

Pollution Is Not Getting Worse

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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The world, especially urban areas in the West, is getting cleaner all the time. Just a little more than a century ago, cities were plagued with diseases spread by biological pollutants. The Flu Pandemic (worldwide) of 1918 killed millions of people, just as European plagues in earlier centuries had obliterated huge proportions of the population. People during my great-grandfather's generation were so worried about getting sick that they would walk city streets with handkerchiefs over their mouths, and public policies were even enacted that prohibited spitting on the street. A remnant of this legislation is still on the books today in some cities (like Dunn, North Carolina). Nevertheless, the world now is relatively free of bacterial pollutants. We never give the idea of airborne or waterborne diseases a second thought in Western countries and most other places. Why? There have been tremendous advances in reactive public policies dealing with public health, widespread education about the importance of hand washing, and tremendous improvements in medical technologies, inoculations, and remedies or cures for common diseases.

And thank God for the advent of the automobile. The liberal ideological environmentalists (LIEs) are a little daffy that want to do away with cars, and that actually long for the days of relatively inefficient walking and bicycling—or especially those that wish for a resurgence of horse-drawn transportation. Do you have any idea how much pollution was caused by having work animals like horses and mules in urban areas? Manure and urine ran liberally through street gutters, having been mashed and run over, mixed together with spittle, rain water, and the settling soot each morning. Plus there was human waste. Let's not forget that indoor toilets are a relatively recent invention. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, urban dwellers utilized chamber pots to relieve themselves, and these pots had to be emptied somewhere, often into the urban sewer system or into the street. The resulting biological sludge from human and animal waste became a hot breeding ground for flies and other insects that transported pollutants. Clothing was "soiled" in a way that modern westerners can hardly imagine just by walking down the street. Unless thoroughly cleaned and bleached, clothing itself became a pollutant-carrier. I'll gladly take automobile exhaust over those nuisances any day. The only kind of horsepower that I want in my transportation has to fit neatly under the hood of my car and be made of metal. Besides that, I prefer the sealed ambiance of air conditioning and digital classical music over the dust, animal gas emissions, insects, road noise, and sweltering heat of yesteryear.

There have also been massive reductions in chemical pollutants. Although smoke, gases, odors, and water pollution are far less lethal to human beings than biological pollutants, they have been a great source of intestinal, ophthalmologic, and bronchial irritation. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many urban areas were characterized by poor air quality on account of huge amounts of soot. Poor air was egregious in most urban areas—for example Los Angeles, California during the 1950s and 1960s. While LA still has bad air relative to Greenville, South Carolina or even Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, it is far better today than forty or fifty years ago. I remember growing up in Orange County, California (just south of LA) during the 1970s that it was a rare sight if the ring of mountains around the LA basin were visible. It might only happen five or six days a year, the result of a "Santa Ana" (forceful onshore) wind condition or a clearing after a prolonged rainstorm. Now when I am in LA I am surprised by how many clear days there are. The difference is remarkable. The air in LA is much cleaner even though the metro population and soared to over twelve million people and probably more than twice that many automobiles.

I also lived in Santiago, Chile for several years. Santiago is big on the LIE list for having horrible air pollution. And in relative terms, they are right. But even in Santiago, the air is only really bad for a couple of months out of the year, and it is improving all the time. Santiago is a booming capital of economic progress and success, thanks to the military having ousted the socialists thirty years ago. Chile has the most prosperous economy in South America thanks many to free-market reforms and a system well-defined and strongly regarded property rights. Like the United States, as Chile continues to prosper, its environmental quality will continue to improve. Why wouldn't it improve? The wealthier people become the more willing they are to demand and pay for improved environmental conditions. Do we want to improve the air quality in Mexico City? The best start would be to oust the socialist bureaucracies and implement free-market reforms at least as strong as Chile's.

Speaking of socialists, let's think back to a fascinating but tragic report in the August 1994 *National Geographic* magazine. The story provided a pictorial tour of pollution, environmental destruction and human deformity on account of improper stewardship of resources in the former Soviet Union. The greatest pollution and environmental degradation in history was not caused by greedy capitalists pursuing a laissez-faire agenda, but rather by the absence of property rights and market incentives under socialist regimes. Bad government policy is a far greater cause of pollution than anything else.

In contra to the fear-mongering of the LIEs, the earth is getting cleaner all the time. Economist Dr. Julian Simon, writing in *The Ultimate Resource 2* (1998), argues that human knowledge continually provides a means to produce cleaner air through technology and properly placed reactive public policies. The human mind, our greatest resource, is seemingly limitless in developing new and better ways to give us a cleaner environment. Contrary to LIE thinking and rhetoric, most people prefer a clean environment and are willing to expend scarce resources in order to clean it up, provided that they have their basic needs met. Most public policies aimed at cleaning up the environment are superfluous. The best way to achieve less pollution is to encourage more progress. And LIE views alleging the dreadfulness of growing modern pollution is fraudulent.