

Cheer Up: Cato's Case for Optimism Influences the Influencers

By Josh Hardman

ILLUSTRATION BY JEAN-MICHEL TIXIER

Many pundits and politicians claim that free markets and individual freedom lead to growing wealth inequality, resource scarcity, and even environmental collapse. Worse still, some ideologues tell young people that humanity's future is too bleak to merit having children. With the fruits of capitalism—the most powerful anti-poverty force known in history—so brazenly misrepresented, it's no surprise many young Americans view it negatively.

The Cato Institute is countering these false narratives head-on, convincing more people each day that there's never been a better time to be alive—precisely because of the spread of personal freedom and free markets.

Top innovators and technological visionaries are pointing to Cato's work as an answer to doomsayers. In recent months Elon Musk, Marc Andreessen, and John Carmack, each with millions of followers on social media, have encouraged their audiences to look to Cato for the facts about global capitalism, resource abundance, and optimism about the state of the world.

Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen's "The Techno-Optimist Manifesto" provides a resolute response to those who claim technology takes away jobs, reduces wages, and increases inequality: "You are being lied to." Andreessen praises technological

innovation—made possible through free people and free markets—and cites Cato scholars Johan Norberg, Marian Tupy, and Deirdre McCloskey among his select list of "patron saints" of capitalism and optimism.

Norberg is widely regarded as one of capitalism's most compelling advocates. His latest book, *The Capitalist Manifesto*, makes the case for economic freedom, applied to the problems and conflicts of the present day. Many skeptics of capitalism at the turn of the century were persuaded by Norberg's *In Defense of Global Capitalism*, and his theses have only been strengthened. Elon Musk even praised *The Capitalist Manifesto* to his 173 million followers on X (formerly known as Twitter). His recommendation was seen by nearly 30 million users, shared more than 25,000 times, and liked by more than 126,000 people. Musk became aware of the book through John Carmack, a tech titan in his own right for his work in artificial intelligence, software, and aerospace technologies who invited his massive audience to challenge their worldview by reading Norberg's *Manifesto*.

One of the most pernicious myths belying calls for bigger government is the notion that an increasing population will lead to resource scarcities. Tupy and adjunct scholar Gale Pooley are challenging that narrative with their Superabundance



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project, which provides overwhelming evidence that resource availability grows faster than the population—as long as government policies don't stifle human freedom, innovation, or the open exchange of goods and ideas.

Tupy and physicist David Deutsch wrote “We Will Never Run Out of Resources” in the *Wall Street Journal*, explaining that “the only bottleneck [to our prosperity] will be the rate at which new knowledge can be created.”

Hosted on HumanProgress.org, the Superabundance project packages concepts found in Tupy's celebrated book—*Superabundance*, coauthored with Pooley—into bite-sized videos. Tupy has further inspired millions by appearing on programs hosted by Jordan Peterson and Dennis Prager, all while appealing to influential academics such as Jason Furman, former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers during the Obama administration, who said, “Anyone who cares about the future of humanity should read [*Superabundance*].”

The Superabundance project is just the tip of the iceberg on HumanProgress.org, which hosts an immense collection of data sets and content. According to Norberg in *The Capitalist Manifesto*, this kind of exhaustive and entertaining collection was unthinkable at the turn of the century, in part because “tax-funded international organizations preferred to keep secret the data they had collected.”

Historians such as McCloskey have been writing about economic progress for decades, and the team at HumanProgress.org has done the painstaking work of combining data and insights about how that progress came to be. The website embodies McCloskey's view that humanity's “Great Enrichment” of the past 200 years is due to the spread of liberalism around the world.

Now the Isaiah Berlin Chair in Liberal Thought at Cato, McCloskey has written 24 books and more than 400 articles on

the freedoms that undergird increasing innovation. Her recent critique in the *Wall Street Journal* of *Power and Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle over Technology and Prosperity* criticizes the illiberal assumptions made by authors Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson. *Power*, she says, discounts that “the world has become radically better off. . . . The state didn't do it, and forcing short-run egalitarianism or handing power to the Office of Economic Development can kill it, as it regularly has.”

Illiberal critics display a selective appreciation of past progress, overstate inequality in capitalist countries, and clamor for big government policies that would crush economic growth. Adjunct scholar John Early, who is also a generous Cato Sponsor, thoroughly rebutted such critics in his book *The Myth of American Inequality: How Government Biases Policy Debate*. Early's research highlights how the federal government overstates wealth inequality by ignoring the more than two-thirds of transfer payments that the government gives to low-income households—a policy that encourages underemployment.

Cato's objective research, innovative content, and principled advocacy for free people and free markets attracts the attention of millions of people online each year. But the work of Cato scholars continues to inspire attention in major media outlets as well. *Washington Post* columnist George Will in August 2023 highlighted a unique spending cut proposal from Romina Boccia, director of budget and entitlement policy, and cited Scott Lincicome and Colin Grabow's research in his October 4, 2023, criticism of the Jones Act. Lincicome, vice president of general economics and the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies, was a major resource for a cover story in *The Economist* asking, “Are free markets history?” The answer was a resounding “no.” ✨