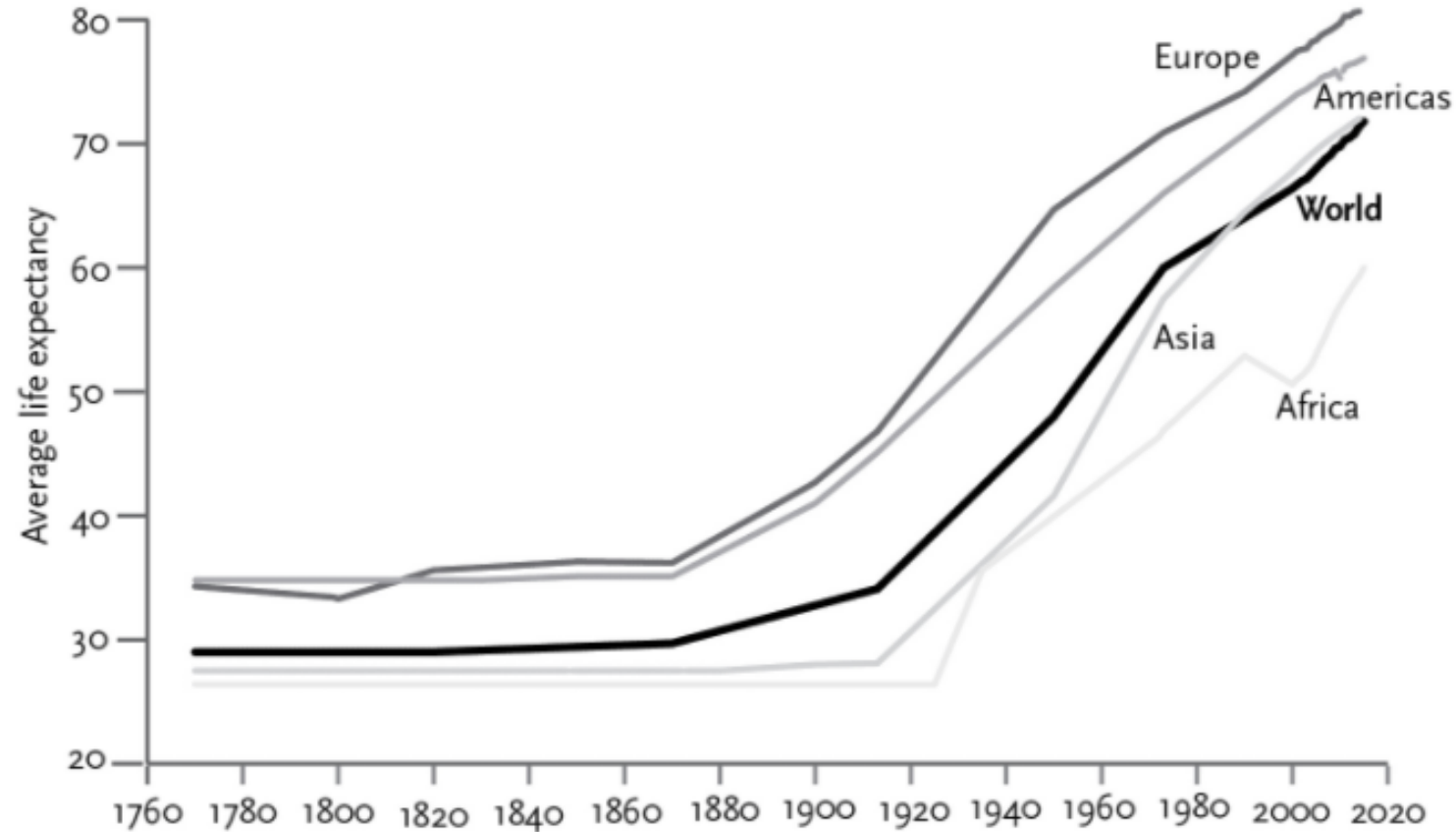
Which plays right into our cognitive biases.

- Cognitive biases are systematic errors in human judgment
- First studied by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky in the 1970's
- Two biases that are relevant here:
 - Availability heuristic – we overestimate the likelihood of events that come to mind easily
 - Negativity bias – we remember negative things more than positive things
- Some other fun biases
 - Confirmation bias – we focus on information that confirms our preconceptions
 - Illusory truth effect – we tend to believe things that are repeated often
 - Loss aversion – we are more distressed by losses than pleased by gains
- There are many others!

But what's the real story?

- The headlines make it seem like the world is falling apart
- But the headlines are just day-to-day noise based on what is happening RIGHT NOW, and they don't capture long-term trends
- So, are things getting better or worse?
- Let's take a look at some charts from Enlightenment Now by Steven Pinker

People are living way longer.



Note that in 1860, average life expectancy was under 30. Today it's over 70.

Figure 5-1: Life expectancy, 1771–2015

Sources: *Our World in Data*, Roser 2016n, based on data from Riley 2005 for the years before 2000 and from the World Health Organization and the World Bank for the subsequent years. Updated with data provided by Max Roser.

Famines are ending.

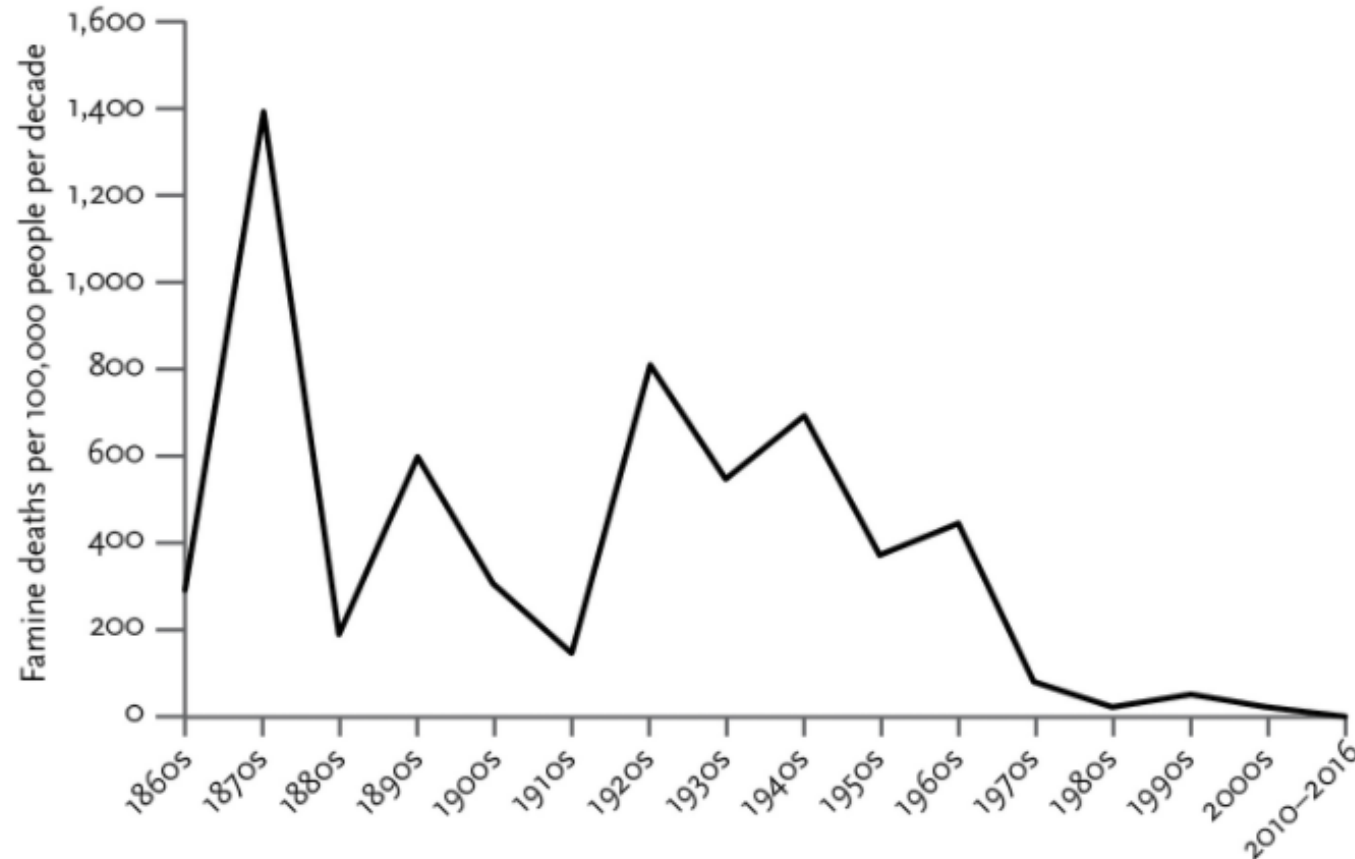


Figure 7-4: Famine deaths, 1860–2016

Sources: *Our World in Data*, Hasell & Roser 2017, based on data from Devereux 2000; Ó Gráda 2009; White 2011, and EM-DAT, *The International Disaster Database*, <http://www.emdat.be/>; and other sources. “Famine” is defined as in Ó Gráda 2009.

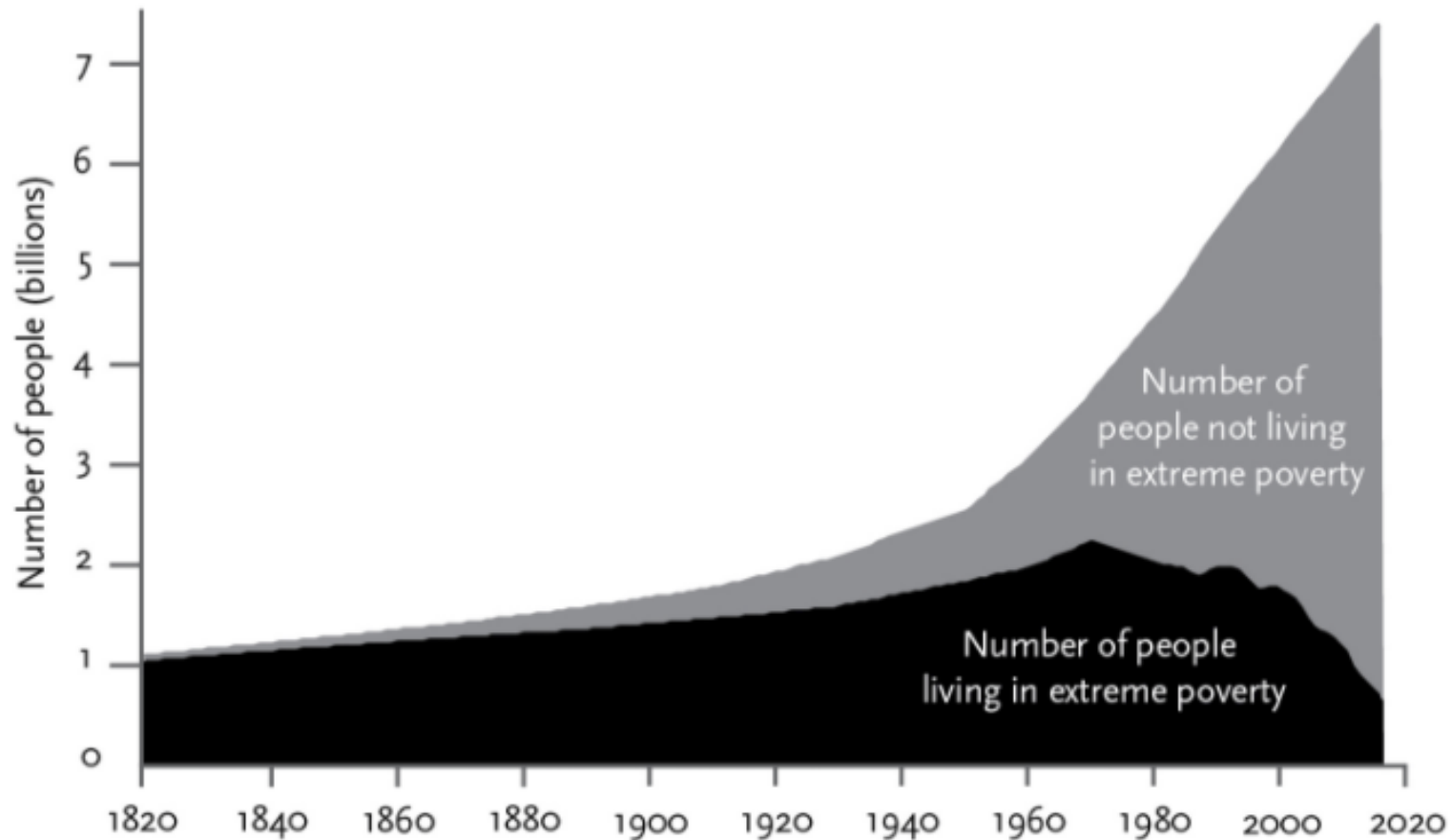
“In the mid-19th century it took twenty-five men a full day to harvest and thresh a ton of grain; today one person operating a combine harvester can do it in six minutes.”

Enlightenment Now, chapter 7

“This is the first society in history where the poor people are fat.”

Chris Rock

Extreme poverty is ending.



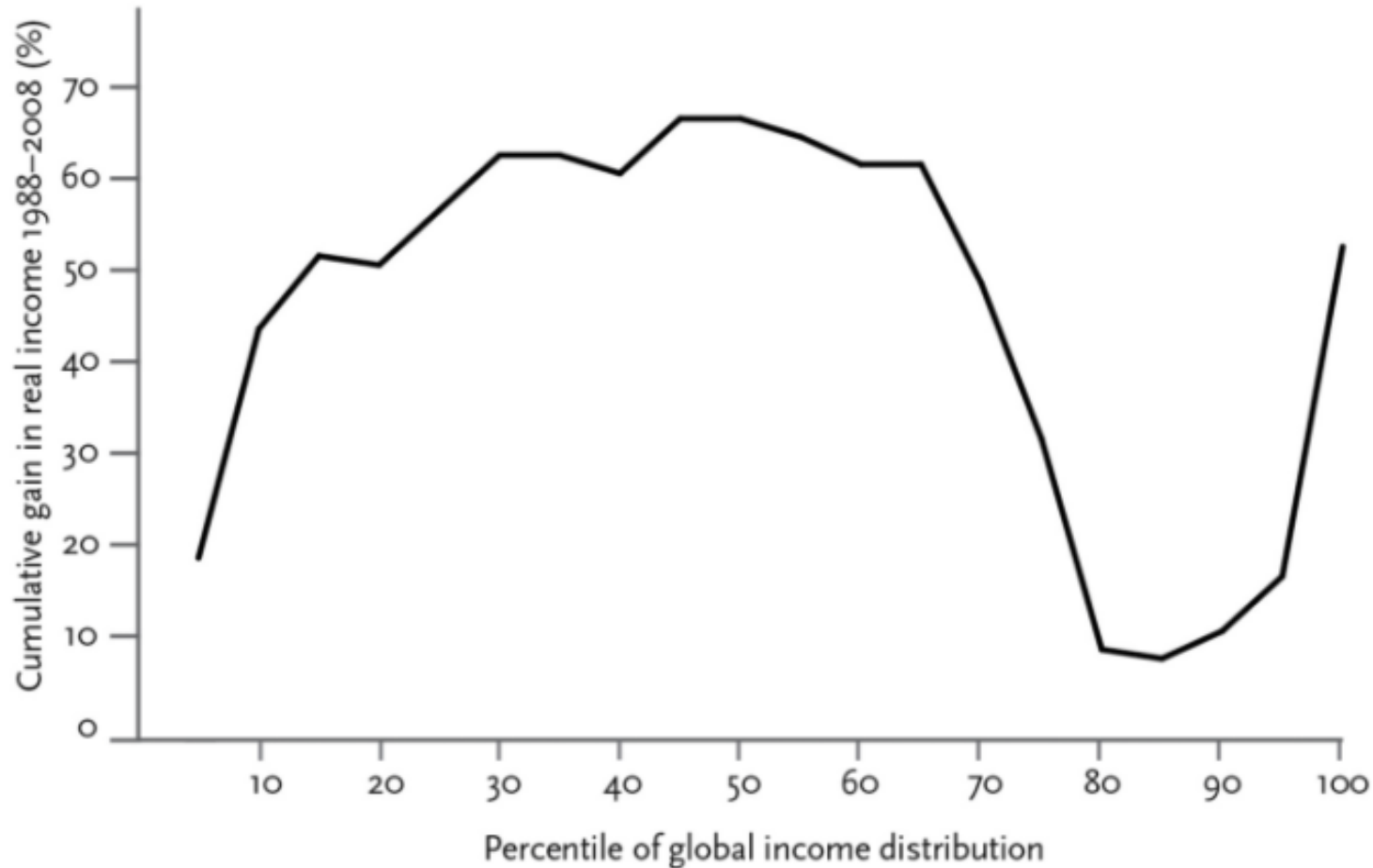
“[I]f news outlets truly reported the changing state of the world, they could have run the headline **NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN EXTREME POVERTY FELL BY 137,000 SINCE YESTERDAY** every day for the last twenty-five years.”

Enlightenment Now, chapter 8

Figure 8-5: Extreme poverty (number), 1820–2015

Sources: *Our World in Data*, Roser & Ortiz-Ospina 2017, based on data from Bourguignon & Morrison 2002 (1820–1992) and the World Bank 2016g (1981–2015).

The standard of living is rising worldwide.

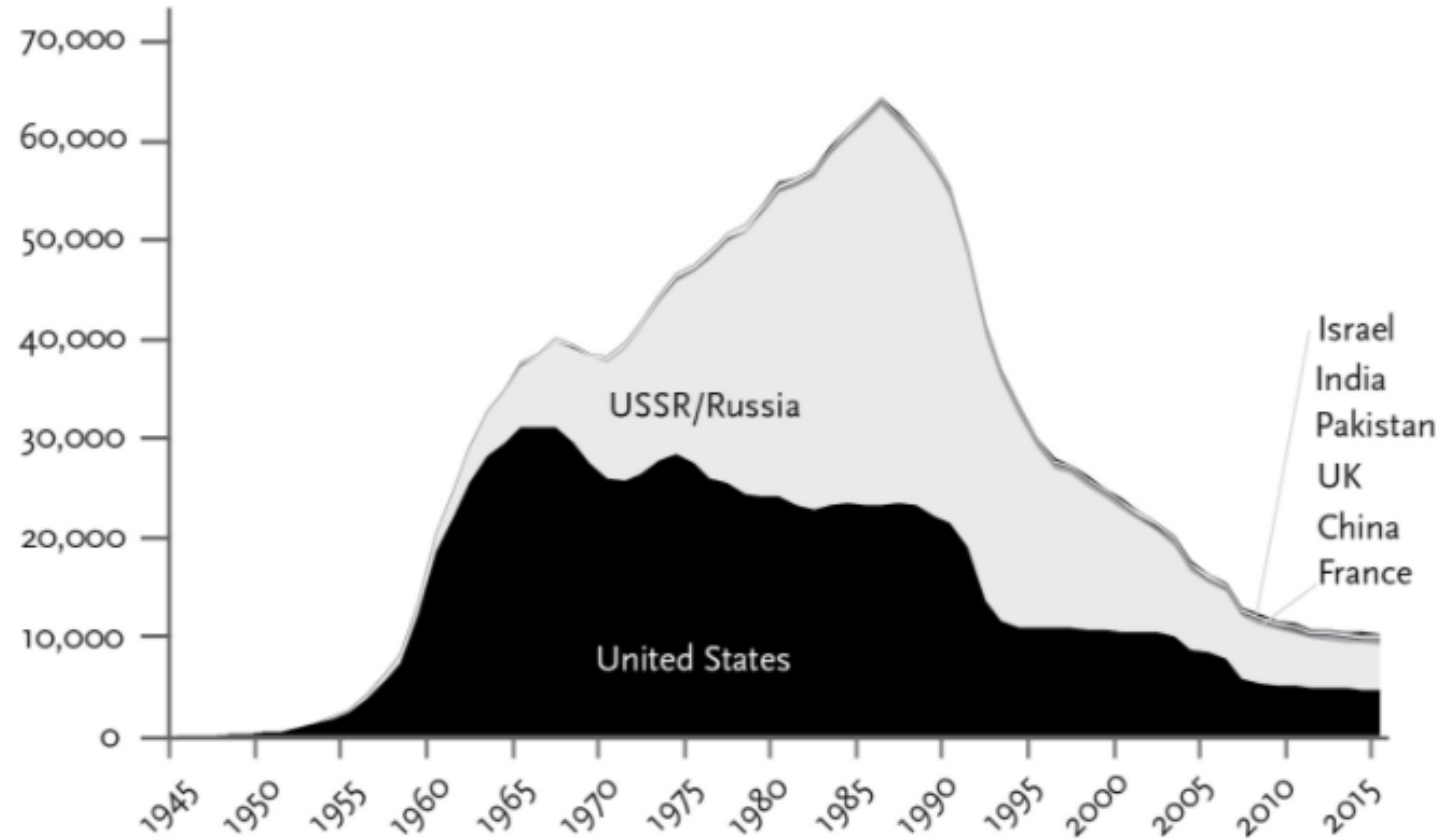


This is the “elephant curve,” which illustrates that incomes are rising across the board for everyone, from the richest to the poorest.

Figure 9-5: Income gains, 1988–2008

Source: Milanović 2016, fig. 1.3.

Nuclear weapons have been greatly reduced.



“No additional countries are known to be pursuing nuclear weapons, and the number possessing fissile material that could be made into bombs has been reduced over the past twenty-five years from fifty to twenty-four.”

Enlightenment Now, chapter 19

Figure 19-1: Nuclear weapons, 1945–2015

Sources: *HumanProgress*, <http://humanprogress.org/static/2927>, based on data from the Federation of Atomic Scientists; Kristensen & Norris 2016a, updated in Kristensen 2016; see Kristensen & Norris 2016b for additional explanation. The counts include weapons that are deployed and those that are stockpiled, but exclude weapons that are retired and awaiting dismantlement.

Democracy is flourishing.



In 1971, 31 countries in the world were democracies. By 2015, that number was up to 103 countries.

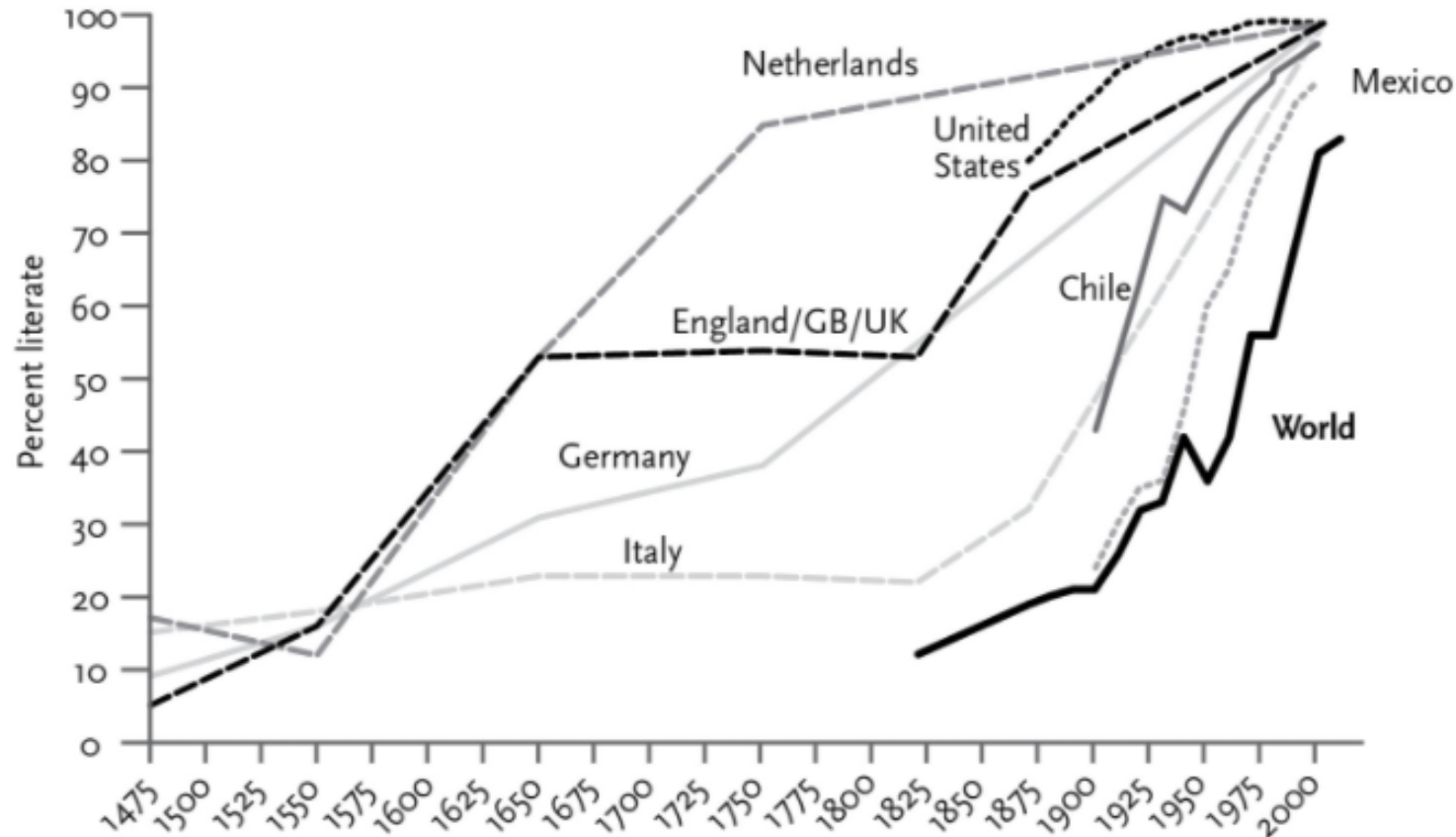
“Two-thirds of the world’s population live in free or relatively free societies, compared with less than two-fifths in 1950, a fifth in 1900, seven percent in 1850, and one percent in 1816.”

Enlightenment Now, chapter 14

Figure 14-1: Democracy versus autocracy, 1800–2015

Source: *HumanProgress*, <http://humanprogress.org/f1/2560>, based on *Polity IV Annual Time-Series, 1800–2015*, Marshall, Gurr, & Jaggers 2016. Scores are summed over sovereign states with a population greater than 500,000, and range from -10 for a complete autocracy to 10 for a perfect democracy. The arrow points to 2008, the last year plotted in fig. 5–23 of Pinker 2011.

Literacy is becoming universal.



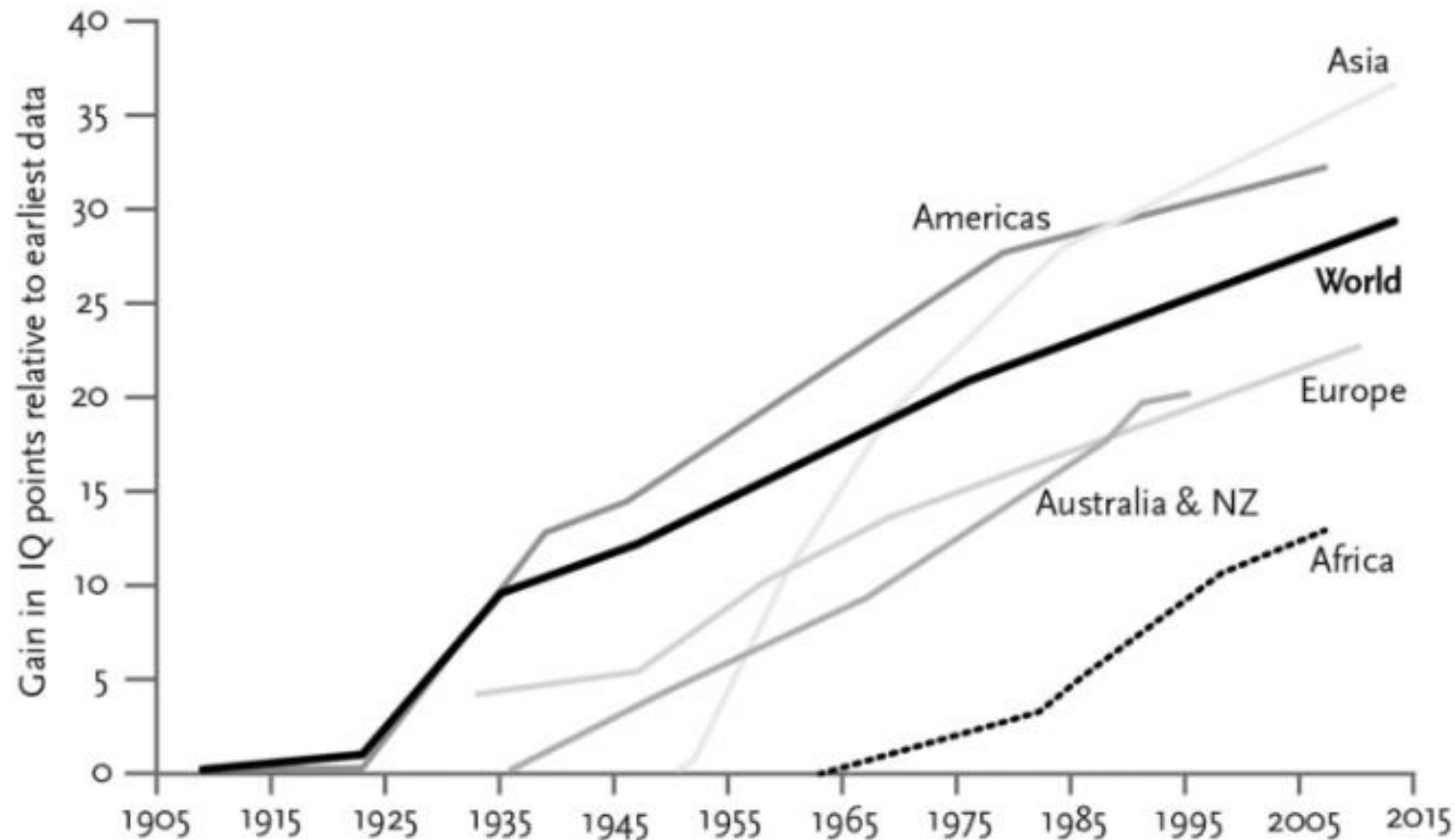
“According to current projections, by the middle of this century, only five countries will have more than a fifth of their population uneducated, and by the end of the century the worldwide proportion will fall to zero.”

Enlightenment Now, chapter 16

Figure 16-1: Literacy, 1475–2010

Source: *Our World in Data*, Roser & Ortiz-Ospina 2016b, including data from the following. Before 1800: Buringh & van Zanden 2009. World: van Zanden et al. 2014. US: National Center for Education Statistics. After 2000: Central Intelligence Agency 2016.

People are getting smarter.



The lines are not directly comparable, but illustrate that people everywhere are getting smarter. The primary drivers of this change are better nutrition, better health care, and better education. The largest gains in intelligence are in the area of abstract analytical skills.

Figure 16-5: IQ gains, 1909–2013

Source: Pietschnig & Voracek 2015, supplemental online material. The lines display changes in IQ measured by different tests starting at different times and cannot be compared with one another.

And Covid doesn't change the story.

- Humanity has survived much worse
 - The Black Death killed around half of the people in Europe in just four years
 - The Spanish flu killed up to 100 million people worldwide in one year
- We now have effective vaccines and treatment options
- Covid is becoming just another disease, like the flu
- Covid set us back a couple of years, but it won't change the long-term arc of human progress

In summary, things are getting better.

- Remind yourself of this whenever you see bad news headlines
- There will always be both good and bad things happening, but the progress human civilization has made in the last 200 years is incredible
- Be proud of your humanity!