

learn more about the power of positive  [click here](#)

Newsweek
SUBSCRIBE NOW
SAVE UP TO
88% OFF THE COVER PRICE

Newsweek *I wondered what took so long* Alleged Times Square bomber Shazad, upon being seized ABC

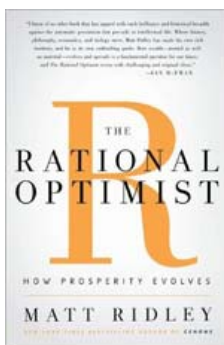
Search

SUBSCRIBE | BLOGS: [THE GAGGLE](#) [DECLASSIFIED](#) [TECHTONIC SHIFTS](#) [HUMAN CONDITION](#) [MORE BLOGS](#) [SHOP »](#)

 **Subscribe to Newsweek and save up to 88%** [CLICK HERE →](#)

CULTURE | **THE ARTS & OTHER PURSUITS** | [MOVIES](#) | [TELEVISION](#) | [MUSIC](#) | [BOOKS](#) | [FINE ARTS](#) | [TRENDS](#)

WE READ IT [SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO]



The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves
 Matt Ridley
 438 pages | [Buy this book](#)

"We Read It" reader: [Barrett Sheridan](#)
 Posted on May 20, 2010

Ridley takes aim at the nattering nabobs of negativity—"the bookshops are groaning under ziggurats of pessimism," he writes—and sets out to prove that now is by far the best of times, and it's only going to keep getting better. Even today's greatest challenges, such as African poverty and climate change, are surmountable because of a remarkable human insight: that specialization and division of labor allow us to constantly improve our lot.



"We're really focused on our clients. We're getting groups together that were separated before. And we're breaking down all the walls to bring solutions to our clients."

Joan Foglia,
 Managing Director, Prime Finance

There's more to this story.

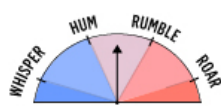
[Watch Now](#)



WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

In recent years, authors like [Gregg Easterbrook](#) and [Steven Pinker](#) have argued that, despite the torrent of bad news gushed forth by 24/7 media organizations, we are living through the most prosperous, peaceful times in history. Ridley eloquently weaves together economics, archeology, history, and evolutionary theory to take the argument a step further. When humans learned to trade and barter 100,000 years ago, "ideas began to meet and mate, to have sex with each other." **Copulating concepts, he says, have spurred a gradual but ceaseless cultural and technological evolution,** leading to the happy times we're now living through.

BUZZ RATING



The author has plenty of high-profile friends. Author Ian McEwan, DNA codiscoverer James Watson, and linguist Steven Pinker all contribute blurbs. As a former journalist, Ridley knows how to work the press. The book's [slick Web site](#) even features an animated trailer. A [pre-release review](#) in *The Economist* says Ridley's theory is "the glorious offspring that would result if Charles Darwin's ideas were mated with those of Adam Smith."

ONE-BREATH AUTHOR BIO

POPULAR CULTURE

Viewed E-Mailed Commented

1. [A Kiss Isn't Just A Kiss](#)
2. [Building A Better Dad](#)
3. [What Makes a High School Great?](#)
4. [America's 25 New Elite 'Ivies'](#)
5. [Has ABC's 'Happy Town' Got the 'Twin Peaks' Curse?](#)

Get ID Patrol from Equifax today!
 Enjoy peace of mind w/ith total identity protection made simple
www.Equifax.com

Washington: Mom Makes \$6795/Month!
 She makes \$6795 a month working online - and You won't believe how!
News13JobsReport.com

Washington: Mom Makes \$6762/Month



Ridley is descended from British nobility, Eton- and Oxford-educated, and heir to a lordship. In other words, **he has plenty of reasons to be rationally optimistic about life.** After a successful career as a journalist for *The Economist*, he became a [bestselling author](#), writing mostly on evolution and genetics. But these days he's better known as the former chairman of Northern Rock, the failed British bank that had to be nationalized during the financial crisis.

She made \$6762 working online last month. Read her story to see how .
World3New s.com/JOBS

NEWSWEEK ON DIGG

773	Why the Last 5 GOP Presidents Wouldn't Win Today
410	The Future of New York City (Interactive)
207	Lena Home: A Life in YouTube [VIDS]
458	Newsweek: The End of the Euro?
255	The 2010 Gulf Oil Spill: A Photographic Timeline

POWERED BY:

THE BOOK, IN HIS WORDS

"Exchange is to cultural evolution as sex is to biological evolution. By exchanging, human beings discovered 'the division of labor,' the specialization of efforts and talents for mutual gain ... And the good news is that there is no inevitable end to this process. The more people are drawn into the global division of labor, the more people can specialize and exchange, the wealthier we will all be" (page 7).

DON'T MISS THESE BITS

1. To trade is human. *Homo sapiens* is the only species that trades with one another. "There is strikingly little use of barter in any other animal species," Ridley writes (page 56). "There is sharing within families, and there is food-for-sex exchange in many animals including insects and apes, but there are no cases in which one animal gives an unrelated animal one thing in exchange for a different thing." Why us and not, say, koalas? Ridley speculates that our "discovery" of fire probably had something to do with it. Fire is hard to start but easy to share, creating incentives for trade. It also led to the invention of cooking, which had a huge evolutionary bonus: because we no longer had to spend hours of time and energy digesting raw food (like cows, apes, and every other animal), our bodies could dedicate more nutrients to growing larger, more intelligent brains.
2. Never forget the shriveling of the Tasmanian mind. Just as physical evolution benefits from a larger gene pool, "a good idea, manifest in bone, stone, or string, needs to be kept alive by numbers" (page 77). When humans arrived in Tasmania 35,000 years ago, they had barbed spears, needles, fish traps, and other advanced tools. But after rising seas cut the Tasmanians off from the mainland—and the rest of humanity—10,000 years ago, that knowledge was gradually lost. By the time Westerners arrived, the Tasmanians no longer had the ability to make clothes or catch fish. "There was nothing wrong with individual Tasmanian brains," writes Ridley. "There was something wrong with their collective brains. Isolation—self-sufficiency—caused the shriveling of their technology" (page 79).
3. Give thanks to the Black Plague. After a population boom in the 13th century, labor had become cheap, and it was more profitable for a shopkeeper to hire additional sweepers than to figure out how to invent a better broom. This reliance on cheap labor is what kept populous China from industrializing and innovating. But in Europe, the Black Death decimated the population—"by 1450, the population of England had been reduced to roughly where it had been in 1200" (page 196)—raising the cost of labor and giving merchants an incentive to design cheaper technologies. In other words, low-cost labor is like an economic drug, and it's hard to kick the habit.
4. Despite his fervent admiration for innovation and technology, Ridley says that **alternative energy is an inadequate solution for today's environmental problems.** He calculates that to provide power for 300 million Americans, the United States would need a solar-panel array the size of Spain or a wind farm the size of Kazakhstan. Today's coal, oil, gas, and nuclear setup supplies the whole U.S. "with nearly all their energy from an almost laughably small footprint" (page 239). "If you like wilderness, as I do, the last thing you want is to go back to the medieval habit of using the landscape surrounding us to make power."

HIDDEN AGENDA

There's no smoking gun here, but remember that Ridley cut his teeth at *The Economist*, a libertarian flagship. In Ridley's mind, **there is very little the free market can't do**; in fact, the book is a not-so-subtle glorification of capitalism. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, [hosted an event](#) to celebrate the book's release.

SWIPE THIS CRITIQUE

Like other free marketeers, Ridley mostly ignores the role of government. "Today a car emits less pollution traveling at full speed than a parked car did in 1970 from leaks," he writes (page 17), without acknowledging that this advancement was due in large part to governmental policies like Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards. There's also plenty to make environmentalists—and particularly climate scientists—cringe. Ridley spills a lot of ink justifying the hydrocarbon industry, and he argues that "there is just no sign of most renewables getting cheaper." Besides being untrue—the price of a five-kilowatt rooftop solar array, for instance, [has dropped](#) from \$40,000 to \$25,000 in two years—it's a **strange claim from a writer who spends the rest of the book lauding the miraculous innovative powers of human culture**. He also takes a blasé attitude toward the threat of climate change that is sure to ruffle some feathers.

GRADEBOOK

PROSE

A

Ridley is a lifelong writer, and it shows. His words effortlessly turn complicated economic and scientific concepts into entertaining, digestible nuggets.

ARGUMENT

B-

Ridley is at his best when he's talking about the deep past and the history of innovation. When he gets to present day, ideology at times overtakes reason.

BOTTOM LINE

B+

Unless you're an environmentalist or a WTO protester, there's plenty to be rationally optimistic about here.

« ARCHIVE

« PREVIOUS

WE READ IT [SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO]

JOIN THE BOOK CLUB THAT REQUIRES VIRTUALLY NO READING.



FOLLOW US ON TWITTER



BECOME OUR FAN

Got a book you keep hearing about that you wish you had time to read? [Send us an e-mail](#), and maybe we'll read it so you don't have to.

Like this article? [Subscribe to NEWSWEEK](#) for the week's most insightful news and analysis



Get ID Patrol from Equifax today!

Enjoy peace of mind with total identity protection made simple
www.Equifax.com

Washington: Mom Makes \$6795/Month!

She makes \$6795 a month working online - and You won't believe...
News13JobsReport.com

Washington: Mom Makes \$6762/Month

She made \$6762 working online last month. Read her story to see how.
World3News.comJOBS

05/12 - 05/18

SUBSCRIBE

For more insightful stories and coverage, subscribe to **NEWSWEEK Magazine** now and save up to 88% off the cover price.



NATION »



Elena Kagan and the Twilight of the WASPs

Why Americans Think Immigration Hurts the Economy

Clean Up the Gulf: Choose Your Own Oil Tycoon Adventure

POLITICS »



Even Reagan Wasn't a Reagan Republican

How to Make an Obama Bush Scandal
Andy Stern's Legacy: Not All Bad

WORLD »



Cameron and Clegg Will Get Along Surprisingly Well

Maziar Bahari: My Sentence in an Iranian Court

Teenage Boozefests Alarm the French Establishment

BUSINESS/TECH »



Are Digital Devices Like iPads Rotting Our Brains?

Global Economy: Can the Euro Be Saved?

NEWSWEEK's Practical Money-Saving Guide

CULTURE »



Video: Ask a Reporter Anything (On Chatroulette)

NEWSWEEK's Gay Story: The Debate Continues

Movie Review: Taking Joan Rivers Seriously

LIFE/HEALTH »



Yearley Love Couldn't Have Gotten a Restraining Order Had She Wanted To

Can You Survive a Plane Crash?

Why Your Brain Loves Near-Misses in Gambling

NEWS FROM TRUSTED NEWSWEEK PARTNERS

msnbc.com

BP told to use less toxic dispersants

It's alive! Artificial DNA controls life

Stocks plunge as euro falls, jobless claims rise

2 police officers, 2 suspects killed in Ark.

Pakistan blocks YouTube over un-Islamic content

The Washington Post

Moss, doctor in HGH case linked

Armstrong: 'Nothing to run from'

2nd state dinner brings pageantry to White House

BP now capturing 5,000 barrels of oil a day

Stocks fall on jobless claims

Slate

Slate V: The Loss of Lost: A Grieving Fan's Guide

New York Times writer Tara Parker-Pope's new book about marriage.

The Slatest: Afternoon Edition

Food fight results: Did Cook's Illustrated or food52 come up with the best recipes for pork shoulder and sugar cookies?

The secret of Oprah's success.

FANHOUSE

Jeff Carter, Ian Laperriere Nearing Return to Flyers' Lineup

High Anxiety in Chicago for Blackhawks

Redskins' Santana Moss Could Face Suspension Over HGH

Andrei Markov Done for Season After Knee Surgery

Scott Nichol Stands Up for Sharks

Budget Travel.

15 Percent off Hotels Worldwide

Morocco, Air/6 Nights, From \$2,499

Costa Rica, 7 Nights, From \$995

Paris, Air/6 Nights, From \$1,601

Buenos Aires & Panama City, Air/7 Nights, \$1,499