"Optimism is cowardice," Oswald Spengler proclaimed in 1923. His polemic, "The Decline of the West," demonstrated that pessimism sells. These days, Matt Ridley reminds us, pessimism is as fashionable as ever. If it's Tuesday, it's Y2K. Or AIDS, overpopulation, a worldwide financial collapse and global warming.

A zoologist by training and a journalist by trade, Ridley is a sworn enemy of Cassandras and Chicken Littles. In "The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves," he covers 200,000 years of human history to make a compelling case that over the millennia poverty declined, disease retreated, violence atrophied, freedom grew and happiness increased. He does not doubt that "the twenty-first century will be a magnificent time to be alive."
Ridley's optimism is grounded in the capacity, unique to Homo sapiens, for "collective intelligence." When people began to share, swap and barter, he points out, they specialized, which in turn caused technological innovation and ushered in progress: "the ever-expanding possibility generated by a growing division of labor." As traders flourished, he speculates, less persuasively, natural selection favored "mutant forms" of the mind that were especially capable of empathy, trust and altruism.

"The Rational Optimist" is chock-full of in-your-face challenges to conventional wisdom. Opposition to genetically modified crops is baseless, Ridley insists, and has delayed the obsolescence of chemical pesticides. He believes that no country that opened its borders to trade has ever ended up poorer. Fossil fuels, Ridley asserts, have saved much of the landscape from the ravages of industrialization. And extreme climate change scenarios are based on "such wild assumptions" and ignore what Ridley thinks are the potential advantages of an increase in temperatures. He predicts that in 2100 people will be four to 18 times as wealthy as they are today.

Ridley recognizes that "collective intelligence" is not always the handmaiden of progress. Consider the Great Depression and World War II. He acknowledges as well that in an interconnected world it may be easier for "predators and parasites" to bring on catastrophe by stopping stem-cell research, erecting tariff barriers, manipulating global financial markets and oppressing women and ethnic minorities. But even if the bad guys prevail, for a time, he concludes that it "will be hard to snuff out the flame of innovation" because human exchange and specialization are evolutionary, bottom-up phenomena.

Let's hope he's right. And that global warming, like Y2K, will turn out to be a false alarm. But if we dare to be optimists, let's make sure we aren't lulled into a false sense of complacency about the very real risks that are out there.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

THE RATIONAL OPTIMIST
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