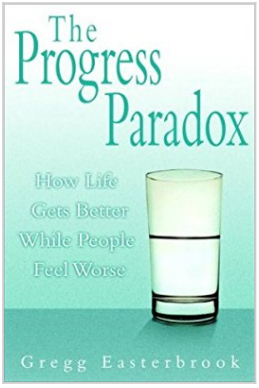

The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse

By Gregg Easterbrook

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aIn **The Progress Paradox**, Gregg Easterbrook draws upon three decades of wide-ranging research and thinking to make the persuasive assertion that almost all aspects of Western life have vastly improved in the past century--and yet today, most men and women feel less happy than in previous generations. Why this is so and what we should do about it is the subject of this book.

Between contemporary emphasis on grievances and the fears engendered by 9/11, today it is common to hear it said that life has started downhill, or that our parents had it better. But objectively, almost everyone in today's United States or European Union lives better than his or her parents did.

Still, studies show that the percentage of the population that is happy has not increased in fifty years, while depression and stress have become ever more prevalent. The Progress Paradox explores why ever-higher living standards don't seem to make us any happier. Detailing the emerging science of "positive psychology," which seeks to understand what causes a person's sense of well-being, Easterbrook offers an alternative to our culture of crisis and complaint. He makes a Compelling case that optimism, gratitude, and acts of forgiveness not only make modern life more fulfilling but are actually in our self-interest.

Seemingly insoluble problems of the past, such as crime in New York City and smog in Los Angeles, have proved more tractable than they were thought to be. Likewise, today's "impossible" problems, such as global warming and Islamic terrorism, can be tackled too.

Like **The Tipping Point**, this book offers an affirming and constructive way of seeing the world anew. **The Progress Paradox** will change the way you think about your place in the world, and about our collective ability to make it better.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Ordinary middle-class Americans have often tried to assuage their jealousy of the rich by repeating the axiom "money can't buy happiness" to themselves. But according to *New Republic* senior editor Gregg Easterbrook, "the rich" are, in fact, those same ordinary middle-class Americans and no, they're not happy at all. Wages have soared over the past fifty years and regular citizens own large homes, new cars, and luxuries aplenty. Better still, the environment, with a few exceptions, is getting cleaner, crime is on the decline, and diseases are being wiped out as life span increases. So why do people report a sense that things are getting steadily worse and that catastrophe is imminent? Easterbrook presents a few psychological rationales, including "choice anxiety," where the vastness of society's options is a burden, and "abundance denial," where people somehow manage to convince themselves that they are deprived of material comforts. The sooner we accept how good we have it, the better off the whole world will be, he says, because if we would just realize that we have this wealth, we could be using it to alleviate hunger, provide health care for the millions who lack it, and otherwise address the ills that actually do exist. While at times the book's attempts to make the world a better place seem a bit of a stretch, it's admirable that Easterbrook is willing to make that stretch and not suggest people simply light up cigars and bask in their newly discovered joys. One might look a bit askance at some of Easterbrook's sunny perspectives on our societal fortunes--he celebrates rampant consumerism while skating past the rampant consumer debt that lies beneath it, for instance--but it's hard to deny that the pessimistic viewpoint is much more widely stated than that of optimists. Is the glass really half empty or should we, as Easterbrook indicates, enjoy the wonderful world in which we secretly live? --*John Moe*

From Publishers Weekly
Easterbrook sees a widespread case of cognitive dissonance in the West: according to Easterbrook, though the typical American's real income has doubled in the past 50 years, the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as "happy" remains where it was half a century ago (oddly, Easterbrook doesn't tell us what that percentage is). Why do so many of us remain discontented, he asks? Is it because now that even the middle classes can afford nearly every conceivable luxury, we have nothing left to look forward to? Easterbrook, a senior editor at the New Republic and contributing editor to the Atlantic, believes so. He also castigates modern psychology and the media for dwelling on minor problems without celebrating the broader, more upbeat context in which they exist. But his endless nagging about how Americans and Western Europeans should be more grateful for their standard of living leads him to overcompensate: for instance, he minimizes the harm done to Wal-Mart employees who were forced to work "off the clock" hours without pay because, after all, they're still living better than their ancestors, since stores like Wal-Mart sell necessities at such affordable prices. The book does confront some serious problems, like the health-care crisis, but suggests that they can be licked as effectively as we've fixed environmental, racial and other seemingly intractable problems. Sarcastic patter and a flair for catchphrases like "abundance denial" and "wealth porn," however, barely disguise a padded thesis and one easily argued against with an alternative set of statistics.

From Booklist
Here's a conundrum: how is it that the quality of life in the U.S. has been improving for about a century, but opinion polls show that many people believe their parents had it better, and their children will have it worse? Why don't people see how good things are? The average life span has nearly doubled since the beginning of

the twentieth century; many once-fatal diseases have been eradicated or conquered. Technology has replaced a lot of backbreaking physical labor. So why has the percentage of people who describe themselves as "happy" not risen since the 1950s? The author offers a number of suggestions. He proposes something called "abundance denial," whereby millions of people "construct elaborate mental rationales for considering themselves materially deprived," and he isolates something else called "auto-grumbling," a kind of perpetual complaining process in which people, no matter how good things are, still grouse that they could be better. This is an important, timely, and well-reasoned book that is sure to have people talking. (But could it have been even better?) *David Pitt*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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