

# Innovation and Ingenuity Will Solve Our Problems

Shôn Ellerton, November 17, 2022

*Despite all our world problems, we've never had it better. Here's how and why.*



Innovation and ingenuity, two key words that make us so successful in life!

I recently listened to a podcast between Jordan Peterson and the authors of a book published in May 2022 with a rather lengthy subtitle called [\*Superabundance: The Story of Population Growth, Innovation, and Human Flourishing on an Infinitely Bountiful Planet\*](#). I haven't yet read the book only just hearing about it on the podcast, but its content looks interesting. The idea of converting the value of commodities and services into 'time prices', or the time it takes to make something in terms of man-hours. In the book, the authors drew out a list of commodities and services with data going back to 1850 on the actual cost of making them in terms of time prices.

The concept makes sense but is not a new one for me. I once recall my father telling me as a child the real cost of suit of armour in medieval times. For those not familiar with medieval armour, I can tell you that it is *very* cumbersome to wear and varies enormously in terms of quality and fit. The 'cheap' armour is, of course, *plate armour*, which comprises of battered bits of plate metal stuck together to form a very clumsy and ill-fitting suit. Think of the plate-armoured guy in Monty Python holding a dead chicken or Inspector Clouseau in the old classic comedy, [\*The Pink Panther\*](#), running around chasing a jewel thief in a creaky suit of armour during a masked costume party. I wouldn't be surprised that a significant number of soldiers wearing plated armour *actually* died of exhaustion running around country fields without being smote by some pointy weapon, some of which look very nasty indeed. Incidentally, swords were

seldom used by the foot soldiers during those intense battle scenes as they were too unwieldy. However, the upper classes and the knights of the establishment were given *chainmail armour* made up of tiny loops of interwoven wrought iron strands to form a ‘fabric of metal’ especially tailor-made for the individual. Still very heavy, if not even heavier than plate, as my wife pointed out when she tried on chainmail armour at Harlech Castle for fun earlier this year.

Now here’s the thing. Something in the order of 800 man-hours is needed to create the ‘basic’ chainmail suit but for the nobility or those who can afford it, the finest chainmail suits had very small loops and could take up to a year to make. If one converted this to time-dollars, this would be near equivalent to producing a \$20m jet fighter!

*Superabundance* also dispels the notion that we are heading into a world where food is scarce, and that population needs to be reduced significantly. Indeed, the authors talk about three conditions to maintain superabundance:

1. Free markets
2. Free speech
3. Minimal intervention by government to regulate industries

In another book by Hans Rosling, [\*Factfulness\*](#), the author practically made it his life research to prove that human population would taper at around 10 billion and stated if we could sustain our resources to accommodate that number, we’ll be fine. Moreover, he stated that war, disease, and poverty contributed to *higher* population growth rates which seems all too apparent in some of our ageing first world nations today, notably Japan and some of the countries of within western Europe.

Humans, in general, have never got it better than the days of old. Let’s go back to the ‘Old West’ during the time of around 1870 or so. A pound of sugar would set you back around 20 cents a kilo. Doesn’t seem like much but let’s take an example of a typical California cop today taking home about \$4000 USD per month after tax. A deputy sheriff back in 1870 would be taking home about \$70 per month. In purely numerical terms, that’s roughly 60 times. Therefore, a pound of sugar if converted to today’s money would be  $60 \times 0.2 = \$12$  USD a kilo. Suffice it to say, that it is not very difficult to get a kilo of basic white sugar for between one and two dollars these days. Another example that makes the Old West so well-known through movies and TV is the apparent abundance of guns and horses. Nothing could be further from the truth. A good gun would

set you back fifty bucks *in old money*. But what about a horse? We're talking about two hundred dollars in old money, or to convert to today's money? \$12,000! And we're not talking race-horse thoroughbreds, which would be, in practical terms, nearly unobtainable and essentially unnecessary given the time and place. As for today's affordability, I might have to make a caveat with respect to rental and property prices in certain parts of the world today, a phenomenon induced by other more recent factors.

No doubt, harvesting innovation and ingenuity within the industrial world has dramatically increased how standard of life, especially during the last one hundred years or so. Controversially, major warfare has created a lot of suffering and misery for many but has also contributed enormously to our standard of living, especially with respect to medicine, science, and technology. Where there is need to spend money, as in defence, there are also the welcoming side effects of improved technology and design. War, however heinous it is, is often a double-edged sword.

By far, in my own lifetime, China has been a shining beacon of innovation and ingenuity within the last forty years. Each time I've been to China, I've always been fascinated observing the zeal and fortitude of the Chinese to make money, often from ideas which, to many westerners, would seem so incredibly obvious and practical. For example, I've been engaged in many a conversation about the practicalities of using driverless cars for the sole purpose of getting a little too merry at some restaurant, bar, or another friend's house. Under most current legislations, that there must be a responsible driver in a driverless car, which defeats the purpose of having a driverless car because the car *still* requires a driver *and*, I might add, being more dangerous because the responsible person driving the car won't be paying attention to the car, because it is driving itself!

On one of my trips to China, my wife and I went to a seafood restaurant on the outskirts of Qingdao, driven by a friend of hers. I noted that her friend was consuming copious quantities of beer throughout the meal and wondered how we would get back home. Presumably, a taxi would be ordered, and he'd collect his car in the morning. Well, that was not what happened. He made a phone call, and we waited in the car park. Not long after, a man in a little bicycle clambered his way to the car, dismounted, and then proceeded to fold it up. It was one of those fold-up bicycles quite popular with office workers. Her friend opened the boot, and that was it! He put his bike in it, got in the driver's seat, drove us back home, and then retrieved his little fold-up bicycle presumably

ambling towards his next customer. I never thought of that idea! And I suspect that many reading this, haven't either. In a philosophical way, I might have been thinking that this could be a great example of applying *Occam's Razor*, which could loosely be translated as the simple solution is often overlooked in favour of something which is more complicated.

The Chinese *can* be over-enterprising at times as I observed while visiting the Great Wall during the tail-end of the SARS epidemic in 2003. Few tourists were around during this time and as I made my way down a long stretch of car park to the Great Wall, I saw hut after hut of vendors trying to sell me everything from ice creams to replicas of swords used during the old empire. If that wasn't enough, there were stalls located *on top* of the wall as well, some in quite precarious places. One that looms in my memory is a man sat in his chair with his little table of wares *and* a TV connected to a rather noisy petrol-driven generator watching some sort of reality game show. Commerce rules, I suppose.

But this entrepreneurial spirit cannot be achieved without the aforementioned three conditions cited by the authors of *Superabundance* of which China has, to much of an extent, enjoyed within the last couple of decades. It is true that China has had a remarkably free market, probably more so than most western countries. The State couldn't care less what you bought or sold as long as you don't upset or dis the Communist Party or its leader. China has enjoyed much more in the way of freedom of speech, again, if it is not directed against the State. And, generally, industry has not been as regulated as in many countries in western Europe. This last point can come with unintended side effects, as with the lack of protection and safety of workers *and* the environment. I remember seeing an image of a clean modern environmentally friendly building on the outskirts of Beijing but opposite the road was a waste plant of some sort burning rubber tyres in the open air. Mind you, with Xi Jinping's quest for emperor-like control of the state, clamping down on freedom of movement and speech and the current events surrounding China's failing Covid Zero strategy, this is changing for the worse as the stats of the economy so brazenly tell.

I'd like to think that we can be optimistic for mankind rather than follow the predictions of the doomsayers that we will fall into some horribly messed up dystopia where we are forced to eat the dead and live in perpetual indigence. The conversation between Peterson and the authors of the book was uplifting insofar that we don't need to be fearful of overpopulation. However, without a free market, free speech, and freedom from government overregulation, we can

all, one day, live in an age where we can enjoy a good standard of living. But human beings are, by nature, a generally greedy lot. So, we may have some issues there.

Although we're approaching the end of this article, I'd like to mention a similar concept based on using time as a method of currency, a concept which was portrayed quite well in a 2011 science-fiction movie called [\*In Time\*](#). The story revolves around a future society in which everyone is allotted a certain amount of time, the end of which, you die, as if you would by a heart attack. You lose and gain time, when buying and selling respectively, through a device embedded into your body which comes active one adulthood is reached. I wrote more about that extensively in my article, [\*Using Time as the Universal Currency\*](#), back in 2018.

Coming back to innovation and ingenuity, if one was to draw a comparison to a developed or developing country, perhaps we are striving to be that perfect stone cube, or ashlar, rather than the rough-looking one. To quote a line from Masonic ritual representing the transformation from rough to perfect ashlar,

*'This represents the mind of man in his infantile or primitive state, rough and unpolished as that stone, till by the industry and ingenuity of the workman, it is modelled, wrought in due form and rendered fit for the intended building'*.