

Doomslayer: Progress Rundup

Record-high US life expectancy, another enormous trade deal, a cleaner ocean, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
FEB 01, 2026

26 1 2 Share

Economics & Development

- India and the European Union have agreed to an enormous **free trade deal**, with both sides committing to cut or eliminate tariffs on over 95 percent of traded goods by value.

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity:

- According to [recently published field research](#), **polar bears living in the Svalbard archipelago have been getting fatter over the past few decades**. This is especially interesting because sea ice around Svalbard is shrinking **much faster** than in other polar bear habitats, something widely expected to harm polar bear populations by shortening their seal-hunting season.
- An ambitious attempt to restore the Galápagos Island of Floreana to its pre-discovery state is **making progress**. The initiative aims to eradicate invasive rats, cats, and other non-native animals, rebuild native habitats, and reintroduce around a dozen locally extinct species, including [giant tortoises](#). Conservationists report that native wildlife is already starting to rebound.

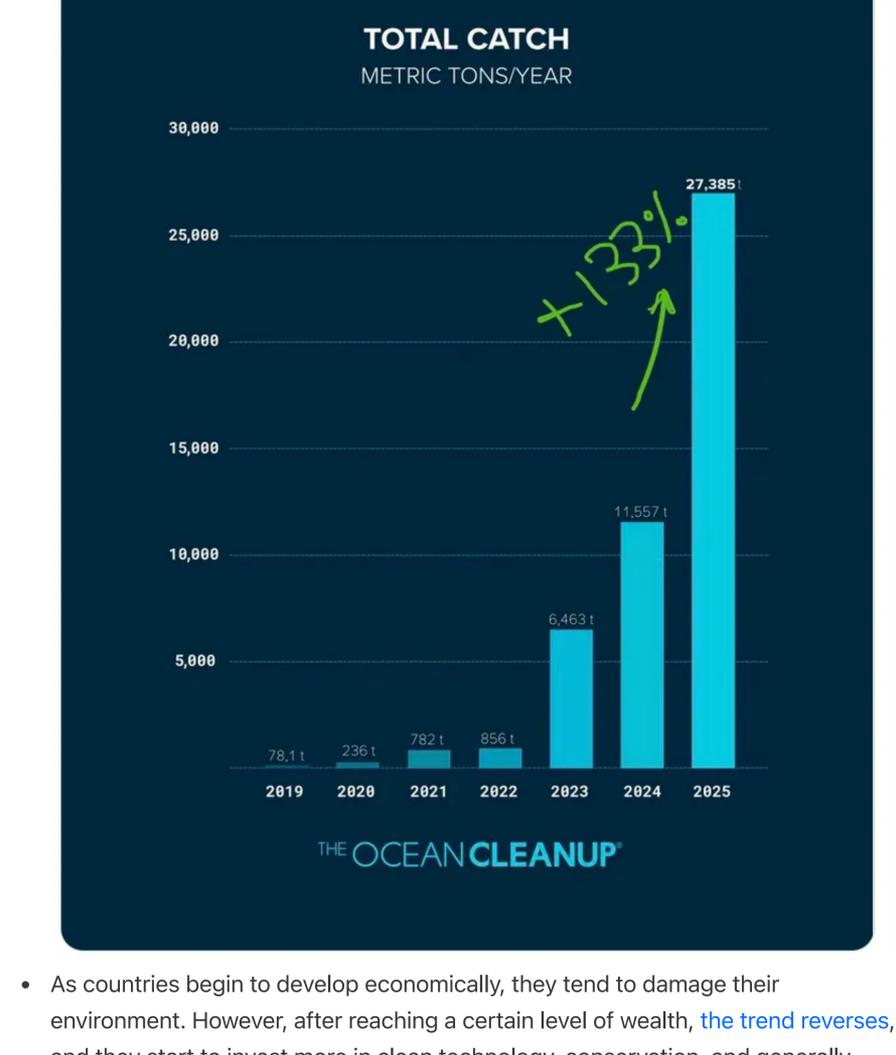
Natural disasters and pollution:

- Boyan Slat [claims](#) that his non-profit **The Ocean Cleanup removed over 27,000 tons of plastic from the world's waterways in 2025**, which he estimates is **2 to 5 percent of annual plastic pollution**. If the operation can maintain its current rate of growth, it could meet its [goal](#) "to clean up 90% of floating ocean plastic pollution by 2040."

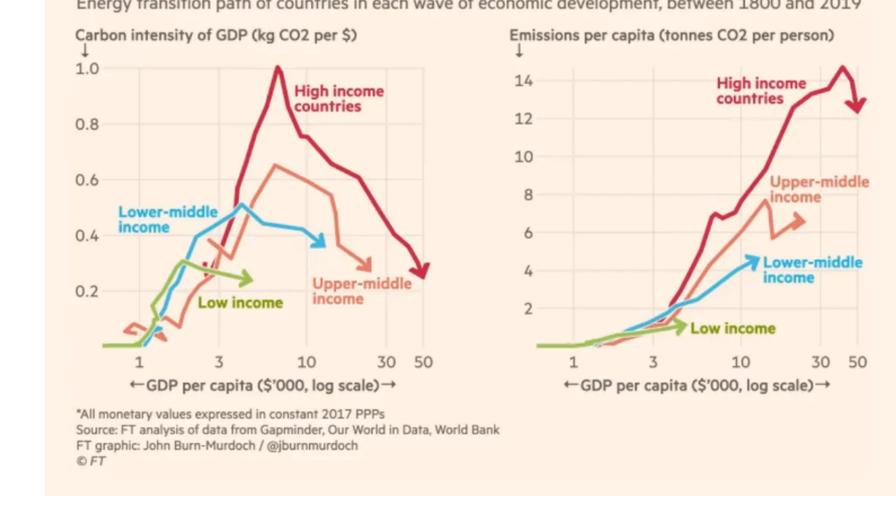
Boyan Slat @BoyanSlat

.@TheOceanCleanup is now intercepting 2 to 5% of global plastic pollution.

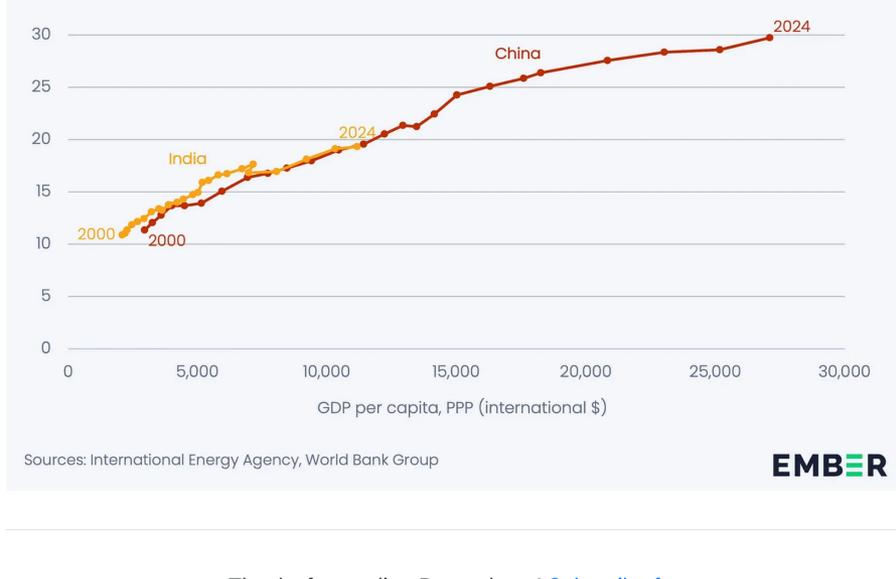
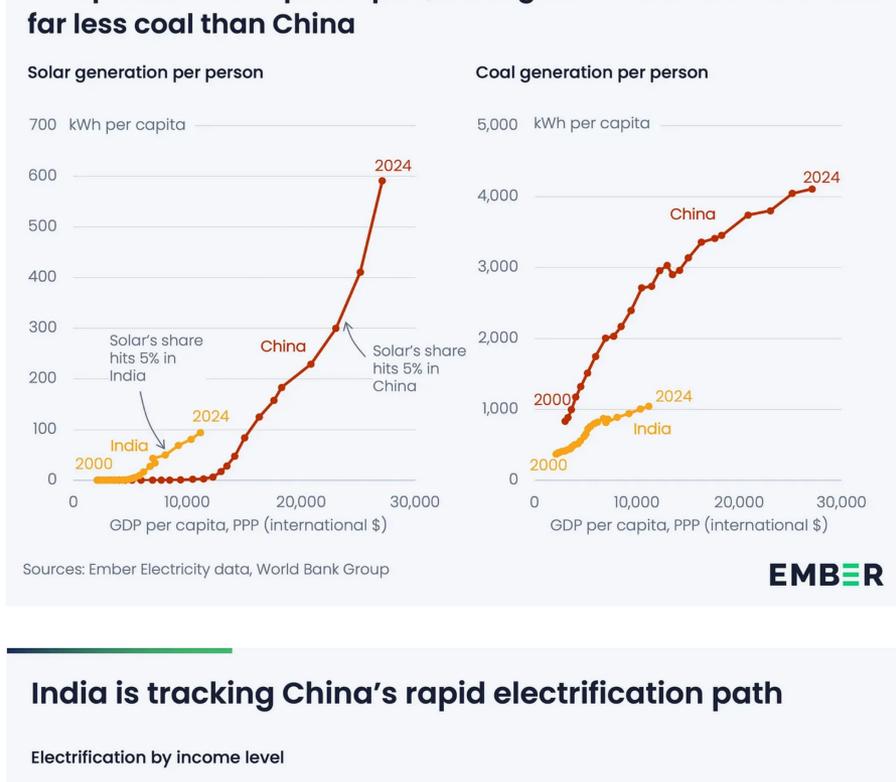
I think we should be able to double again this year.



- As countries begin to develop economically, they tend to damage their environment. However, after reaching a certain level of wealth, [the trend reverses](#), and they start to invest more in clean technology, conservation, and generally taking better care of the environment.



This relationship, known as the **Environmental Kuznets Curve**, is becoming **flatter thanks to the global diffusion of cleaner technology**. The chart above shows how peak carbon intensity is [falling over time](#), with poorer countries reducing their emissions per dollar of GDP at much lower income levels than earlier industrializers. The energy think tank Ember [recently illustrated](#) this trend by comparing India and China, the former of which is curbing coal use and electrifying its economy at a much lower level of development.



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Health & Demographics

- The CDC reports that **US life expectancy climbed to an all-time high of 79 years in 2024**, finally surpassing its pre-Covid level.
- Researchers have published the [full results](#) of the **largest randomized trial of AI cancer screening to date**, comparing mammograms read by one radiologist assisted by AI with the standard two-radiologist review. The AI-supported process cut the radiologists' workload by 44 percent and detected 29 percent more cancers, without additional false positives. Women who received a negative result during their AI-assisted mammogram ended up having 12 percent fewer cancer diagnoses before their next scheduled screening than those in the control group, suggesting that the AI screen missed fewer aggressive cancers.
- The [Healthy Minds Study](#), a large survey of **US college students' mental health**, shows **some improvement between 2022 and 2025**: the share reporting severe depression fell from 23 percent to 18 percent, anxiety from 37 percent to 32 percent, loneliness from 58 percent to 52 percent, and suicidal thoughts from 15 percent to 11 percent.

Science & Technology

- Paleontologists have published their first [comprehensive analysis](#) of a **giant fossil site in southern China** containing the remains of a 512-million-year-old marine ecosystem. The team analyzed [thousands of specimens](#) from the site representing 153 species—nearly 60 percent of them new to science.
- Neuralink has now implanted its brain chip in 21 people** with paralysis, allowing them to use digital tools like computers and cameras with their minds. According to a [company blog post](#), some chip recipients can now operate a computer as fast or faster than the typical able-bodied user.
- Sometime next year, NASA plans to place **the first radio telescope on the far side of the Moon**. Far away from Earth's atmosphere and protected from human radio interference, the instrument will be able to measure faint, low-frequency radio signals that are inaccessible from Earth, potentially leading to new discoveries about a wide range of cosmic phenomena.

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Energy Isn't Just About Power Stations. It's About Life

To advance human flourishing, enable clean, abundant, reliable energy rather than restraining it.

ZION LIGHTS
FEB 03, 2026

40 5 13 Share



Get Zion Lights's new book, [Energy is Life: Why Environmentalism Went Nuclear](#).

Energy is so deeply woven into modern life that it is easy to forget what it truly does for us. We notice it most when it disappears—when the lights go out, homes turn cold, and transport grinds to a halt. In those moments, energy stops being an abstract policy issue and becomes something far more basic: survival, opportunity, and human dignity.

Across the broad sweep of human history, progress has gone hand in hand with energy abundance. For most of our existence, people lived close to subsistence. Life expectancy was short, physical labor was relentless, and even small disruptions—such as bad weather or poor harvests—could be devastating. What changed that trajectory was not only moral awakening and better institutions, but access to more reliable and more concentrated sources of energy.

Coal freed societies from the limits of muscle and wood. Oil and gas powered mobility, industry, and modern agriculture. Electricity transformed homes, cities, healthcare, and communication. Each step up the energy ladder made people healthier, wealthier, and more resilient. Energy was the multiplier that allowed human ingenuity to scale.

That is why energy should never be treated as a mere input or technical detail. It is a foundation on which nearly every indicator of human well-being rests. Clean water requires pumping and treatment. Modern medicine depends on refrigeration, sterilization, and precision equipment. Food security relies on fertilizers, transport, and cold storage. Education, information, and economic opportunity all depend on reliable power. Where energy is scarce, life is constrained.

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Yet in today's energy debates, energy often fades into the background. It is discussed primarily in terms of emissions targets, system costs, or consumption limits. These are important considerations, but when energy policy loses sight of what energy is for, it risks becoming detached from human needs, especially the needs of those who have the least.

Around the world, hundreds of millions of people still lack access to reliable electricity. Billions rely on traditional biomass for cooking, exposing them to dangerous indoor air pollution. For these populations, the question is not whether energy use should be reduced, but how access can be expanded safely, affordably, and quickly. Telling people who cook over open fires or study by candlelight that progress requires using less energy is not a serious moral proposition.

Even in wealthy countries, energy abundance underpins social stability and public trust. Affordable heating and cooling protect the elderly and vulnerable. Reliable power keeps food affordable and supply chains intact. When energy becomes unreliable or unaffordable, the consequences are immediate and political: household stress, industrial decline, and public backlash. These are not side effects; they are signals that something essential to human life is being undermined.

That does not mean environmental concerns should be dismissed. On the contrary, environmental progress has historically gone hand in hand with technological advancement and energy innovation. Cleaner air, safer water, and reduced local pollution were not achieved by freezing development, but by improving how energy is produced and used.

A mistake has crept into the energy transition debate: an emphasis on scarcity in the pursuit of net-zero goals, rather than on abundance and resilience. The real challenge is not to use less energy, but to build energy systems that are cleaner, more reliable, and more plentiful. Scarcity is not a climate strategy, constraint is not a development plan, and human progress has always come from expanding possibilities rather than narrowing them.

Too often, public debates frame energy as something to be rationed rather than improved. That framing risks turning energy policy into a zero-sum moral exercise, where comfort, mobility, or growth are treated as indulgences rather than achievements. History suggests the opposite lesson: societies that solve problems through innovation and abundance outperform those that attempt to manage decline.

A human-centered approach to energy starts with outcomes, not abstractions. Does a policy make people healthier? Does it reduce poverty? Does it increase resilience to shocks? Does it expand opportunity across generations and borders? These questions are harder to answer than setting targets, but they are the ones that matter.

They also point toward a more optimistic path forward. The tools for progress, such as advanced nuclear power, better grids, and improved energy storage, are real and improving. The task is not to retreat from energy use, but to deploy these tools at scale, guided by the principle that energy exists to serve human life.

Energy policy, in other words, is human policy. When it succeeds, people live longer, healthier, freer lives. When it fails, the costs are measured in more than statistics; they are measured in cold homes, dark hospitals, and stalled futures.

If we want a future defined by human progress, we must begin with a simple recognition: energy is not the problem to be managed away. Where energy is scarce, well-being stalls or regresses; where energy is abundant, people and the planet can thrive. Energy is life—and abundant, reliable, and continually improving energy systems are among the greatest enablers of human flourishing ever created.

Get Zion Lights's new book, [Energy is Life: Why Environmentalism Went Nuclear](#).

Introducing the American Abundance Index

American living standards are best measured in time.

HUMAN PROGRESS

FEB 06, 2026

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We are excited to share a new tool we've been building at Human Progress: The [American Abundance Index](#)—an interactive dashboard that tracks US living standards while adjusting for both inflation *and* rising incomes.

The idea is straightforward: how many hours do you need to work to afford the same basket of goods and services? Using Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the American Abundance Index converts price and wage growth into “time prices”—the amount of work time required to buy the Consumer Price Index (CPI) basket of goods and services—and “abundance,” which is the inverse: how much of that basket one hour of work can buy. When time prices fall, abundance rises, and each hour of work goes further. That’s the measure of affordability that actually matters.

Conceptually, this work builds off of [Superabundance](#), a book by our editor, Marian Tupy, and his coauthor and Human Progress board member, Gale Pooley. Their core argument—that abundance is best measured in time—forms the foundation of the project. The index itself was built by our Quantitative Research Associate, Jackson Vann.

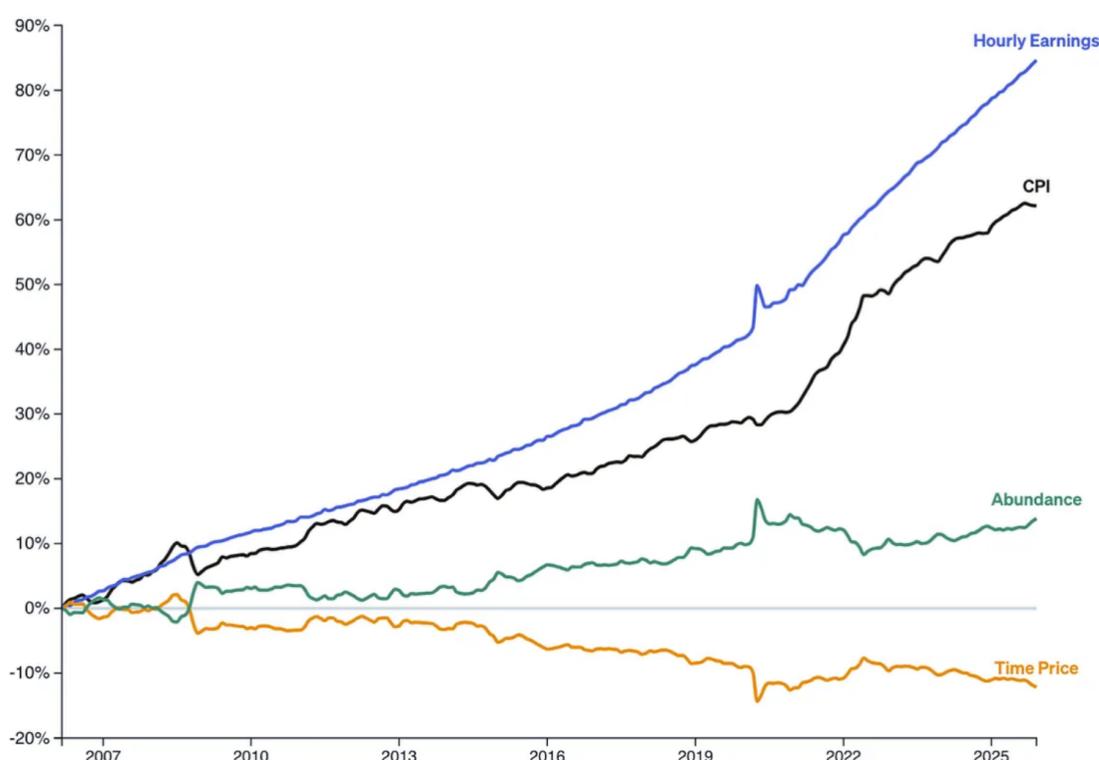
Users can select multiple worker categories, compare short- and long-run trends, and even see wage growth modeled to reflect real career progression rather than freezing workers in place. All the calculations are transparent and replicable, with the [full dataset and code](#) available on GitHub.

So what does the index actually say about American standards of living?

Over the past 12 months, inflation rose 2.68 percent while hourly earnings for the average private-sector worker grew 3.76 percent. As a result, the CPI basket became 1.05 percent more abundant. Since 2006, it has become nearly 14 percent more abundant—roughly equivalent to adding an hour of purchasing power to the average workday.

All Private-Sector Workers' Abundance Index Over Time

Percentage change over time in **Abundance**, **Time Price**, **Hourly Earnings**, and **CPI**.



[Visit the American Abundance Index](#)

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Falling global inequality, new trade deals, a drone that herds cattle, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

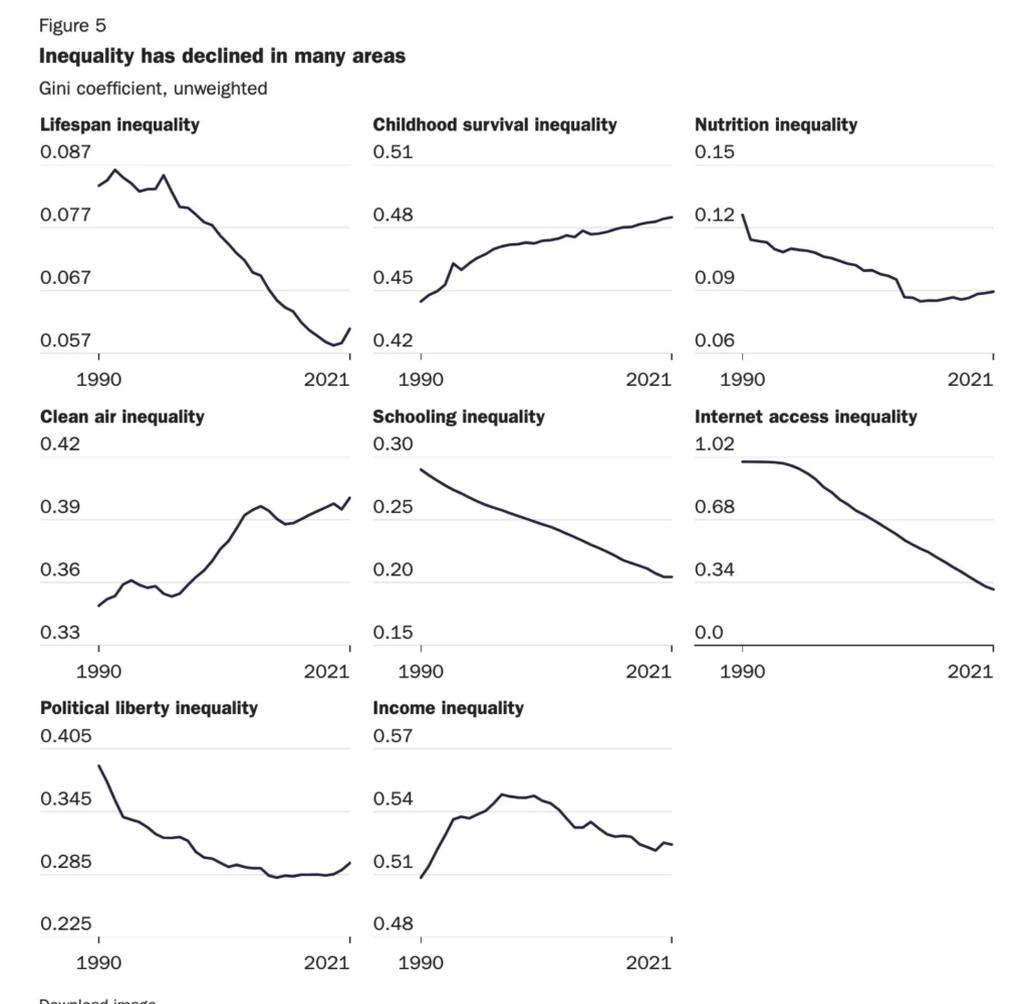
FEB 08, 2026



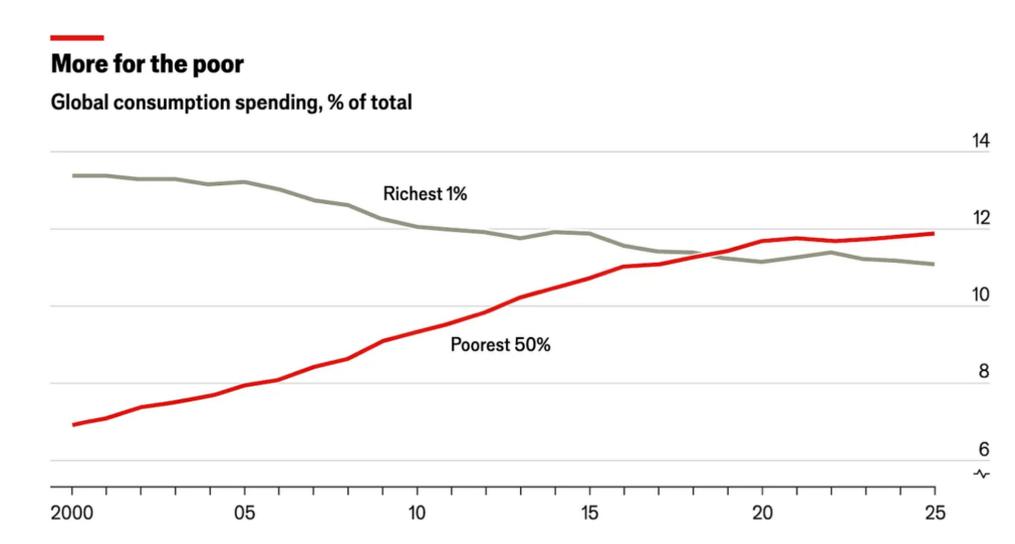
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Economics & Development

- **82 percent** of rural Indian households now have access to tap water, up from just 17 percent in 2019, representing over 125 million new tap water connections.
- A [recently updated report](#) from our managing editor Chelsea Follett and the economist Vincent Geloso finds that not only has global well-being improved substantially since 1990, but **global inequality in well-being has also fallen across many metrics**.



- [Another analysis](#) published in *The Economist* finds that **global inequality in consumption spending is falling**. In 2000, the richest 10 percent of humanity spent 40 times more than the poorest 50 percent. In 2025, they spent around 18 times more.



- **The United States has made new trade commitments**, including large bilateral trade agreements with [India](#) and [Argentina](#), and has also [extended a program](#) that lets many sub-Saharan African countries export certain goods to the US duty-free.
- President Javier Milei has also been unilaterally lowering trade barriers. As a result of his actions, **Argentine consumer goods imports were 55 percent higher in 2025 than the year before**.

Energy & Environment

- **Saudi Arabia's Royal Natural Reserve is now home to endangered red-necked ostriches**, a close relative of the native Arabian ostrich, which was driven to extinction in the early 20th century. The ostrich is the twelfth creature to be reintroduced to the reserve as part of a plan to reestablish 23 species in the country.
- **China's endangered Yangtze finless porpoise is recovering** thanks to a fishing ban. The population is now estimated at **1,426 porpoises**, up from 1,012 in 2017.
- **Deforestation dropped 25 percent in Colombia**: the country lost 36,280 hectares of forest during the first three quarters of 2025, down from 48,500 hectares during the same period the year before.
- **Bogotá is becoming less smoggy**. Thanks largely to improved infrastructure, the Colombian city's air pollution fell 24 percent between 2018 and 2024.

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Health & Demographics

- **A study of the RTS,S malaria vaccine's effectiveness** in Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi found that vaccinated children suffered about **30 percent fewer malaria cases** and 58 percent fewer severe cases than their unvaccinated peers.
- **A large UK study** monitoring 25,000 teenagers over three school years **found no evidence** that time spent on social media or video gaming led to increased anxiety or depression.

 **The Misdiagnosis of American Mental Health**
ADAM OMARY AND CHRISTOPHER J. FERGUSON, PH.D. • JAN 10
[Read full story →](#)

Science & Technology

- **Waymo says it now provides 400,000 robotaxi rides per week**, up from 200,000 around this time last year. That number will likely grow even more this year, with the company planning to expand operations to **more than 20 new cities**.
- **China has become the first country to issue commercial licenses for autonomous flying taxis**.

 **Waymo Drivers Are Way Safer (10x) Than Humans**
GALE POOLEY • JANUARY 11, 2025
[Read full story →](#)

- A new startup plans to sell **a drone that autonomously monitors and herds cattle**, potentially saving ranchers **hundreds of thousands of dollars** per year.

 **GrazeMate | Autonomous Drones to Help Ranchers Manage Cattle** Copy link



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Environmentalism Without Degrowth

Zion Lights explains why environmentalists must embrace energy abundance.

CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT AND ZION LIGHTS

FEB 11, 2026

8 1 3 Share Transcript

Environmentalists often claim that solving climate change requires scarcity: less energy, less consumption, and less economic growth.

Zion Lights, a former radical environmentalist, now argues the opposite—that energy abundance is necessary for both thriving human societies and environmental protection. Her latest book, *Energy Is Life*, tells the story of her journey from Extinction Rebellion activist to outspoken advocate for nuclear power.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, Zion Lights joins Chelsea Follett to discuss how modern environmentalism became fixated on scarcity, how nuclear power became so misunderstood, and why energy is essential to human wellbeing.

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

Joining me today is Zion Lights, an award-winning science communicator who is known for her vision of a high-energy, low-carbon future. Her latest book is titled *Energy is Life: Why Environmentalism Went Nuclear*.

Zion, tell me, what inspired this book?

There are a lot of good nuclear energy books out there, but they tend to focus on the technology. That’s good, but people who read technical books tend to already agree that nuclear energy is good. I’m trying to convince people to think differently. So, I’ve written this book as a narrative following my journey as an anti-nuclear environmental activist to where I am now, while also explaining things like waste and accidents. Ultimately, I wanted to write something that would have changed my mind if I had read this book 15 years ago when I was out blocking roads.

We recorded an earlier podcast about your journey. But for people who aren’t familiar, could you just quickly summarize your history as an activist?

I’m what you might call a former radical environmentalist. I was very active in the major groups, like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, taking part in protests, organizing protests, and lobbying. I was doing all of that from quite a young age, from my teenage years and even before. And part and parcel of that was being anti-nuclear. I went on anti-nuclear protests and signed anti-nuclear petitions.

Over time—and this is a long story, I won’t get into it, but it’s all in the book—I changed my mind and realized how good this technology actually is for the environment. I decided I need to make amends for my own sake, but also because I believe in having clean air and a better future for my children.

Let’s dive into the book. You argue that “Energy is life.” That’s right in the title. What do you mean by that?

When I was in Extinction Rebellion, one of the things that we pushed for was net zero. This idea was influential everywhere, not just in Britain, where the group was founded. All over the world, people were suddenly setting net-zero goals, even in countries with very little capacity to actually meet them. And I’m not saying that the reasons were wrong. Climate change is an issue, and air pollution is an issue. The problem was that net zero or decarbonization became synonymous with renewable energy. That was a huge mistake. It should have been not just clean energy, but what’s cleaner? Gas is cleaner than coal, so really, it should have been a phasing out coal initiative.

I think the reason why net zero was tied to renewables was that activists were really trying to promote energy scarcity. How do we use less? This is an old idea that was present in environmentalism well before I was born. Less stuff, less consumerism, less energy. Even when I was growing up, I remember campaigns on TV about not leaving your lights on when you leave the room and not wasting your tap water. It was really drummed into us. So, net zero got lumped in with “We need to live with less.”

On various panels, I’ve been asked by people in the audience, “Isn’t there a danger of too much?” I think that’s really interesting. Why would there be a danger of having too much? Then, I started to realize it’s because those people aren’t connecting their everyday life with energy. They never had to live with scarcity.

I wrote the book to challenge a lot of those ideas. I’ve tried to have readers imagine their lives without access to reliable electricity. What’s that life like? And do you really want to live that life? Because millions of people don’t.

My parents’ family in the Punjab in India live in a very poor rural area, although it’s not extreme poverty. They have food. They’re rice farmers. But here’s where the issues come in: they’re dependent on rain. If it doesn’t rain enough, then they don’t eat, and they don’t make any money. It’s so hard to imagine having that kind of lifestyle where you can’t just go to the shop and buy whatever you need.

I had friends who’ve gone to India, and they just go to the tourist sites and say, “Oh, it’s so peaceful, and I love how it’s not materialistic. They don’t have that stress of capitalism.” In reality, they don’t have the privilege. They are just trying to get through the day and make sure everybody’s fed, and nobody dies of a preventable disease. In the village, if you get bitten by a snake or a dog, which is very common, you’ll probably just die. The nearest hospital will be hours away by car, which nobody has. A lot of people have bikes. You think you can get to a hospital on a bicycle carrying a sick child when it takes four hours by car? All this impacts education as well. I remember my parents trying to pay for a teacher to live in the village. They’re very well off compared to most people in India, so they had a building built, thinking they were giving something back to a community, and they couldn’t find a teacher, even after offering a really good salary, who’d be willing to live in a village where they might die of a snakebite.

So they don’t have those privileges that we have, and spreading those privileges will require burning a lot of fossil fuels, unless someone goes over there and builds them a load of nuclear power plants. They will need coal, and then gas, to enable access to things like public transport, hospitals, and schools. And then if you have a school, you could have people there who know how to administer antivenom. You’ll have all of those incremental things that we developed over time that come with having access to energy.

So, it’s the people who grew up with abundant energy that protest that same benefit and say, “Well, we’ve had too much.” And I think some of that comes from guilt. But feeling guilty doesn’t help my family in India. You trying to get people to use less is actually detrimental to them because then you have things like COP, where poor countries get pressured to sign agreements to burn less fossil fuels.

Many energy discussions, you point out, focus almost entirely on emissions targets. Why do you think people take that approach, and how can we improve upon that?

For quite a few people, climate change equals the apocalypse, so that is the sole problem they think we should be focused on. They also seem to not pay much attention to human wellbeing. In a way, they think people are part of the problem. And that’s where the scarcity argument comes from, the idea that we need to have less. That kind of self-flagellation might make activists feel less guilty, but it doesn’t really help those who are impacted by climate change.

For me, it’s a bit different. I want the planet to be healthy because I care about people. I want my neighbor to be healthy. I want people to be well-fed and not struggling.

Poverty is one of the many issues where I think we could have moved forward a bit more than we have. We’ve got brilliant thinkers crunching out reports explaining how we can alleviate poverty, and it hasn’t happened because we’re over-focused on environmental targets. I have spoken to people who do this work independently, trying to alleviate poverty, and they have said to me privately, “The climate thing’s just taken over. It’s hard to get funded for anything because all anyone cares about is climate.” I’m not saying climate change is not an issue, I’m just saying it’s not the only issue.

How do you respond to the idea that prosperity must mean restraint and degrowth?

I knew someone in Extinction Rebellion who was going to go and live in this community with some other degrowthers. He’s one of the most well-off people I know. He’s an academic professor, he’s got a country house, he’s got everything that might create a perfect life, but obviously, he didn’t feel like that, otherwise he wouldn’t be saying, “Well, I need to go and live on the land.” It’s almost because he has everything that he wanted that he believes he’s unhappy because of modern society.

It’s almost because he has everything that he wanted that he believes he’s unhappy because of modern society. That’s a very common argument. “Our mental health is bad because of how we live.” I’ve had people say that to me, and I’ve said, “Well, do you think that people living in poverty have good mental health?” Where’s that assumption coming from? You just think that they’re happy every day because they can’t go to a shop and buy whatever they want or have whatever they want to eat for dinner?

When I visited India, I would ask people, “What would you do if you could leave?” When I asked my cousin, she said, “Well, I can’t leave. I’ve got to support my brother, who’s disabled. I’ve got to help my mum cook.” I couldn’t even get her to imagine having these choices. This academic and these Degrowth people would say, “Oh, they’re so selfless.” No, they just don’t have a choice. They don’t have the choice to think about their own needs. They don’t think in terms of choice because poverty takes away their choices. I remember saying to her, “You could be a doctor.” And she just said, “No, I could never. I don’t have the money to do it. I don’t even know how to fill in the forms.” All of those things were true. There are so many barriers that she couldn’t even think of it as a possibility. And that made me sad because even on the hardest day, I still think, “How can tomorrow be better? What could I do differently? What are my choices?” They are endless.

If I wanted to, I could go and live on the land and embrace degrowth and grow my own food, but I’d only be pretending. If I got sick, I could still go to a hospital. The people who really live in the situation of degrowth, where they have a very low carbon footprint, also have very little agency.

If you look at it honestly, the idyllic idea of “living on the land” is not actually better for the environment on any metric. People in dense cities consume much less than those in the country. When lots of people live in one place, when they are connected to a grid and have public transport or can walk to places, they become really efficient. And people are already moving to the cities, so all that policy needs to do is make sure that cities are well-connected and that we have access to everything we need.

I live in what you’d call a 15-minute city. I know that’s taken on negative connotations with people, but everything I need is within 15 minutes. There is a primary school, a secondary school, several supermarkets, and a post office that I use regularly. I moved here specifically because I wanted to be somewhere where I could get to these things on foot. It’s much easier and also definitely much better for the environment. To live this way, I need the grid, and I would like the grid to be clean and reliable and not reliant on gas from Russia.

I would like it to be better than that. Our electricity is very expensive. It’s not the most expensive in Europe, but it’s up there. We could do what France did. In 10 years, we could build 58 reactors and decarbonize the grid. That would tick the box on our climate goals, but most importantly, it would make electricity cheaper at home. I have been told several times that it’s too ambitious, but I think it’s less ambitious to do what France did than to try and do what Germany did, which was decarbonize with just wind and solar. For some reason, that’s not seen as ambitious, but that’s the thing that we know doesn’t work.

Why do you think there is so much skepticism toward nuclear power? And why is it so misunderstood by the public?

The reason that I was afraid of nuclear technology for quite a long time was that it was conflated with weapons. Once I started thinking about energy, and then separating the military and civil technology, I realized that there’s not as much crossover as they’ve made out. And actually, it’s very, very difficult to develop nuclear weapons.

And then there are scary stories that we hear all the time. There’s a new Chernobyl series, right? They’re constantly pumping these out. Just the word Chernobyl is enough to scare people. Another story I was told by some of these activist organizations was that loads of people died because of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant meltdown. Now, if you look into it, they actually died because of the tsunami and the earthquake, not the meltdown. We even got it from The Simpsons. The most evil person in The Simpsons is Mr. Burns, the nuclear industry owner. And what’s a nuclear plant worker like? Homer Simpson. Lazy and irresponsible. One of the worst caricatures of a person. Even in the intro, there’s nuclear fuel portrayed as green, goopy waste just lying around.

These stories caused entire populations to associate nuclear energy with a bad feeling, and environmentalists used that fear and pushed it further.

If listeners take away just one idea from your book, what should it be?

I would like people to stop thinking in terms of scarcity. We’ve always been told, “You’re wasteful. Are you wasting food? Are you wasting electricity? Do you need to buy that thing?” That message, which is pushed all the time, makes us feel guilty for our prosperity, and in the extreme, it leads people to believe we should give it all up.

So, instead of saying, “These people have too much,” we should ask, “How do we get this to more people? How do we make this thing more efficient? How can we make better technology?” The reason we got to where we are today is that we kept pushing for more. That is the space in which human progress happens.

The best word for it is abundance. I want to see abundance for everybody, and I want to get rid of this old Malthusian idea that we can’t have it for everybody, or the planet will die.

Read the full transcript

Romance Costs Less Than It Used To

The time required to buy chocolate and flowers has fallen dramatically.

ADAM OMARY

FEB 14, 2026



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Long before heart-shaped boxes lined supermarket aisles, cacao was consumed as a bitter ceremonial drink in Mesoamerica and valued enough to function as a medium of exchange. Among the Aztecs, cacao beans could be traded for everyday goods, and the beverage prepared from them was associated with wealth and status. Chocolate entered Europe in the 16th century as a rare and expensive commodity, with high prices of sugar and spices helping to keep the elaborately prepared drink from the hands of ordinary people. Only with the rise of industrial processing, global trade, and mass production in the 19th and early 20th centuries did chocolate steadily migrate from royal courts to average shop counters, becoming a common indulgence for many children and sweet-toothed adults.

Despite that, there is a prevailing sentiment that everyday luxuries like chocolate are becoming unaffordable, and two-thirds of Americans remain “very concerned” about the rising cost of food and consumer goods, according to the [Pew Research Center](#). This is especially the case for holiday spending, with [2 in 5](#) Americans reporting Valentine’s Day activities being unaffordable in 2026.

But sticker prices are often misleading. A better way to judge affordability—the method economists increasingly favor—is to ask how long someone has to work to buy something. When prices rise, but wages rise faster, the functional price of a commodity goes down, because more can be bought with the same amount of work, or the same can be bought with less work.

Seen through the lens of time prices, Valentine’s chocolate tells a surprisingly hopeful story.

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In 1929, around the time See’s Candies was establishing its reputation, a pound of quality chocolate cost about [80 cents](#). That same year, the average wage in the U.S. was [56 cents per hour](#), according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. A box of chocolate for that special someone would have cost nearly an hour and a half of work.

Today, a one-pound box of See’s assorted chocolates sells for \$33.00, just a fraction more than today’s median blue-collar hourly wages of [\\$31.95 per hour](#). In other words, the time price for that box of indulgence has fallen by 24 minutes over the last century, making the same romantic gesture 28 percent more affordable.

The same applies to the classic bouquet of roses. Today, Trader Joe’s sells a dozen roses for \$10.99, or a time price of a mere 20 minutes for the average U.S. worker. That price would have been considered a bargain [even 40 years ago](#), when the same median hourly wage was \$9.00 per hour. The time price of roses has fallen by 71 percent in just four decades.

Moreover, before modern greenhouses and supply chains, roses were not even reliably available in February across much of the world. Like the endless supermarket shelves stocked year-round with once-seasonal tropical fruit, technological progress and globalization have made romantic gestures possible in the depths of winter.

Romance has not become a luxury good. If anything, the opposite is true. The time required to buy chocolate and flowers has fallen dramatically, and we now have constant access to goods that were once rare commodities.

For those concerned about consumerism spoiling romance, advancements in time prices are still a welcome boon. When people don’t have to work as long to meet their basic needs, hours free up for physical closeness, quality time, and immaterial romantic gestures. Love, it turns out, is more accessible than ever.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Argentine labor reform, progress against tropical diseases, Yangtze recovery, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN
FEB 15, 2026

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Economics & Development

- Argentina’s Senate has approved a major labor reform bill** that loosens rules around hiring and firing and curbs union power. The bill still has to pass through the lower house, but the Senate—where President Milei’s party, La Libertad Avanza, holds a smaller share of seats—was the larger hurdle. As policy analyst Marcos Falcone [recently discussed](#) on our podcast, labor reform is a crucial step toward fixing the Argentine economy:

Argentina also has a very high degree of informality in its labor market because it’s very expensive to hire employees legally, and it can be even more expensive to let them go because of litigation. Businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises, are constantly trying to avoid litigation because they know, due to the way that the judicial system is set up, if they face a lawsuit by a former employee, they’re going to lose. This needs to stop, and the Milei administration knows this and is going to push for labor reform.

THE HUMAN PROGRESS PODCAST

Milei Midterms: An Update on Argentina

CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT · NOVEMBER 14, 2025



Argentina’s recent midterm elections delivered a clear verdict: voters want President Javier Milei’s reforms to continue. Defying predictions of public backlash and political collapse, Milei’s party, La Libertad Avanza, won far more support than expected and greatly strengthened its hand in Congress.

[Read full story](#) →

Energy & Environment

- US forests are absorbing historically high amounts of carbon.** According to a [recently published study](#), thanks to higher CO₂ levels, warmer temperatures, shifting rainfall, expanding forests, and maturing trees, US forests have stored more carbon over the past two decades than during any comparable period in the last century.
- China’s 2021 Yangtze fishing ban didn’t just benefit the porpoise:** the whole river is recovering. A [new study](#) finds that Yangtze fish biomass more than doubled two years after the ban, with species diversity rising by 13 percent.
- The greater Bermuda snail, once thought to be extinct, is now thriving.** After a few hundred were discovered in Bermuda’s capital city—likely the last of their species—conservationists bred and released 100,000 of them across the island, establishing six stable populations.

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Health & Demographics

- Thanks to successful elimination efforts, fewer people need preventive treatment for neglected tropical diseases.** According to the World Health Organization, around 1.4 billion people required large-scale distribution of preventive medicines in 2024, 92 million fewer than in 2023.
- The number of organ transplants in the US has increased nearly every year since 2013** (2020 was the exception), reaching a record 49,064 in 2025.
- In a large trial in Singapore, releasing male mosquitoes infected with Wolbachia bacteria**—which prevents certain viruses from replicating and mosquito eggs from hatching—**reduced dengue infections by roughly 70 percent.**

Science & Technology

- Southwest Airlines plans to outfit more than 300 aircraft with Starlink by the end of the year**, bringing faster and more reliable connection to passengers.
- Paul Erdős, a prolific 20th-century mathematician, left behind over 1,000 open math problems.** Since October, **researchers have used AI models to find solutions for about 100 of them**—mostly by tracking down and combining overlooked proofs, but in some cases by generating novel solutions.

Tolerance & Culture

- Same sex couples in the Philippines can now share ownership of property.**

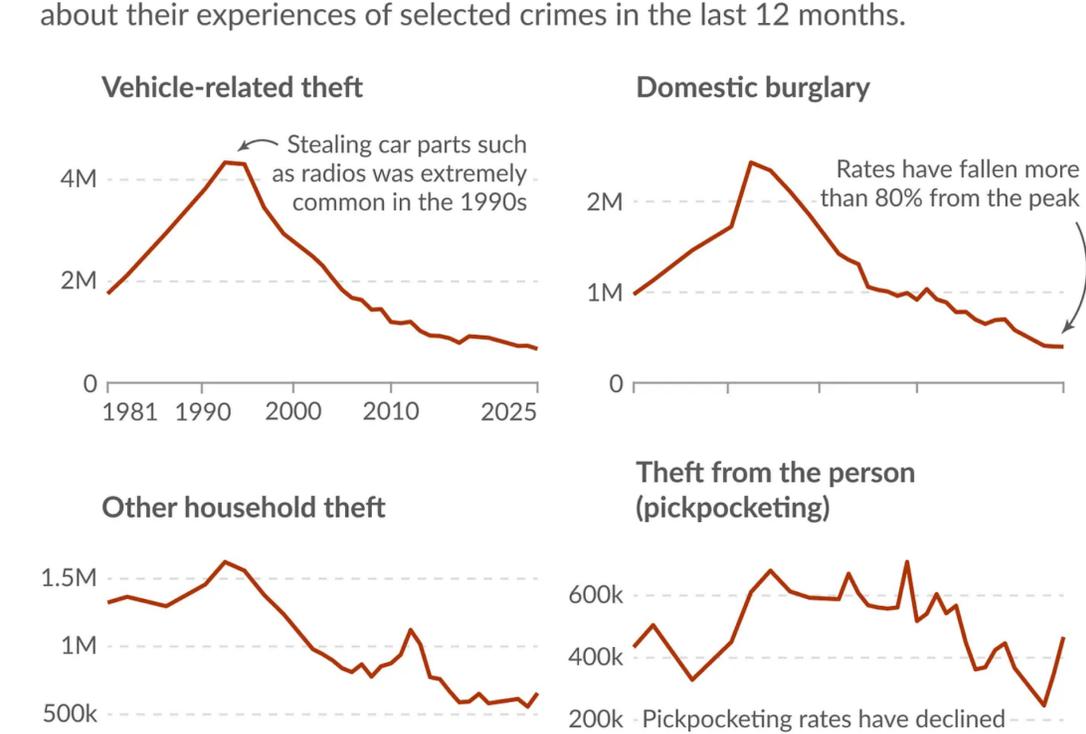
Violence & Coercion

- There were 34,086 homicides in Brazil in 2025, down from 38,374 in 2024**—the fifth consecutive annual drop.
- In the 12 months before September 2025, England and Wales suffered just under 500 homicides, the lowest number since 1977.** Property crime is also [way down](#) from its 1990s peak.

Thefts in England and Wales are much less common than they were in the 1990s



Based on the Crime in England and Wales Survey, which asks adults about their experiences of selected crimes in the last 12 months.



Note: This data captures many incidents that were not reported to the police.

Data source: Office for National Statistics (2025)

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Are Americans Getting Richer? New Data Might Surprise You

Workers have proven resilient over the past decade, despite inflation and valid affordability fears.

HUMAN PROGRESS
FEB 20, 2026

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by The Washington Post Editorial Board

The resilience of the American worker is one of the most underreported stories of the 2020s. From red tape to import taxes, successive governments have erected barriers to success. Yet America's workers have persevered and figured out ways to prosper.

A new American Abundance Index illustrates this. The project from Human Progress, an arm of the Cato Institute, reveals the steady rise of the average worker's purchasing power. The premise of the index is simple: how many hours do you need to work, compared to the month or year before, to be able to afford the "basket of goods," which is a standard set of household items and services that comprise the Consumer Price Index used to calculate inflation.

The "time price" is how many hours of work it takes to purchase the basket of goods. The "abundance" is how much of the basket one hour of work can buy. The story told by the index is a very good one: since recordkeeping began, "abundance" for average private sector workers comes out to a net increase of 13.8 percent.

Abundance has increased for an average U.S. private sector worker since 2006

Change in the value of goods and services one hour of work can buy for all private sector workers since March 2006

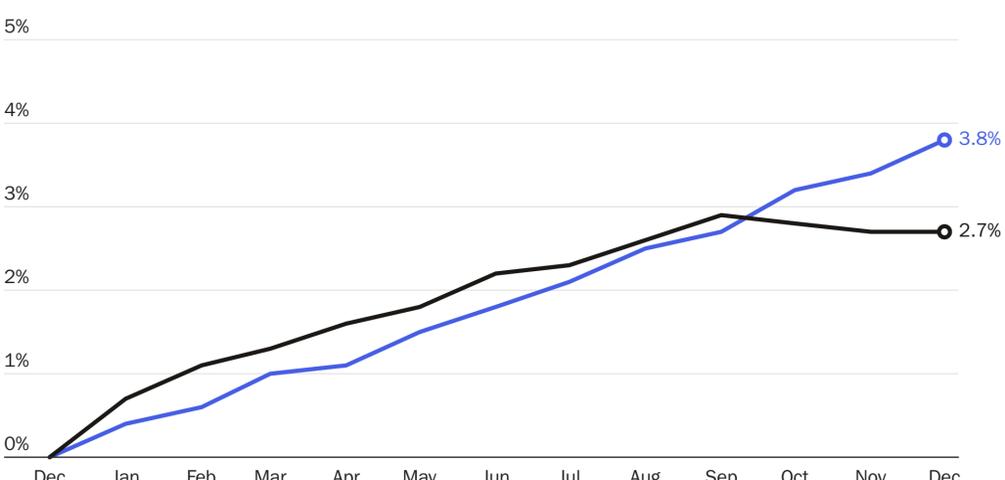


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Source: American Abundance Index from Human Progress

It increased the past year, too. The index shows the average private sector worker saw prices rise by 2.7 percent from December 2024 to December 2025, while their hourly wages grew by 3.8 percent. This means workers could work 1 percent less to buy the same basket of goods. Put differently, workers could afford 1 percent more stuff.

Wage growth outpaced inflation in 2025

Change in CPI and average hourly wage of private sector workers since December 2024



Download image
Source: American Abundance Index from Human Progress

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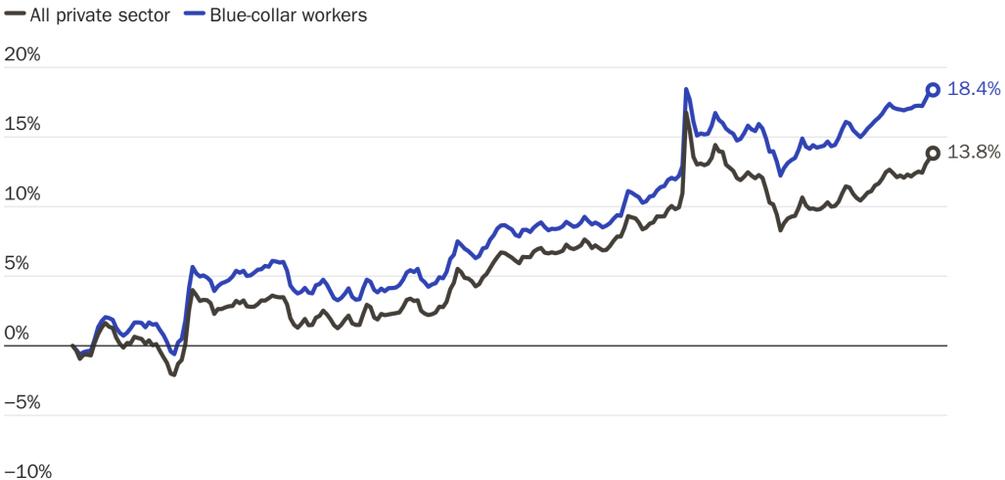
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The reason for this is that earnings have continued to outpace inflation. So long as wages increase faster than inflation, the worker gets ahead. And it's not just desk jobs that have enabled workers to purchase the same amount of goods and services for fewer hours worked. The gain for traditional "blue collar workers" is even higher: a historical net increase of 18.4 percent since 2006.

Abundance has increased more for U.S. blue-collar workers since 2006

Change in the value of goods and services one hour of work can buy since March 2006

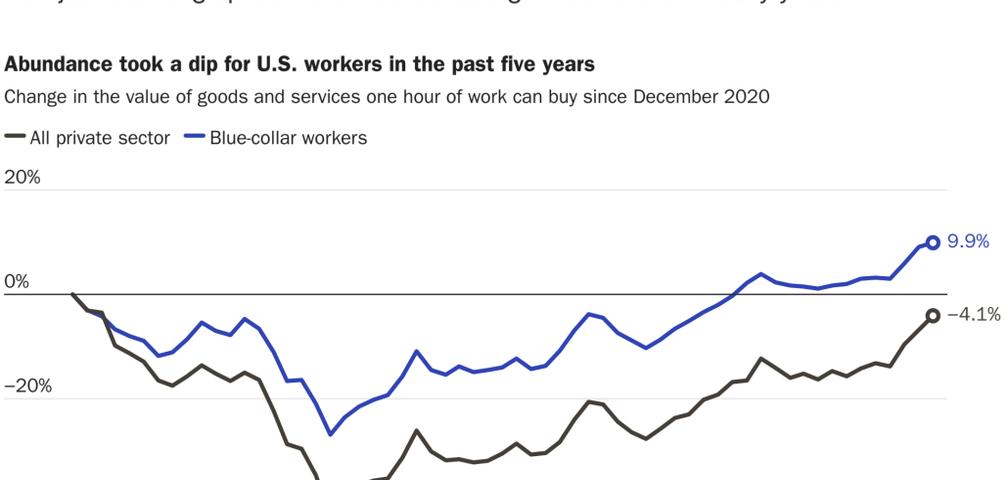


Download image
Source: American Abundance Index from Human Progress

Despite workers significantly increasing their purchasing power over the past two decades, the past five years have taken a toll. The self-inflicted pain of printing vast sums of money during the pandemic sent the annualized inflation rate to over 9 percent in 2022, far outstripping raises. While inflation is now mostly under control, it has taken time for the gap between wages and inflation to settle, and workers are only now just catching up after their losses during those inflation-heavy years.

Abundance took a dip for U.S. workers in the past five years

Change in the value of goods and services one hour of work can buy since December 2020



Download image
Source: American Abundance Index from Human Progress

Americans continue to rank affordability as a top concern and do not believe the government is doing enough to address the cost of living. These frustrations are understandable. Prices are still rising while tariffs and uncertainty strangle businesses and push consumer confidence to a 12-year low. America's growth and prosperity story has always been one of fits and starts, and workers are right to demand that government gets out of their way. But the new data make clear that 21st century Americans can still be content about how far they've come and optimistic about how far they've yet to go.

This article was originally [published](#) in the Washington Post on 2/6/2026.

Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

A check on US tariffs, reasons to trust crime statistics, beaver acceleration in the UK, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

FEB 22, 2026

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Economics & Development

- The United States Supreme Court has ruled that **President Trump lacked the authority to impose widespread tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act**. The ruling **does not end** President Trump's broader tariff policy or invalidate tariffs created under other statutes, but it does strip the executive of one mechanism for unilaterally imposing sweeping trade barriers.
- China has promised to eliminate tariffs on imports from every African country except Eswatini**, which maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Energy & Environment

Conservation and biodiversity:

- Elephant seals are no longer considered "near threatened" in South Africa** after their population reached 5,500 in 2023, up from 3,000 in 2016.
- After being driven to the brink of extinction **in Serbia** in the late 20th century, **the eastern imperial eagle**—which graces the national coat of arms—**has been reestablished in the country**, with 19 breeding pairs recorded in 2025.
- The cheetah is back in India, and its population is growing**. In 2022, conservationists began reintroducing the species using animals from Namibia and South Africa. As of this week, the wild population **has risen to 38**.
- In 2009, the UK began officially reintroducing beavers, which were extirpated in the 16th century, but only within closely monitored areas. Last year, those restrictions were lifted in **England**, and this year, there are **plans to release around 100 beavers into the wild**.
- Since August, according to official satellite data, **deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has fallen to its lowest level since 2014**. If the trend continues, 2026 might see the **lowest level of Amazonian deforestation since 1988**, when monitoring began.
- According to a recent government report, **forest and tree cover in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh expanded by roughly 338,000 acres** (about 528 square miles) between 2017 and 2023.

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Energy production

- Fervo**, a geothermal energy company, **has drilled a well with a temperature above 555 degrees Fahrenheit, its hottest well yet**. The hotter the well, the more electricity each borehole can produce, boosting efficiency and helping move US geothermal closer to commercial viability.
- US companies are trying to repurpose jet engines into natural gas turbines to power data centers**. According to a Jefferies analyst, about 1,600 commercial jet engines are retired each year, and if a third were converted, they could yield roughly 13 gigawatts of generating capacity.

Health & Demographics

- Libya has eliminated trachoma**, a bacterial eye infection, as a public health problem, **and Nepal is on the verge of eliminating Kala-Azar**, a highly deadly parasitic disease.
- Measles is coming back under control in Europe and Central Asia**. Cases **fell 75 percent last year**, dropping from 127,000 in 2024 to 34,000 in 2025.
- Canada is making progress against cancer**. According to a **recent government report**, the five-year survival rate has grown from 55 percent in the early 1990s to around 64 percent today.
- The FDA commissioner Marty Makary recently announced plans to make one major study, rather than two, the agency's new default requirement for approving new drugs**. He argued that advances in biomedical science make duplicate trials less necessary, and that the change should speed up approvals and encourage more drug development. Makary has also promised to **allow more drugs to be sold without a prescription**.

Science & Technology

- Waymo **recently disclosed** that its **fleet of 3,000 robotaxis requires just 70 remote operators** on duty at any given time, a small ratio that suggests the vehicles rarely need human assistance.

Violence & Coercion

- The death penalty is losing ground in Southeast Asia**. While only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Timor-Leste have fully abolished it, several other countries—including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam—have sharply reduced executions or narrowed their use.
- The blogger Scott Alexander **has assembled some arguments for why we should take the long term decline in US crime rates seriously**:
 - The National Crime Victimization Survey, which asks people directly whether they have been victims of crime and operates independently of police reports, shows a broadly similar long-run decline to other crime measures.
 - Homicide and motor-vehicle theft, which are consistently reported and reliably measured, have dropped at similar rates to other crimes.
 - Improved hospital trauma care likely doesn't explain the long-run drop in murder; research suggests that although medical treatment has improved, gunshot injuries have grown more severe over time, leaving overall lethality per violent act roughly stable.



Astral Codex Ten

Record Low Crime Rates Are Real, Not Just Reporting Bias Or Improved Medical Care

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Brink Lindsey explores why unprecedented prosperity has failed to deliver widespread meaning.

MARIAN L TUPPY
FEB 27, 2026

4 1 1 Share Transcript

In 1930, the English economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that once humanity solved the problem of material scarcity, we would face a deeper challenge: how to live wisely and well in a world of abundance.

Nearly a century later, that prediction seems justified. We are richer, healthier, and better educated than any society in history, yet economic growth has slowed, trust in institutions is fraying, birthrates are collapsing, and a deep pessimism hangs over much of the developed world.

In this episode of *The Human Progress Podcast*, our editor Marian Tuppy speaks with writer and policy scholar Brink Lindsey about his new book *The Permanent Problem: The Uncertain Transition from Mass Plenty to Mass Flourishing*. They discuss why material abundance creates dissatisfaction, the decline of marriage and community, bureaucratic stagnation, and the cultural and institutional innovations needed to produce mass satisfaction without scarcity.

Listen on your favorite podcast app

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

Today, I'll be speaking with Brink Lindsey, an American political writer and Senior Vice President at the Niskanen Center. Previously, he was Cato's Vice President for Research and a dear colleague. Today, we'll be discussing his latest book, *The Permanent Problem: The Uncertain Transformation from Mass Plenty to Mass Flourishing*.

I want to start by congratulating you on your excellent book. It is concise, thoughtful, and beautifully written. As a published author, I'm envious of your style, and I really recommend the book to our listeners.

Let's start with the most obvious question. What is the permanent problem?

I stole that line from the British economist John Maynard Keynes, who wrote a fascinating essay called "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren."

That essay came out in 1930 in the depths of the Great Depression, but he was brave enough to argue that this global catastrophe was just a bump in the road in a much longer process of modern economic growth, which he believed would continue until his audience's grandchildren were grown. By that point, he said that the economic problem, meaning serious material deprivation, would be more or less solved. With that done, he foresaw that humanity's permanent problem would loom into view: how to live wisely and agreeably and well with the blessings that modern economic growth has bestowed upon us.

He got some specific things wrong. He imagined that by now we'd only be working 15 hours a week, which hasn't panned out. However, he got the big picture profoundly right, which is that an abundant future was coming, and that moving from tackling the economic problem to the permanent problem would be traumatic for societies. That they would have to unlearn the habits of untold generations.

He imagined that this transition would be, in his words, something like a "general nervous breakdown throughout society." That phrase struck me as a pretty good description for the predicament that the United States and other advanced democracies have found themselves in. We're richer, healthier, better educated, and more humanely governed than any people have ever been before, yet economic growth has slowed to a crawl in most advanced economies, class divisions have sparked a global populist uprising against elites and established institutions, personal relationships are fraying, mental health problems are on the rise, faith in democracy is waning, and widespread pessimism is one of the few things you can get people across the political spectrum to agree on.

So, the thesis of the book is that our predicament amounts to the fact that we are in this no man's land between mass plenty and mass flourishing. That, having achieved mass plenty, we've moved the goalposts of what makes a successful life. It's no longer just about having food, shelter, and clothing, but meaning, purpose, belonging, and status. While we are providing those conditions for a larger fraction of the population than ever before, for 70 or 80 percent of people, our current way of life is not providing the conditions for flourishing that one would imagine would go with our level of technological and organizational prowess.

So, in America today, things are so good that we are moving to the top of Maslow's hierarchy, but on the other hand, we have a hysteria where people are saying basic necessities like food and shelter have never been more unaffordable.

Can both be true at the same time?

I think we are absolutely materially richer than any society before. People who are discontent with the status quo grope for something quantifiable that has gone wrong, and so they try to make an argument about material decline that just isn't consistent with the facts. It is true that we are rich enough to take our basic material needs for granted. Nonetheless, we enjoy these blessings with a kind of asterisk, which is that we get them only by spending the bulk of our waking adult lives working 40-hour weeks.

The blessed 20 or 30 percent at the top have an arena for flourishing. They've got intellectually challenging jobs that offer a lot of autonomy and scope for creativity, and social status. The rest are in fairly low-autonomy jobs with a lot of scutwork, and they're one stroke of bad luck away from losing their job and falling into a serious hole. They're shadowed by both the precarity of their hold on mass plenty and also by the need to spend a lot of their lives in drudgery to pay the bills.

According to Gallup, life satisfaction in America remained pretty much the same between 1979 and 2025. Roughly 80 percent of Americans say they are either satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, while only 20 percent of Americans believe that America is going in the right direction.

So, how bad is it really, if 80 percent of Americans say that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their lives?

I don't put much stock in self-assessments of life satisfaction. Psychologically healthy people make the best of things, whatever the circumstances. Plus, happiness and life satisfaction surveys have a lot of cultural variation. Latin Americans seem to report higher life satisfaction given their level of GDP than Scandinavians or Japanese.

What I look at instead is the conditions for a well-lived life. The chances to do work that is challenging, fulfilling, and interesting are very good for a considerable fraction of society, but they're not so good for the majority. There's a large divergence there between the well-off and well-educated and everybody else. That's also translated into diverging odds of even being in the workforce: there's been a small drop-off in male prime-age labor force participation for college-educated men from the mid-'60s to the present, and a big drop-off in labor force participation for non-college-educated men. There's been a similar divergence in the odds of getting married and in the odds of growing up in a two-parent home. And finally, in recent years, we've seen a divergence in life expectancy. Rather than the poor catching up with the rich over time, they're now pulling apart.

So, are we doing better than ever before? Sure. But I don't think that exhausts the inquiry. In a society organized around progress, a purely backward-looking standard of evaluation isn't dispositive. In some of the more intangible aspects of flourishing, there are warning signs that things are going in the wrong direction.

So, do you have in your mind a sense of what an agreeable life should be?

At least in broad outlines.

In the agrarian age, to quote Hobbes, "Life was poor, nasty, brutish, and short," but it was not solitary. People were miserable and poor, but they weren't atomized or alienated. Now, I think it's a real liberation that we're not stuck in the same place that we were born, working the same trade as our parents. We can choose our own lives, and that's a great opportunity. The next question is, "Are we going to develop cultural and institutional supports in these new conditions that will help us to have satisfying lives?"

It's beyond serious dispute that for most people, the most important determinant of the quality of their life is the quality of their personal relationships. And once upon a time, when the world was poor, your face-to-face relationships with other people filled vital practical functions. Your spouse was a partner in economic co-production. Your kids were economic assets. Your neighbors were an insurance policy. The main source of entertainment was hanging out with your friends and talking.

Over time, as we've gotten richer, we've outsourced a lot of those functions either to the marketplace or the welfare state. Personal relationships with people have become just one consumption option in a sea of expertly marketed alternatives. Learning to live wisely and agreeably and well amidst riches requires cultural and institutional supports that push us to spend our time on what really matters, which is the people who are close to us. We don't have those, so we're seeing fraying human connection.

This is cashing out most fatefully in the declining rate of people getting married and having babies. More than half of people now live in countries where the fertility rate is below replacement. That puts the whole demographic sustainability of liberal, democratic, capitalist, cosmopolitan, affluent civilization in doubt.

I want to ask you about the danger of presentism.

When we see a problem on the front pages of newspapers, we tend to extrapolate from it a broader crisis. In other words, we have trouble separating that which is fundamental to our civilization from that which is just a passing trend.

Let me give you a few examples. You write in the book that "we are getting fatter, dumber, and our mental health is deteriorating." It certainly feels like it, right? But obesity is already declining in the United States because of Ozempic. Increasingly large numbers of young people are quitting off social media. In particular, Gen Z, the newest ones, are the best at that. Suicide rates are falling in rich countries outside of the United States, meaning this may be a particular American problem, or even simply a problem of measurement, rather than a general problem with modernity.

So, are we underestimating human adaptability and technological innovation?

That's a very good point. We learn over time that some things that we thought were great turned out to be bad, and we put them behind us. Forty percent of American adults used to smoke, and we covered our walls with lead paint. And yes, we've got what looks like a *deus ex machina* for obesity, but the fact that the obesity wave happened at all is a good example of a more general challenge of being rich.

When we were poor, we developed a scarcity-based morality of self-discipline and self-control and resisting temptation out of necessity, but as those material constraints lessened, there was an inevitable and appropriate loosening. People could indulge their desires more. They could, to a greater extent than in the past, follow an "if it feels good, do it" kind of path. Well, it turns out that those qualities of self-discipline and self-mastery are still extremely helpful today, not for keeping you from falling into horrible poverty, but for keeping you focused on the things that really matter, rather than trivial, distracting desires.

Capitalism gives us what we want, and we don't yet have the cultural supports that make sure it gives us what we want to want.

One set of problems that you identify has to do with the disintegration of personal bonds and the atomization of society.

Now, if I wanted to make grandparents more reliant on their children, to make neighbors more helpful to each other, and to increase church attendance, I would start by abolishing the welfare state, which I think has eroded the kind of mutual, voluntary reliance that people once had on each other.

This might irritate you, but I see the welfare state as an integral part of modern capitalism. Nowhere do we see a complex, technologically intensive, organizationally intensive division of labor without a strong welfare state. It's possible to imagine such a thing, but it's also possible to imagine a human being that's 100 meters tall. If you actually had a person being that tall, he would collapse under his own weight. Plus, the libertarian movement in the United States has made zero headway in knocking back the welfare state, so I think libertarians need some kind of plan B.

The hopeful future I have in mind is more localistic and involves reimbuing our face-to-face relationships with practical functions, which will allow people to live without the welfare state to a considerable degree. You can imagine a world of small modular nuclear reactors and 3D printing and vertical farming where small communities, with small divisions of labor, could have a degree of material affluence that today requires large-scale divisions of labor. But even in the here and now, if people are living together in communities, they can reassume duties of care that have been outsourced to private enterprise and the welfare state, such as taking care of little kids and elderly people and educating the young.

I wonder what is going to be more effective at driving culture change: appealing to people, or changing the incentives. When the government says, "We can pay for your child to go to a school," you can opt out, but you will have to pay twice if you want to send your kids to a private school.

At the very least, I think we agree we will need to have competition. We could give the welfare state to the states and let them play around with it so that different jurisdictions can learn from each other.

Yeah. And, even more importantly, on the regulatory side.

So far, I've been talking about what I call capitalism's crisis of inclusion, which is the weakening relationship between growth and widespread conditions for the good life. Meanwhile, though, we have a crisis of dynamism, a weakening capacity of the system to just keep delivering growth and pushing the technological frontier outward. Mancur Olson identified this problem a long time ago, which is that the richer you get, the more people you have with a stake in the status quo. For those people, the prospect of disruptive change is anxiety-provoking because it could knock them off their privileged perch, so they have an incentive to stop change. Also, the richer you get, the lower communication costs are, and the easier it is to band together with like-minded people and throw sand in the gears of creative destruction.

Meanwhile, the knowledge economy has created this large class of knowledge workers who desire to control and rationalize everything in their grasp. When something isn't working, the solution is to add another layer of bureaucracy and process. Obviously, we've got lots of this kind of dysfunction in the public sector, but I think we also see it in the private world, with the explosion of administrative staff on campus, the HR-ization of corporate life, and also in personal life, with helicopter parenting. These same professionals, on their off hours, deploy their managerial instincts to squeeze every drop of spontaneity out of childhood in the name of safety.

Those impulses are deep-seated, and they have contributed to an increasing drag on our dynamism.

One of the most effective ways to tackle this is inter-jurisdictional competition, allowing different groups to have different rules to limit the exposure of those different rules. Then, if that different set of rules really is producing better results, they can be emulated elsewhere. Beyond that, we're just ineradicably culturally pluralistic people, especially under conditions of modernity. People are not going to agree with each other on what the good life is. They're going to have different values. Having us all crammed together under one set of rules makes those value differences really high stakes and combustible and has produced a lot of the dysfunctional politics we're experiencing now.

Last question.

My view of what living wisely, agreeably, and well may be very different from a guy who is perfectly satisfied living in his basement playing games and smoking a lot of pot. I would find such a life appalling, but who am I to tell this person that they are not living wisely, agreeably, and well?

In other words, aren't you worried that even if all your hopes come to pass, the future may still contain a lot of people who will not be living wisely, agreeably, and well, just as they are today?

We can talk about flourishing at the individual level and then flourishing at the societal level.

In the book, I talk about projects, relationships, and experiences. Some people are really focused on projects and very light on relationships, and they do fine. Some people are great at cultivating amazing experiences, and they're not very practical about anything else, but they live well that way. So there are a lot of different ways to have a good life.

At the social level, there's a little bit less variety. To take one example, you can totally have a flourishing individual life without having children, but you can't really have a flourishing society unless a certain number of people are having babies. So, I think you can't have a flourishing society that isn't a free society where people are the authors of their own lives, and a free society requires the freedom to fail. Some people are just not going to live wisely and agreeably and well.

I think we can create better conditions for people to choose well than we have at present. But that doesn't mean we need to converge on one way of living well. That would be boring. Getting richer should mean a flowering of variety, not everybody converging on one way of life. And I think a more pluralistic, localistic institutional environment is most conducive to that end.

And it seems to me that living in a pluralistic society doesn't mean that you are voiceless, that you don't have a right to express your views about other people's lives. Pluralism does not require total relativism. I can still say to little Jimmy, "Spend less time playing video games in your room and go out and explore the world."

Ultimately, if we are going to be living in a pluralistic society where people can choose their values and how they want to live, it should be possible for people to persuade them that some ways of living, such as living up to their best potential, are better than wasting their lives.

This is the ultimate challenge for *Homo sapiens*: are we cut out for freedom? Are we cut out for being allowed to choose the good? Or are we just such a refractory species that we have to be lorded over?

The dystopian novel *Brave New World*, I think, is a much better fit with the predicament we're in right now than 1984. The human spirit is being degraded, not by a regime of fear, but by a regime of cheap pleasures. At the end of that book, there's this long monologue by the head of the society making this argument that human beings just don't know what's good for them and need to be taken care of. I don't believe that. I have faith that there is a human nature that wants the good, that wants to connect to the outside world, and to other people, and figure things out. And we have the great privilege of living in a very rich, technologically advanced world that gives more people opportunities to do those things. We just need to structure things a little bit better to make it easier to make the right choices.

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