


Not only does that allow for a better understanding of how and why we got to where we are today, but it gestures toward a way forward that might involve not having to resign ourselves to slouching for the rest of time.

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## Response to Comments on *Slouching Towards Utopia*

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I blush at the extremely high praise that the commenters give my book *Slouching Towards Utopia: The Economic History of the 20th Century*. And I am over the moon at how seriously they take it, and my less-than-adequate attempt to find a framework that we can use to productively think more deeply and insightfully into the global political-economy history of the years 1870–2010. It is a treasure of inestimable value that these four have given me and that other people have given me as well.

Jari Eloranta said, during the session, that “in some parts of the globe . . . utopia is already here, and yet in others very, very far . . . (Eloranta 2024, p. 580)” I disagree. In my view, utopia is for everyone, or it is not. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine at his exaltation, riding in triumph through Persepolis and crowing how it is passing brave to be a king is not a utopian scene. Half a mile from where I live in prosperous and smug liberal Berkeley, California, there are people living in cardboard boxes.

That simply should not be: the hard problem should have been given human fecundity and resource limitations, baking a sufficiently large economic pie so that everyone could have *enough*. The problems of slicing and tasting the pie – of equitably distributing it, and utilizing our wealth to live wisely and well – were supposed to be more straightforward problems. They are not. The biggest fact of my 1870–2010 twentieth century is that it is the century in which the prospect that humanity could achieve any past proposed utopia became clear. The second biggest fact is that as of 2010 we could only claim that we had slouched towards that particular Bethlehem.

Too much was said for me to comment on it all, so let me just comment on one or two things from each of my four commenters.

I do think that Jari Eloranta is correct when he complains that the book has too little on the “technological and societal progress . . . [that fill] the visions

of . . . historians like Joel Mokyr and Alexander Field . . . (Eloranta 2024, p. 577)” and rather more on the “political economy narrative . . . the struggle . . . which . . . has resulted in somewhat underwhelming compromises, hence the ‘slouch’ . . . (Eloranta 2024, p. 577)” The balance of the book is off. I can only plead that I had to get the book package down to 600 pages, and did not have a steady-enough hand in doing so to avoid cutting not just into but through muscle to the very bone. I would plead that I can only do what I can and that I was really not up to the task I attempted.

I do think that Jari Eloranta and Simone Wegge are correct when they complain about the lack of demographic history. In my book, the demographic transition is essentially offstage: humans get rich, infant mortality falls, you no longer need nine pregnancies to have a 2/3 chance of having a son who will outlive you, and so fertility declines. And so, in the end, technology wins its race against fecundity. After the population explosion that has carried our numbers up to more than 8 billion, we approach zero population growth. That is not an adequate treatment at all of what is one of the very most important pieces of twentieth-century human history.

I find myself standing before the ghost of my great-grandmother Florence Wyman Richardson Usher, who was expelled from St. Louis’s Veiled Prophet Débutante Society because she had chained herself to the Missouri Statehouse for women’s suffrage. She might say: This is not adequate to what we did and how we do it. And don’t think you can escape into some Oded Galor-like – brilliant as Oded is – *all of a sudden the marginal return to investing in the quality of your children goes up and investing in the quantity of your children goes down*. She might say: *That increase in female social power – I did that. And your sister and your daughters and granddaughters benefit from it. Don’t you dare neglect the fact that I, your great grandmother, and all my sisters did this!*

Simone Wegge is also disturbed by the absence of oil and global warming. I say that the coming of global warming to the fore is one of the big signs that the grand narrative of the twentieth century no longer applies. And, as part of that decision, the fossil-fuel industrial-structure pages all got left on the cutting room floor. I had 20 descriptions and examples of wonderful technologies in the long twentieth century. I cut those 20 back to 2, leaving only Nikola Tesla and Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation (TSMC). She is right to be disturbed. Note that it is not just Simone who is annoyed. I think this is the principal reason for Adam Tooze’s conflicted reaction to this book – on the one hand, saying it’s one of the three must-reads of the fall of 2022 (Tooze 2022); on the other hand not liking any chapter in it much.

I do think that Barry Eidlin is correct when he accuses me of evading the key role played by labor and capital and their struggles over distribution in the twentieth century. I see the Hayek-Polanyi axis of contestation as a genuine quest for the best way of organizing human society as we move from imperial-commercial through steam power, applied science, mass production, global value-chain, and not into information-attention modes of production. He sees it as, in large part, the matador’s cape distracting the poor from organizing against the rich for what is their key need: abolishing debts and redistributing resources. My sleight-of-hand in shuffling who-whom offstage so quickly is not excusable.

And, yet, to call the neoliberal order’s 1970s coup against social democracy simply a victory for plutocratic capital against labor unable to organize itself is, I think,

too simple. I would like to call the ghost of Eric Hobsbawm as witness. Remember Eric Hobsbawm's "The Forward March of Labor Halted? Hobsbawm (1978, p. 284)" denouncing labor unions that based their social power not on their ability to add to production and thus assist the forward march of humanity, but rather on their ability to inconvenience the populace? And I would point to the passage in Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* where he says that even the British left grew to recognize that much of what Margaret Thatcher had done was necessary – as the good ship mixed economy needed a thorough neoliberal barnacle scrub. There is something deeper in the neoliberal turn than simply the triumph of reactionary capital.

I do think Emily Merchant is correct when she notes that the book gives "no sense of the complexities of . . . technologies (Merchant 2024, p. 581)." Technology, in *Slouching Towards Utopia*, is a *deus ex machina* that since 1870 descends, doubling human productive potential every generation. I give no sense of how we have, within limits, chosen which technologies to develop, or what we are then to produce with them, or who we are going to burden with the heaviest loads in that production. Here, too, the balance is off. I do quote Richard Easterlin about how modern economic growth has turned not into a triumph of humanity over material want, but rather a triumph of our material wants over our humanity – we are, indeed, substantially trapped on the hedonic treadmill.

And, yet, on the other hand, I would like to call as a witness my 89-year-old mother-in-law, Barbara Marciarille, who forced to drop out of high school at 16 back in Providence, Rhode Island to take care of her younger siblings. The thing that she values most every single day is the clothes washing machine. That changed her life.

Last, given how it has come closest to reconciling Polanyian and Hayekian imperatives, Scandinavia in the twentieth century deserves something more in the book than an aside about how it was so poor that a quarter of young men migrated to the U.S. upper Midwest in the 40 years before 1914.

Again: I can only plead that the book has 600 pages as it is, and Basic's editors got increasingly nervous with each page past 350.

Now let me again take the offensive, and remind you of what my book's grand narrative is, and die on the hill that this grand narrative is the least-false one we can tell about history between 1870 and 2010. It tells a story of:

- Humanity, before 1870s, ensorcelled by the Devil of Malthus, desperately poor, spending hours a day thinking about how hungry you are, watching half your babies die, unable to even think about baking a sufficiently large economic pie for everyone to have *enough*.
- Humanity, after 1870, escaping as wealth and productivity explode; indeed, people looking back a generation or two later talk about 1870 as the beginning of "Economic El Dorado."
- After 1870 it becomes clear that humanity will relatively soon have the productive mojo to bake a sufficiently large economic pie for everybody to have *enough* – at least by all previous societies' definitions of *enough*.

Thus by now, all that should remain are what our predecessors would have seen as the second-order problems of slicing and tasting the economic pie – of equitably distributing it, and of utilizing our fabulous wealth to live "wisely and well."

Those problems should have been easier to solve than the problem of production. After all, the problem of equitable distribution was a consequence of pre-1870 Malthusian-era poverty. Back then the only way to get *enough* for yourself and your family was to join a gang: become part of an élite and successfully run a domination-and-exploitation game on the rest of humanity. Those in charge and their bully-boy thugs, assisted by their tame accountants, bureaucrats, and propagandists, reaped where they did not sow and gathered where they did not scatter. That was much of what was wrong with human society back before 1870.

But after 1870 the road opens to the recognition that nobody any longer needs the *government of men* in order that the small élite grab one-third of everything for itself. Instead, all we need is the *administration of things*, which should be technocratic and unproblematic: private activity where it belongs, public activity where it is needed, with circumstances-altering cases.

And yet, in spite of our wealth being fabulous from historical perspective, what were supposed to be second-order problems continue to completely flummox us.

In large part, they flummox us because technological progress has been so fast. Every single generation we have Schumpeterian creative destruction revolutionizing economy and society. Every generation it gives us a brand-new set of forces-of-production hardware. We then have to frantically write new socio-econo-political-cultural relations-of-production, -communication, -organization, -and-so-on software to run on top of it so the whole thing doesn't crash. We try to figure out how to get the proper benefits of decentralization and incentivization on the one hand, while on the other hand not reducing society to a state where the only rights that are recognized are property rights and thus the only people who have any social power are those who have been lucky or who chose the right parents.

This was the point at which I started writing my book. I could have looked backward from 1870: asking the question of how we got to the point of explosion. But that sector is very crowded indeed. I could have looked forward from 1870: asking the question of how scientific research, technological development, corporate distribution, and market diffusion interacted to grow our wealth after 1870, and what the consequences of the five great waves of Schumpeterian creative destruction since 1870 have been. I hoped that Landes-Schumpeter-Gordon thread of narrative would be a major part of this book. I was unable to execute that and stay within 600 pages. I do mourn my failure.

So I looked forward from 1870: asking about the working out of the logic of unprecedented, revolutionary, economic growth generation after generation, and that growth's political-economy consequences. I know that this book turned out to be the only book I could execute.

I look forward with great eagerness to others with their proposed alternative grand narratives – about 1870–2010, and beyond.

## References

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