

CURRENT HISTORY

Perils and Progress

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After *Current History* began publication a hundred years ago, the world suffered a succession of horrors: world wars, depression, totalitarian tyranny, genocide, nuclear terror, environmental threats. These sorely tested the modern belief in progress. Yet over this same century, knowledge and innovations accumulated, liberal values and open markets spread, and nations laid the foundations for collective security and global governance. For our centennial issue, we asked a dozen scholars to consider major trends that emerged in the past century and how these might influence events moving forward. A fair reading of their essays gives cause to hope for a bright, if complicated, future.

Not that progress will be automatic. All the essays, on the contrary, emphasize the importance of politics. The world still depends on America to safeguard security and promote globalization, according to Michael Mandelbaum. Sheila Jasanoff warns that global warming could threaten the human species with ruin, absent concerted effort. The challenges posed by globalization, says G. John Ikenberry, increase the demand for international coordination. Will supply follow? Amrita Narlikar argues that burden sharing will require greater understanding of rising powers' interests, worldviews, and negotiating strategies. Still, as Ikenberry suggests, China and other emerging powers have little interest in overturning the US-built international order that has facilitated their progress.

A recent wave of democratic regressions, governing failures in advanced nations, autocratic resistance, and turmoil following the Arab Spring raise concerns about the health of democracy within nations, concedes Larry Diamond. However, as he points out in his essay, "it is worth considering the intrinsic political dilemmas of authoritarian regimes, and the tenacity of popular aspirations for government that is open and accountable."

The swelling ranks of a global middle class ought to boost democratic prospects. Nicholas Eberstadt notes that "the greatest population explosion in history" over the past hundred years did not prevent the "greatest jump in per capita income levels ever recorded." The rapid expansion of global markets has lifted millions from poverty. And the international economy, observes Uri Dadush, is no zero-sum game in which countries prosper only at others' expense. In another demonstration that politics matters, the rich nations' current stagnation has resulted, Dadush says, not from "the rise of the rest," but from "errors in macroeconomic policy and regulation."

The security realm, too, is a positive-sum game in which mutual interests multiply. Increasing economic interdependence and advances in liberal norms and institutions account for a demonstrable decline in warfare, writes Bruce Russett. The ongoing information revolution, according to Joseph S. Nye Jr., is helping to disperse power to more actors, including groups that seek to influence others via example and persuasion, rather than coercion. Martha Crenshaw observes that threats nowadays arise less from rivalry among great powers than from extremist groups operating in frail states. But keeping the nuclear peace, Scott D. Sagan warns, will depend on sustained cooperation to discourage proliferation and uphold the taboo against using atomic arms.

Moral progress, meanwhile, continues apace—evidenced, for example, in evolving attitudes about torture, the treatment of women and minorities, and human rights generally. The struggle for gay rights, highlighted by Omar Encarnación, also underscores the importance of politics. Human rights, too, are not a zero-sum contest (gay rights do not threaten heterosexual rights). And here again, there is cause for optimism. As Encarnación notes: "International norms, once established, tend to spread to even the most recalcitrant corners of the world as part of the international 'socialization' of states." ■

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