

The Middle Opinion. USA 2020.

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Chapter 18 (post-election draft, 5th November)¹

Better world, worse democracy?

NOTE: I wrote this on 3rd February 2020, just before all the world knew about COVID-19 – at a time when a better world seemed a reasonably appropriate hypothesis.

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 - 5.4 Social and psychological space - geographical variation [Yearbook 2015, 6]
 - 5.5 Time series: social value, violence and population [Yearbook 2015, 7]
 - 5.6 Value trajectories: wellbeing, wealth, health, peace and environment [YB 2017, 7]

Overview. This brief chapter places alongside one another two quite disparate ideas. The first idea is that the world is becoming a better place (or was doing so pre-COVID19). The second idea is that there is global dissatisfaction with democracy. International comparisons for a variety of social indicators are referenced. The trajectory of these indicators over time have in many cases supported the hypothesis of a world becoming better. In contrast is a major report presented at the launch of Cambridge's new Centre for the Future of Democracy. *The Global Satisfaction with Democracy 2020 Report* starts with a discussion of the recent literature which suggests a malaise in democracy: dissatisfaction with democracy has risen over time, and is reaching an all-time global high, in particular in developed democracies. What might we say that embraces both these ideas? In recent years I have tried to provide an overall appraisal of world society over the preceding year and I have come to the conclusion that in broad terms certain generalised remarks are apt.

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October 27, 2020

1 Global indicators and international comparisons

Steven Pinker and others have argued that the world is becoming a better place. This thesis is discussed in my chapter, “Value trajectories: wellbeing, wealth, health, peace and the environment”. This chapter and chapters elsewhere have discussed a variety of global indicators and international comparisons. These are listed in Table 1. Overviews for some of these chapters are provided in Section 5.

Table 1 Global indicators discussed in the Yearbooks

population	DeLong, one million BC to present	YB15, 7, 141-144
economy	IMF Annual Report 2017	YB14, 11, 206-217; YB17, 7, 135-137
state system	number of states, 1816-2004	YB14, 8, 140-147
democracy	SPI; Ward & Gleditsch	YB15, 6, 118-120
literacy	UNESCO gender parity	YB14, 12, 234-245
social	Social Progress Index Report 2015	YB15, 6, 112-118 YB17, 7, 147-148
development	UN Human Development Index, 1980-2013	YB15, 7, 134-141
crime	UK prison population statistics, international comparisons	YB17, 2, 30-32
football	World Cup 2014, 2018	YB14, 13, 262-275; YB18 Vol. 1
health	Global Burden of Disease 2016	YB17, 7, 137-141
health & war	Lancet 2006	YB17, 7, 141
war	UCPD/PRI0; COW data; time series	YB15, 144-151; YB17, 7, 142-147
nuclear war	Ellsberg, 2017	YB17, 7, 147-148
environment	Nature Geoscience 2017	YB17, 7, 148-154
threats	Pew Center	YB17, 7, 154-158

2 Cambridge’s new Centre for the Future of Democracy

However the headlines back in January talked about record levels of global dissatisfaction with democracy. The headlines are based on a major report presented at the launch of Cambridge’s new Centre for the Future of Democracy². *The Global*³*Satisfaction with Democracy 2020 Report*⁴ starts with a discussion of the recent literature which suggests a malaise in democracy. The report then proceeds to a detailed analysis of the results of surveys of satisfaction with democracy worldwide over recent decades. The contents of the report are:

² The head of centre is David Runciman; and the centre is part of the Bennett Institute:
<https://www.cambridgenetwork.co.uk/news/centre-future-democracy-launches-next-week/>;
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/research/centre-future-democracy/>;
www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk.

³

⁴ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Williams. 2020. “The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020.” Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.
<https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/media/uploads/files/DemocracyReport2020.pdf>
Global dissatisfaction with democracy at record high, new report reveals
https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2020-01/uoc-gdw012720.php
BBC. “Dissatisfaction with democracy at record high.”
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-51281722>
Hurst, Greg. “Voters suffer loss of faith in the democratic process.” *The Times*, January 29, 2020: 2.
Leading article. “Losing faith. More than half of Britons are dissatisfied with democracy according to a new report. Boris Johnson’s challenge is to rebuild trust in the political system.” *The Times*, January 29, 2020: 27.

Table 2 Contents, “The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020”

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1 Executive Summary

- We use a new dataset combining more than 25 data sources, 3,500 country surveys, and 4 million respondents between 1973 and 2020 asking citizens whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with democracy in their countries.
- Using this combined, pooled dataset, we are able to present a time-series for almost 50 years in Western Europe, and 25 years for the rest of the world.
- We find that dissatisfaction with democracy has risen over time, and is reaching an all-time global high, in particular in developed democracies.

2. Key Findings

Across the globe, democracy is in a state of malaise. In the mid-1990s, a majority of citizens in countries for which we have time-series data – in North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australasia – were satisfied with the performance of their democracies. Since then, the share of individuals who are “dissatisfied” with democracy has risen by around +10% points, from 47.9 to 57.5%.

This is the highest level of global dissatisfaction since the start of the series in 1995. After a large increase in civic dissatisfaction in the prior decade, 2019 represents the highest level of democratic discontent on record.

The rise in democratic dissatisfaction has been especially sharp since 2005. The year that marks the beginning of the so-called “global democratic recession” is also the high point for global satisfaction with democracy, with just 38.7% of citizens dissatisfied in that year. Since then, the proportion of “dissatisfied” citizens has risen by almost one-fifth of the population (+18.8%).

Many of the world’s most populous democracies – including the United States, Brazil, Nigeria, and Mexico – have led the downward trend. In the United States, levels of

dissatisfaction with democracy have risen by over a third of the population in one generation.

As a result, many large democracies are at their highest-ever recorded level for democratic dissatisfaction. These include the United States, Brazil, Mexico, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Colombia, and Australia. Other countries that remain close to their all-time highs include Japan, Spain, and Greece.

Citizens of developed democracies have also experienced a large increase in democratic dissatisfaction. While in the 1990s, around two-thirds of the citizens of Europe, North America, Northeast Asia and Australasia felt satisfied with democracy in their countries, today a majority feel dissatisfied.

While it goes beyond the scope of this report to explain the cause of this shift, we observe that citizens' levels of dissatisfaction with democracy are largely responsive to objective circumstances and events – economic shocks, corruption scandals, and policy crises. These have an immediately observable effect upon average levels of civic dissatisfaction.

However, the picture is not entirely negative. Many small, high-income democracies have moved in the direction of greater civic confidence in their institutions. In Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, for example, democratic satisfaction is reaching all-time highs. These countries form part of the “island of contentment” – a select group of nations, containing just 2% of the world's democratic citizenry, in which less than a quarter of the public express discontent with their political system.

Comparison by region shows a number of other bright spots, above all in Asia. In democracies in South Asia, Northeast Asia, and above all in Southeast Asia, levels of civic contentment are significantly higher than in other regions. For now, much of Asia has avoided the crisis of democratic faith affecting other parts of the world ...

3 Values: rationality? ... faith? ... herd? ... satisfaction, dissatisfaction

“While it goes beyond the scope of this report to explain the cause of this shift, we observe that citizens' levels of dissatisfaction with democracy are largely responsive to objective circumstances and events – economic shocks, corruption scandals, and policy crises. These have an immediately observable effect upon average levels of civic dissatisfaction.”

“Our findings suggest that citizens are rational in their view of political institutions, and update their assessment in response to what they observe. If confidence in democracy has been slipping it is because democratic institutions have been seen failing to address some of the major crises of our era ...”

4 World Society in the past year

Each Yearbook devotes one chapter to an account of world society in the past year – see Table 2. I came to the conclusion that in broad terms the following generalised remarks were apt:

World Society in 2017

Overview. The aim of this short chapter is to try to get an idea of what it might mean to talk about what happened in world society in 2017.

What happens each year is a unique mixture of the prosaic and the sensational; the normal and the notable; continuation and change; good and bad, positive and negative; and betterment and deterioration. News stories tend to select the sensational and the negative.

...

How should we characterise world society in 2017?

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ... in short, the period was so far like the present period, that its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.”⁵

How should we characterise world society in 2017? Should we look at the headlines and the reports of journalists in the newspapers? ... or should we look at the statistical accounts? Both are informative. Both sensational events and prosaic events did indeed occur in 2017. Also the sensational events of 2017 were different from the sensational events of previous years ... and these same general remarks about 2017 could also have been made a year ago about 2016. That is what one would expect from a complex system like world society. Combining these various thoughts we can characterise 2017 in the following way:

differently sensational and prosaic as usual

a mixed year – a somewhat different variety of events as usual

some things stayed the same; not so many changed

some things changed a little; not so many changed a lot

some things continued in the same direction; not so many changed direction

some things improved; not so many things deteriorated

We can think of world society as a system which operates in such a way as to exhibit a pattern of normal functioning together with less common patterns of abnormality. Abnormalities may be local or more widespread – they may start local and become more widespread involving a larger part of society. Abnormality may be either positive or negative.

For example most people are healthy most of the time but everybody has illness some of the time and a few people have illness most of the time. Most households are safe most of the time but a few households experience catastrophic failure. Most cities have a normal routine but a few cities are visited by abnormal events. Most states function in an acceptable way but a few states are categorised as ‘failed’ states ... occasionally there is concern that a state has broken international rules.

What is world society doing at any one point in time? One answer to this is to look at one day’s news. What we find is a rich variety of events involving a rich variety of actors in relationships in a complex structure. These events are not all the events - they are the abnormal events and are often of a negative conflictual nature.

⁵ Burleigh quotes Dickens in his title and in his preface in order to convey the quandary of characterising the current times.

Burleigh, Michael. *The Best of Times, the Worst of Times. A History of Now*. London, Macmillan: 2017.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: All The Year Round, 1859.

Thinking of world society as a system, we can consider its structure and its process. World society involves a complex structure of relationships. The relationships are ongoing processes and we can consider the trajectory of these ongoing relationships. The trajectory may contain both normal and notable events, the latter tending to be selected as news.

Each Yearbook contains a chapter on World Society in the past year – see Table 3.

Table 3 World Society in the past year

The World Today: tension and volatility in a multi-level geopolitical structure	
.	YB14, 7
World Society in 2015	YB15, 5
World Society in 2017	YB15, 2

5 Overviews of selected chapters

5.1 Democracy: satisfaction? ... dissatisfaction? ... value space [Yearbook 2015, 11]

“Government of the people, by the people, for the people”⁶

“You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can’t please all of the people all of the time.”⁷

“It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those others that have been tried from time to time.”⁸

Overview. Does democracy deliver satisfaction? - or dissatisfaction? Over the past year, dissatisfaction has been expressed with various aspects of democracy. Democratic elections raise hopes of satisfaction which cannot be fulfilled for all. The elections we have studied in previous chapters have given the satisfaction of victory sometimes to a majority and sometimes to just a minority but always leaving at least a sizeable minority experiencing the dissatisfaction of defeat. Moreover the following chapter will show that the percentage experiencing the satisfaction of victory in UK elections has declined over the past seventy years.

The concept of a value space can provide useful insight into these issues. Using it, Chapter 14 will show that there are theoretical limits to the amount of satisfaction which democracy can deliver. In this chapter we look at two studies which are particularly informative. The first study asks about the amount of value of each option; it asks about many options; and the analysis applies multiple criteria in its evaluation of the options. The second study asks for a full preference ordering of the options.

With the prospect (at the time) of a coalition government a survey asked people to place a value on each of nine possible government outcomes. All nine options had a mean negative rating, with a Conservative majority government being the least negative. However this option scored poorly on

⁶ Boritt, Gabor. *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

⁷ Attributed to John Lydgate and/or Abraham Lincoln. For example: Word Press. “Famous words of Lincoln and Lydgate.” *Word Press*. Accessed September 1, 2016. <https://scottdunlop.wordpress.com/2007/09/07/famous-word-of-lincoln-and-lydgate-you-cant-please-all-of-the-people-all-of-the-time/>.

⁸ Winston Churchill (1947) quoted on the cover of *The Times* on election day. Churchill, Winston. [speech, House of Commons], November 11, 1947. —*Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963*, ed. Robert Rhodes James, vol. 7, 1974, 7566. Accessed September 1, 2016. <http://www.bartleby.com/73/417.html>.

polarisation and extreme dissatisfaction. People's views were approximately consistent with single-peaked value functions on a left-right continuum in value space.

After the election, dissatisfaction within society gave way to dissatisfaction within parties. In particular there was a discourse of dissatisfaction in the Labour Party and in the media relating to the candidacy and leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. A survey found a diversity of views amongst Labour Party members. The preference orderings can be represented by the vertices of a tetradecahedron. Most preference orderings were close to a transversal corresponding to single-peaked value functions on a left-right continuum in value space.

Finally it should be noted that the same broad argument applies not just to democracy but to any system of government, and not just to systems of government but to all social arrangements.

5.2 The world economy: growth and inequality [Yearbook 2014, 11]

Chapter 11 is about the world economy. It is a global system. So to understand any local economy it is helpful to know about the world economy as a whole. Growth and inequality present a major policy challenge. There is a need to conceptualise growth and inequality within nations, between nations and for the world as a whole. The following statements are subject to much debate.

There is absolute poverty.

There is great inequality between individuals.

There is great inequality between continents.

Some countries have more inequality than others.

There is substantial economic growth.

The poorer regions have faster growth than the richer regions.

There is income stagnation for the poorer people in richer countries.

Ordinal inequality is constant.

Absolute poverty is declining.

Global inequality is declining.

Major redistribution should take place.

Concerning the last of these Thomas Piketty “sparked an epic debate” with his new book *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Inequality has been increasing, he argues, with top incomes receiving an increasing share.⁹ Others have challenged Piketty's figures, their interpretation and their explanation. A simple descriptive two-region, two-class model of growth and inequality is offered to help think about these issues. Power law and other models of economic distributions are noted. A spatial model of growth and inequality in UK house prices is presented.

5.3 Gender: culture and psychology: literacy and education [Yearbook 2014, 12]

Chapter 12 is on gender. Three women hit the headlines in 2014. Malala Yousafzay won the Nobel Peace Prize fighting for the right of girls to education. Maryam Mirzakhani was the first woman to win the Fields Medal, the ‘Nobel Prize’ of mathematics. Also, World Chess Championship contender Judit Polgar announced her retirement. All three women have excelled in fields – Nobel prizes, mathematics and chess – where women are rare. How are we to explain this rarity? Gender is a major division between people in world society. The division has biological, psychological and cultural aspects. Popular discussion of gender lacks conceptual sophistication and displays gender exceptionalism. There is a need to conceptualise historical trends in gender inequality within nations, between nations and for the world as a whole. Social programmes for literacy and education are important in the cultural formation of gender inequality.

World literacy rates and UK GCSE exam scores are mirror opposites. Worldwide, men have higher literacy than women; but in the UK across school subjects, girls have higher GCSE exam scores than boys. By coincidence and loosely speaking the equation for world literacy is the mirror opposite of the equation for GCSEs. World literacy rate z-scores: female=1.18male-0.54. GCSE exam z-scores: male=1.00 female-0.23. There is a gender aspect to subject differentiation with a law of comparative advantage. Female relative participation f is related to female relative performance dz : $f=0.5+k(dz-0.23)$. The transition from GCSE to A level is characterised by stratification and differentiation.

⁹ Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014.

Literacy and education are part of society as a whole and their relationship to the other parts of society needs to be considered. See for example a study of the relationship between educational level and fertility rate in the USA; and the recent Global Gender Gap Report produced by the World Economic Forum. Special attention is given to the conceptualisation of gender differences – and this has application to the conceptualisation of group differences in general, a topic discussed in Chapter 14.

5.4 Social and psychological space - geographical variation [Yearbook 2015, 6]

This chapter looks at the relationships between a variety of social and psychological variables and, on this basis, places the variables in an abstract space. Variation between nations and between regions is studied rather than variation between individuals. The focus is on per capita variables not aggregate variables. This chapter is the first of several in which the abstract concept of space plays a central role.

The chapter has two parts. The first part is on social value. How do countries differ? How do different dimensions of social value relate to one another? Does more money lead to more social value? World maps of social progress for 133 countries are given in the 2015 Report for the Social Progress Index (SPI). The overall SPI correlates +0.8 with GDP per capita. It correlates +0.8 with life satisfaction and -0.8 with extreme poverty – but it has only a weak negative correlation, -0.4, with inequality. An analysis of the twelve main variables in the SPI identifies a first principal component which explains almost 50% of the total variance, running from basic features of progress to more advanced features. The correlations between variables suggest ‘divergent sequential development’. A separate study considers the relationship between GDP per capita and democracy: does more money lead to more democracy? - or is there a U-shaped relationship?

The second part of this chapter is on psychology and geography and a range of important social variables. How do regions within the UK differ? How do the different variables relate to one another? ‘Friendly Scots and grumpy Londoners’ was typical of the superficial newspaper headlines, belying the depth of the actual study of 380 Local Authority Districts in the UK by Rentfrow and his colleagues. The pattern of results was similar to findings from previous research: personality traits are unevenly distributed geographically and this is associated with a range of important social outcomes. Personality was assessed using the Big Five Inventory. An analysis of the correlations at the individual and group level locates the Big Five along a continuum: from Agreeableness to Conscientiousness to Stability to Extraversion to Openness. The correlations for each of the Five have a single-peaked profile on the continuum. Likewise, the correlations for each of twenty-four political, economic, social, health and demographic variables have a single-peaked or single-troughed profile on the continuum.

5.5 Time series: social value, violence and population [Yearbook 2015, 7]

This is the first of two chapters about how things change over time. Here we discuss social value, violence and population. In a later chapter, we discuss the history of party fortunes in UK general elections.

Whereas the previous chapter looked at how social value varied between nations, the present chapter considers how social value changes over time. Has social value increased? Whereas the measure of social value used in the previous chapter was the Social Progress Index (SPI), the measure of social value used in this chapter is the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI). The previous chapter noted a correlation between social value and GDP per capita. Given that world GDP per capita has increased, social value should also have increased. This is what we find: the HDI shows a linear increase in the period 1980-2013. Turning to a specific aspect of social value in a specific country, life expectancy in England has had a linear increase over the period 1991-2014. There is some inequality between regions which has reduced slightly over the period. At least in these studies then, social value has increased.

Whereas the word ‘violence’ is normally used to refer to physical harm, the phrase ‘structural violence’ is sometimes used to refer to a broader lack of social value. So measures such as the HDI might be taken as measures of the lack of structural violence, with increases in HDI representing decreases in structural violence. So, according to the above studies, structural violence has decreased.

Measures of social value can be aggregate totals or per capita averages and this prompts us to look at population trends. The simplest model of population dynamics is an exponential one with a constant growth rate. Applying this model to De Long’s data, we find that growth rates increase: low in the

early period up to 5000BC; and 0.0007 in the period 5000BC-1500AD, 0.004 in the period 1500AD to 1940 and 0.02 in the period 1945 to 2000.

One specific aspect of social value is peace - or its opposite, violence. In 2013 the journal *Sociology* published a Book Review Symposium on Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, and this was also discussed by Scott Gates and Larry Ray at the 2015 annual conference of the Conflict Research Society. This prompts a re-examination of Steven Pinker's Chapter 5, 'The Long Peace', and its thesis of declining violence. The underlying equations are formulated. Attention then focuses on the war death rate and its probability distribution. A beta distribution gives a fair approximation to the data. Finally models for the time series of the war death rates are considered.

5.6 Value trajectories: wellbeing, wealth, health, peace and environment [Yearbook 2017, 7]

"Violence is not the only unpleasant thing that has changed: disease, poverty, illiteracy, premature death, and other scourges of the human condition have decreased as well." Steven Pinker¹⁰

"All the problems we face are solvable despite all the terrible news that you see. If you had to choose a moment in human history in which you would want to be born you'd choose today because the fact is that the world is healthier, wealthier, better educated and more tolerant, more sophisticated and less violent."
Barack Obama¹¹

Overview. Are things getting better? Are people better off? Are people healthier? Is the world more peaceful? Has environmental quality improved? What of the future? What threats do people perceive?

Good things happen and bad things happen. Sometimes things improve and sometimes things get worse. So we are left with the question, are things getting better on average?

Human history thus far has been characterised by an increasing population, and technological, economic and social development.

The IMF Annual Report of 2017 reports that GDP has grown over the past seventy-six years. This growth has been uneven: GDP has grown fivefold in advanced economies and tenfold in emerging markets and developing countries. However there are concerns about productivity growth.

In *The Lancet*, *The global burden of disease* reported that mortality rates have decreased and life expectancy has increased (by 14 years) in the period 1970-2016. The rate of change has been fairly constant over the period. In the under-5 age group there were 16 million deaths in 1970 but just 4 million deaths in 2016.

National media sometimes emphasise 'our combatant deaths'. What about 'theirs'? What about non-combatants? What about other human costs besides death?

Is the world more peaceful? The research on this question has examined a wide variety of variables. A conceptualisation of variables is offered. Is the world becoming more peaceful? Pinker and others conclude from the evidence that it is, but Sarkees offers an alternative analysis and conclusion. Statistical models have a variety of possible trajectories with varying probabilities ... in particular lowest and highest, and mean, median and mode trajectories ... so there are both optimistic and pessimistic possibilities. A unit root model of war death rates exemplifies these points.

What is global warming? Does global warming exist? Are specific extreme events caused by global warming? Is it caused by human society? Is it a serious threat? Can the threat be averted? Are the proposed actions sufficient to avert it? An overview of the radiation flows between the sun, the earth's surface and atmosphere and space is presented. A recent report revises the global warming estimates used in the Paris 2015/2016 agreement and a simplified model is presented.

An international survey by the Pew Centre covering the threats perceived by people in 38 different countries. The top four threats were: IS, climate change, cyberattacks and the global economy. An analysis identified two clusters. The threats in cluster A were: US, global economy, climate, cyberattacks and China; and the threats in cluster B were: Russia, IS and refugees. (Note: correlation does not imply cause.)

¹⁰ Pinker, Steven. "Response to the book review symposium: Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*." *Sociology* 49, 4 (2015): 1224-1232.

Kenny, Charles. *Getting Better*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

¹¹ Bannerman, Lucy. "Obama takes swipe at Trump tweets." *The Times*, December 28, 2017: 23.