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Good news, the undergraduate perspective and hope

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Good News, the Undergraduate Perspective and Hope



One of the joys of working in higher education is the opportunity to interact on a daily basis with 17-24 year olds, with all the hope and possibilities that entails. At the same time, for those of us who are in mid-life (or beyond) it can be hard to remember that with youth comes a truncated worldview. Not always in terms of perspectives but certainly in terms of time. A college “generation” is four years and the time spent on campus is a significant part of the average undergraduate’s life. This perspective can over weight recent and current events in the lives of students, particularly news that affects our students. A weak job market for a few years can seemingly threaten to last forever. A political system that seems gridlocked can appear to freeze political life for decades to come. Foreign policy challenges on multiple fronts can seem to

promise endless threats and danger.

I think it is important for all of us to remember to raise our eyes and take the long view, even in the midst of the busyness of our days. This thought was prompted by the [25th Anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall](#) on 9 November 2014. A post-Soviet world is simply part of the lived experience of our students and can seem unremarkable. But, for those of us who lived through the Cold War with the nuclear threat, duck and cover drills and the existential struggle for minds and hearts between capitalist democracy and centrally planned, single party states, the fall of the Berlin Wall is arguably the single most important geopolitical event of our lifetimes. And it was completely unexpected. Virtually no one believed the collapse of the Soviet model was possible, to say nothing of the possibility that it could end up in the dustbin of history so quickly and relatively peacefully. Anyone who says they thought otherwise is either lying or delusional. The point is simply to remember and remind our students that for the vast majority of the population the world is a better place now than it was a generation ago. Things can and usually do get better over the long run. There is reason for hope.

A few other reasons for hope for the future that maybe do not get enough press:

1. **Racial Attitudes.** Less than 50 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the United States has elected an African American President twice. Surely a sign of changed attitudes regardless of one’s politics, attitudes that current undergraduates take for

granted.

2. **Education.** Education levels are **continuing to grow** in the US and around the world—which has important implications for those educated individuals, their families and their countries.
3. **Standard of living.** The Millennials still can expect to live better than their parents—this version of the American Dream lives. According to **recent research** that asks, “...whether adults tend to have higher, size-adjusted incomes than their parents did at the same age, after taking into account increases in the cost of living. The answer is, unambiguously, yes. Fully 84 percent of today’s forty-somethings have higher size-adjusted family incomes than their parents did at the same age.”
4. **World poverty.** Possibly the most inspiring economic news of the last generation is the sharp drop in the number of people living in extreme poverty even as the world population grows. In a recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, Dartmouth economics professor Douglas Irwin notes the sharp decline in poverty among the poorest of the poor. Here’s an excerpt from, “The Ultimate Global Antipoverty Program” (the full article is available behind a pay wall [here](#)):

The World Bank reported on Oct. 9 that the share of the world population living in extreme poverty had fallen to 15% in 2011 from 36% in 1990. Earlier this year, the International Labor Office reported that the number of workers in the world earning less than \$1.25 a day has fallen to 375 million in 2013 from 811 million in 1991.

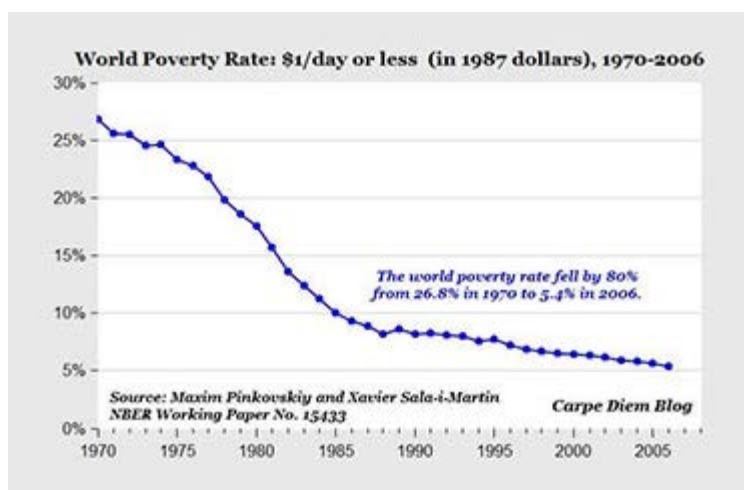
Such stunning news seems to have escaped public notice, but it means something extraordinary: The past 25 years have witnessed the greatest reduction in global poverty in the history of the world.

To what should this be attributed? Official organizations noting the trend have tended to waffle, but let’s be blunt: The credit goes to the spread of capitalism. Over the past few decades, developing countries have embraced economic-policy reforms that have cleared the way for private enterprise.

An American Enterprise Institute blog by economist Mark Perry [comments on the op-ed](#) by writing:

*I will state, assert and defend the statement that if you love the poor, if you are a good Samaritan, you must stand for the free enterprise system, and you must defend it, not just for ourselves but for people around the world. **It is the best anti-poverty measure ever invented.***

Perry also includes a graphical description to the phenomenon Irwin describes:



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Of course there **remain challenges**, even in a unified Germany, but the Martin Luther King quote seems appropriate as we remind ourselves – and our students – that despite any immediate challenges we may face, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” A nice reminder to start the holiday season.

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