

Investigation

Capitalism at a Crossroads: What's an Economy For?

In Episodes 8, 9, and 10, reporting by Lewis Raven Wallace, Katy Shields, and Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo reveals capitalism at a crossroads. The world has seen enormous economic growth since capitalism's rise. Yet, people worldwide face persistent economic challenges, raising persistent questions about what economic success means.

In this investigation, you'll examine why growth is often seen as an important economic goal, analyze perspectives from Episodes 8, 9, and 10, and engage with an argument from British economist Kate Raworth. After considering these different ideas about economic success, you'll begin to form your own response to a fundamental question: What's an economy for?

(Don't worry if you haven't listened to all three episodes. You'll find a brief summary of each below.)

Part	Guiding Questions
Part 1 The Growing Economy	What do the sources suggest about why growth is often seen as an important economic goal?
Part 2 Snapshots of Economic Life	- What economic challenges and tensions do various people identify in Episodes 8, 9, and 10? - How might each person react to the perspectives shared in Part 1? - What might each person say needs to be true for an economy to work well?
Part 3 The Aim of an Economy	- According to economist Kate Raworth, why isn't economic growth enough to tell us about whether an economy is working? - How does Raworth propose we go about deciding what an economy should achieve? - To what extent do you find Raworth's arguments convincing?
Part 4 Reflect: What's an Economy For?	- What do you think an economy should achieve – for people and other living things? - Revisit the Features of Capitalism. To what extent could the goals you identified be achieved within capitalism as you understand it? What, if anything, might need to change?

Part 1 The Growing Economy

Examine the graph showing changes in global GDP over time. (You can find this graph in the [Features of Capitalism explainer](#) entry on [Accumulation and Investment of Capital](#).)

Then, examine additional sources (also shared in Part 1 of the Investigation titled **Two Stories About Capitalism**) to consider why some see this economic growth as an important goal.

A note about the sources: The sources below are drawn from longer works by Our World in Data founder Max Roser. They reflect Roser's perspectives on the relationship between economic growth and improvements in people's lives, but they do not represent the full range of his thinking. Roser also raises concerns and complications related to economic growth, some of which are explored in Part 2 of Two Stories About Capitalism.

Source

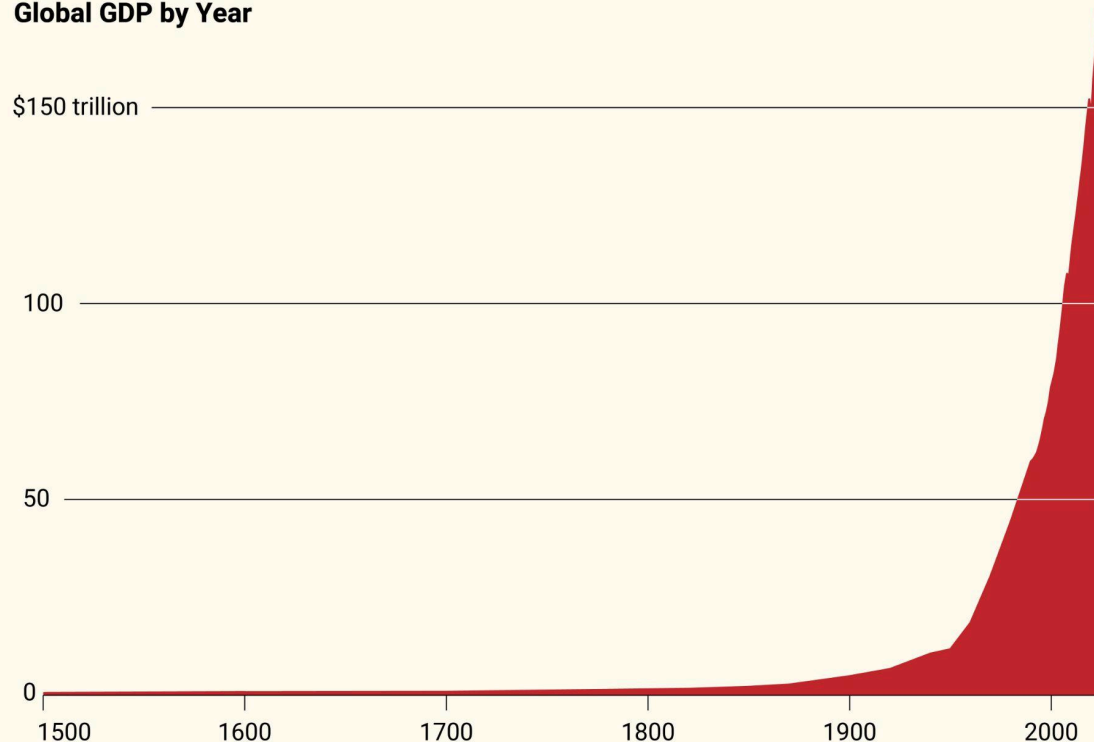
“Just how much have the world’s economies grown under capitalism? Global GDP by Year” created by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University using data from [Our World in Data](#)

According to the organization’s website, Our World in Data is “produced as a collaborative effort” between researchers at the University of Oxford and the non-profit organization Global Change Data Lab. Our World in Data was founded by Max Roser in 2011 with the aim of making data and research “accessible and understandable to empower those working to build a better world.” All visualizations, data, and articles produced by Our World in Data are completely open access under the [CC BY 4.0](#) license.

Just how much have the world’s economies grown under capitalism?

To answer this, we can look at how the world’s **gross domestic product, or GDP**, has changed over time. GDP represents the monetary value of all of the goods produced and services offered across the world’s economies.

Global GDP by Year



Source: Our World in Data

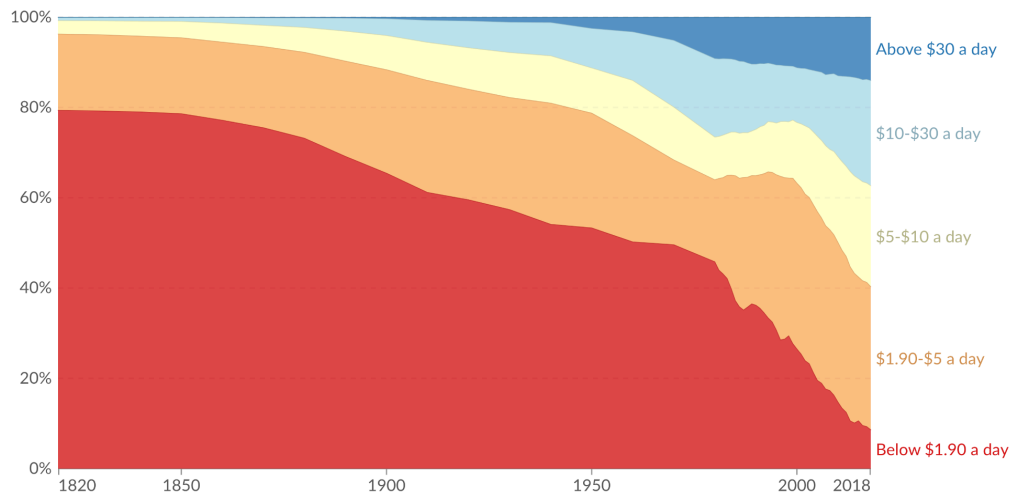
Excerpt from [“The short history of global living conditions and why it matters that we know it”](#) by Max Roser for Our World in Data (December 14, 2016)

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Distribution of population between different poverty lines, World, 1820 to 2018



This data is adjusted for inflation and differences in living costs between countries. Data after 1981 relates to household income or consumption surveys collated by the World Bank; before 1981 it is based on historical reconstructions of GDP per capita and inequality data.



Data source: Michalis Moatsos (2021; 2022)

OurWorldinData.org/poverty | CC BY

Note: Data is measured in international-\$ at 2011 prices.

The chart shows that almost 10% of the world's population lives in extreme poverty. It also tells us that two hundred years ago, the same was true for nearly 80% of the world’s population. In 1820, only a small elite enjoyed higher living standards, while the vast majority of people lived in conditions that we call extreme poverty today. Since then, the share of extremely poor people has fallen continuously. More and more world regions industrialized and achieved economic growth, which made it possible to lift more people out of poverty. In 1950, about half the world lived in extreme poverty; in 1990, it was still more than a third. By 2019, the share of the world population in extreme poverty had fallen below 10%.

That is a considerable achievement. For me, as a researcher who focuses on growth and inequality, it may be humanity’s most significant achievement in the last two centuries.

“What did economic growth mean for US households?” by Max Roser for Our World in Data (July 28, 2025)

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Roser explains economic growth as “an increase in the quantity or quality of the many goods and services that people produce.” Over the past two centuries, the United States has experienced dramatic economic growth. This chart shows changes that occurred as the U.S. economy grew.

What did economic growth mean for US households?

Our World
in Data



Data sources: Household technology data from Horace Dediu, Comin and Hobijn (2004), and other sources collated by Our World in Data. GDP per capita from Maddison Project Database which relies on Sutch, R. (2006) for US data for the 19th century.

CC-BY | Max Roser

Part 2 Snapshots of Economic Life

Examine select quotes from Episodes 8, 9, and 10 to consider the economic challenges and tensions they reveal. What might each person say needs to be true for an economy to work well?

Quotes from Episode 8: The People's Pushback

In this episode, journalist Lewis Raven Wallace investigates why more and more people in the United States – especially young people – are questioning capitalism in its current form. His interviews reveal discontent that has grown over the past several decades.

Lilly Clark, interviewer on the street: Um, how do you feel about your own future? Like, do you feel hopeful or confident that you'll have a financially secure life?

Brittany, Durham, NC: Uh, no, I don't! And I think a lot of it is because the cost of living compared to what we make is, there's such a huge gap. Like, it makes me wonder when I'm, when my kids are taking care of me, where I'm actually going to be no matter how hard I work today.

Josh Bivens, Chief Economist for the Economic Policy Institute: The entire, like, post 1979 period in American economic life is really unsatisfactory on a ton of levels. That's where you see inequality just explode. You see incomes and wages at the very top of the scale rise enormously fast, and almost everyone else loses.

Lewis Raven Wallace, journalist: Coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s was an immersion in Reaganomics and then Clintonomics. If you lived in an urban area, you saw unemployment and wage stagnation, divestment from neighborhoods and communities, mass criminalization and incarceration. If you lived in the suburbs, or in a college town, like I did, you saw the aggressive spread of development. In all of the places, you saw the globalization of trade. All this was supposed to be great. Hopeful. But it was confusing. As governments made these new so-called "free trade" agreements like NAFTA...it had real world effects: American factories moved to Mexico and China, where they could pay people less; the middle class was shrinking; the whole economy was being reorganized, often at the expense of the most vulnerable people.

Esteban Kelly, Executive Director of the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives: But this was the beginning of it. It was like there's so much that could be sold off. There's so many, you know, companies that can be shut down, reopened overseas, offshored, automated. And what better way to break the backs of worker power and labor solidarity than to simply move to a different jurisdiction where the workers are not organized, where you don't need to have this balanced contract with labor.

Quotes from Episode 9: At the Tipping Point

In 1972, a team of young scientists led by Dennis and Dana Meadows published a study exploring what would happen to human civilization if people kept pursuing endless economic growth on a finite planet. One of the team's most famous outcomes is called the Standard Run – a scientific model showing how the world might change if industrial production and human population continued to grow at the rates they were growing in the 1960s and early 70s.

In this episode, writer Katy Shields tells the team's story. She explains the Standard Run below.

Katy Shields, writer: For the first few decades, expansion was rapid and the global economy, and with it, pollution, ballooned.

Australian news broadcast host: From 1980 to the year 2020 pollution really takes off, so by the year 2020 the condition of the planet starts to become highly critical.

Katy Shields, writer: But with limited measures to use [natural] resources more judiciously, a rise in consumption combined with exponential growth in pollution started impacting food supplies and then of course human health.

Australian news broadcast host: Pollution is going to become so serious that it will start to kill people! So the population will diminish, and at this stage, around about the year 2040-2050, civilized life as we know it on this planet will cease to exist.

Katy Shields, writer: They were not talking about the end of life as we know it, but as Dana herself later explained:

Dana Meadows, scientist: if we run into those limits, what will happen will be a collapse of our system, not necessarily the Earth system, but the industrial system.

Quotes from Episode 10: The Extracted

Journalist Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo investigates the economic relationships connecting African producers and countries with corporations and consumers in wealthier parts of the world, with a focus on chocolate.

John Biewen: Last time you made a piece for us, Ugochi, in Season 5, we talked about the oil industry in your home country, Nigeria.

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo, journalist: Yes, we're the top oil-producing country in Africa. But has that made Nigerians rich? Not at all. Most of the people who live in the oil-rich region, the Niger Delta, live in extreme poverty. And meanwhile the main oil companies operating there, Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobile, Eni, Chevron, Oando and others have left the delta one of the most polluted places on the planet. This is a place where people had an economy and a way of life based on fishing from that river, for centuries. That's been destroyed.

Ellen McGirt: So, Ugochi, how should we think about this? Do we stop eating chocolate and drinking coffee?

Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo, journalist: Renouncing chocolate is probably not what these cocoa growers would want us to do. Sure, it's good to support companies that are paying a better price for these commodities, but the real solution is systemic. We need to change the power dynamic so corporations in rich countries don't have all the leverage that allows them to make big money processing and marketing things like chocolate while paying so little to the people who grow the key ingredient.

Part 3 The Aim of an Economy

In this 3-minute, 26-second video, Kate Raworth critiques economists' emphasis on economic growth and proposes a different way to decide what an economy should aim to achieve.

Source

"Kate Raworth on Growth" by the Royal Society of Arts (March 25, 2014)

Kate Raworth is a British economist known for Doughnut Economics, a framework that rethinks how economies define progress and success. She teaches at Oxford University's Environmental Change Institute and is co-founder of Doughnut Economics Action Lab.