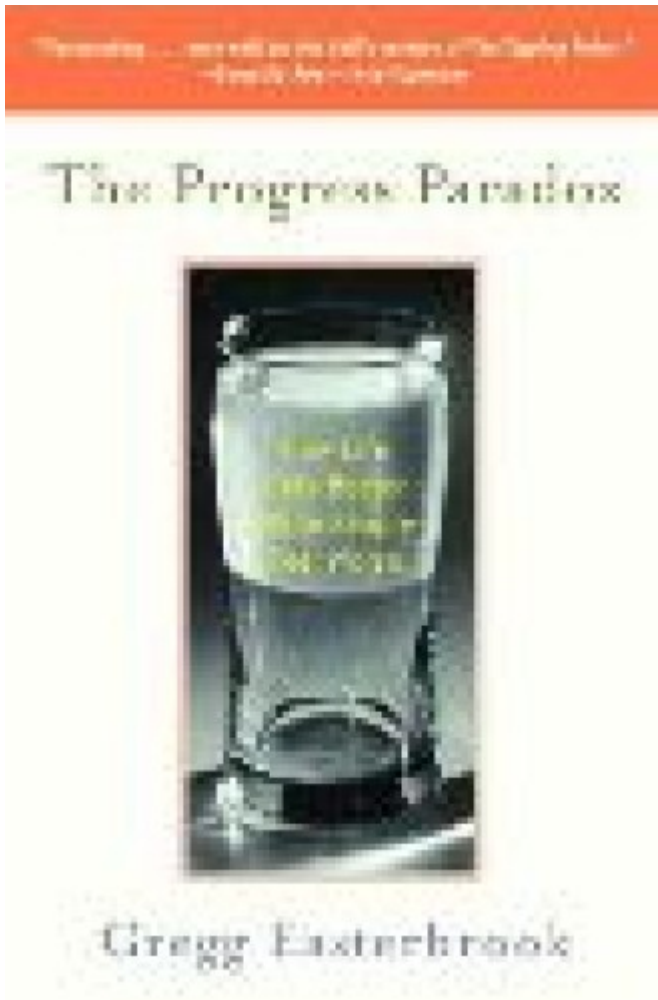


High anxiety

By [Kenneth P. Serbin](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

In Review



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

Gregg Easterbrook
Random House

If life in America has improved so much since World War II, why do we feel so insecure and unhappy? The mere voicing of this question, one too seldom asked in public, makes Gregg Easterbrook's book a must read, especially in an election year that could become a serious referendum on the proper balance between security concerns and social policy, between affluence and values.

Easterbrook marshals impressive evidence to demonstrate something of which we are aware, but of which we need regular reminders. People in the developed world have greater comfort, wealth, health and longevity than human beings have had at any time in history. In 1900 life expectancy in the U.S. was 41 years; today it is 71 years. Most Americans and Europeans live far better than did the royalty of centuries past. Even much of the developing world has shown gradual improvement in its social indicators. In recent years Americans have witnessed a drop in crime, pollution, traffic deaths, divorce, black poverty and the world's stock of nuclear weapons. Technological and medical trends give us every reason for optimism about the future. And despite America's economic imperialism and chronic military interventionism, the Pax Americana has brought the world prosperity and hope.

As with all change, however, this enormous progress has generated new problems. Easterbrook cites a plethora of evidence proving that money and consumer gadgets don't bring happiness. On the contrary, increased access to a growing variety of consumer goods fosters "choice anxiety." Our prosperity overwhelms us with a trivial consumerism that creates a "tyranny of choice." How can one possibly decide among all the numerous brands and models available to us? Once exclusively the domain of the rich, conspicuous consumption now is part of everyday American life. Youth practice it in a way that Easterbrook calls "wealth porn."

Our glut of affluence has produced a culture of individualistic, self-perceived "victims" who cannot cope with being unable to fulfill their ever-raising consumer expectations. Raised by parents who survived the Great Depression and World War II, many Americans go into "abundance denial," convinced that the rich have everything and average people nothing.

Fear of losing it all to environmental exhaustion, terrorism or some other calamity produces "collapse anxiety," exacerbated by the media's obsessive presentation of life and international relations as a series of disasters. Following suit, politicians exaggerate the significance of every policy discussion and decision.

Americans are expert complainers. We decry the cost of prescription drugs, for example, but fail to remember their benefits and the fact that a generation ago most of them did not exist. According to Easterbrook, we should not lament but celebrate the increasing amount our society invests in health care—it has diminished the impact of most illnesses and introduced such procedures as knee replacements, 200,000 of which took place in 2001 alone.

Humans, Easterbrook concludes, are plagued by a built-in pessimism. Pessimism probably kept our ancestors alive because it guaranteed constant vigilance in a dangerous world. We no longer confront predators, but we are still genetically programmed to be on guard for them. Progress is unsettling. We are always wondering what will come next, and if it will be as good as the past has been.

A professed churchgoing Christian, Easterbrook believes that our progress paradox can be resolved by returning to the search for transcendent meaning. This includes securing social justice for the poor in America—whose condition shamefully contradicts our progress—and in the developing world. He preaches a gospel of free-market capitalism tempered with the practice of love and reverence for life. Easterbrook sees this practice as an enlightened form of self-interest (“selfish reasons to become a better person”).

He further suggests that people adopt a “positive psychology” of optimism rather than succumb to the negative view of the human subconscious put forth by Freud. It is good to forgive others and to be thankful to God (or nature) if for no other reason than that doing so will make us live longer and happier lives. Jesus and other great religious figures were not only holy philosophers but givers of “practical down-to-earth advice.” Easterbrook is not the first to meld spirituality with economic virtue or psychology. Nevertheless, it is refreshing to see a prominent writer cast spiritual values in sharp contrast to pure consumerism.

But a serious contradiction emerges from this mixture. By stating that capitalism should be superseded by some as yet undefined system, Easterbrook will perhaps disappoint conservative enthusiasts for his work like Rush Limbaugh. However, his endorsement of the current social structure naïvely assumes that self-interest alone will bring about positive change. We should all pay more for products, for example, so that the desperately poor can rise above the level of misery, which will make us feel better about ourselves. Easterbrook praises Wal-Mart for bringing cheaper goods to the poor, but he ignores the company’s fierce competitiveness, which

drives out local businesses, and the extremely low wages earned both by the chain's employees and by the workers who manufacture the products for its stores. Wal-Mart is successful precisely because people seek the best deal, not a spiritual boost. As the world's largest corporation and a symbol of the new global economy, Wal-Mart needs to be far more seriously analyzed.

More than good intentions or comfortable people's understanding of self-interest are required to achieve global economic justice. We need an international New Deal that can design, implement and enforce a worldwide system of wages, working conditions and environmental protection. Easterbrook briefly toys with such an idea without explaining how it could be realized. Such a system would come about not voluntarily but through political struggle and the careful crafting of treaties, political mechanisms and checks and balances.

The same goes for reform within America. Easterbrook correctly points out that Americans have far too few vacation days per year. Changing this will require a national movement and federal legislation. Spiritual values can and should inform such struggles, but they cannot bring the necessary governing structures into being.

Though Easterbrook masters the statistical evidence, he lacks a full appreciation for the American landscape. His numbers prove that many Americans wrongly complain that "my parents had it better than I do." The average home today is far larger than that of a generation ago, for example. But quality of life is about more than the availability of consumer goods or even the crucial variable of lifespan.

I had hoped that this book would help me find an answer to my own predicament, one shared by many Americans. My maternal grandfather, an immigrant who arrived here at the age of 12 with no English, was able to buy a spacious home in the 1950s with only a small mortgage, even though he did not finish high school and spent his entire working life as an upholsterer. My parents did not attend college and yet were able quickly to pay off their mortgage. My grandmother never worked, and my mother did so only during part of her life. But though I have a Ph.D., my wife, who has an M.A., must work to enable us to pay a 30-year mortgage and maintain the kind of household our forebears had.

Surely the necessity for a two-income household is a powerful reason for many Americans' insecurity. Easterbrook claims that the current generation is earning more than ever, but the two-income household suggests otherwise. He does not

examine this fundamental shift in American life and neglects to account for the vast changes in women and men's roles during the past few decades.

He devotes little time to considering the family, the heart of social life and for many of us the source of happiness and the institution where spiritual values are best cultivated. Why are Americans unhappy? Perhaps because the two-income household has forced child-rearing out of the home and into the daycare center, a phenomenon practically absent from our culture a generation ago but now a fact of life for most young working families.

The two-income household has transformed the way we raise our children. Parents simply have less time for their children. Exhausted by a long work day, they often must balance housework with paying attention to a child who has been in day care for eight or more hours. The stress of parenting is magnified by the geographic mobility required by the fast-paced economy, which leaves many families far from the traditional support network of grandparents, aunts and uncles. We will not know for another generation or more how deeply these changes have affected our society and children.

The progress paradox is rooted not only in psychological factors such as anxiety over future income and purchases or finding the right kind of therapy, but also in difficult calculations that people must make as they seek to construct new modes of familial and social life. People *are* better off in many ways, but not *all* ways. Progress is not just made up of things and how long we can enjoy them. It is about people and how we relate to them. Progress needs to be redefined by each successive generation, and true progress will occur only if we can feel that we are doing our best to strengthen our sense of family togetherness and community.