McDonald’s Abundance Serves the World

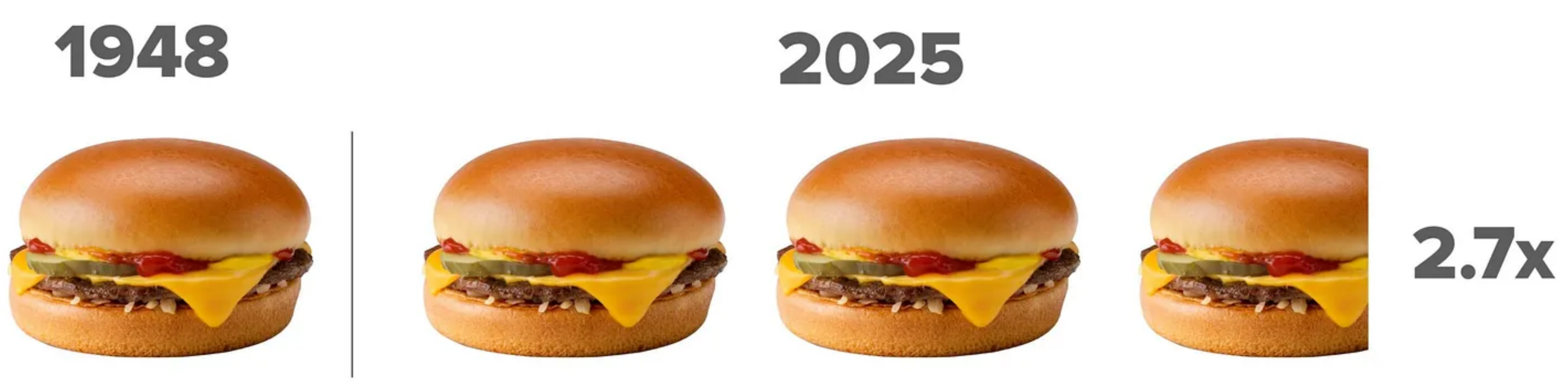
The premier American brand has sold a trillion burgers.

GALE POOLEY
OCT 02, 2025

In 1948, McDonald’s offered nine items on its menu. This helped simplify operations and lower costs. McDonald’s stopped officially counting its hamburger sales after surpassing 100 billion burgers in 1994. However, based on recent estimates of roughly 75 burgers sold every second—or approximately 2.36 billion per year—the total number of burgers sold by McDonald’s is likely in the hundreds of billions, with some sources suggesting McDonald’s has already sold its trillionth burger.

My favorite McDonald’s item is the cheeseburger. It’s been my top choice since 1973, when McDonald’s first came to my hometown. This product will provide you with 300 calories, 15 grams of protein, 31 grams of carbohydrates, 13 grams of fat, and 720 milligrams of sodium. I think it’s delicious and a great food value.

In 1948, entry-level workers were earning around 66 cents an hour. A 19 cent cheeseburger would cost them around 17.4 minutes. Today they’re $1.99 and entry-level food service workers are earning $18.67 an hour, putting the time price at 6.4 minutes. The time price has dropped by 63 percent: You get 2.7 cheeseburgers today for the time price of one in 1948.



Today, with over 41,800 stores in 118 countries and global sales of $130 billion, chances are, wherever you go in the world you can find the Golden Arches calling you. Approximately 93 percent of the restaurants are owned and operated by independent franchisees, which has made many of them millionaires.

Chris Arnade has written extensively about how important McDonald’s is to American culture. He has a PhD in physics from Johns Hopkins University and worked for 20 years as a trader at an elite Wall Street bank before leaving in 2012 to become a photojournalist. His writings include many beautiful photographs that reveal the central role McDonald’s plays in many communities. Please take a few minutes to enjoy his work here.

Writing this has made me hungry. Time to add to that trillion burger count.

In Trade We Trust: How Markets Build Social Fabric

Far from eroding community bonds, markets weave broader networks of trust.

HUMAN PROGRESS
OCT 03, 2025

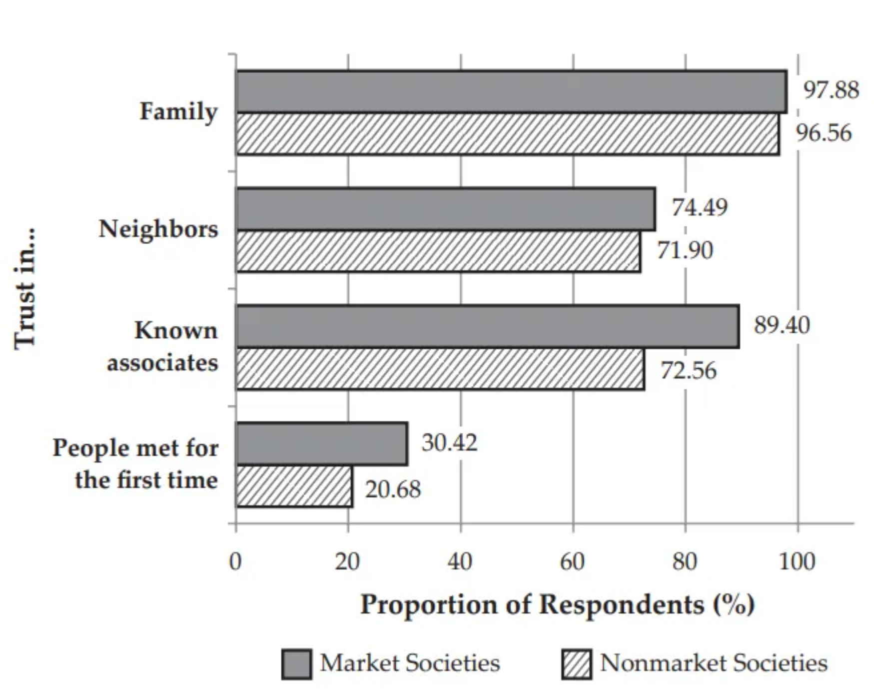
by Walker Wright

In my previous piece, I argued that a trade society generates prosperity, a widespread abundance of capital. But that raises another question: Does commercial exchange also lead to an abundance of *social* capital? While many may accept the economic efficiency of a market economy, they may see the trade-off as the fracturing of our social fabric and the deterioration of social capital.

But trade requires trusting attitudes and trustworthy behaviors to function properly, making a commercial society equivalent to a trust-based society. The American economist Ryan Murphy of the Bridwell Institute has distinguished between what he calls *bonding* social capital and *bridging* social capital. Bonding social capital refers to what increases the bond of affection with those in our inner circle, such as our family and friends. Bridging social capital refers to what builds social bridges, expanding our social network to those outside our inner circle. Too much bonding can interfere with bridge-building and can even burn bridges, creating a host of problems such as corruption and hostility toward out-groups. Trade acts as a social bridge. And a trade society is one full of social bridges.

Research from the Mercatus Center's Virgil Henry Storr and Ginny Choi demonstrates the bridge-building capacities of market economies. They found that people in both market and nonmarket societies trust close family and neighbors. However, as social distance increases—from family and friends to neighbors or strangers—trust decreases. And yet, this decline in trust is slower in market societies. Compared with those in nonmarket societies, people in market societies are more likely to (at least somewhat) trust friends, colleagues, and even strangers. As Choi and Storr concluded, "People around the world seem to have equally strong core networks, but those living in market societies seem to have stronger periphery networks."

Figure 1. Market versus nonmarket societies on trust

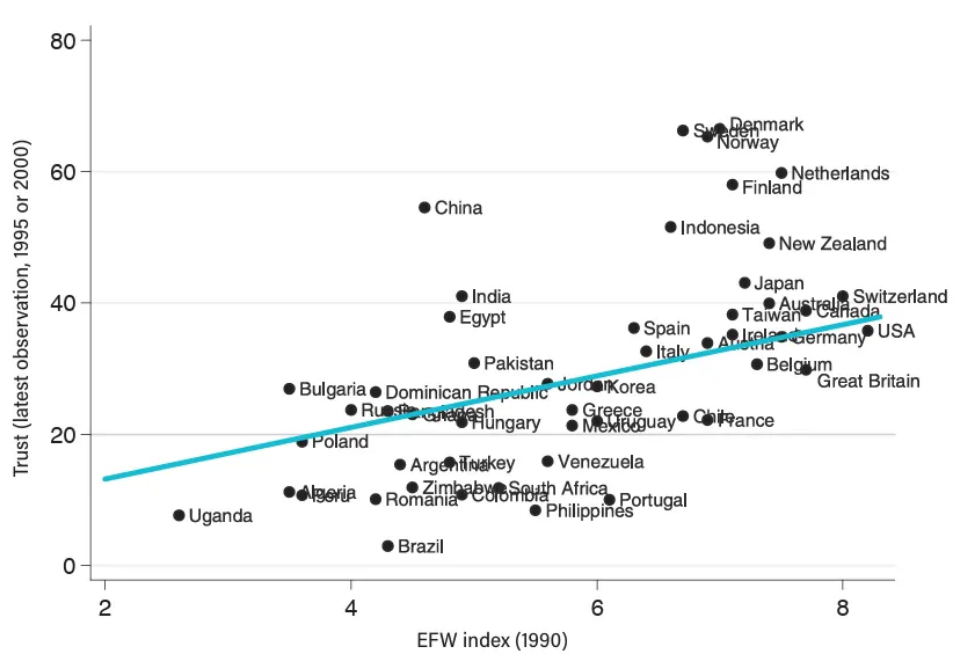


Source: Virgil Henry Storr and Ginny Choi, *Do Markets Corrupt Our Morals?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pg. 180.

Other survey data support Storr and Choi's findings and suggest that commercial societies produce trust. Utilizing data from the Economic Freedom of the World (EFW) index and the World Values Survey, researchers ran cross-country regressions with over 50 countries for the years 1995 and 2000. They found that economic freedom plays a significant and possibly causal role in the development of trust within countries. Even after controlling for variables such as urban population, age, human capital, government share of gross domestic product, political institutions, and inequality, countries with higher levels of economic freedom have been shown to have higher generalized trust than less free countries. But these trust levels are not fixed! Countries that experience pro-market reforms also see improvements in trust.

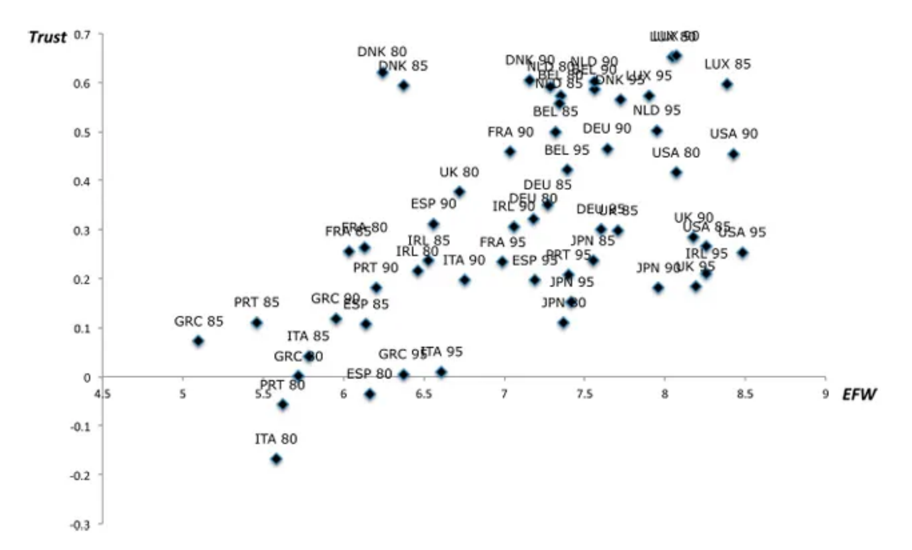
Drawing on European survey data and the EFW index, Mercer University economist Antonio Saravia looked at the effects of economic freedom on generalized trust for the years 1980, 1985, 1990, and 1995. After implementing several controls, Saravia found that a 10 percent increase in economic freedom led to a 2.5 percent increase in generalized trust.

Figure 2. Economic freedom and generalized trust across countries



Source: Niclas Berggren and Therese Nilsson, "Economic Freedom as a Driver of Trust and Tolerance," in *Economic Freedom of the World: 2020 Annual Report* (Fraser Institute, 2020), p. 193.

Figure 3. Economic freedom and trust in Europe

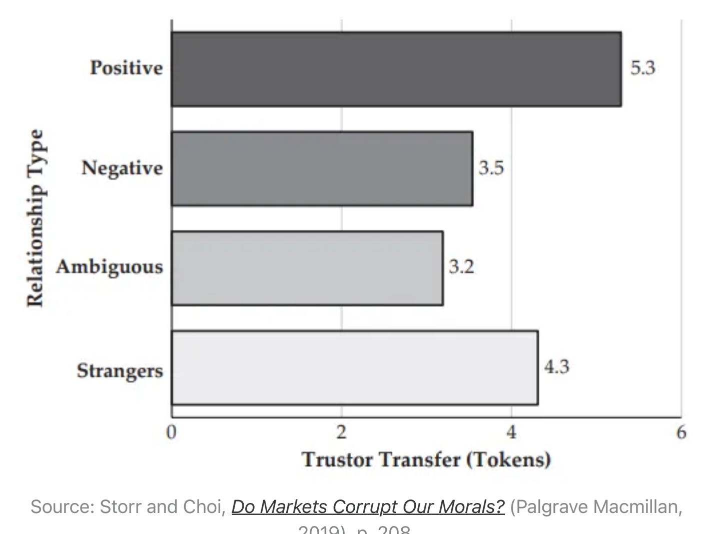


Source: Antonio Saravia, "Institutions of Economic Freedom and Generalized Trust: Evidence from the Eurobarometer Surveys," *European Societies* 18, no. 1 (Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2016): 13.

The evidence appears to indicate that market-based economic institutions have a positive effect on trust. However, one of the criticisms of the trust literature is that survey data and real-world behavior do not always match up. Contrary to expectations, people tend to be *more* trusting and trustworthy in experiments than survey answers, and laboratory experiments can give us a better sense of how economic institutions shape the trust-based behaviors of individuals.

The results of various laboratory experiments by Storr and Choi are telling. In studies published between 2018 and 2022, the two researchers demonstrate that in markets where cheating is possible, participants learn to reward trustworthy partners with greater trust and reciprocity (measured through token transfers). Those with positive market interactions received significantly more tokens than cheaters. What's more, even strangers received more tokens than cheaters. In experiments where cheating was prevented or its effect neutralized, positive relationships were treated similarly to relationships between strangers. Storr and Choi stressed that participants knew nothing about each other and could not communicate beyond offers. That means the relationships were purely commercial, with no distortions stemming from race, sex, religion, or the like. In short, when corruption and dishonesty are absent from the marketplace, trust and equal treatment emerge. When dishonesty is a factor (as it is in the real world), trustworthiness is incentivized, and dishonesty is stigmatized. Positive market transactions breed trust and trustworthiness.

Figure 4. Trustor transfers by relationship type



Source: Storr and Choi, *Do Markets Corrupt Our Morals?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 208.

Using similar trust games as the one featured in Storr and Choi's study, other laboratory experiments primed random participants to unconsciously think about markets. The results indicate that a market mindset makes people more trusting of others. George Mason University economist Omar Al-Ubaydli and colleagues explain their findings:

> Priming markets leaves people more optimistic about the trustworthiness of anonymous strangers and therefore increases trusting decisions and, in turn, social efficiency. . . . Absent markets, economic interactions with strangers tend to be negative. Market proliferation allows good things to happen when interacting with strangers, thus encouraging optimism and leading to more trusting behaviors. Participation in markets, rather than making people suspicious, makes people more likely to trust anonymous strangers. Our results seem therefore to corroborate the idea of *doux commerce*. [Italics in original.]

Another pair of economists selected internet business professionals from two cutthroat industries: domain trading and online adult entertainment. Multiple laboratory games between these internet professionals and Berkeley students yielded surprising results: The business professionals were more trustworthy, trusting, generous, and honest. As the study's authors put it, "Internet business people were, on the whole, 'nicer' than students." An earlier study performed similar experiments with company CEOs and students. Although CEOs are often caricatured as being greedy Gordon Gekko clones, they ended up being both more trusting and more trustworthy than students in the experiments.

The fact that the commercial society *exists* should be awe-inspiring. The absolute scale of trust and cooperation is incredible. But markets aren't magical. They are spaces in which people engage in repeated trade, where individuals learn to consistently rely on and cooperate with each other. As people demonstrate a pattern of trustworthy behavior, exchange becomes more fluid, and trust becomes more concrete. Long-term success in the market depends partly on developing strong bonds of trust. And this practical necessity for economic success can eventually develop into a personal virtue.

Author: Walker Wright, the manager for Academic Programs at a public policy think tank in Washington, DC, and an adjunct faculty member at Brigham Young University-Idaho. His forthcoming book, In Trade We Trust: How Commerce Makes Us More Social*, will be published by Bloomsbury.*

PROGRESS ROUNDUPS

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Bigger trees in the Amazon, robo-IVF, a toothless typhoon, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

OCT 05, 2025

Economics & Development

- **Barbados, Belize, Dominica, and St Vincent and the Grenadines have agreed to let citizens of all four countries move, live, and work freely across each other's borders.**
- John Stossel released a video **debunking ridiculous economic nostalgia memes.**

Energy & Environment

- **Typhoon Ragasa**, which at its peak was a Category 5-equivalent super typhoon, **claimed no lives when it made landfall in China** last month—part of a broader trend of improving disaster resilience in the region.
- The AI reporter Kai Williams claims that **AI models "have almost completely automated" earthquake detection**.
- A recently published study analyzed 30 years of Amazonian tree records and found that **trees in the Amazon are getting bigger thanks to higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.** Bigger trees are better trees: better at capturing carbon, better at surviving forest fires, and better habitats for other species.

Health & Demographics

- **For men suffering from prostate cancer, there are a growing number of alternatives to prostate removal**, which can cause incontinence and erectile dysfunction. Options range from simply monitoring slow-growing tumors that may never cause harm to precisely targeted therapies that kill tumors without destroying the rest of the prostate.
- **In the UK, pilot programs using AI-analyzed CT scans saw stroke recovery rates triple.** The key may have been faster diagnosis for stroke patients: during the pilots, the average time from hospital arrival to treatment was about an hour shorter than normal.
- **Scientists in Oregon turned human skin cells into viable eggs** by transplanting their nuclei into donor eggs. While only a small share developed correctly, the technique could eventually create new reproductive options for infertile women.
- **Over the past three years, at least 20 babies have been born following automated in vitro fertilization**, where AI software selects the strongest sperm and a robot arm fertilizes the egg with little human involvement. The technology is still experimental but may one day make IVF far more affordable.
- **For decades, the only real defense against peanut allergies was avoiding exposure and carrying an EpiPen. That's starting to change.**
  - Evidence is mounting that feeding infants peanut products early can prevent most peanut allergies from ever developing.
  - Scientists are experimenting with safer ways to help desensitize allergic children to peanuts, such as a skin patch that delivers a steady trickle of peanut protein.
  - An early-phase trial is in the works to test a new drug combination that might be able to destroy the cells that produce allergy antibodies.
- **Saloni Dattani and Niko McCarty have summarized more recent innovations in medicine and biotechnology**, including cell transplants that evade immune rejection, AI-designed antibiotics, long-acting flu antivirals, and a potential new treatment for progeria.

Tolerance & Culture

- **While same-sex marriage in Japan is not recognized nationally**, broadly equivalent systems of same-sex partnership are common at the local level. According to a recent survey, **92.5 percent of the Japanese population has access to these same-sex partnership systems**.
- **The gender gap in AI adoption may be closing.** According to OpenAI, when ChatGPT first came out, less than a fifth of users had feminine names. Now, over fifty percent do, and there is some evidence that the AI model is helping automate household labor.

How Liberty Made Progress Possible

Peter Boettke joins Marian Tupy to examine the institutional foundations of the modern world.

MARIAN L TUPY AND PETER BOETTKE

OCT 10, 2025

For centuries, people lived under rigid hierarchies that stifled innovation and kept humanity in poverty. Somehow, that world of stagnation gave way to an age of relative freedom and unprecedented abundance.

Explaining that transformation is among the most important questions in economics; the answer shapes not only how we understand prosperity, but also how we might preserve it.

In this episode of *The Human Progress Podcast*, the economist Peter Boettke joins Marian Tupy to examine the institutional foundations of the modern world and what's at stake if we lose them.

Below is an edited and abridged transcript featuring some highlights from the interview.

Today, I'm speaking to Peter Boettke, a Professor of Economics at George Mason University, who has a new book out with Rosolino Candela called *The Historical Path to Liberty and Human Progress*.

Let's start with the big picture. What's the book about?

This book is based on work that Rosolino and I have been doing for about a decade on the institutional requirements for pursuing productive specialization and social cooperation under the division of labor.

This notion of social cooperation, which is at the core of what Ludwig von Mises wrote about in *Human Action*, is the foundation for modern economic growth. We're trying to tell the story of how institutional frameworks throughout history have empowered individuals to pursue productive specialization and realize social cooperation through mutually beneficial exchange.

By institutions, we mean both the formal and informal institutions. So, it's not only the formal institutions that you might read about in Acemoglu, but also those informal institutions that you would read about in McCloskey. Deirdre McCloskey likes to draw a line between her work and the institutionalist work, but we're trying to see a joint program. We're trying to see how all those things fit together.

When we think about economic progress, we often think about free markets and competition. But the free market is also about cooperation. Can you tell us a little more about that?

Yeah, especially among modern economists. Classical economists had a much better notion of the role that markets play in making us more cooperative.

Voltaire says that the Jew, the Gentile, and the Muslim can hate each other, but when they go into the market, the word heathen is left only to those who don't honor their contracts. That thesis, called doux commerce, has been de-emphasized in modern economics in favor of the idea of competition and market discipline, that we're going to be constantly seeking the highest rate of return so resources will be allocated in an efficient way, and that after we do that, and after we have exhausted all the gains from trade, we end up continually producing more with less.

All of that is true, but behind it is the idea that after two individuals meet in a market, both thank the other for the exchange. The term "catallaxy," which Hayek used a lot, means not only exchange, but also turning a stranger into a friend. It's symbolized by a handshake, meaning mutual agreement. That's the core of what we are talking about with regard to social cooperation and the division of labor.

In chapter one, you put a lot of emphasis on economic development being a result of private property and the price mechanism. Can you describe briefly why private property and the price mechanism matter?

Prices guide our behavior, profits lure us, and losses discipline us. If we don't have those signals, we end up engaging in activities that are wealth-destroying rather than wealth-creating. Private property creates those incentives through exchange, which produces prices. So, if you attenuate property rights, the rest of the system gets distorted, and if you try to abolish property rights, the system breaks down.

To make it more concrete for the listener, in somewhere like the Soviet Union, the state has property rights rather than individuals, and therefore prices are not properly generated. You have overproduction of stuff that people don't want, and underproduction of stuff that people need.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a lot of people became unemployed, and there was a lot of suffering. Many blamed that suffering on capitalism, but it was socialism that had employed so many people in unproductive ventures that needed to be shut down because they were reducing national wealth.

Yeah. They had firms for which the value of the inputs was greater than the value of the outputs. They were wealth-destroying. So, they needed to shut those firms down and reallocate their capital and labor more productively.

So, you already summarized the importance of property rights and the price mechanism, but they exist within institutional frameworks. There are different institutional frameworks, such as socialism and capitalism, that create different levels of believable knowledge or information.

How does the information part of it—the knowledge problem—relate to these different institutional frameworks?

When Mises and Hayek asserted that private property and incentives matter, the response by the socialists was, "Oh, wait a minute, the base determines the superstructure. So when you transform the material base, you're going to transform the superstructure and the attitudes of the individuals within it. All those greedy little things that need to be organized and capitalized are going to go away, and rather than homo economicus, we're going to have homo sovieticus."

Mises and Hayek then said that, even making that assumption, those individuals will not have the knowledge necessary to accomplish the task. It's not only a matter of mobilizing information, but also generating that information.

So, economic information doesn't just exist out there; it has to actually be produced. Private property and the freedom of contract give rise to prices. Those prices then help entrepreneurs form wishful conjectures about various enterprises. Profits tell them they're doing the right thing, and losses tell them they're doing the wrong thing. It's their ex-ante expectations being defeated by their ex-post realizations that cause the market to constantly churn, agitate, and create new ideas. Without competitive markets, it's not that the information is difficult to process; it doesn't exist.

That is very important for the current AI debate.

I've encountered arguments that once we have super quantum computers, they will be able to predict what needs to be produced and in what quantities: the ultimate socialist dream. But the problem is that decentralization is fundamental for the production of that information.

Yeah. They think of information as existing outside of the system. Imagine that you have a sand pile, and you've got to move it from one place to another. In the old days, we were trying to move the sand with a shovel, and now we've developed a backhoe. What Hayek and others argue is that without that generative process, you don't even have that sand pile to play around with.

Of course, once we have knowledge, it does have to be mobilized. In a book that I wrote with Chris Coyne many years ago called *Context Matters*, we divide the entrepreneurial moment into three moments: serendipity, search, and seize. The most important moment is serendipity. That notion of actually being aware of a possibility that others hadn't seen before is the essence of the entrepreneurial moment.

Is that why it's so difficult for governments to identify and encourage entrepreneurs? Because you don't know who, out of the 8 billion people, will have that serendipitous moment?

One hundred percent. This is a very Julian Simon point. In the beginning of *The Ultimate Resource*, he tells a story about the priest at Normandy looking at all the graves, whose eulogy is basically, "who among these could have been the next Mozart? Who among these could have been the next Einstein?" The ultimate resource is the human imagination. And economic thinking that pushes that to the wayside because we can't model it misses out on understanding innovation and ends up being excessively pessimistic. And, again, there's the key problem of identifying the institutional conditions most conducive to utilizing human creativity.

Let's pursue that line of thought. In your book, you talk about "polycentric constitutional order" as leading to the best outcomes.

Can you briefly describe what a polycentric model is?

The best model is from Bruno Frey. He has papers on what he calls functioning, overlapping, and competing jurisdictions. Basically, you have lots of governments with overlapping jurisdictions that citizens can move freely between, depending on the bundle of goods and services they are offered. This puts checks on political actors so that they don't engage in as much predation.

To put it in a very American sense, imagine American federalism on steroids. Take the basic structure of these United States, the American federalist system, and push it even further so that governance is at the most local level.

This seems close to Eric Jones's emphasis on the geographical decentralization of preindustrial Europe. Basically, whereas most of the world was ruled by large land empires, Europe was divided into hundreds of different statelets. So there was a horizontal competition, as well as a vertical competition, where your feudal lord had to compete with the king and the clergy, and that competition created a mishmash of different liberties and responsibilities that people could choose from.

Does that qualify?

One hundred percent. I have a very brilliant economic historian colleague named Mark Koyama, who wrote a book with Jared Rubin called *How the World Became Rich*. It's a textbook. And I asked Mark, "When did the Eric Jones European miracle thesis get defeated?" And he thinks it's never been defeated. People just got bored and moved on to other explanations because that's what they thought they needed to do.

We're trying to resurrect that idea again in this book: this notion that polycentric governance provides the infrastructure that allows us to pursue productive specialization and realize peaceful social cooperation among greater and greater numbers of people.

My biggest takeaway from your book is that the European miracle was really the result of a multi-century, perhaps even multi-millennial process of gradual liberalization. You write that the "accumulation of liberties leads to institutionalization of liberty, which leads to generalized increased returns, which leads to human progress."

Thank you for finding that sentence and reading it. That is the heart of the book. Liberty is won through numerous hard-earned battles for particular liberties. Alfred Marshall, the great economist, said that "History doesn't move in one giant leap. It moves in little marginal steps." You see these small victories where various oppressed groups are able to push back the oppressor and gain some space for themselves.

In my book, *The Struggle for a Better World*, I describe this in terms of winning victories against the crown, the military or other forces of violence, the dogma of the church, the bondage of slavery, and the mercantilist interests. These various victories accumulate until you reach a tipping point that creates an economic transformation.

This issue of transformation is important. If it were simply the case that every liberty we win improves us, we would have a straight line of increasing prosperity instead of a hockey stick. The great economist G. Warren Nutter used to ask his students, "Explain to me how a larva turns into a butterfly." And then he would pause for a minute and say, "Now try to explain it to me in a Solow growth model." In economics, we like to think about these things as Solow growth models, but Deirdre McCloskey's work tells us that a Solow model cannot explain the Great Enrichment, but what can explain it is a transformation akin to a larva turning into a butterfly. That accumulation of liberties, and the moment they get institutionalized, creates a transformation.

You mentioned the Soviet context before, and in the Soviet culture, they had an issue that they called tall poppy syndrome. Which is that when anyone gets ahead, they are cut down rather than celebrated. This is McCloskey's point: let me give it a go and I'll make you rich. Well, for a lot of human history, we didn't let people give it a go. We penalized them if they tried to do something different. So, we needed to get to the point where those accumulated liberties provided enough security that people could think differently and pursue things that no one had done before. That's how you unleash the creative powers of civilization.

It's almost like a nuke going off. You have to have a critical mass of whatever it is that you're trying to blow up, and then eventually you achieve ignition.

It seems to me that this process of liberalization you are describing takes place on two different levels. One is the philosophical or moral level, and the other is the political or economic level. There are these little liberties that get institutionalized into law. For example, you can now trade overseas, there is no longer a monopoly on salt, you can open a new factory without being a member of the guild, and so on. That's the political-economic level. Then you have the moral level, which is where McCloskey comes in. She says that on top of the political and economic system, you need to have people who are comfortable with you exercising your freedom and doing with your life and with your property what you want.

McCloskey explains that the transaction costs of enforcing a rule are going to rise or fall depending on people's value systems. So, for example, private property was introduced long before the economic takeoff, so you can't explain the takeoff using just the formal right to private property. All our liberties rely on informal value systems that lower the costs of enforcing those rights.

Let me just tell you about two reformers in Russia whom I knew. One was Anatoly Chubais, who became the head of privatization in Russia, but at one time was a young academician just like me. Yegor Gaidar was another. In the late 1980s, all these people were reading Western thinkers like Milton Friedman and Hayek. Then, all of a sudden, they became the people in charge.

They were ridiculously young and given all this power, and, prior to them being in politics, they were as hardcore a Friedmanite or Hayekian as you'd meet at any Cato University event. And Gaidar, when he stepped down, what did he create? A giant scientific research center for himself. What did Chubais do? Chubais ended up getting a lucrative contract for a book he never wrote. And he ended up taking control of a state-run energy corporation.

Those guys became oligarchs. They violated the rule of law under the guise of privatization. How are you going to constrain that kind of behavior? You need to have the rules, but you also need to have morals that justify and legitimate those rules.

My last question is as follows: Steven Pinker says that progress is due to the Enlightenment. Deirdre McCloskey says it's due to liberalism. But in your book, *The Historical Path to Liberty and Human Progress*, you call liberalism "the political philosophy of the Enlightenment."

Could we say that those two explanations are really part of the same process of gradual liberalization?

That's the argument we make.

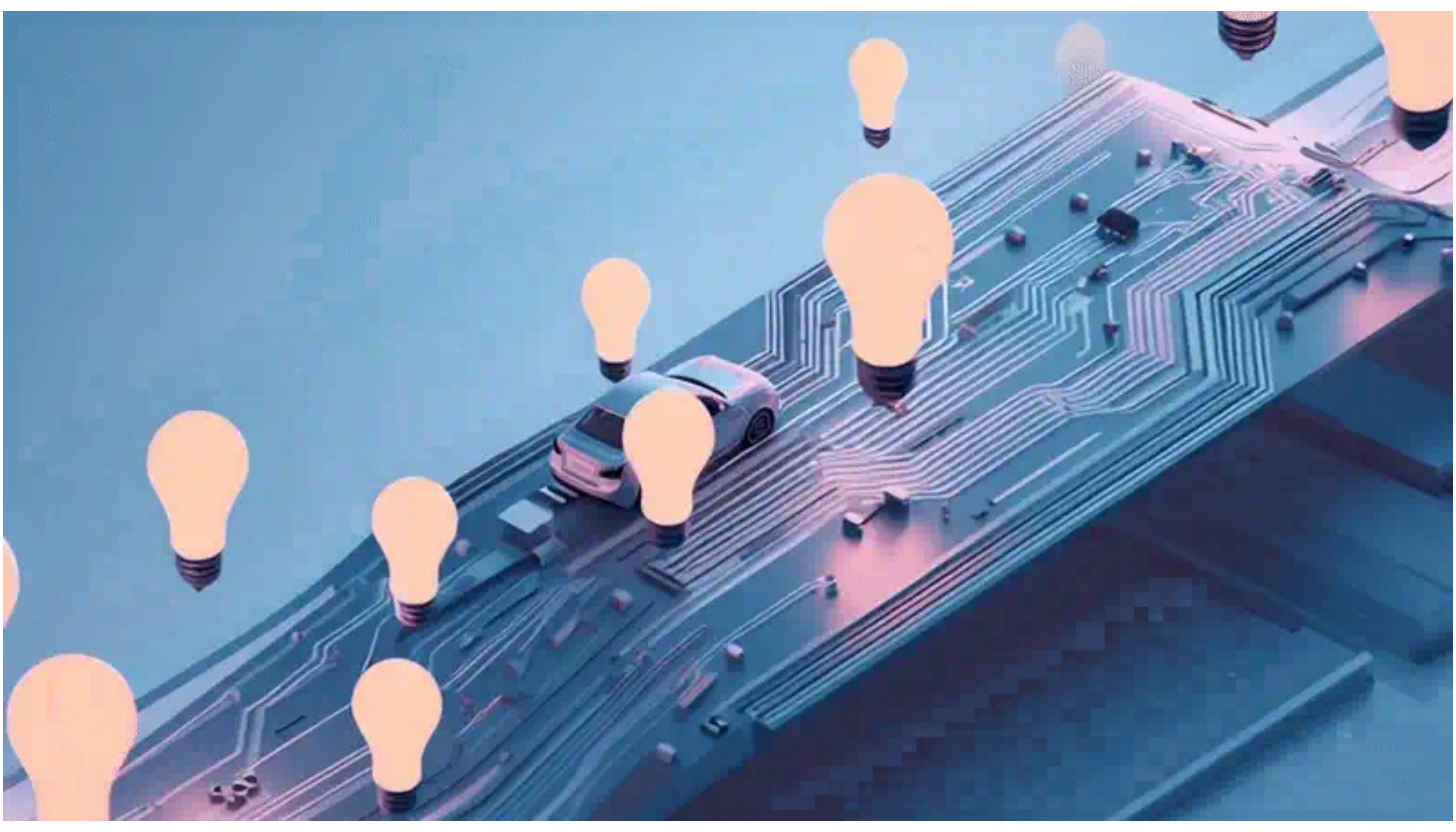
I think that the Enlightenment project is critical to understanding the co-evolution of both liberal political and legal institutions and liberal economic institutions. And it's the co-evolution of those two things that, over centuries, gets us to the tipping point, this combustible combination that leads to the world that we benefit from to this day. Despite the growing role of the state, we still have enough space—enough elbow room, as Thomas Sowell says—that ordinary people can do extraordinary things. That's, I hope, the message that we get across.

Don't Slam the Brakes on Technological Progress

Embracing change is worth the cost in disruption.

RYAN BOURNE

OCT 11, 2025



Some US conservatives want to slam the brakes on progress, quite literally. At the recent US National Conservatism conference, Senator Josh Hawley of Missouri declared: "Only humans ought to drive cars and trucks."

His techno-scepticism runs deeper than opposing driverless vehicles. "Every so-called innovation the tech class has delivered in recent decades operates as a power transfer ... from us to them," he warned. "Us" meaning the honest "common man". "Them" being Silicon Valley transhumanist elites and their job-killing code.

We must take this urge to ban driverless cars and smother AI seriously. Not because Hawley is right, but because his anxieties are commonly held here. A recent survey by the Schwartz Reisman Institute found just 8 per cent of Britons are strongly positive about artificial intelligence, putting us last except for Australia. Only France and the US had higher negative sentiment than the UK too (33 per cent). On driverless cars, just 22 per cent of us say we'd feel safe in one. This is fertile ground for populists looking to appeal to displaced workers in our own politics.

Fears of job loss from new technology aren't irrational. But trying to resist the tide can smother the benefits of new tech while making any eventual adjustment harder. Still, politicians can't help themselves. Last year, in opposition, Labour's Louise Haigh warned that automated vehicles could repeat "the ravages of deindustrialisation". That's Labour-speak for "government intervention required". The tool of choice, of course, is typically "safety" regulation.

This instinct isn't new. In 1865, parliament passed the Locomotive Act, capping self-propelled vehicle speeds at 2mph in towns and 4mph in the countryside, while requiring each be preceded by a man waving a red flag. Branded as a safety measure, it was backed by the horse-drawn carriage and rail lobbies. Maybe it spared a few pedestrians, but it certainly stunted any early car industry. Innovation was sacrificed to protect incumbents, with safety the excuse.

The US mis-stepped too. For decades, cities required human lift operators even after automatic elevators became safer and cheaper. A few thousand jobs were saved, with higher costs for building owners and slower productivity in sectors based in tall buildings. Like red flag laws, the aim of this safety regulation was really to preserve jobs in aspic.

The Hawley instinct would repeat this error. Trials of autonomous vehicle systems like Waymo in the US show 70–90 per cent reductions in crash rates compared with human drivers. In the UK, where human error is a factor in 88 per cent of collisions, industry modelling suggests autonomous vehicles could save 3,900 lives and prevent 60,000 serious injuries by 2040, with just 20-24 per cent market penetration. Studies predict less congestion, lower fuel use, and cheaper deliveries and logistics. And then there's time freed. The average Brit spends over 120 hours per year behind the wheel, which is ripe for reclaiming for work or leisure. All these efficiencies would boost downstream sectors.

Yet the public isn't sold. Polls show most Britons still consider driverless cars unsafe. That gives our own Hawleys an opening. Regulation to slow innovation always attracts both well-meaning safety worriers and affected workers with political allies. Labour has passed enabling legislation for automated vehicles, but seems to be dragging its feet on rollout. Meanwhile, the diffuse benefits of improved safety and efficiency get downplayed and delayed.

As AI spreads through the economy, such political battles will proliferate. Someone will always stand ready to highlight the freak accident, the displaced worker or the imperfect chatbot. And certain politicians will promise to protect workers affected.

That's why it falls to those not wedded to the status quo to state the obvious: yes, automation is disruptive. But it's also the path to safer roads, cheaper goods, and higher productivity. Hiding behind a modern red flag is no answer.

Progress that is delayed amounts to progress denied.

This article was originally published by The Times *on 9/17/2025*.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

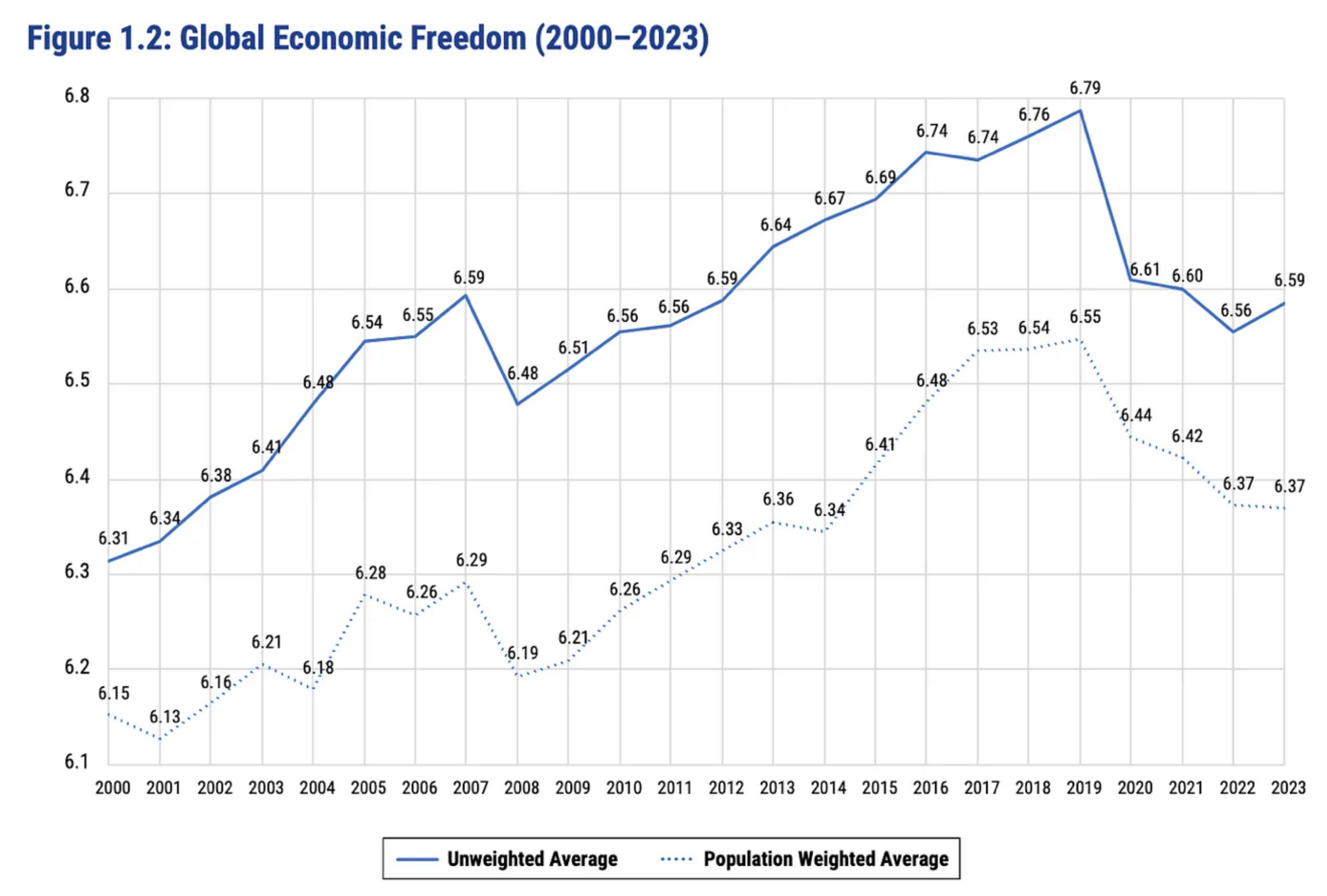
Innovations in precision agriculture, hordes of humpbacks, an update on economic freedom, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

OCT 12, 2025

Economics & Development

- The latest *Economic Freedom of the World* report from the Fraser Institute finds that **the disastrous erosion of global economic freedom that followed the pandemic may have come to an end in 2023**. That year, the unweighted index score—simply the average across all countries in the index—rose from its 2022 low, while the population-weighted value stopped falling. While calling this a "recovery" would be an overstatement, the new data suggest the world may be regaining at least some of the freedom it lost since 2019.



- Despite escalating US tariffs, **global trade volume was 5 percent larger in the first seven months of 2025 than during the same period in 2024,** though World Bank economists caution that companies may have "rushed to complete transactions before tariff increases took effect."

The Rising Tide: How Trade Lifts All Boats

HUMAN PROGRESS • AUG 15

The globalization of the market system has brought global extreme poverty to its lowest levels in human history.

Read full story →

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity

- Recent research suggests **there were over 50,000 eastern Australian humpback whales in 2024**, up from 25,000 a decade ago.
- **Some cave-dwelling bat populations in Wisconsin appear to be recovering from White Nose Syndrome**, the infamous fungal disease that has wiped out millions of North American bats.
- **Seabirds, crabs, geckos, and native flora are flourishing on Bikar Atoll and Jemo Islet**—two small islands in the Marshalls—after conservationists successfully eradicated invasive rats.
- **Salmon are breeding in England's River Don for the first time in over 200 years.**
- **The Little Bustard**, a heavy-bodied grassland bird native to Eurasia, **is making a comeback in Kyrgyzstan** after it was nearly extirpated during the Soviet period.

Energy & Natural Resources

- **New Hampshire has passed a law exempting electricity providers who don't connect to the grid from public-utility regulation**, cutting red tape that can delay projects by years and opening the door to experimentation and innovation in the electricity sector.
- **Nigeria is importing record quantities of solar panels**, which are helping its citizens cope with the country's notoriously unreliable power grid.

Food & Hunger:

- A biotechnology company called **InnerPlant has developed soybeans that glow when stressed, allowing farmers to intervene early** and avoid crop losses. Recently, their system, which pairs the fluorescent soybeans with optical sensors, detected a fungal infection weeks before it would have been visible to the naked eye.
- *The New York Times* recently profiled another precision agriculture innovation: **health-tracking collars for cows.** The devices monitor each animal's activity and rumination—a measure of digestion—and automatically flag abnormalities, **helping farmers keep their herds healthy**. They might also make animal husbandry less labor-intensive:

> Annie Vannurden, general manager of Warner Dairy in Brown County, S.D., bought the collars last year and has used them to expand her dairy to 5,000 cows from 2,700 without adding a single worker.

Health & Demographics

- **Twenty-two countries and territories in the Western Pacific**, including Japan and a number of small island nations, **have eliminated measles and rubella.**
- **A new vaccine is being rolled out across Africa's "meningitis belt,"** where dry winds and dust fuel regular and deadly outbreaks. **The shot protects against nearly all major bacterial strains that cause meningitis in sub-Saharan Africa** and could save millions of lives.
- **Chinese surgeons have transplanted a genetically modified pig liver into a living person for the first time.** While the organ functioned for just 38 days before it had to be removed, doctors hope procedures like this one could buy patients crucial time for their own livers to recover or regenerate.

Science & Technology

- With new federal rules expected to permit "beyond visual line of sight" flights, **a growing list of US companies**, including Walmart, Uber, DoorDash, and Amazon, **are launching or significantly expanding their drone delivery programs.**
- **Flock Safety**, a tech startup focused on crime detection and prevention, **is selling drones to private businesses to help them catch thieves.**
- **Verizon is partnering with AST SpaceMobile to launch satellite-based cell service across the US starting next year**.
- Google's DeepMind laboratory has created an **AI system called RoboBallet that allows factory robots to coordinate their movements and avoid crashing into each other.** Normally, this kind of choreography has to be painstakingly programmed by humans.

What Richard Nixon's Real Scandal Should Have Been

A decade of price-control misery

GALE POOLEY

OCT 15, 2025

Shortly after I turned 15, President Richard M. Nixon managed to make my life miserable. On Sunday August 15, 1971, against the advice of his economic counselors, and in total repudiation of his party's campaign platform, he announced on national TV that he was suspending the gold standard, imposing a 10 percent tariff surcharge, and imposing wage and price controls.

At the time, I didn't know a thing about macroeconomics. What I did know was how to make customers happy at my dad's gas station: Fill their tanks fast, wash their windows, and send them off with a smile.

Nixon's decision not only shook the foundations of global finance—it trickled all the way down to a teenager pumping gas on Main Street, teaching me firsthand how government policy can reach into everyday life. Nixon's policies caused a decade of artificial shortages and almost destroyed my father's business. As Robert Bleiberg, editor of *Barron's*, noted at the time, "Price controls, as their advocates have claimed all along, do work like magic. They can make things disappear in the twinkling of an eye." For me, Nixon's policies meant no more happy customers, which translated to no more tips.

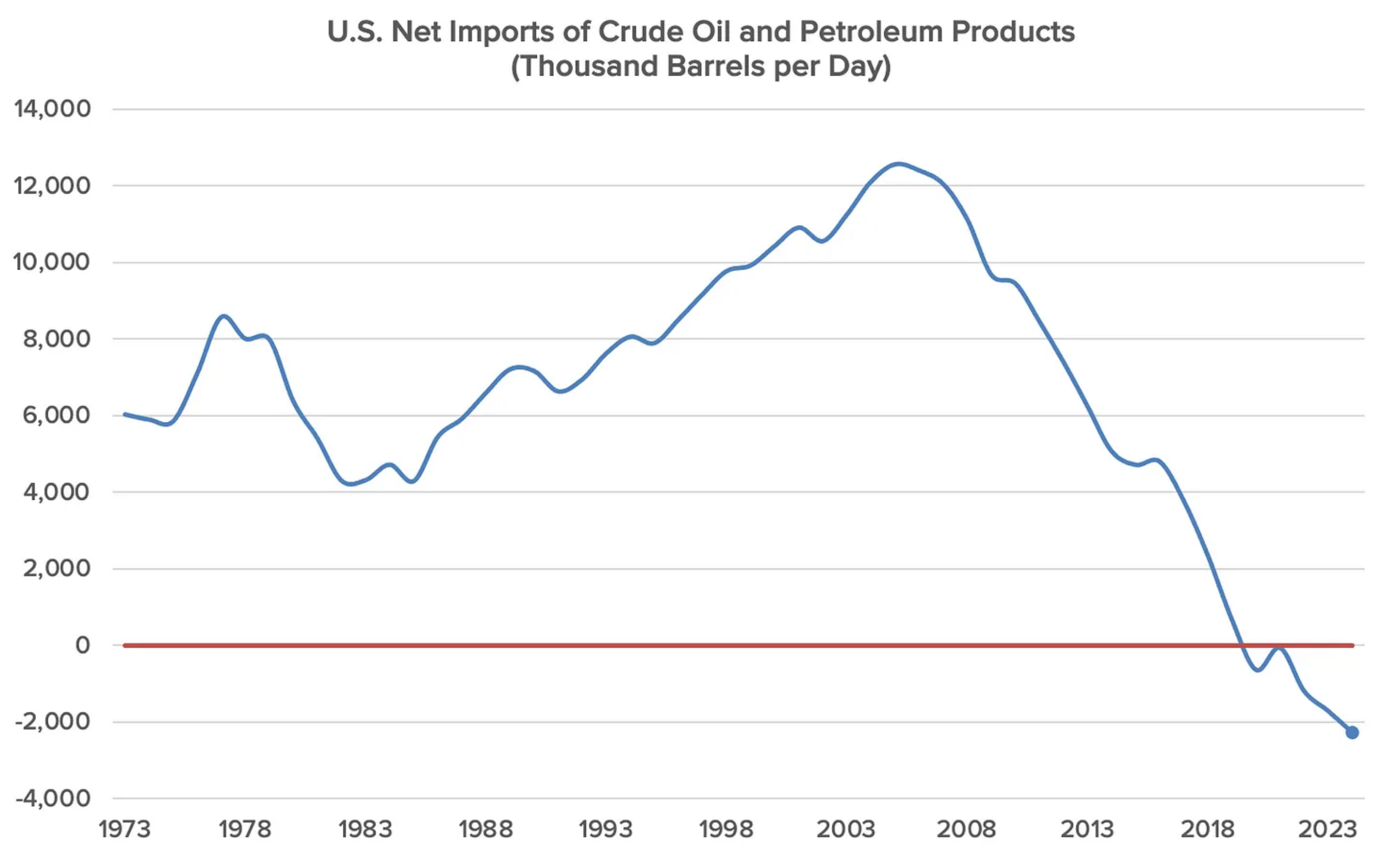
Like many gas station owners at the time, my dad decided to attempt rationing his limited allotment of fuel by restricting sales to only five gallons per customer. After waiting in line for sometimes more than an hour, most customers were furious to be told that they could only buy five gallons of gas. They took their anger out on their lowly attendant, not on the perpetrator of the calamity living in the White House.

The president, along with the politicians and corporate leaders who cheered for price controls, never had to face the fury of my customers. They could make sweeping decisions from behind their podiums and boardroom tables without ever paying the price for being wrong. As Thomas Sowell once put it, "It is hard to imagine a more stupid or more dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong."

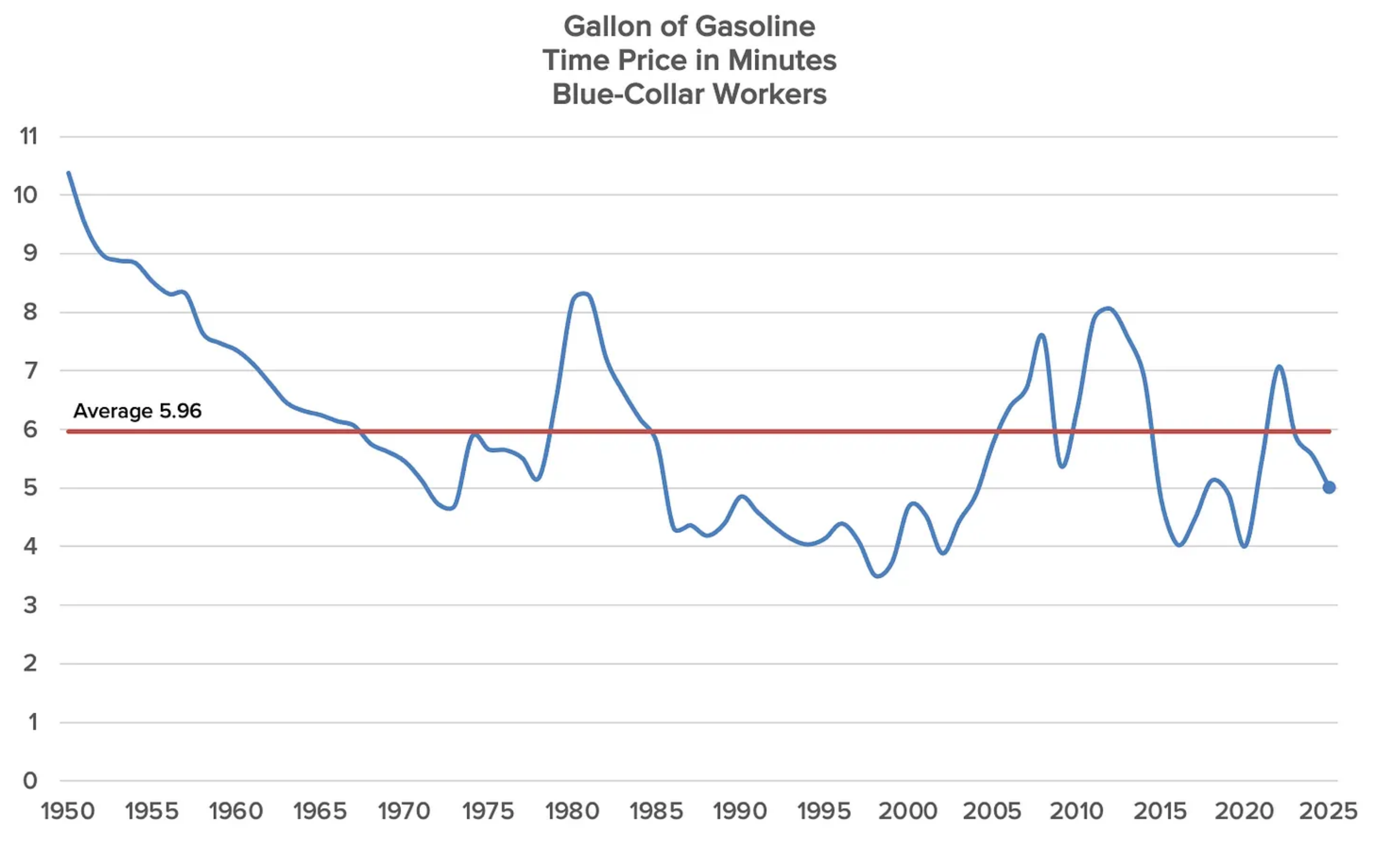
Price controls tied the hands of domestic producers while leaving foreign suppliers, such as OPEC, untouched. The result was the opposite of what policymakers had intended. Instead of fueling independence, the policies throttled domestic supply and handed foreign oil giants the keys to America's energy future.

In 1981, just eight days after taking office, President Ronald Reagan swept away the federal price and allocation controls on domestic oil and refined products. Overnight, my decade of gas-line misery came to an end. Prices did rise—but for the first time in years, people could fill their tanks without rationing, limits, or fear of empty pumps. I learned a key lesson: Politicians create scarcities, entrepreneurs create abundances.

When oil prices surged in the early 2000s, entrepreneurs and markets responded with a wave of innovation. Breakthroughs such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing unlocked vast new oil reserves, unleashing a surge of supply. America's unique system of private ownership of subsurface mineral rights—rather than government control—supercharged this revolution by giving landowners a direct stake in production. The results were astonishing: The United States, whose oil industry was once thought to be in irreversible decline, has become a net exporter of petroleum products.



Since 1950 the average time price for a gallon of gasoline has been around six minutes for blue-collar workers. We're actually around five minutes today. The United States has some of the lowest gasoline time prices on the planet.



Yes, we've had periods where the price has spiked, typically due to political turmoil, but time and again, innovation and markets have responded by creating greater abundance. Julian Simon predicted such would be the case, as long as politicians and bureaucrats don't impose "solutions" that have counter-productive consequences.

Nixon resigned on August 8, 1974, to avoid impeachment for his crime of covering up the Watergate break-in. But to me, his darker crime wasn't in a hotel—it was in every gas station in America. His Soviet-style controls left behind a nation of frustrated, unhappy customers and pump attendants who bore the real cost of his misguided policies.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Sea turtle de-listing, a new world record in genome sequencing, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

OCT 20, 2025

Energy & Environment

- **The green sea turtle is no longer considered endangered** by the IUCN following a 28 percent increase in its population since the 1970s.
- The latest **snow leopard count** in India's Himachal Pradesh found **83 cats, up from 51 in 2021.**
- After nearly a century of absence, **bay scallops are back in Virginia waters and multiplying fast**. Conservationists began restoring their seagrass habitats back in 1997, and in 2009 began breeding and releasing scallops back into the ecosystem. Now, the species is booming, with its Virginia population doubling roughly every 18 months.
- **China reduced particulate air pollution by 41 percent between 2013 and 2022,** adding an estimated two years to national life expectancy.

Health & Demographics

- **Ethiopia has become the 23rd African country to introduce the R21 malaria** vaccine following a recent surge in cases.
- **The Maldives has eliminated mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B, HIV, and syphilis.**
- **The recent Ebola outbreak in the DRC may have ended** just six weeks after it began.
- **The Galleri blood test**, which can detect more than 50 types of cancer, **has shown promising results in a major trial**. The test correctly identified cancer in 62 percent of people who tested positive and ruled it out in over 99 percent of negatives. Notably, three-quarters of the cancers it identified have no existing screening program.

Science & Technology

- **SpaceX's Starship had a very successful test flight last Monday**, passing every major flight milestone with only minor hiccups. Its reworked heat shield also performed well, leaving the vehicle in much better condition after reentry than in previous flights.
- **Researchers in Boston have set a new world record for the fastest human genome sequencing, processing some samples in under four hours**. This is a medical achievement as well as a technical one, paving the way for genetic diagnoses for critically ill newborns within hours instead of days.
- **Waymo says it will bring robotaxi service to London next year.**

Read more news stories on our website

Wheat Superabundance Proves Malthus Wrong

Compared to 1960, we can grow 250 percent more wheat on 9 percent more land, at an 85.7 percent lower time price.

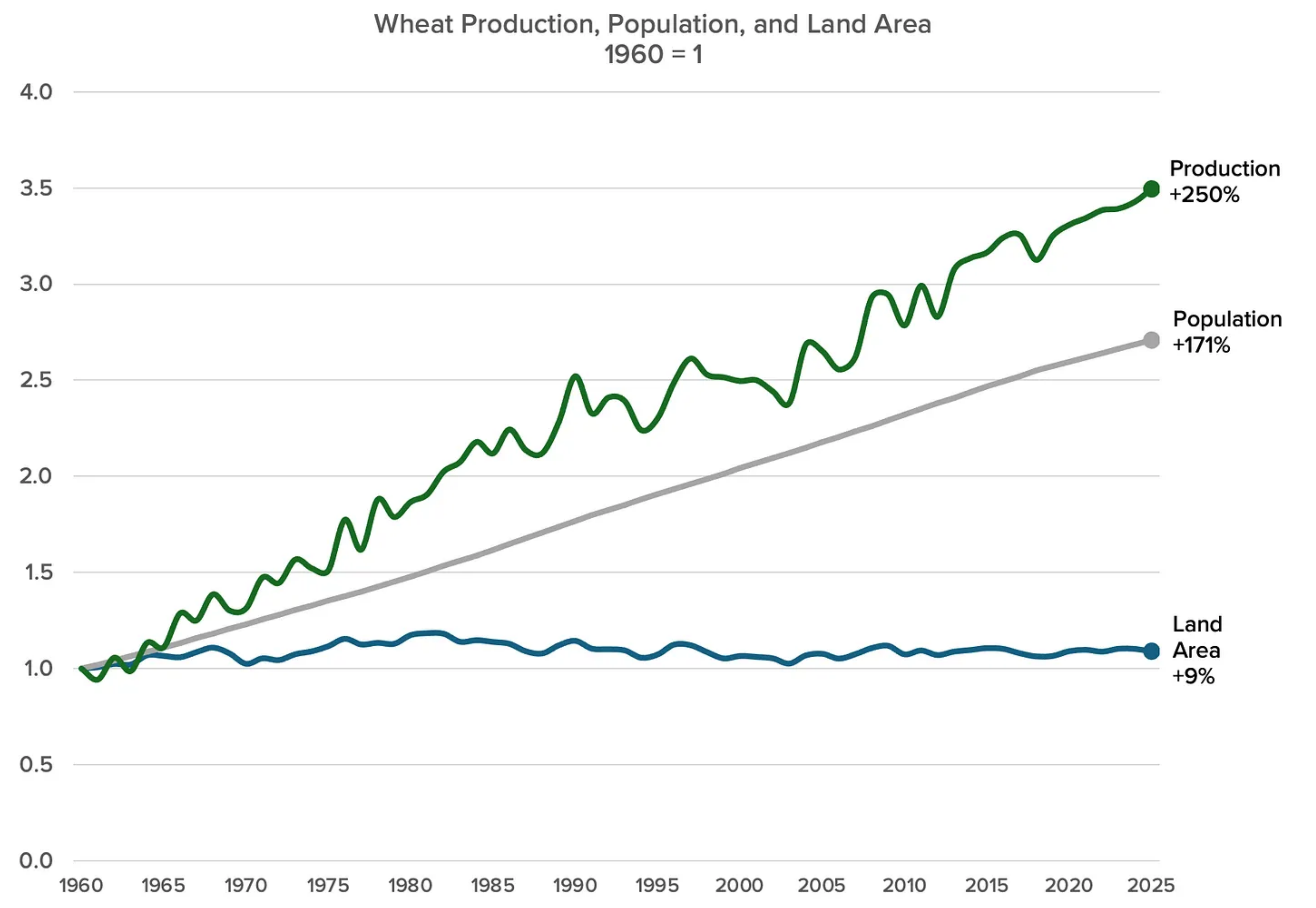
GALE POOLEY

OCT 21, 2025

The Reverend Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) got it backwards. In his 1798 *Essay on Population* he warned that "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio."

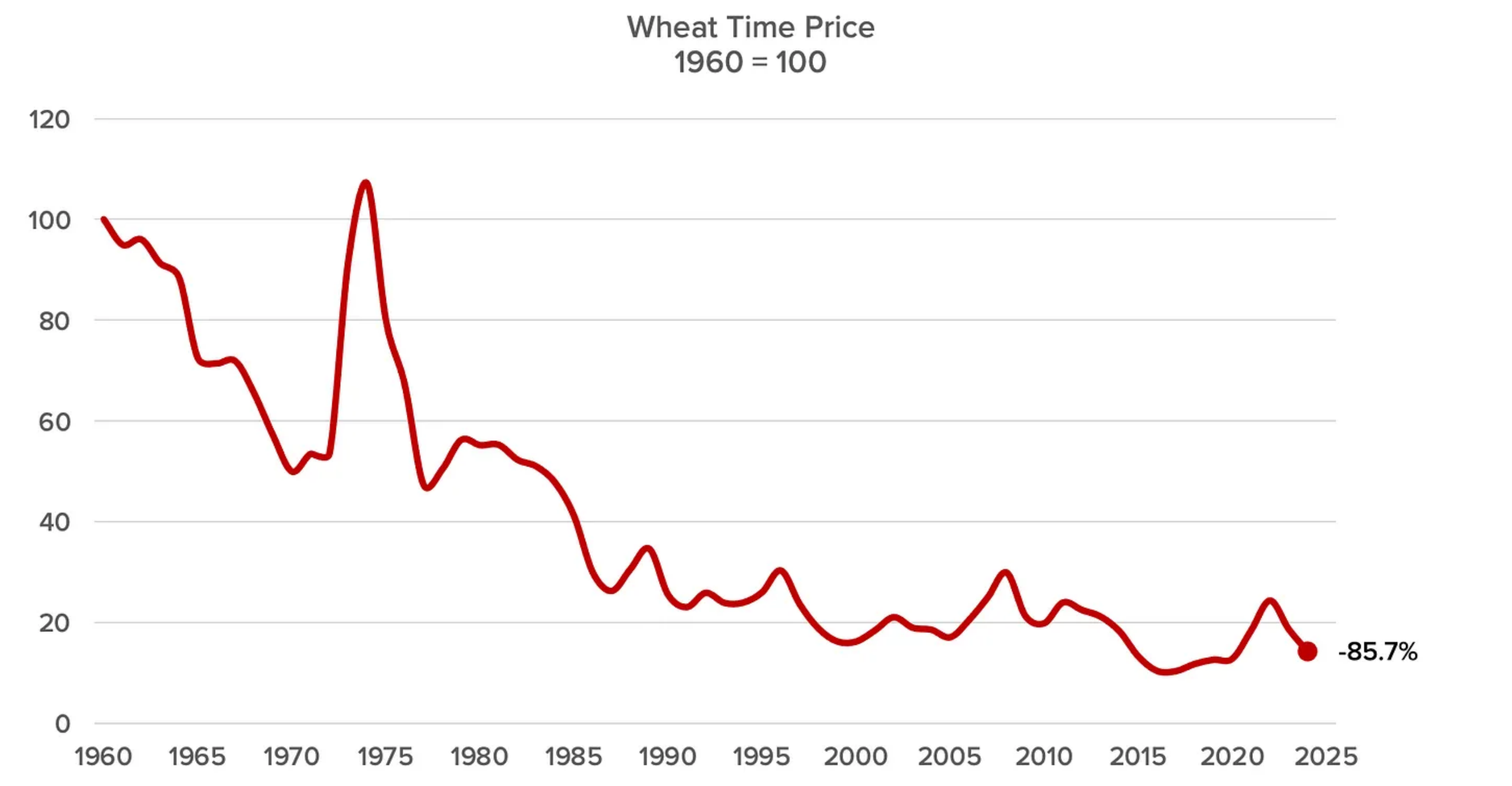
Malthus even added, with no small dose of condescension, that "a slight acquaintance with numbers will shew the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second."

When Malthus published his essay, the world's population hovered around 1 billion. By 1960 it had reached 3 billion. Today it stands at roughly 8.2 billion. And yet, instead of mass starvation, food production has outpaced population growth. Consider wheat.

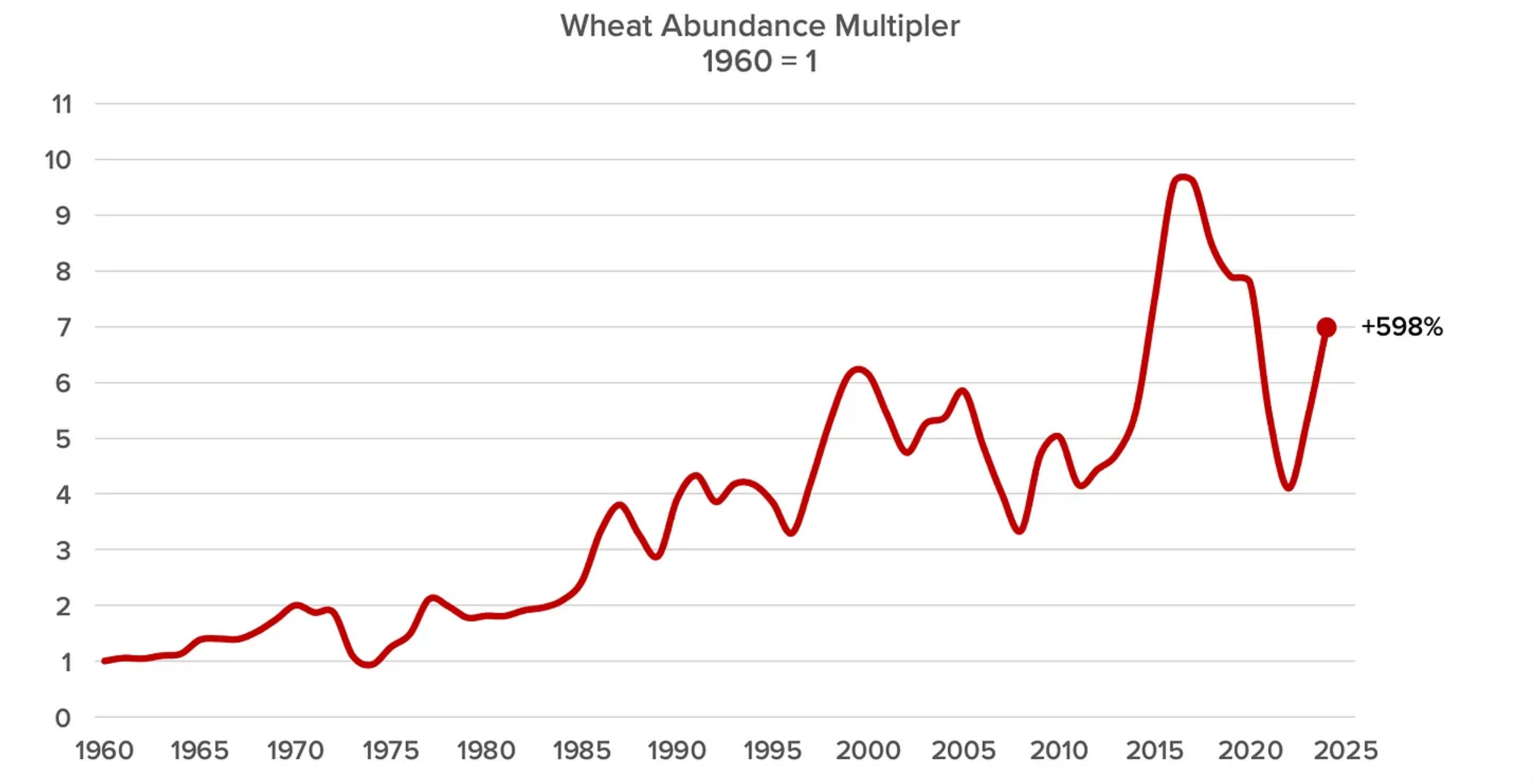


According to the US Department of Agriculture, since 1960 wheat production has surged by 250 percent, while the world's population grew by only 171 percent. For every 1 percent increase in population, wheat production rose by 1.46 percent. Even more remarkable, this bounty came from just 9 percent more arable land. Wheat yields—the amount harvested per acre—have soared by 271 percent.

But what about the time price? Glad you asked. Since 1960, the time price of wheat has fallen by 85.7 percent.



Put differently, the time it took to earn the money to buy a single bushel of wheat now buys almost seven bushels.



Yes, there have been moments when wheat prices spiked—due to droughts, wars, and politics. Yet with fewer conflicts, relentless innovation, and open markets, wheat has only grown more abundant. If Reverend Malthus could see our world today, I suspect he'd be relieved—and perhaps even delighted—that human ingenuity proved him to be so spectacularly wrong.

More Reasons to Distrust Contemporary Feudal Fantasies

Romantic visions of feudal life bear little resemblance to the historical reality.

CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT
OCT 23, 2025

CROSS-POSTED BY PAST IMPERFECT

""Modern economic systems, for all their flaws, have delivered longer lives, safer working conditions, and unprecedented prosperity.""

- Malcolm Cochran

"Feudalism is so much better than what we have now. Because at least in feudalism, the leader is vested in the prosperity of the people he rules," declared Tucker Carlson recently on *The Tucker Carlson Show.* His guest, writer Auron MacIntyre, agreed enthusiastically. Carlson added, "If all your serfs die, you starve." McIntyre replied, "Yeah. There's a true incentive to care for those people."

The conversation sparked ridicule online, but it also reflected a broader, bipartisan trend. As Amanda Mull observed in *The Atlantic,* social media has grown "strangely nostalgic for life in the Middle Ages." Samuel Matlack of *The New Atlantis* noted the puzzling frequency of the argument that the preindustrial past may have been superior to modernity.

Carlson's reasoning implies that feudal lords, out of self-interest, nurtured the well being of their serfs. Yet the system he imagines has more in common with modern markets than with medieval Europe. Adam Smith explained the principle long ago: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." If customers are displeased, businesses collapse. Markets channel self-interest into mutual gain in ways that feudalism never could.

History makes that clear. Start with life expectancy. Even kings in the feudal era rarely lived into old age. Between the 11th and early 15th centuries, most European monarchs died young. Alfonso VI of Castile and León, who reached 79, was the outlier. Only a few others across England, Aragon, Germany, and France managed to live into their 60s. For most rulers, living to 70 was unattainable, and commoners fared far worse.

The average European life expectancy in the 11th century hovered around 25 years, driven down by staggering child mortality. Historian Richard Hoffmann notes that of 1,000 children who survived infancy, as many as 250 died by age seven. Only between 40 and 70 percent ever reached adolescence. In contrast, life expectancy in Europe today exceeds 80 years.

Nor were feudal peasant lives leisurely. A persistent myth claims medieval peasants worked less than modern people. This misconception stems from an early estimate by historian Gregory Clark, who suggested peasants worked only 150 days annually, an estimate he later revised upward to about 300. That number is higher than today's 260 working days, even before accounting for paid holidays and vacation. Serfs' labor was grueling and often damaging to their health. They were legally bound to the land, compelled to work their lord's fields in addition to their own, and held few rights against mistreatment.

Another common misconception is that feudal societies provided security in exchange for labor. In reality, medieval Europe was marked by frequent famine, war, and violence. Crop failures were devastating, and local lords often demanded their share of harvests regardless of whether peasants had enough left to survive. Raids and small-scale wars were constant features of life, and the people at the bottom had little protection when armies swept through their fields. Unlike citizens in modern states who benefit from the rule of law and relatively impartial modern justice system, peasants depended on their lords for protection but had no meaningful recourse when those same lords were the source of oppression. For most peasants, daily life combined backbreaking labor with exposure to hunger, violence, and disease, far from the idyllic stability sometimes imagined today. (I explore these harsh realities in my forthcoming book, *The Grim Old Days: An Introduction to the Preindustrial Past*).

In Russia, where serfdom endured until 1861, abuse could be extreme. Serfs were frequently beaten or killed without legal consequence. The notorious case of Darya Saltykova, who tortured more than 100 of her serfs to death, was unusual only in that she faced punishment.

Material conditions were equally bleak. In 1300, the United Kingdom's average income was about $1,657 in today's dollars. That represented one of the wealthiest regions in Europe at the time. Even kings lived in poverty by modern standards, while ordinary peasants experienced deprivation that is difficult to imagine today.

When Friedrich Hayek titled his classic *The Road to Serfdom,* he did not mean it as praise. He used "serfdom" to warn against a return to systems that crushed freedom and prosperity. Carlson's romantic vision of feudal life bears little resemblance to the historical reality.

Modern economic systems, for all their flaws, have delivered longer lives, safer working conditions, and unprecedented prosperity. The record of feudalism offers no reason to wish for its return.

This article was originally published at LA Progressive *on 9/22/2025.*

The System Everyone Hates Is the One That Has Actually Worked

Despite its bad reputation, neoliberalism has been a global success story.

RICHARD HANANIA
OCT 24, 2025

Despite the polarization of our times, there is widespread agreement regarding the economic approach pursued by global elites between, roughly speaking, 1980 and 2008. If the term "neoliberalism" is used today, it is usually as an epithet for that era. Progressive critics including Joseph Stiglitz frame neoliberalism as a destructive ideology that widened inequality, weakened democracy, and commodified social life. To populist and national conservatives, neoliberal globalization hollowed out national industries, undermined communities, and empowered elites at the expense of ordinary citizens.

These critics are wrong. Neoliberalism emerged to deal with real problems, had strong intellectual foundations, and largely accomplished its goals. The anger at neoliberalism does not reflect its failures but instead represents scapegoating for complaints that are largely unrelated to economic issues. Critics of neoliberalism are wrong on economics, and there is little reason to believe that most of their preferred policies provide a better alternative.

Neoliberalism was a response to stagnation and malaise around the globe. Outside the Communist Bloc, the mid-20th century was dominated by Keynesianism in the West and state-led development in the Global South. Governments regulated industries, controlled capital flows, and expanded welfare states. By the 1970s, cracks appeared in this system: stagflation (low growth and high unemployment) in the United States and Europe and recurring fiscal crises discredited state-centered models. In the developing world, mounting debt and balance-of-payments problems forced governments to seek assistance from international institutions, setting the stage for policy change.

This atmosphere of crisis created an opening for market-oriented thinkers who had been marginalized in earlier decades, perhaps most notably the Chicago University economist Milton Friedman, who would win the Nobel Prize for economics in 1976 and become highly influential as a public figure advocating for deregulation. The law and economics movement, centered on figures including Ronald Coase, Richard Posner, and Gary Becker, also emerged at the University of Chicago, and they began to apply cost-benefit analysis to government regulations that had previously gone unquestioned. They called for taking efficiency concerns into consideration when interpreting legal doctrine.

Neoliberalism was characterized by taking seriously classical liberalism's commitment to free markets and limited government. In the context of the world created by the 1970s, this approach meant slowing the growth in the money supply, deregulating industry, taking a skeptical approach to labor unions and industrial policy, opening markets up to the free flow of capital and trade, and in some cases, trying to shrink or at least prevent the expansion of the welfare state.

This cross-partisan convergence toward such ideas beginning in the late 1970s and continuing into the early 2000s has been called hegemonic neoliberalism. The first wave was identified with the right, associated with the tenures of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989) and Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990). The second came in the 1990s in the form of the "Third Way" leaders, notably Bill Clinton (1993–2001) and Tony Blair (1997–2007). Far from rejecting their conservative predecessors, they consolidated the new order: Clinton championed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), welfare reform, and financial deregulation, while Blair's New Labour accepted Thatcherite economic reforms.

The impacts of neoliberal ideology were felt well beyond the Anglo-American world. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank began to make financial aid to the developing world, much of it in disarray due to failed post-independence economic policies, conditional on adopting neoliberal reforms. Across Africa, Latin America, and Asia, governments privatized industry, cut public spending, and began to open up to international trade. The impacts of neoliberalism can clearly be seen in India and China, the two largest nations in the world. Beginning in late 1978, China introduced market mechanisms during the reign of Deng Xiaoping. In 1991, facing a balance-of-payments crisis, India implemented sweeping reforms under International Monetary Fund guidance. That involved cutting tariffs and the dismantling of the "License Raj," which created strenuous permit requirements to import goods or operate a business. The old system placed limits on imports, set tariffs as high as 300 percent, and "made India virtually a closed economy."

Neoliberalism made two major promises. It would put Western nations on a better economic track and also turbocharge development in the third world. On both accounts, it worked. The UK, in particular, saw growth increase in the 1980s and 1990s. Growth was about the same in the US in the 1980s and 1990s as it was in the 1970s, but with lower inflation, more stability, and lower unemployment. Refusing to follow Thatcher's approach of taking on unions and limiting the expansion of the welfare state, the other major economies of Western Europe—France, Germany, Italy, and Spain—saw slower growth than either the US or the UK in subsequent decades. While growth rates in the Western world never returned to the those of the golden age of the 1950s and 1960s, the crisis of the 1970s had been overcome.

To put it another way, the US has been more neoliberal than the UK, which has been more neoliberal than most of the rest of Western Europe. And since the neoliberal revolution, the US has grown fastest, followed by the UK, and then Western Europe. Moreover, many economists believe that the main issue hindering even greater economic success in the UK and the US is their inability to build enough housing, due to government regulations getting in the way. That indicates that the US and the UK are suffering from too little, rather than too much, free market capitalism.

Together, China and India accounted for about 40 percent of the world population in 1980, and an even higher portion of the third-world population, so their trajectories are not just national stories but also tell us much about what has happened to the global economy. After market-oriented reforms, both nations experienced dramatic improvements in growth and poverty reduction. China's opening up, beginning in 1978, unleashed decades of double-digit expansion, lifting more than 700 million people out of extreme poverty and transforming the country into the world's second-largest economy. After India's 1991 liberalization, annual growth rates increased, fueling the rise of a vast middle class and massive reductions in poverty. According to a 2022 World Bank report, China alone has accounted for nearly 75 percent of the global reduction in extreme poverty over the last four decades.

It is often said that China did not adopt all aspects of neoliberalism but pursued a hybrid model. Yet although China has grown impressively, it still remains much poorer than other East Asian nations. Its growth is slowing while its people are still at middle-income levels, whereas Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan maintained much higher growth until they became wealthier. China was able to improve its standard of living due to adopting pro-market reforms, and there is reason to believe that its growth would have been even more spectacular if it more fully embraced neoliberalism, which it hasn't in part because free markets are potential threats to the centralized Communist Party control. Contrasting the nation with Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Taiwan, the economist Garrett Jones notes, "China is, by far, the world's poorest majority-Chinese country." He also points to Chinese success in Southeast Asia and the New World, indicating that there are deep cultural factors and individual traits behind the remarkable consistency we see. With that context, China's hybrid model doesn't look nearly as impressive. It was beneficial for China to move away from communism, but its growth has likely occurred despite practices like large state-owned enterprises and government-directed resource allocation, rather than because of them.

After the fall of communism, Eastern Europe became another major laboratory for neoliberal reform. Beginning in the early 1990s, countries such as the Czech Republic, Estonia and Poland embraced "shock therapy," which was characterized by rapid liberalization of prices, trade, and capital flows, coupled with the privatization of state-owned enterprises. The results were relatively painful in the very short run: output collapsed, unemployment soared, and inequality spiked. But over the medium to long run, many of these economies stabilized, integrated into the European Union, and experienced sustained growth. Poland in particular became a post-communist success story, avoiding recession during the 2008 financial crisis and seeing consistent income gains. Russia's path was harsher, with extreme volatility marking the 1990s. Many reforms were started, then abandoned. It took about a decade and a half for Russian living standards to reach what they had been before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still, across the region, neoliberal prescriptions defined the initial transition away from central planning, making Eastern Europe a critical chapter in the global diffusion of market-oriented policies.

The terrible state of Russia in the 1990s has often been cited as a blow against the ideas of neoliberalism. In fact, there is an argument to be made that in some ways Russia's problems resulted from it not being willing to reform far or fast enough. After losing much of its economic base due to the collapse of money-losing state-owned enterprises, Russia carried the burden of subsidies, state pensions, and state wages into the post-communist era. Rather than cut spending it printed money, which led to runaway inflation, as standard economic doctrine predicted. Inflation would reach 2,500 percent in 1992. Moreover, when it came to privatization, many Eastern European states sold state assets to foreign investors rather than insiders, as was the case with Russia. That allowed the domestic producers to access better technologies, accounting practices, and so on.

If the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that neoliberalism has succeeded, why have intellectuals turned against it? It is important to understand that any idea that develops hegemonic status is likely to be challenged by aspiring elites. Neoliberalism dominated intellectual discourse, and the phrase began to be used as a stand-in for every problem that people saw in the world. Modernity is in many ways alienating, and every cultural, psychological, or public health issue that arose was placed at the feet of the dominant ideas of a previous era.

In fact, neoliberalism might have succeeded too well. In an influential 2016 paper, the political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris showed that as countries have become wealthier, politics has centered less on economic issues and more on cultural ones, like gay rights and immigration. While social class used to be a strong predictor of how people voted, that was no longer the case by the 2000s. In effect, when Western economies faced crises in the 1970s, people cared first and foremost about the economy, and neoliberalism largely solved the most pressing issues of that decade. Instead of declaring victory, Western publics began fighting about cultural issues. To be fair, the main cultural issue they fight over is widescale immigration, which has often been justified on neoliberal grounds. That is the only issue where widely held political values directly clash with neoliberal doctrine, and the idea that neoliberalism is not a cause of widespread discontent must be qualified by admitting that immigration is an exception to that rule.

When material fears come to the forefront, people go back to caring primarily about the economy, as was the case during the Great Recession in particular. But interestingly, there have been fewer recessions during the era of neoliberalism, freeing people to argue about cultural issues. From the nineteenth century through the Great Depression all the way up to the early 1980s, recessions were a regular occurrence in the United States and Europe. They often came every few years as policymakers struggled with inflationary cycles, more limited tools for stabilizing demand due to the gold standard, and eventually oil shocks. In the US, in the years immediately before the neoliberal consensus, recessions had become routine, with such downturns happening in 1969–1970, 1973–1975, 1980, and 1981–1982. That created a sense that economic instability was an unavoidable fact of life. Yet since the mid-1980s the frequency and severity of recessions have dramatically declined because central banks embraced credible anti-inflation policies, unions lost the power to hinder necessary structural adjustments to the economy, free trade allowed capital and resources to be quickly deployed to more efficient uses when necessary, and governments learned to use fiscal and monetary stabilization more effectively.

Both the US and much of Western Europe have experienced what economists call the "Great Moderation," a period of steadier growth and fewer, shorter downturns. While the Great Recession of 2008 was a major exception, it stood out precisely because it interrupted what had become an era of relative economic stability compared to the turbulence of earlier decades. The only other serious economic crisis since the mid-1980s was the COVID-19 downturn, but that was due to government shutdowns and voluntary social distancing resulting from the pandemic. That said, the COVID-19 recession was followed by an exceptionally rapid recovery.

There has also been a greater societal turn towards pessimism, related to, but in a sense independent of, the culture war. The increasing use of smartphones and social media has been linked to greater anxiety and depression among young people. Trust in institutions—from Congress to the media and organized religion—has plummeted over the last several decades. Meanwhile, there has been no similar decrease in economic optimism. The University of Michigan Consumer Sentiment Index polls 500 Americans every month to measure their attitudes toward their personal finances and expectations. Consumer sentiment had collapsed in the late 1970s during stagflation but then shot up and remained high until the Great Recession. It picked up again as the economy recovered, before falling to around the level of the late 1970s during COVID-19, where it has been stuck since.

Note that 2020 was not only the year the pandemic began, but also the year when Joe Biden was elected president; Biden ran an administration that moved away from the neoliberal consensus and spent large amounts of money while adopting measures to ostensibly revitalize manufacturing. As predicted by the Harvard economist Larry Summers and other mainstream economists, that led to high inflation and, ultimately, contributed to the reelection of President Donald Trump. In other words, Americans were most optimistic about their finances during the period of hegemonic neoliberalism, and were more pessimistic before the consensus formed and after it broke down.

To take another indicator, the American National Elections Survey, conducted every two years since 1956, has been asking Americans whether they think their finances are likely to get better, worse, or stay the same over the next year. The two years with the greatest pessimism were 1974 and 1978, with more Americans saying they expected their finances to get worse than better. Yet from 1980 to the present, Americans have been more likely to respond that they expect to be better off than worse off. The increasing pessimism that we see regarding American governance and institutions does not apply to people's individual finances. Data on sentiments and economic growth tell the same story.

Free markets do not have the answers to all of life's problems, as postliberals of both the right and left have been correct to point out. Neoliberalism was a consensus that emerged from a long history of experimentation to address problems such as high inflation, high unemployment, and stagnant economic growth. It largely succeeded in its goals, and out-of-control housing prices in the era of NIMBYism indicate that policymakers have, if anything, not leaned in enough to the magic of markets. Turning back to strong labor unions, tariffs, and the state trying to decide which industries succeed or fail would simply make people around the world poorer without solving any of the underlying issues that inspire their discontent.

If someone wants to argue that neoliberalism itself is the cause of noneconomic social and political issues, the burden is on them to prove it. Simply pointing out that, for example, the birth rate or trust in government has decreased over the last few decades and indicting neoliberalism—which does not directly speak to such indicators—will not do. Causation must be established in order to justify a return to failed economic policies. At the very least, postliberals of the right and left should be able to point to countries that rejected neoliberalism and succeeded on the specific measures that they care about. But they cannot do that. Neoliberalism is an economic theory that has had positive economic results—it is not a religion that provides meaning, or ethical and spiritual guidance. Those concerned most with men's souls should focus on shifting the culture in their preferred direction, rather than dismantling a system that has been working well for most of the world.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Deforestation is slowing down, plus recent innovation in automation, agriculture, water use, and more.

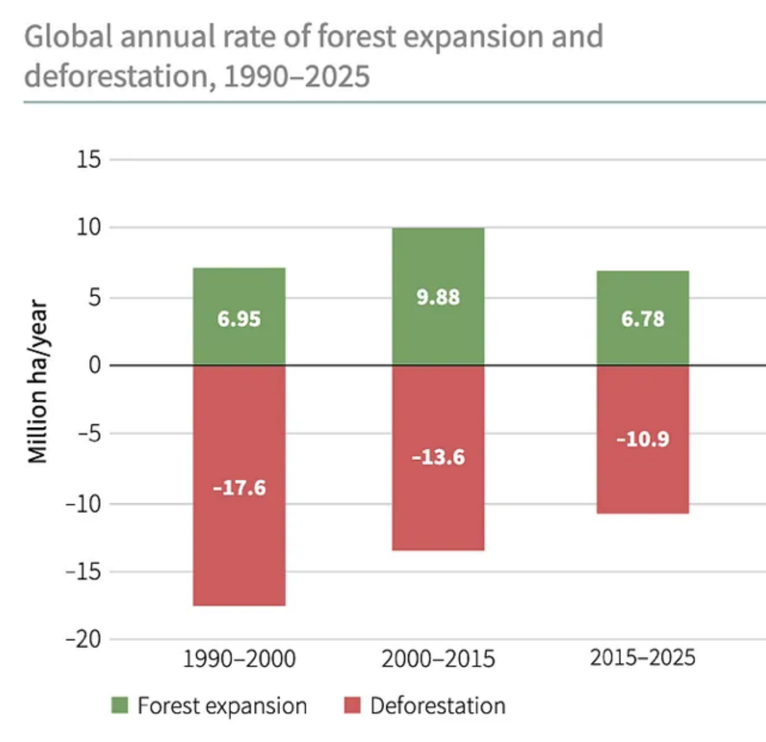
MALCOLM COCHRAN

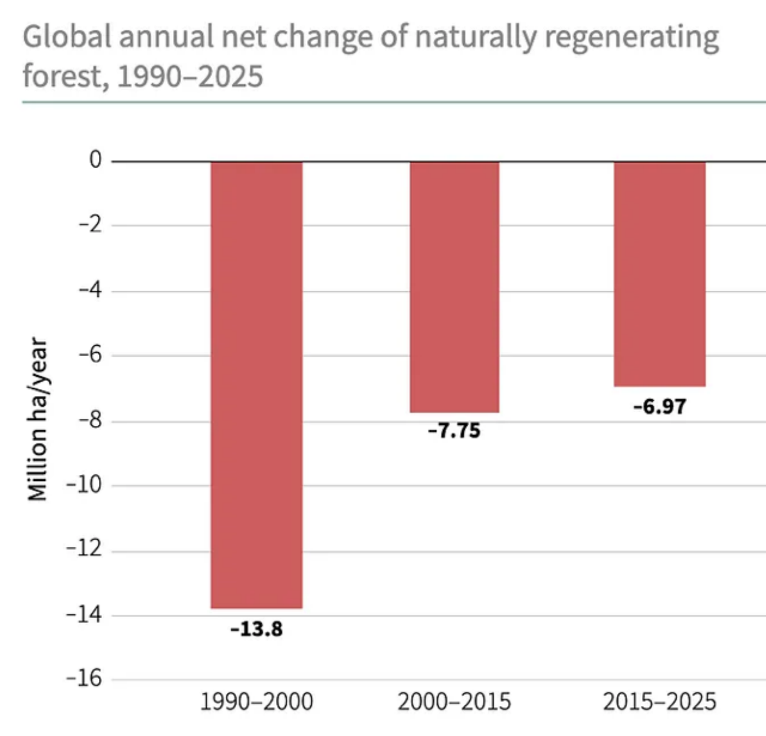
OCT 26, 2025

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity

- **Scientists in the UK have developed the world's first vaccine for elephant herpesvirus**, a disease that kills many young Asian elephants. In tests at Chester Zoo, the vaccine triggered strong immune responses without observed side effects. Researchers now plan to test it in elephant calves and wild populations.
- In 2023, Hurricane Idalia scattered hundreds of **flamingos** across the eastern US. Recent surveys suggest that some of those lost birds **may have founded a permanent colony in Florida**.
- **The North Atlantic right whale population has grown about 7 percent since 2020**, a small but welcome turnaround after falling roughly 25 percent during the 2010s.
- **Deforestation continues to slow down.** According to a new report from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the world lost 10.9 million hectares of forest each year over the past decade, down from 13.6 million between 2000 and 2015, and 17.6 million between 1990 and 2000.





Energy and natural resources

- **A startup in Utah has developed a more sustainable way to collect lithium**. Using proprietary ceramic beads, Lilac Solutions can extract highly pure lithium while recycling nearly all the water it uses. Their technology, which they plan to license, could boost US lithium supplies without straining scarce water resources in the arid West.
- Omar Yaghi, who recently won a Nobel Prize in chemistry for his work developing metal-organic frameworks, is about to start manufacturing atmospheric water harvesters through his startup Atoco. The **machines**, expected to debut next year, **will use metal-organic frameworks to pull moisture directly from the atmosphere** at a rate of 1,000 liters per day.

Food & Hunger

- Researchers at the University of Maryland have identified **a gene that makes wheat grow three grains per flower instead of one**, potentially unlocking new higher-yielding cultivars.
- Scientists at the Roslin Institute in Scotland have created **gene-edited pigs resistant to classical swine fever**, a deadly disease endemic in many major hog-producing countries. The edited pigs stayed healthy when exposed to the virus and showed no adverse effects over multiple generations.
- A new essay in *Asimov Press* describes how **Nigeria, once wary of genetically modified crops, has become a regional leader in agricultural technology**. In 2019, their regulators approved Bt cowpea, followed by insect- and drought-resistant corn in 2024. Several more GM crops are in the pipeline, including a more nitrogen-efficient rice and nutritionally fortified cassava. There's a lot more information about agricultural innovation in the developing world in the article, which I highly recommend reading:

> Asimov Press
>
> **Why Nigeria Accepted GMOs**
>
> Read more
>
> 9 days ago · 35 likes · 4 comments · Asimov Press

- In Malawi, a UK-based nonprofit has deployed **an AI chatbot that can speak the local language of Chichewa and give useful information to farmers via WhatsApp**. In a profile of the technology, multiple farmers describe how the chatbot's advice saved their crops from pests and poorly suited agricultural chemicals. This story reflects a wider proliferation of cheap, localized AI tools as costly frontier research in wealthy countries makes language models affordable for the rest of the world.

Health & Demographics

- According to a recent report from the World Health Organization, **the number of people suffering from neglected tropical diseases fell from 1.9 billion in 1990 to around 1 billion in 2021.**
- Relatedly, **Fiji was just verified by the WHO for eliminating trachoma.**
- **There's more evidence that GLP-1 drugs have heart benefits that go beyond weight loss.** A new analysis of the landmark SELECT trial of semaglutide found that only around a third of the 20 percent reduction in heart attacks and strokes among people taking semaglutide could be explained by reductions in waist circumference.
- **The results of the clinical trial of Science Corporation's PRIMA eye implant have now been published.** According to the paper, 80 percent of the 38 participants suffering from advanced macular degeneration showed meaningful improvement in their vision, allowing them to read text, recognize shapes, and perform daily tasks that were previously impossible.
- Two years after receiving an experimental gene therapy, **a formerly congenitally deaf toddler can hear without her cochlear implant.**

Politics & Freedom

- **Thailand has given Burmese refugees permission to seek work outside their camps**, a step toward self-reliance and the freedom, opportunity, and dignity that come with it.

Science & Technology

- Using a new algorithm, **Google's quantum computer ran a molecular simulation about 13,000 times as fast as the best supercomputers.** The experiment, which was recently published in *Nature*, shows how quantum computers might one day help design new drugs or materials.
- In some quintessentially Japanese news, **a Tokyo-based startup is using remotely operated robots to help ease the aging and immigration-averse country's labor shortage**. The machines—which are mostly autonomous with backup pilots in Manila—stock shelves in over 300 convenience stores across the city.
- **Amazon's efforts to automate its warehouses appear to be bearing fruit.** Internal documents reviewed by *The New York Times* suggest that Amazon executives believe their new robots will allow the company to sell twice as many products by 2033 without expanding its human workforce. The documents also claim that by 2027, Amazon's increasingly automated system will save customers about 30 cents per item.
- **Amazon's delivery drones are back up and running** after a two-month hiatus and, according to an Amazon spokesperson, are experiencing "unprecedented levels of demand."
- Have you looked at the **Starlink** connection map recently? Their **service now covers almost all of the Americas and Europe, and a rapidly growing share of Africa and Asia.** Universal internet connection will be here before you know it. They also recently launched their 10,000th satellite.

Violence & Coercion

- **Kazakhstan has fully criminalized "wife-stealing," the practice of abducting women for forced marriage.** Previously, the aspiring bridegroom could avoid criminal penalties by returning the victim voluntarily. Great success!

Rewiring the Human Experience: Optimism in Modern Biomedicine

Biomedical innovations are redefining what's possible.

ZION LIGHTS

OCT 29, 2025

For most of history, medicine could only ease suffering—not cure the diseases that cut lives short. Conditions such as blindness, paralysis, and neurodegeneration were seen as inevitable tragedies beyond the reach of science. Yet, recent advances suggest we are entering a new era, defined not just by longer lifespans but by healthier ones too. Over the past year, biomedical research has delivered breakthroughs that were once thought impossible, and these discoveries signal a profound shift. Medicine is no longer only about managing decline but increasingly about also restoring function, preventing disease, and offering hope to the once hopeless.

In landmark medical news that broke last month, doctors appear, for the first time, to have slowed the relentless progression of Huntington's disease in humans. This genetic disorder, among the most devastating known to medicine, is caused by a single mutation in the *huntingtin* gene. The faulty gene produces a toxic protein that kills neurons, leading to a cruel mix of dementia, Parkinson's, and motor neuron disease. Symptoms usually begin in a patient's 30s or 40s, and until now, the condition has always been fatal within two decades.

The new trial offers unprecedented hope. Patients who received treatment showed a 75 percent slowing of disease progression. During the treatment process, surgeons spend 12 to 18 hours guiding a catheter deep into the brain. There, they infuse a harmless virus that has been redesigned to carry a special DNA sequence. Once inside neurons, the virus prompts cells to manufacture microRNA molecules that silence the faulty genetic instructions. This reduces levels of the toxic *huntingtin* protein, thus preserving brain cells and function.

This breakthrough underscores the transformative potential of genetic medicine: What once seemed impossible is now becoming reality. The new approach may also open the door to treatments for many other conditions once thought untouchable, including muscular dystrophies, ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis), inherited blindness, and even certain forms of Alzheimer's. Each success strengthens the case that precision therapies targeting DNA and RNA can shift medicine from managing decline to restoring health.

The restoration of touch to amputees through cutting-edge prosthetic technology represents another standout breakthrough this year. In new clinical trials, sensory-enabled neural prostheses are allowing people with upper-limb amputations not only to control their artificial limbs but also to feel again, thanks to electrodes that stimulate nerves in the residual limb and relay signals the brain interprets as touch. Other research has shown that even sensations such as temperature can be recreated: In one study, more than half of participants reported experiencing hot or cold directly in their phantom hand when their residual limb was stimulated. These developments go beyond improving motor function. They reconnect people to a vital human sense, transforming prosthetics from tools into extensions of the self and offering a glimpse of a future in which disability is met with evermore empowering technologies.

Parallel innovations in gene therapy are restoring sight to the blind, demonstrating how biomedical science is increasingly able to recover lost senses and functions once thought permanent. Earlier this year, gene therapy dramatically improved sight for children dealing with a rare genetic eye disorder that causes blindness. Leber congenital amaurosis is caused by mutations in the AIPL1 gene and other genes critical for photoreceptor function, leading to severe vision loss or blindness from birth or early infancy. In the experimental procedure, doctors injected healthy copies of the AIPL1 gene into the eyes of four children using keyhole surgery. The children, who were born blind, regained substantial visual ability: They can now see shapes, recognize their parents' faces, find toys, and in some cases, even read and write. Crucially, this is the first effective treatment for a particularly severe form of hereditary childhood blindness.

On the therapy front, remarkable developments have taken place in treating chronic diseases, metabolic illnesses, and aging-related risks. One particularly compelling advance involves GLP-1 agonist drugs, such as semaglutide (marketed as Ozempic and Wegovy). Originally developed for diabetes and obesity, trials show that GLP-1 drugs reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, and heart attack—even before dramatic weight loss occurs. This suggests that the medications may be more broadly useful in preventing diseases and extending healthy lifespans than was previously appreciated.

Meanwhile, immunotherapy combinations are reshaping cancer treatment. Trials involving combinations such as botensilimab and balstilimab have shown promising results in types of colorectal cancer that previously resisted treatment. In one trial, around 60 percent of tumors shrank or were stabilized. Progress here is especially exciting because many patients with microsatellite-stable metastatic colorectal cancer have very few effective options. Immunotherapy has been transformative in cancer, and these newer combinations are showing what might be possible in even tougher cases.

These are just a few examples from the past year demonstrating that biomedical research is not merely producing incremental change but delivering measurable progress toward earlier, more precise diagnoses and better-targeted therapies. The trajectory of human health is rising, and the horizon of possibility continues to widen. Science is no longer merely about imagining a better future: It is actively building it, and we are already living healthier and longer than ever before.

What You Need to Know About Humans to Advance Human Progress

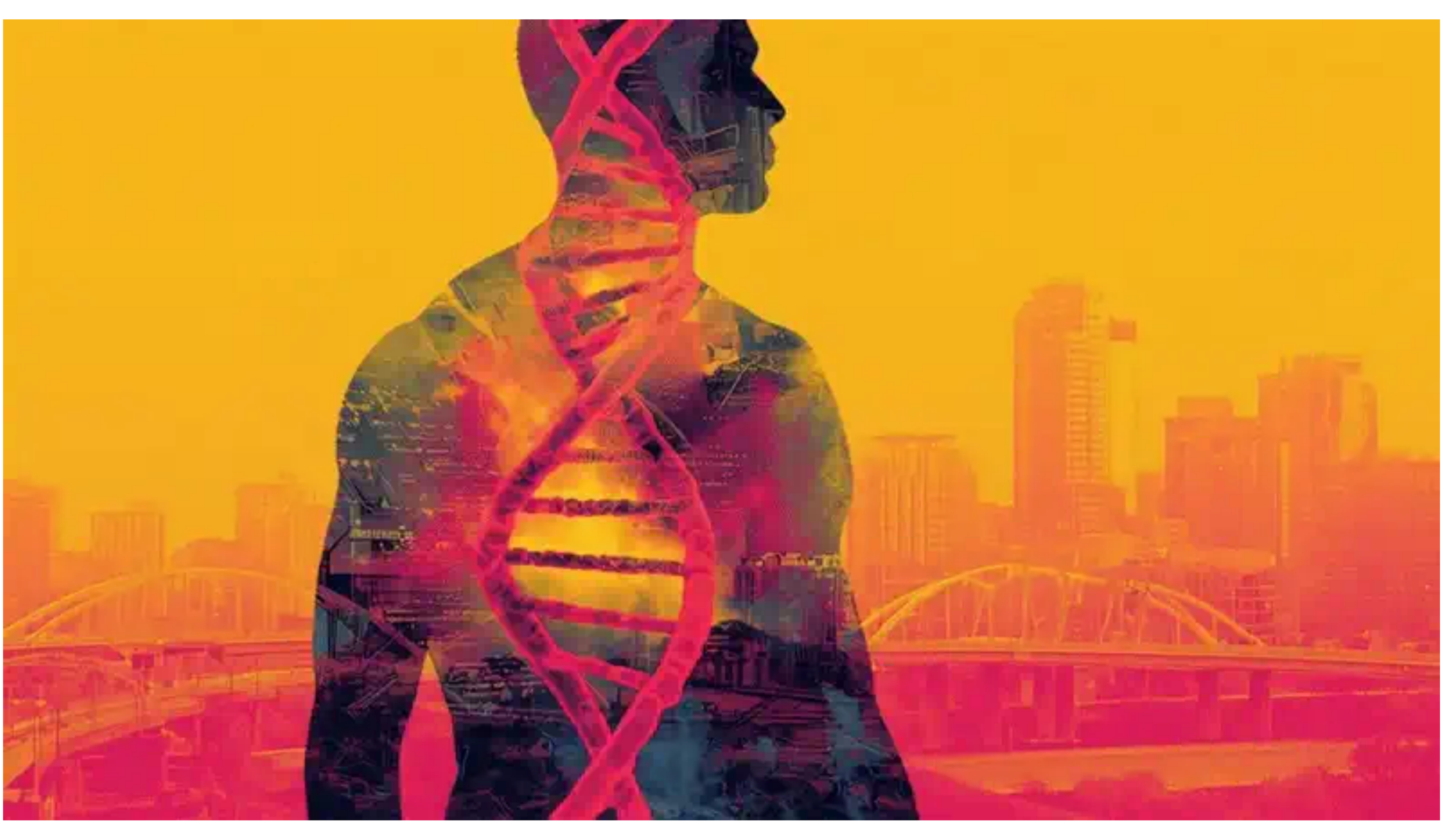
Neither nature nor nurture can be ignored.

ADAM OMARY
OCT 31, 2025

CROSS-POSTED BY THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROGRESS

"We are pleased to introduce Adam Omary, our new research fellow who will be writing about how human nature and nurture impact our efforts to build and sustain well functioning and prosperous societies. Below is his debut article."

- Human Progress



"Nature versus nurture" is a debate older than the field of psychology itself. Are we born with fixed traits, or are we shaped entirely by our upbringing? Of course, this is a false dichotomy. Both genes and environment shape most psychological traits. The real question is not nature versus nurture, but how much each contributes to different outcomes.

This question matters deeply for thinking about human progress. Any attempts at improving the human condition must be compatible with human nature, or they will risk creating more problems—such as the collapse of communist and socialist economies, for example—than they solve. And understanding human nature means grappling with our biological constraints and evolutionary history. Progress for squirrels might mean a world devoid of natural predators, where every tree grows acorns year-round. But human progress is a distinctly human concept.

As a psychologist, I am interested in the psychological foundations of human progress. To understand and sustain human progress, we must first understand the nature of the humans who are progressing. Strangely, the beings most capable of reflecting on our own values are also the most skilled at obfuscating them, as my graduate advisor, Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker, has explored at length in his books *The Blank Slate* and *Rationality*. Many influential thinkers throughout history have questioned or outright denied the concept of human nature.

Superficially, that makes sense. Unlike some animals, which can walk and forage minutes after birth, human infants are born helpless and remain dependent on others for years. We are not born with language, and the languages we learn to speak depend entirely on the environment we were brought up in. As the English philosopher John Locke noted, all knowledge appears to come from experience, whether firsthand or taught by others. The human mind, at birth, is seemingly a true blank slate.

The blank-slate view was profoundly influential on the Enlightenment philosophy that set the stage for the miraculous forms of human progress in the coming centuries. If every baby starts out essentially the same, only advantaged or disadvantaged by their environment, then the case for equality becomes not just moral, but empirically necessary. It suggests that no one is born inherently superior, and that differences in status, intelligence, or virtue are all shaped by experience, not destiny. If all minds begin equally blank, then all individuals are capable of reason, learning, and democratic self-governance.

The idea that human nature was endlessly flexible fueled optimism, but it also began to cast blame on modern society. If we are all a product of our environments, then violence, poverty, and inequality were the results of a manipulated system. This philosophy was most famously embodied by the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed that humans were born fundamentally good and were corrupted by society. In his view, the natural state of humanity was one of egalitarian peace, disrupted only by the emergence of social institutions that fostered competition and inequality.

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in stark contrast, believed the default state of human life was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. For Hobbes, society constrained the worst of our innate impulses, and a strong legal system made crime more dangerous than cooperation. While Hobbes's vision was often caricatured as bleak or authoritarian, modern psychology has increasingly validated his core insight. Humans are not born peaceful and rational, but possess a mix of impulses—some prosocial, others aggressive, impulsive, and self-serving. As the Canadian developmental psychologist Richard Tremblay has shown, the most aggressive humans are, in fact, toddlers. Although they cannot inflict real harm, most toddlers hit, steal, and lie as soon as they are capable. As all parents know, these innate antisocial behaviors must be patiently weaned out of children through healthy socialization and repeated instruction.

These two visions—Rousseau's romanticism and Hobbes's realism—have shaped centuries of thought about human nature and the role of institutions. One sees society as the source of our problems; the other sees it as the solution. Both, in their extremes, miss the full picture. We are born capable of both empathy and cruelty, cooperation and tribalism, innovation and superstition. Society both nurtures us and constrains us. Different aspects of different ideologies and institutions both facilitate and prevent human progress.

Institutions are not just abstract systems—they are extensions of human psychology. Their success or failure often hinges on how well they accommodate and channel our evolved tendencies. When institutions align with human nature, they can guide self-interest into cooperation, aggression into justice, and tribalism into civic identity. When they ignore it, they risk collapse, corruption, or unintended negative consequences.

Consider the market economy. At its best, it transforms individual ambition into mutual benefit. Entrepreneurs seek profit, but in doing so, they create goods, services, and jobs. This is not a triumph over human nature—it is a clever use of it. As the Scottish economist Adam Smith noted, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." Contrast that with utopian communes that attempt to erase hierarchy, suppress competition, or eliminate private property. These experiments often fail because they ignore deep-seated human drives for status, autonomy, and reciprocity. When institutions deny these drives, they invite dysfunction.

Successful democracies are not built on the belief that humans are all born the same, but that our differences can complement each other, given sufficient freedom and equality before the law. Checks and balances, the rule of law, and free speech are not just moral principles, but safeguards against the psychological realities that humans are fallible, competitive, and prone to power-seeking. Progress is not achieved by transcending our psychology, but by building systems that align with our best impulses and constrain our worst.

Despite these self-evident truths, discussions of progress often neglect human nature in favor of nurture. Whether arguing for government intervention in the market, increased social welfare spending, or profound cultural change, advocates of such positions share a commitment to reshaping our environments. Yet even in identical environments, outcomes vary dramatically depending on psychological factors such as trust, optimism, gratitude, and self-control. These are not variables that can be socially engineered. Instead, they are traits that arise from genetic inheritance, individual beliefs, decisions, and cultivation of habits.

Even in this almost miraculous age of superabundance—characterized by unprecedented material wealth, a high degree of freedom, and technological sophistication—many people feel lost, cynical, and devoid of purpose. To improve people's psychological outlook, a deep understanding of human nature is necessary. That consists of considering not only our environments but also human nature itself. Without that understanding, progress can lead to unintended, sometimes negative, consequences. Material abundance can breed obesity and lethargy; excess freedom can lead to decision paralysis; technological progress can erode attention spans and lead to addiction. History shows that we are not blank slates who can be remolded into something we are not.

My role at Human Progress will be to not just examine the psychological aspects of progress—mental health, optimism, rationality, cooperation, creativity, and productivity—but to understand how progress interfaces with human nature and leads to human flourishing. In the words of the American economist Thomas Sowell, there are no solutions, only trade-offs. Progress is a negotiation between our aspirations and our nature—between what we were built to be and what we hope to become. The most enduring advances come not from denying our instincts, but from designing systems that guide them toward constructive ends.