

Social Theory for the 21st Century

Brad DeLong

Adams House, Harvard University, Cambridge MA

March 29, 2023

MY PUNCHLINE: Machiavelli, Smith, de Tocqueville, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Weber, Durkheim, Freud, de Beauvoir; Keynes, Schumpeter, and Polanyi; Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, Benedict—not Perry—Anderson, Gellner, and Richard Baldwin; Gary Gerstle; Arendt; and Debord, Foucault, and Marion Fourcade

I. 2023 Navin Narayan Memorial Lecture

2019-2020: Sarah Lewis: “Race and the American Landscape: Visual Tactics of the Stand Your Ground Era”

2018-19: Arlie Hochschild: “Strangers in Their Own Land: The Way Forward”

2017-18: Robert Putnam: “How Did We Get Here? Social Change in America, 1900-2020”

2016-17: E.J. Dionne: “Defending Democracy in an Age of Disaffection”

2015-16: Peniel E. Joseph: “From Selma to Ferguson: Civil Rights, Black Power, and Racial Justice in the Age of Obama and Black Lives Matter”

2014-15: Martha Minow: “Justice and Debt Forgiveness”



The Committee on Degrees in Social Studies presents
The 20th Annual Navin Narayan Memorial Lecture

Social Theory for the 21st Century

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Wednesday, March 29
7:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.
Adams House
Lower Common Room
26 Plympton Street, Cambridge

Please join us for a cocktail reception in the Adams House Conservatory following the lecture



What is the work?

II. The Intellectual Bets That Make Up Social Studies

- History & Lit a good model...
- The disciplinary structure of Social Sciences is an iron cage...
- History matters...
- “Social theory” matters...
- But social theory can be your tool rather than your master only if you gain a critical distance on your own...
- The best way to gain that critical distance is through intensive focus on the creative-trespassing “classics”...
- But which of the “classics” are *useful* for understanding society?...

Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, **Adam Smith**, Immanuel Kant, Mary Wollstonecraft, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, **Alexis de Tocqueville**, Frederick Douglass, **John Stuart Mill**, Charles Darwin, **Karl Marx** (and the underrated Friedrich Engels), Friedrich Nietzsche, **Max Weber**, **Emile Durkheim**, W.E.B. Du Bois, **Sigmund Freud**, Marc Bloch, John Maynard Keynes, Carl Schmitt, Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Talcott Parsons, Friedrich von Hayek, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, C. Wright Mills, Thomas Kuhn, Eric Hobsbawm, Nancy Chodorow, Arlie Hochschild, Clifford Geertz, Immanuel Wallerstein, Benedict Anderson, Betty Friedan, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, Edward Saïd, Jürgen Habermas, Robert Nozick, Amartya Sen, Jared Diamond, Frank Fukuyama

**What about human
society do we most
need to understand?**

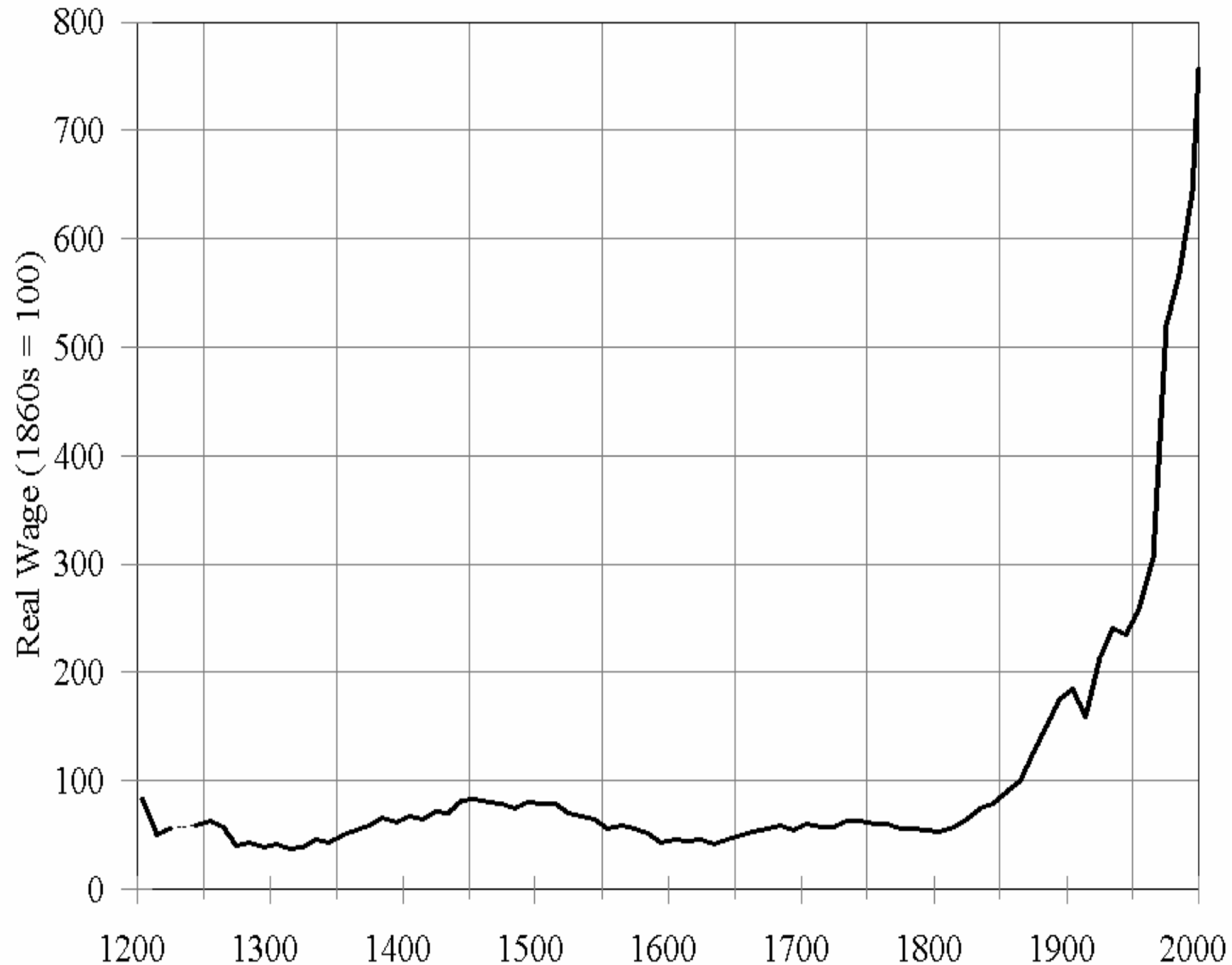
III. What About Human Society Do We Need to Understand?

Largest-Scale Human History

- How did our changing “forces of production” both enable and constrain the kinds of societies we built?...
- Why was economic “progress” so slow in the Agrarian Age?...
- What possibilities were unleashed by the coming of the:
 - Imperial-Commercial,
 - Steampower & Machinery, and
 - Modern Economic Growth ages?

Date	Ideas Growth Rate h	Ideas Stock Level H	Real Income/ Capita y	Human Population P (millions)	
-6000		0.06	\$900	10	End of Mesolithic
800	0.023%	0.28	\$900	220	Early Agrarian Age -6000 to 800
1500	0.071%	0.47	\$1,000	480	Late Agrarian Age 800 to 1500
1770	0.146%	0.69	\$1,100	875	Commercial Society 1500 to 1770
1870	0.365%	1.00	\$1,300	1300	Steampower Age 1770 to 1870
1930	1.831%	3.00	\$3,000	2100	Applied Science Age 1870 to 1930
1975	2.441%	9.00	\$6,000	4000	Mass Production Age 1930 to 1975
2020	2.441%	27.00	\$12,000	7800	Global Value-Chain Age to 2020
2050	1.250%	40.00	\$16,000	9500	Info-Biotech?????????

The English-Wage Hockey Stick



English construction workers

- Lots of priests and monks in England hiring construction workers, and then writing everything down, and then saving it
- English construction workers on average earned the same real wages in 1000, in 1450, and in 1850
- In John Stuart Mill's old age—1870—they were only 20% above what they had been 400 years before.
- Yet today they stand sixteen times as high as in 1800—and maybe much more

Rick: Steckel: Heights...

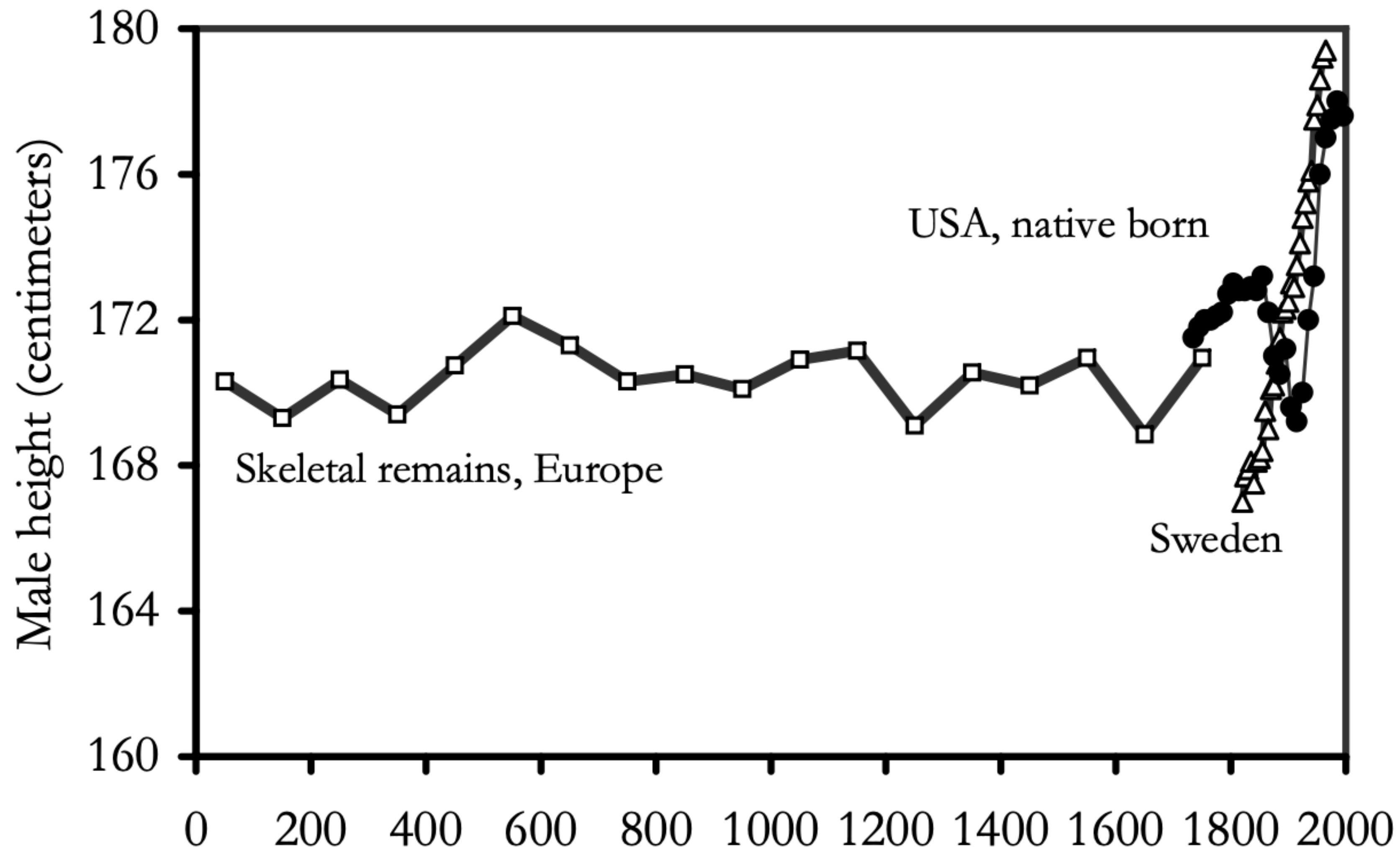


Figure 3.6 Male heights from skeletons in Europe, AD 1–2000. Data from Steckel, 2001, figures 3 and 4, and Koepke and Baten, 2005.

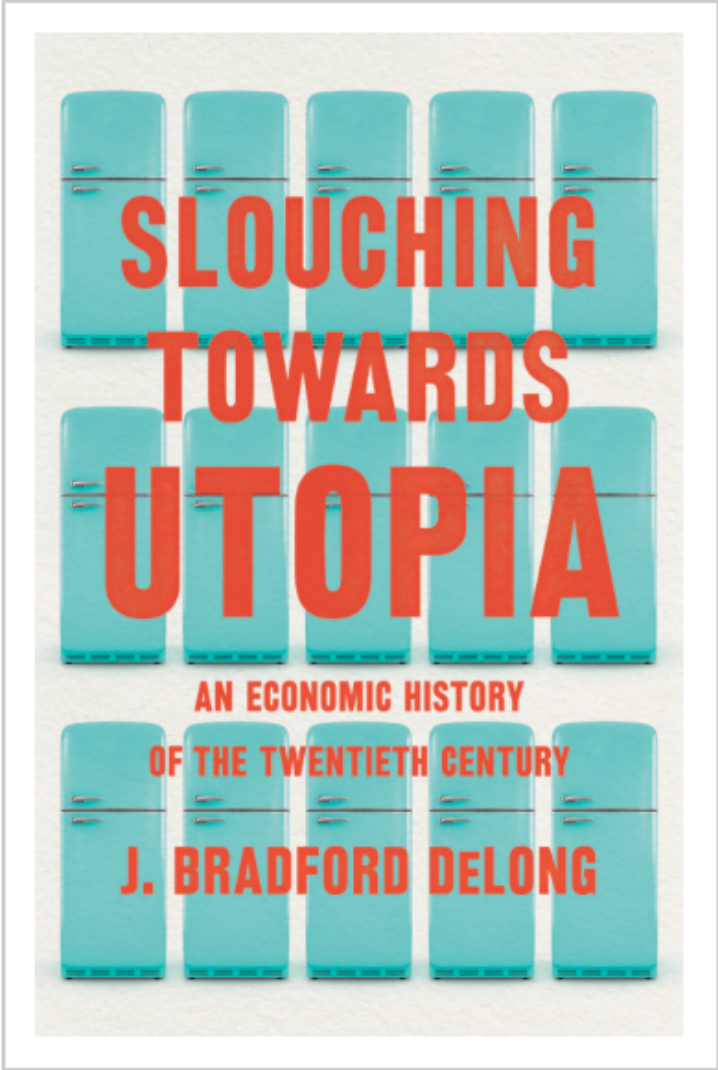
- What diet stunts your adult height by 8 cm?
- Upper classes 5 cm or so higher than lower classes...
- What would Alameda County child and protective services say about this?
- What constraints are parents under for this to happen?

**How have we handled the
opportunities and dangers that
opened up around 1870?**

IV. *Slouching Towards Utopia* in the Long 20th Century

- 1870 as the hinge of history...
- Before 1870 humanity desperately poor: ensorcelled by the Devil of Malthus...
- Before 1870, governance a force-and-fraud game by thugs-with-spears (and their tame accountants, bureaucrats, and propagandists)...
- Only an élite and their families can have *enough*...
- After 1870, constant technological revolution and the demographic transition...
- Thus everyone can have *enough*—“exceed the limits of human felicity”...

BOOK DETAILS



Slouching Towards Utopia

Hardcover Book

By: J. Bradford DeLong
ISBN-13: 9780465019595
On Sale: Sep 06, 2022

Publisher: Basic Books
Imprint: Basic Books

Price: \$35.00 (\$44.00 in Canada)
Size: 6x9-1/4 inches **Pages:** 624

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Audio Book: Downloadable (Audio) ISBN: 9781668611777	6,514	6,455
Electronic Book: EPUB ISBN: 9780465023363	6,526	6,526
Hardcover Book ISBN: 9780465019595	24,251	24,031
Totals	37,291	37,012

**Why have we been
so flummoxed?**

V. From Feudal Society to Commercial Society

- Feudal-era forces- and relations-of-production taught:
 - society is static, hierarchical
 - who you is chosen for you by the role ascribed to you
 - production is small-scale, handicraft, and individually autonomous
 - those who work owe rent to those who protect them and tithes to those who guide them to salvation. Hence Agrarian-Age forces-of-production requires that we write something like feudal-society software to run on top of it.
- Commercial-imperial gunpowder-empire forces- and relations-of-production taught:
 - society is mobile, contractual
 - who you are is chosen by you—if you can make a contractual-network place for yourself;
 - production is middle-scale, aided by tools and finance, and interdependent
 - in a peaceful world we can make and fulfill the bargains and contracts our interdependence requires
 - the bourgeois virtues.



**No, “Commercial
Society” not the end of
history...**

VI. The Government of Men & The Administration of Things

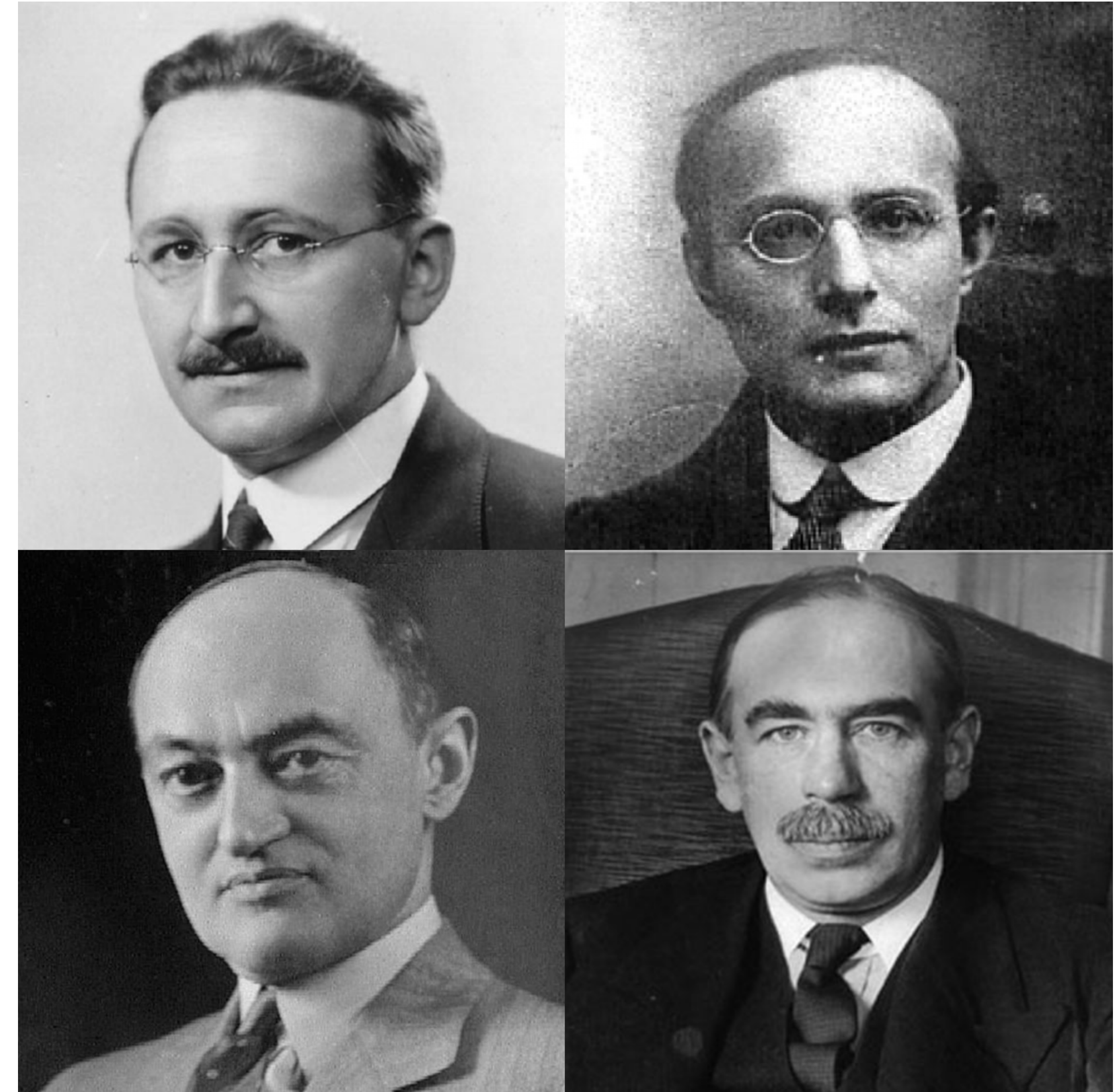
- After 1870, it is clear that soon, very soon, governance no longer has to be a force-and-fraud scheme...
- Freddie from Barmen: The requirements of organizing production in Steampower & Machinery Society will teach us:
 - to recognize our interdependence...
 - to recognize our collective power...
 - to recognize our individual equality...
 - that it is fair that we rotate through administrative jobs...
 - that we really want to all wear identical blue overalls...
 - that we really want to all call one another “comrade!”...
- The problems of slicing and tasting the sufficiently large economic pie are second-order...



**No, “Steampower &
Machine Society” not the
end of history either...**

VII. Not So: The Problems of Slicing & Tasting Continue to Flummox Us, More-or-Less Completely

- Schumpeterian creative-destruction revolutionizing the economy every generation...
- Schumpeterian creative-destruction creating immense wealth...
- Schumpeterian creative-destruction destroying firms, jobs, occupations, livelihoods, communities...
- We need the market economy to crowdsource the problems of managing our immensely complex division of labor...
- But the only rights the market vindicates are property rights...
- That stark utopia is not fit for humans...
- How to cobble together rewritten software code for society on the fly so that it does not crash as the underlying forces-of-production hardware changes?...



**We need help in figuring out
how to rewrite society's
software code, yet again...**

VIII. Our Social Theorists Are All Guides to Our Past

- **Guides to Agrarian-Age Society:** Marc Bloch
- **Guides to Commercial-Imperial Society:** Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, Mary Wollstonecraft, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel,
- **Guides to Steampower & Machinery Society:** Alexis de Tocqueville, Frederick Douglass, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx (and the underrated Friedrich Engels),
- **Guides to the Applied Science Age:** Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, W.E.B. Du Bois, Sigmund Freud,
- **Guides to the Mass Production Age:** Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, Nancy Chodorow, Michel Foucault, Edward Saïd, Jürgen Habermas

IX. My Punchline

Machiavelli, Smith, de Tocqueville, Engels,
Lenin, Luxemburg, Weber, Durkheim, Freud, de
Beauvoir; Keynes, Schumpeter, and Polanyi;
Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Ta-
Nehisi Coates, Benedict—not Perry—Anderson,
Gellner, and Richard Baldwin; Gary Gerstle;
Arendt; and Debord, Foucault, and Marion
Fourcade

**But I really need to cut this list
down to 1/3 its current length...**

IX. But What We Need Are Guides to the Future

Who might they be? And what might they say?

- I went down to Washington in 1993 to be a Deputy Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Treasury for Economic Policy, working for Alicia Munnell, best of all bosses...
- There I found myself thinking over and over again that:
 - My social studies education had equipped me absolutely perfectly for my job...
 - If, that is, I had been a Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Treasury in some country in Western Europe...
 - And if it had been sometime between 1919 and 1940...
- Our tasks:
 - Continue to solve the problems of producing a sufficiently large economic pie that everyone can have *enough*, and good...
 - Figure out how to slice it—distribute it equitably...
 - Figure out how to taste it—utilize it wisely and well, so that people feel safe and secure and are healthy and happy...
 - Freedom of speech...
 - Freedom of worship...
 - Freedom from want...
 - Freedom from fear...