

Lydia Miljan: Why you shouldn't fear the future

Good Things: We have a cleaner, healthier and more equitable society over what we imagined would happen in the 80s

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*At FP Comment, we do our share of complaining. For the festive season, six wise Canadians tell us what not to complain about. What's going well and shouldn't be changed? Today, **Lydia Miljan** on why we shouldn't fear the future.*

The year 2019 brought us to new heights — or depths — of anxiety about the future. The Oxford English Dictionary word of the year is “climate emergency,” which it defines as “a situation in which urgent action is required to reduce or halt climate change and avoid potentially irreversible environmental damage resulting from it.” That the standard-bearer for climate change anxiety, Greta Thunberg, was named Time magazine’s Person of the Year — with her pronouncements such as “I want you to panic” — explains a lot about the next generation’s fear of the future.

“The End of the World as We Know It” has been the rallying cry for generations of young people, even though it took until 1987 for the rock group R.E.M. to make it into a hit song. Pop culture amplifies our concerns and projects them in many ways. For my generation, pivotal glimpses into the future were films such as the Terminator and Blade Runner, the latter released in 1982. Blade Runner has always stuck with me for its highly stylized vision of a dystopian future. It just so happens that, 37 years on, we are now living in Blade Runner’s precise time — and it looks nothing like what the filmmakers imagined.

The movie’s setting was Los Angeles, November 2019, a place riddled by crime, no doubt because of a massive population explosion, resulting income inequality, and the ravages of climate change. In Blade Runner’s L.A. not only were the skies polluted but Angelinos had to suffer a constant deluge of rain.

Sometimes the best way to appreciate our present condition is to contrast it with what others imagined it would be. In this case, everything Hollywood thought would get worse actually got better. Rather than being plagued by black markets and violent crimes, the Canada of 2019 enjoyed a crime rate half what it was in the 1980s. Both non-violent and violent crime have now been on the decline for decades.

Population explosion and a consequent inability to feed the masses were a deep and widespread fear in the 1980s. The Ethiopian famine that in that decade claimed 1.3 million lives and got us all to purchase the “We are the world” single and watch Live Aid was a cautionary tale about over-population and the difficulty of feeding the planet. Yet there have been only three major famines since then and the latest, in Somalia, claimed only a fifth the lives the Ethiopian famine did. That’s a horrible number, of course. But it’s a major improvement. And the Ethiopian famine itself was one-tenth of what the Chinese endured in the 1960s. The past four decades have shown us that famine is a result, not of too little food, but of corrupt government. For the first time in human history food has become so abundant and its price has fallen so low that there are now more obese people in the world than people who are starving.

Because the price of basic needs has gone down, the number of people living in absolute poverty has declined sharply, both domestically and around the world. There is still a divide between the very rich and the very poor, but the middle class is thriving — in Canada and around the world. Notwithstanding the federal government’s creation of a ministry of the middle class, this country’s middle-income earners are doing quite well, even better than their American counterparts. The annual Global Wealth report from Credit Suisse found that not only was Canadians’ median wealth of \$106,342 significantly higher than Americans’ (at \$61,670) but also that, compared with the U.S., Canada has a lower percentage of people with wealth below \$10,000 and a higher percentage with more than \$100,000.

As for climate, while Los Angeles isn’t bathed in constant rain, concerns over extreme weather and its impacts persist. But notwithstanding Greta Thunberg’s cries that we have stolen her future, the facts are quite different. At the risk of being dismissed with “OK Boomer”: my generation has left the planet significantly better than we found it. Environmental quality indicators all point to dramatically improved conditions over the past four decades. Since the 1970s all five major air pollutants — particulates, ozone, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide

and sulphur dioxide — have been reduced sharply and levels in most Canadian cities are well below regulated air quality standards. We also enjoy much cleaner lakes and rivers than we did in the 1980s. All this while our population, economy and output have grown.

We may not have many of the cool things that Blade Runner also imagined — flying cars, replicants, or off-world colonies — but we have a cleaner, healthier and more equitable society than we had in 1982 or could have imagined then we would have now.

Lydian Miljan is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Windsor and a Senior Fellow at the Fraser Institute.

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