

Only 6% of Americans Think the World is Getting Better



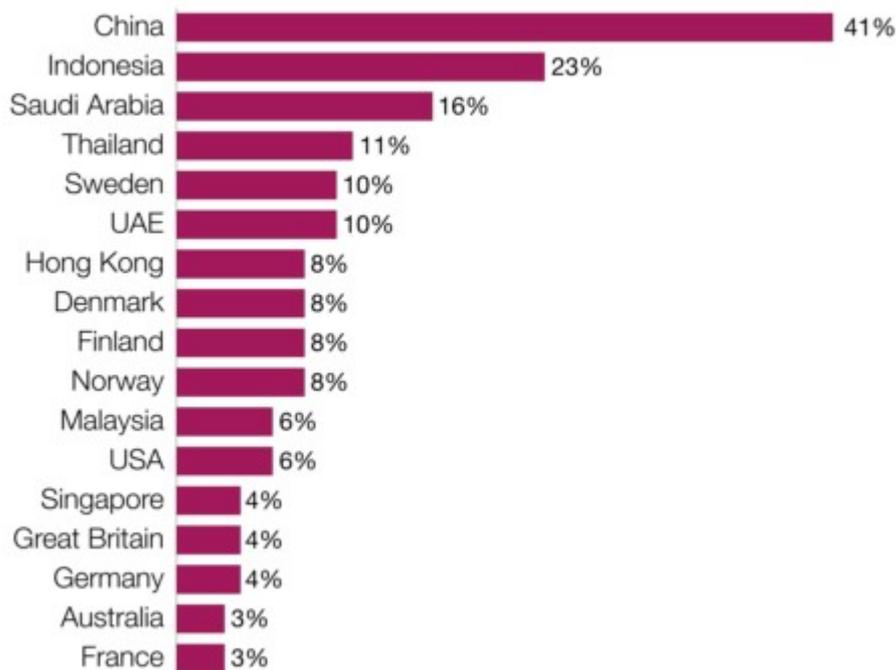
By Alex Berezow, PhD — July 3, 2016

Recently, I had the honor of attending the Breakthrough Dialogue, hosted by the [Breakthrough Institute](#) [1], in Sausalito, CA*. The conference, which is attended mostly by self-described "ecomodernists" [2], represents everything that modern environmentalism should be: Optimistic, pro-technology and pro-humanitarian.

The upbeat mood of the meeting stands in stark contrast to both mainstream environmentalism, with its apocalyptic and misanthropic worldview, and the American public, which seems to believe that the world is bad and getting worse. Max Roser, an Oxford economist, showed a stunning graph in a lecture he gave at the Dialogue that depicts just how cheerless people are.

Share of the population who think the world is getting better

18,235 adults in the following countries were asked "All things considered, do you think the world is getting better or worse, or neither getting better nor worse?"



Data source: Survey conducted and published by YouGov (2015). The is available at OurWorldInData.org. There you find more visualizations on this topic.

Licensed under CC-BY-SA by the author Max Roser.

[3] *Global pessimism.* (Credit: YouGov/Max Roser/Our World in Data)

As shown, pessimism is widespread across the world, particularly in highly developed nations. Merely 6 percent of Americans think the world is improving. Similarly dismal numbers were reported across Europe and in Australia. But in China, people were much more optimistic, perhaps because the country has seen incredible economic growth in recent years, bringing some [680 million](#) [4] people out of extreme poverty.

What explains the gloom in the Western world and other developed countries? Dr. Roser offered

two major reasons.

First, people don't remember how bad things used to be. The "good ole days," as it turns out, weren't quite as good as your (grand)parents remember them. For example, before 1900, the average woman in the U.S. lost one child before he or she turned five-years old. Today, childhood mortality is the exception rather than the rule. Similarly, [in 1900, the top three causes of death](#) [5] were due to infectious disease. But, because of advances in public health (such as vaccines and hygiene), the [top three causes of death today](#) [6] are due to genetics, lifestyle and old age.

Second, people are unaware of the progress being made now. Despite what some politicians may say, global income inequality has been falling. (Yes, [inequality is increasing in developed countries](#) [7], such as the United States, but inequality is decreasing in the world as a whole.) Perhaps worse, the media continues to adhere to the cliché "if it bleeds, it leads." Bad news is always reported -- from car bombs and homicides to financial scams and drops in the stock market -- while good news is given scant coverage, if it's even covered at all.

The fact is that bad news sells. Good news does not. Proclaiming widespread misery is how politicians get elected (and how most environmentalists get funded), and giving coverage to mass shooters is how newspapers are sold. Giving people a balanced perspective, which often includes a dose of good news, rarely excites anybody.

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*Full disclosure: My room and board were paid for me.

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Links

[1] <http://thebreakthrough.org/>

[2] <http://www.ecomodernism.org/>

[3] <https://ourworldindata.org/>

[4] <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21578665-nearly-1-billion-people-have-been-taken-out-extreme-poverty-20-years-world-should-aim>

[5] <http://demography.cpc.unc.edu/2014/06/16/mortality-and-cause-of-death-1900-v-2010/>

[6] http://www.realclearscience.com/journal_club/2013/03/01/top_10_causes_of_death_in_the_us_106473.html

[7] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/05/16/report-income-inequality-rising-in-most-developed-countries/>