

Libertarian Mythologies

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One modest benefit of the current recession is that politicians are less likely to declare how fortunate we are to live under capitalism. This was a common refrain during the 1945-1973 “Golden Age of Capitalism,” as politicians from Harold MacMillan to Lyndon Johnson upbraided “ungrateful” citizens by telling them that they “*never had it so good.*” Of course, the Global North’s general stability and relative affluence during the 1950s and 1960s dramatically contrasted with the violence and desperation of the preceding era’s world wars and depression and the Gilded Age before that. Since the 1973 global slowdown and particularly since the 2008 Great Recession, however, politicians have been savvy enough to not offend common sense by implying that people are lucky (politicians are instead far likelier to seek scapegoats for the majority’s deteriorating standard of living). Anyone who would now claim that we’ve “never had it so good” – thereby denying people’s experiences of being overworked and underpaid within an increasingly frenetic, toxic, and alienating society – would in fact lose all credibility if not appear delusional or perverse. But if office-seeking politicians are reluctant to seem obtuse, libertarians have no such reservations.

The Cato Institute-backed [HumanProgress](#) website recently tweeted a claim by Princeton Professor Angus Deaton that “Today, children in sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to survive to age 5 than were English children born in 1918.” Before addressing the intrinsic dishonesty of such comparisons in general it is worth noting the absurdity of this comparison in particular. 1918 was the final year of the First World War and the first year of the Spanish influenza. Decimated by war, England struggled to combat “[one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history](#)” as the flu killed [228,000](#) people during the summer of 1918. Of course, if your criterion for “progress” is that you aren’t currently being devastated by world war and “[the mother of all pandemics](#)” then the entire world has been progressing for all of human history and the socialist world was a veritable utopia. No matter, three cheers for Africa and capitalism.

Beyond HumanProgress’s dishonestly contrived segmentation of time is its dishonestly contrived aggregation of people. Libertarians’ assumption is that if sub-Saharan Africa is poorer than the Global North today it is merely because the former hasn’t yet “caught up” to the latter. But is this how capitalism developed and functions? Revealingly, HumanProgress measures progress in large part through income, which puts it in the uncomfortable position of defending colonialism. Their website notes, “Between the time of the European colonization in 1870 and African independence in 1960, a typical inhabitant of the African continent saw his or her income rise by 63 percent.” The fact that income rose during colonialism and the “Scramble for Africa” – in

which the Belgians murdered 10 million Congolese among countless other European atrocities – might alert us to the fact that income hardly correlates to quality of life. Africans who were terrorized into wage labor had little initial need for income, and for the vast majority of human history people have survived without needing to sell their labor time for wages. But given that wage labor is the source of capitalist profit, colonial governments systematically undermined the indigenous population’s ability to support itself, destroying native economies and enclosing the lands on which people subsisted. This process, in which the North is enriched precisely through the impoverishment of the Global South, continues [today](#) and is depicted in the outstanding documentaries [End of Poverty?](#) and [Darwin’s Nightmare](#).

The general rise in global income today (as usual, ironically skewed by the decidedly non-laissez-faire Chinese) does not reflect an increase in power and wealth but an increase in dependence. After all, who needs wages when you could get what you need without having to work at the mercy of a boss? Needless to say, HumanProgress makes no mention of the rising rents, among other “costs of living,” for which income must be used or the fact that the richest people do not earn income at all. That is, rather than enabling everyone to “escape” poverty “sometime in the future,” capitalism guarantees that those who produce wealth for private property owners now will only be excluded from it later.

The website goes on to peddle another libertarian canard: we are living in an age of increased leisure time, surely a surprise to anyone who isn’t rich and probably a surprise to many of the rich as well. Predictably, HumanProgress decries the onerous work of pre-industrial life (without noting that farmers worked seasonally and often had entire winters “off”) and ignores hunter-gatherer societies (in which people worked for four hours a day) altogether. The obvious and hopelessly ethnocentric presupposition is that modern humans wouldn’t want to trade places with their ancestors (how would we watch the NBA playoffs?), but it’s a fair bet that our ancestors wouldn’t want to change places with us (and would likely suffer multiple heart attacks upon encountering the relentless hyper-stimulation of contemporary city streets).

It doesn’t take long from there for our libertarian friends to rejoice at the technological gadgets that are responsible – thanks of course to capitalism – for granting us such unprecedented (*you know what we mean*) leisure. Yet, “time-saving” inventions (one thinks of email) only “save time” at the expense of generating new opportunities – which quickly become demands – for increased profit-production. How many modern inventions have there been over the past century? Yet a 10-hour workweek is the stuff of science fiction. In fact, thanks to “time-saving” inventions under capitalism, there is hardly a moment of our waking lives when we are not directly or indirectly producing profit for someone other than ourselves, whether through generating online content or dealing with Kafkaesque automated phone administrators so that we can receive “better service,” subjects of Craig Lambert’s *Shadow Work*.

HumanProgress inevitably credits capitalism for humans’ increased lifespans (“Tell that to Freddie Gray,” to paraphrase Roland Barthes), in part through invoking Steven Pinker’s [dubious argument](#) that warfare is declining in today’s supposedly more peaceful era. Betraying a failure of political imagination, such an argument interprets what has been over a half-century of US hegemony (characterized by enormous violence and near [nuclear war](#) though no “great power conflict”) as peace. However, threats to this hegemony’s inevitable, [if not ongoing](#), decline are as

likely as not to trigger a scramble for power that will remind everyone that the world wars failed to permanently resolve the imperial antagonisms that brought those catastrophes into being.

To be sure, warning of future horrors to condemn the present is just as silly as invoking past horrors to praise the present. Both acts reflect a failure to denaturalize contemporary reality and see it for what it is. But at least leftists fall into this trap because of their rejection of the degradation of everyday life and their desire to wake their contemporaries up. Libertarian cheerleaders for the status quo want us to stay asleep.