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We live in a world marked by pessimism. The recently released COVID Response Tracking Study reports that Americans are the unhappiest they've been in 50 years. Only 42% of Americans believe that standards of living are improving for the next generation, and even larger percentages are convinced that the country is on the wrong track. According to the Pew Foundation, pessimism is also prevalent throughout the world, especially among developed nations where more than 60% see a grimmer economic future for their children and a globe rent by political, social, and environmental crisis. Add to that the increased and painful awareness of how wide the gap remains between ideals of social justice and equity and the reality of racial and class disparities, and you have one of the more fraught and difficult moments any of us have faced.

What, then, is to be done? Pessimism can focus the mind, but it can also become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading people to detach and despair rather than galvanizing us. The Progress Network starts with the idea that the widely shared belief that we can work collectively toward a more constructive future is a non-negotiable component of building that future. It is our mission to boost that belief, not through "feel-good" news but the sharing of the careful and considered, yet inspiring, thinking of constructive public voices.

The principles that The Progress Network members represent and disseminate in the public sphere—trust in science, international cooperation, human solidarity and adaptability, the furthering of education, long-term thinking, and the celebration of progress, among others—are the crucial pillars for moving forward, so we can indeed bring about a better future. The question is and always has been: "What progress can we make?"

The sense of a downward trajectory is enhanced not just by the pandemic but by a news and noise culture that foments an almost constant feeling of crisis. It has always been true, of course, that hot emotions such as fear and outrage command more immediate attention, hence the old media adage: "If it doesn't bleed, it doesn't lead." In a world where exponentially more players compete for billions of eyeballs, that has translated into ever higher levels of anxiety.

It's entirely possible that things will indeed get worse, and that is where The Progress Network becomes vital: what happens now and in the time ahead is not ordained. It's up to each of us to define that future. But the information, analysis, and sensibility that points in a more constructive direction, even in the thick of one of the most challenging times for humanity since World War II, are wholly overshadowed. This pandemic places us in the beginning of a transition, although a transition to what we don't yet know. We are, as always, in the midst of creating the future. This is an opportunity to pay close attention to what we are building together.

What we need is a coherent, cohesive, and powerful network that connects and amplifies those voices currently making arguments that point in a more positive direction. There are a plethora of individuals and organizations who are marshaling data, advancing debate, and creating templates for addressing and ameliorating our problems, yet those remain atomized and less than the sum of their parts. The Progress Network's goal is to create critical mass, connect those voices with one another, and provide a megaphone for their work and ideas, pushing them out into the media, into universities, and into policy debates locally and nationally, creating a groundswell based on our conviction that humanity's ingenuity and willingness to cooperate for the common good is ultimately more potent than forces pulling in the other direction.

The Progress Network is building an idea movement that speaks to a better future in a world dominated by voices that suggest a worse one. Idea collectives have had great force in the past, whether the Transcendentalists in the 19th century or the various right-tilting think tanks in the late 20th. Our lens is neither rose-tinted nor Pollyannish but instead grounded in the intensive and rigorous argumentation and analysis of its members. These are not all in agreement, but they share a sensibility of building on what is working and focusing on how we can make progress more than on how far short we are falling.

Based at the paradigm-challenging organization New America, The Progress Network brings idea people together and creates a virtual space to congregate. The individuals and groups who comprise the network also benefit from the connections with each other. The net result is a more concentrated and accelerated effect, just as currently exists in various scientific fields where hundreds of researchers and dozens of centers benefit from sharing and knowing the work of others. Nothing comparable binds a community of scholars, thinkers, and organizations who are collectively charting a more positive arc of the future. The Progress Network is the first. We trust it will not be the only.

This work is a crucial ingredient in ensuring that the future is indeed one where more people have both their material and existential needs met. The Progress Network is an incubator and connector, enhancing our chances of working collectively to build that, rather than giving in to the fragmentation and decline that so many expect and so many believe is our fate. The present feels almost unbearably messy, but these are the times to reshape the world.

