

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## The Human Race Is Doing Pretty Well. Just Look At The Data.

**Marian Tupy founded HumanProgress.org to show how the state of humanity has improved in almost every way over time.**

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Stories are subjective, but numbers don't lie, right?

Marian Tupy disagrees. An economist and senior policy analyst at the libertarian CATO Institute in Washington, D.C., Tupy was born in Czechoslovakia, grew up in South Africa and was educated in Scotland. He founded [HumanProgress.org](http://HumanProgress.org) in 2013 on the premise that the media misuse data to paint an overly negative picture of development.

The data-driven site and blog curates data from third parties like the U.N., the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The cherry-picking, so to speak, is powerful. Taken together, the charts and graphs on Human Progress show that humans are doing better in 26 different vectors of wellbeing over the past century -- from gender equality and violence to economic freedom.

Among the uncommon variables tracked is "charity"; the site [recently published](#) a map on world giving.

Over the last three years, Tupy has added just one person to his operation, CATO research assistant Chelsea German, as the managing editor. It remains largely a labor of love, and bears the strong editorial stamp of Tupy, who pens several blog posts a week in addition to curating data.

He finds hopeful trends in some unlikely places, like the fact that, despite population increases, lightning kills fewer Americans now because of better public-safety policies and infrastructure.

Good news is not exactly popular in media or in economics, dubbed the "dismal science." Even the last decade's promising wave of data-backed policy interventions has fallen short of, well, changing the world, as Michael Hobbes pointedly observed in a [New Republic article](#) last year. But in Tupy's account, there's a fundamental error in comparing all progress we've made with a utopian future rather than celebrate our progress from the past, which is why he founded his site. He has good company in the Human Progress [advisory board](#): this year's economics Nobel laureate Angus Deaton; Steven Pinker, psychologist and author of *The Better Angels of Our Nature*; and Matt Ridley, the economist and author of *The Rational Optimist*.

The site's libertarian underpinnings, though muted, are not absent. The website [officially states](#), "While we think that policies and institutions compatible with freedom and openness are important factors in promoting human progress, we let the evidence speak for itself."

Still, when Bernie Sanders famously compared the United States to Denmark in the first Democratic debate, it touched off three separate blog posts on Human Progress, which criticized the comparison, analyzed Sanders's "fixed pie fallacy" and examined how socialist Denmark really is. The fixed pie post concludes that Sanders is "half right" to say, "The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer," because the poor are becoming nominally richer as well. I spoke to Tupy on the phone about his project, how to market good news, and why he thinks we should stop comparing the present to the "future perfect."

**You have quite a globetrotting background. How does that inform your work?**

Well, I grew up in a communist country, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and there I saw real poverty. The shops were empty, there were queues everywhere, people couldn't really buy anything, their currency was worthless, and there was no freedom of speech, religion, assembly - anything. The first time I went to the West was in 1989 when the Wall came down, and I went to Vienna, and saw that just across the border from Czechoslovakia was a very prosperous country. So that got me thinking, as a kid, what makes some countries rich and some countries poor?

Then I moved to South Africa when I was 16, with my parents, who are doctors, and there I saw even worse poverty. And from there I moved to Scotland for my PhD at St. Andrew's, and finally the United States, to work at CATO. So I've lived in countries which have varied tremendously in terms of economic outcomes, and I wanted to know more. So my dissertation was about globalization and trade and inequality. And when I looked into the data, I realized that actually even though there are vast differences between countries in the world, the world as a whole is becoming more prosperous, and things are improving everywhere, and the differences between people are actually diminishing.

**What do you do to contextualize the data presented on your site?**

We don't produce any data. We just look for data about anything, from life expectancy to the price of movie tickets and we put it up online and let people see for themselves. But we don't editorialize at all. We do suggest videos and literature that people can read that may illuminate what they are looking at and, but people don't have to click on that.

**How do you think the media misrepresents or partially represents data? Do you think they over-rely on bad news?**

I don't think that people go out of their way to misuse data. I just think that people are sometimes ignorant about how to use data and what are proper correlations between different data sets. When people don't compare likes with likes, that can also be a problem.

**Can you give an example of that?**

Sure. A very good journalist, a good man, Nick Kristof at The New York Times, wrote a wonderful article last month about global poverty. And he said, this is an underreported story, we should be talking much more about this amazing thing that is going on right now, this huge decline in global poverty. The world is getting better and everything is fantastic. And that's where he finished.

And if you were reading this article, and I blogged about it, you would think well my goodness, how did this prosperity come about. How did this drop in poverty come about? Did it just materialize out of thin air like manna from heaven? What happened to humanity since 1980, and

what is the mechanism by which some countries escape from poverty and some don't? And the answer is economic growth. That allows us to basically pay for all the things that we like; not just cell phones, but also education and health care and so on.

And then, how do you get to economic growth? The answer is very simple, you do it through free trade. You do it through privatization of private property. You do it through having peace in your country. You don't have a murderous dictator in charge. Just look at South Korea and North Korea. I personally don't need much more than to look at these two countries to know what works and what doesn't.

**Has your site had any impact on individuals, officials, or policies?**

As the site's profile has grown, our material has been shared by entities ranging from Human Rights Watch to Marc Andreessen. As for international impact, British MP Douglas Carswell is a fan of the website and blogged about us recently. We also know that the site has been used as an educational resource in Canada, Australia, Estonia, Mexico, and elsewhere. We are being used more frequently as a resource by educators and would love to see this trend grow. We are listed as an educational resource by the University of Chicago, UCLA, Duke, and others, and we know that our site has been used in the classroom at Dartmouth and George Washington University, among others.

**What does the average reader stand to gain from your website?**

What we provide for people is basically access to data that comes from tremendously different places. Anything from the World Bank to some obscure professor at an even more obscure university – we get the data, and we let people see for themselves the state of the world. And we hope that when people look at it they'll say, wow, I didn't realize that there are more women at school and university than ever before. All of the data is out there, but very few people specialize in looking at the data and searching for it. So hopefully when people come to a website with all of that in one place, they can get a better sense of the state of the world.

**What's a salient data point that, when you originally created the site, you found particularly surprising?**

There are a couple of data sets that had to do with life over a very, very long time. So for example, in 1980 50% of humanity lived in absolute poverty. At the end of this year, in 2015, only 35 years later, less than 5% of percent of human beings will live in absolute poverty [of less than \$1.90 a day], in spite of the fact that the world's population has exploded between 1980 and 2015.

In other words over the last 35 years we have added billions of people and yet poverty as a percentage of humanity has dropped from 50% to less than 10%. So that gives you a sense of how rapid, how extraordinary this dramatic decline in poverty has been. But then you also think, okay, but what happened before 1980? And you look at GDP per capita from "year one" to 2010, and what you find is that, before the 1800's, almost *nothing* ever changes. Life expectancy, GDP per capita, it all stays the same, pretty much. For 10,000 years, human beings' life expectancy was around 25 years, and GDP per capita in year one, at the time of Jesus or Caesar or whomever, is about \$3 a day.

So humanity has these incredibly short and poor lives and then something happens at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and everything changes. That was the Industrial Revolution.

Today, life expectancy is 71 years, globally. In the United States it's 80 years, and in Japan it's 88 years. GDP per capita in the West, and in the United States has increased 15-fold, around the world it has increased 10-fold. So it is these long data sets that sort of jump at me, and made me realize how incredibly recent prosperity is.

**What's the biggest question in economics for you?**

The things that you and I think about as the modern way of life – gadgets and retirement and pensions and travel and access to information and health – are all incredibly recent. They are a question of the last 200 years. So I think that the biggest question in economics, and also in politics, is why have the last 200 years been so different from tens of thousands of years that preceded it.

**Now that you have been living and working in American for quite a while, do you view your work as bipartisan? Or does it have a political slant?**

Well, I'm a libertarian, which means that I believe in limited government. I'm not an anarchist. I believe in individual responsibility and in free markets. Nothing infuriates me more than when people blindly vote just because there is a "D" or "R" behind a candidate's name. I evaluate candidates on the basis of how committed to freedom they are. As an example, in 2000 I supported Bush, and in 2004 I supported Kerry. In 2008 I supported Obama, and in 2012 I supported Romney.

**What do you think are the policy implications of your work?**

The policy implications of my work, I think, are very obvious: the way to prosperity and long life and peace is political and economic freedom. People who are politically free are less likely to go to war with another politically free country. Democracies don't fight each other.

There's a general propensity amongst people to want to improve their own lives and the lives of their own families, and if you leave people to themselves, if you don't put barriers in their lives, they are likely going to prosper.

**Is human progress inevitable? If not, what are its major threats?**

No, and the biggest threat is utopian thinking. Utopians compare the present with what might be called the "future perfect." They ignore the positive bent of many development trends that way. A realistic account of the world should focus on long-term trends between two or more generations, and compare the imperfect present with a much *more* imperfect past, rather than with an imagined utopia in the future.

Ultimately, my goal is not to try to convince you that the world is a perfect place. As long as there are people who go hungry or die from preventable diseases, there will always be room for improvement. We all have a role to play in helping the destitute in our communities and beyond. Our goal is not to paint a rosy picture of the state of humanity, but a realistic one. And the realistic one is quite positive.