



Writing

"There is no such thing as progress. The standard of living may rise, but the quality of life remains the same." Do you agree?

Some ideas from different places and times...

From Guns, Germs and Steel by Jared Diamond



Don't words such as "civilisation" and phrases such as "rise of civilisation," convey the false impression that civilisation is good, tribal hunter-gatherers are miserable, and history for the past 13,000 years has involved progress towards the greater human happiness? In fact, I do not assume that industrialised states are

"better" than hunter-gatherer tribes, or that the abandonment of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle for iron-based statehood represents "progress," or that it has led to an increase in human happiness. My own impression from having divided my life between United States cities and New Guinea villages, is that the so-called blessings of civilisation are mixed. For example, compared with hunter-gatherers, citizens of modern industrialised states enjoy better medical care, lower risk of death by homicide, and a longer life-span, but receive much less social support from friendships and extended families.

From The Empty Throne, Paul Strohm

Few contemporaries would have regarded the last decade of the fourteenth century as a moment of 'progress'. Rather, this decade would (like all medieval decades) have been understood primarily as a way-station in a pattern of drastic irremediable and inevitable decline. That all time was running downhill from the creation to a final and inevitable Day of Doom (literally 'Judgment Day') was a matter of generally shared conviction. The only question was when that judgment would occur.

Fourteenth-century people, anxiously scanning the historical record and signs of deterioration in their immediate surroundings, generally agreed that the moment was near.

George Monbiot in The Guardian

It is impossible not to notice that, in some of the poorest parts of the world, most people, most of the time, appear to be happier than we are. In homes constructed from packing cases and palm leaves, people engage more freely, smile more often, express more affection than we do behind our double glazing, surrounded by remote controls. Perhaps one of the reasons is that they have less to lose by letting people into their lives. The more wealth we possess, the more isolated we become. We retreat to gated communities, hire guards and install CCTV. The rich lock themselves in and lock everyone else out.

Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister of Malaysia

When I went to university in Singapore, I was considered one of the luckiest students in Malaysia. At that time, very few people - particularly indigenous people - were able to go to university, and very few could get a scholarship, so I was fortunate to obtain one. Today there are thousands and thousands of scholarships available, both domestically and internationally. Students can study any subject as long as they have the capability to do so. The problem today is not the opportunity to study, but the desire of the person to get a better education or not. Sometimes a student gets a scholarship, but he doesn't study. They take the opportunity and scholarship for granted. They think that it is their right to go to university but not their responsibility to study. Some of them get involved in activities that distract them from concentrating on their studies. Some of them are more interested in politics. They believe that they know about how a country should be run. They spend a great deal of time demonstrating, or debating how the country should be governed. As a result, although they get the opportunity, they do not receive the amount of education that they should be getting.

I don't mind if students are interested in politics, but they shouldn't go to university just to





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become politically active. We spend public money to educate them. It's irresponsible to waste funds earmarked for education.

I was active in politics when I was in the university but that was when Malaysia was under foreign rule. I was struggling against colonial rule believing that independence would bring better educational opportunities. Now we are independent and should use our educational opportunities to gain good education. We spend 20% of the national budget for education, more than any other country. So for students there really is no reason to fight against the government. The expectations of my generation have been fulfilled.

Two parties...

A description of a party in the 1780s taken from A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens

Unbelieving Philosophers who were remodelling the world with words, and making card-towers of Babel to scale the skies with, talked with Unbelieving Chemists who had an eye on the transmutation of metals, at this wonderful gathering accumulated by Monseigneur. Exquisite gentlemen of the finest breeding, which was at that remarkable time - and has been since - to be known by its fruits of indifference to every natural subject of human interest, were in the most exemplary state of exhaustion, at the hotel of Monseigneur. Such homes had these various notabilities left behind them in the fine world of Paris, that the spies among the assembled devotees of Monseigneur - forming a goodly half of the polite company - would have found it hard to discover among the angels of that sphere one solitary wife, who, in her manners and appearance, owned to being a Mother. Indeed, except for the mere act of bringing a troublesome creature into this world - which does not go far to the realisation of the name of mother - there was no such thing known to the fashion.

A description of a party in the 1980s taken from The Bonfire of the Vanities by Tom Wolfe

This season no fluffs, flounces, pleats, ruffles, bibs, bows, battings, scallops, laces, darts or shirs on the bias were too extreme. They were the social X-rays, to use the phrase that had bubbled up into Sherman's own brain. Second, there were the so-called Lemon Tarts. These were women in their twenties or early thirties, mostly blondes (the Lemon in the Tarts), who were the second, third or fourth wives or live-in girlfriends of men over forty or fifty or sixty (or seventy), the sort of women men refer to, quite without thinking, as *girls*. This season the Tart was able to flaunt the natural advantages of youth by showing her legs from well above the knee and emphasising her round bottom (something no Xray had). What was entirely missing from chez Bavardage was that manner of woman who was neither very young nor very old, who has laid in a lining of sub-cutaneous fat, who glows with plumpness and a rosy face that speaks, without a word, of home and hearth and hot food ready at six and stories read aloud at night and conversations while seated on the edge of the bed, just before the Sandman comes. In short, no one ever invited... Mother.

