

# Progress

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## Class 7 - Ambition

Kevin A. Bryan - Toronto Rotman - Oct 29 2025

After class notes in Red

Ambition: scale of what you *try* to do

What is your highest ambition goal?

Also Why? Why did you choose that ambition? This is different from Great Man Theory - it asks what individuals try to do with their life. High variance, difficult things or not? May be many people who contribute to progress but some ambition is needed.

Ambition: scale of what you *try* to do

What is your highest ambition goal?

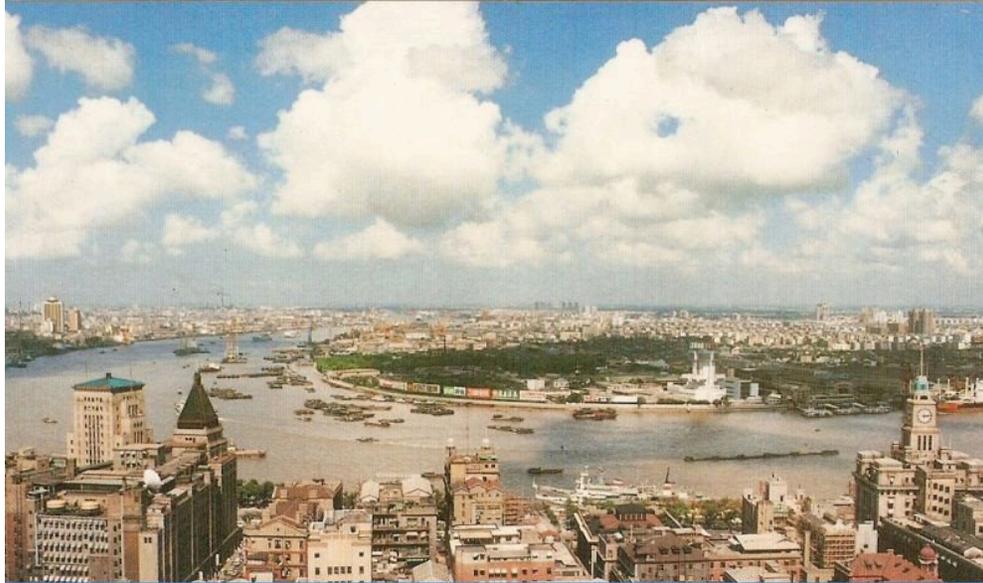
*Note: ambition in self vs. ambition in "progress"*

Many may have the ambition to be the CEO of Company X. Great! But the social outcome will be one person with that job. But ambition for progress - directed human action that improves the standard of living - is in theory infinite. We can all contribute.

Is there anything wrong with having a satisfying life? Coconuts on the beach, a house in the suburbs?

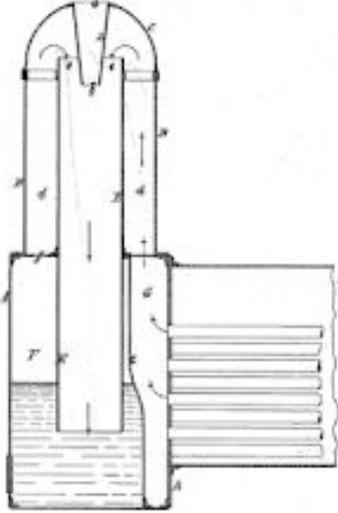
Let's go further - is this *immoral*?

Ok, not really. But raising the level of ambition of some folks in society, or directing it better as in Baumol, can be useful! Just like "are we required to be charitable and kind to all we meet" is "No, but it would be better if we did..."



Some examples of serious ambition. First, the 30 year development of Shanghai Pudong from fields to today.

M. E. WALTON.  
Locomotive and Other Chimneys.  
No. 221,550. Patented Nov. 18, 1879.

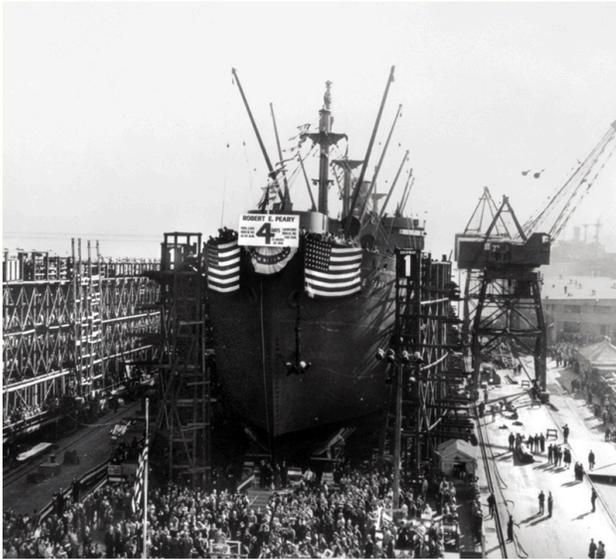


Witness  
Henry Brown for  
Harry Smith

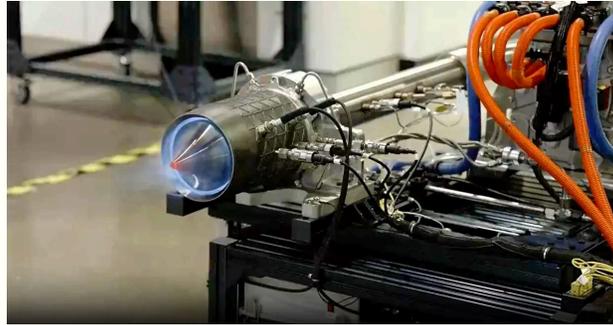
Inventor  
Mary Elizabeth Walton  
by her Attorneys  
Harrison & Co.



Mary Walton, independent inventor, patented a way to store air pollutants in water (at the time, cities were just covered in pollution), and then, after hearing Edison tried and failed to make the elevated trains more quiet, figured out a way to use tar and sand boxes to dampen sound and sold it to New York City.



Henry Kaiser, construction company that built the Hoover Dam, and his shipyard (now Richmond, CA) was building liberty ships in 4 days, AND they created the first employer sponsored health care program which is now probably the best health system in the US, Kaiser Permanente.



And Zipline delivering drugs (and pizza!) by drone; one of the many supersonic jet companies trying to make this cost-feasible; and much of Boston was literally filled in. You should ask - who had the idea and the ambition and the wherewithal to literally make cities out of the sea!

## Embedded Website:

<https://caseyhandmer.wordpress.com/2024/10/26/we-can-terraform-the-american-west/>

Indeed, who has the ambition to terraform the Nevada desert today? It would be cost feasible!

Our goal today is to know:

- Does ambition vary?
- If so, for predictable reasons?
- Can we "raise ambition"? If so, how?
  - Should we try to do so?

On or about December 1910 human character changed.

Woolf, 1924



But maybe get over yourselves. It's a chair.

Except...

The modernist artists and writers, from Woolf to Eliot to the Bauhaus (incl. Gropius' incredible tubular steel Wassily chair, from 1919!) were clearly different...but "human character changed"? Actually, yes! The entire modern world of arts and architecture changed because of their ambition.



But Bauhaus *did* change the world...

From Brazil to Chicago to Japan, you see the influence of the Bauhaus and their descendants: clean lines, expressed materials, large glass expanses.

*So let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavoured to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and which will one day rise heavenwards from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come.*

Gropius Manifesto, 1919

"Building is the ultimate goal of all creative activity!" What a progress-oriented way to put it! But note this manifesto was written before the Bauhaus was famous. Look how ambitious they are! They aren't just building new chairs...

How exactly did they create the modern world?

Was it just having Kandinsky and Klee and van der Rohe and Breuer and Gropius and so on in the same place?

Peer effects must matter, as they raise the ambition of each other. Perhaps the time also, just after WW1, though note that Woolf referred to 1910 not 1918, and many others followed World War I by going camping in the woods and painting!

The most famous exponent of the idea that ambition varies for predictable reasons is Max Weber

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism is among the most cited works in all of social science. It is wrong, to be clear. But there is an insight here: the level of ambition of a society can vary, depending on things like the social and religious setting and so on. Clear links to Ogburn here from our previous lecture.

to you to follow vs.  
10 For euen when wee were with you, this wee commanded you, that if any would not worke, neither should he eate.  
11 For we heare that there are some which walke among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busi-bodies.  
12 Now them that are such, we command, and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietnesse they worke, and eat their owne bread.  
13 But ye, brethren, || be not wearie in well doing. || Or. faint 1007.



(To be clear, this isn't *true*, but...)

Groups like the Calvinists loved "he who does not work, shall not eat". Pilgrims forced people to church for hours-long sermons, no card playing, no dancing, no bright colors, no "leisurely walks" on Sunday - and yet, they create Harvard, the world's highest literacy rate, people so progress oriented they have names like "Increase Mather". They were building a new society *on Earth*.

Weber's "Spirit" (Geist) is a rational, disciplined  
"calling" (Beruf)

Heaven reached not based on sin and forgiveness.

Rather, humans contribute to society through  
worldly work because it is right thing to do.

Again, this isn't true, as we'll see; Protestant N. Europe does not in fact have some unique role in the history of invention and other progress.



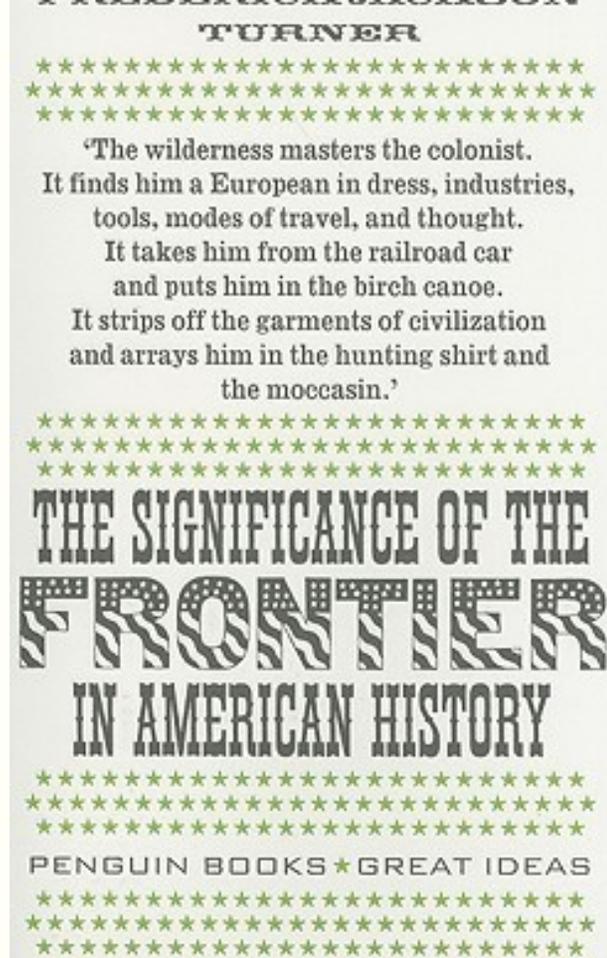
Where is ambition directed here?

Weber: too much focus on the after life or the inner self limits how much time can be spent on the here and now, progress in our material world. This must be true at least in part, no?



And yet, the Cistercians, a Catholic order, were critical to metallurgy, waterwheels, architecture...even invented their own numeral system for mathematics! So not just protestants - these were literally orders of monks. Bloch and Ovitt both argue this may have been an attempt to be more efficient to leave more time for praying!

So given the "geist" of Weber's argument: can we show more formally that the environment can change one's level of ambition?



More male, younger, more immigrant, fewer services....and stranger names! The people who move to the frontier had stranger names...and AFTER moving, are more likely to give their kids stranger names.

*(And yes, of course, it was conquest, not 'free land')*

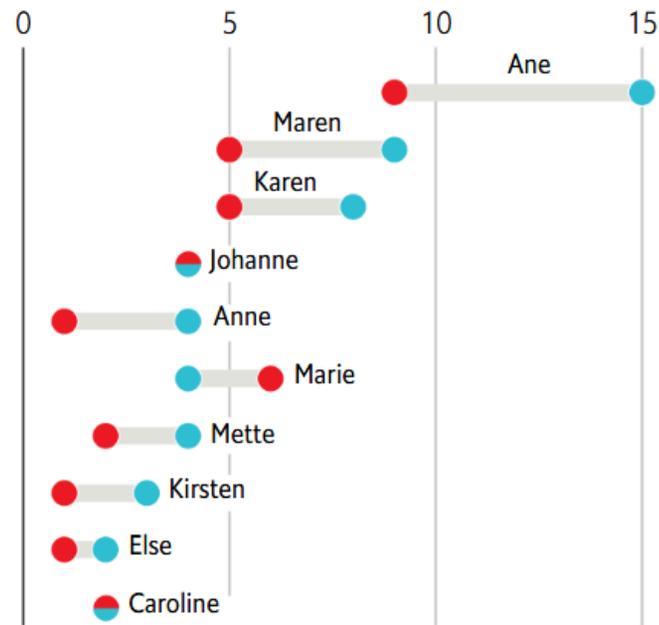
From Bazzi et al, "Frontier Culture". Plus they earn a bigger wage premium from "individualism" on the frontier. Really cool way to measure individualism - unusual names!

## Few Scandinavian immigrants to America had common names

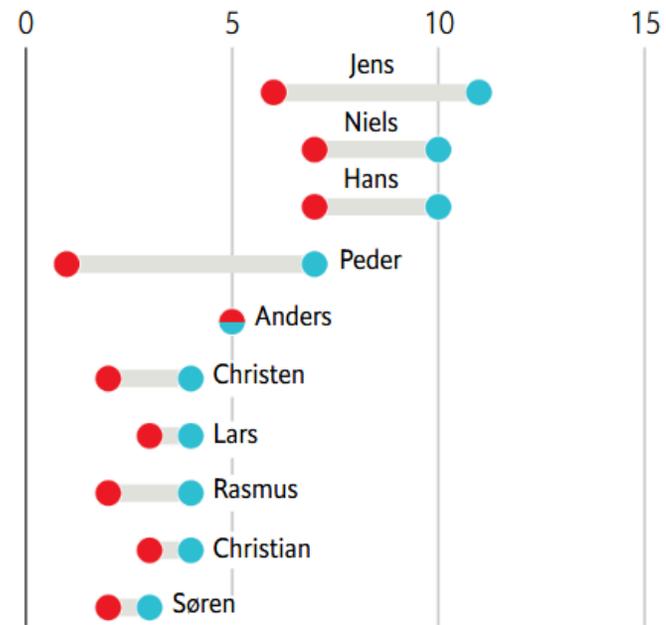
Most common first names among **Danish immigrants to America** and **Danish population**

As % of total, 1845

### Women's names

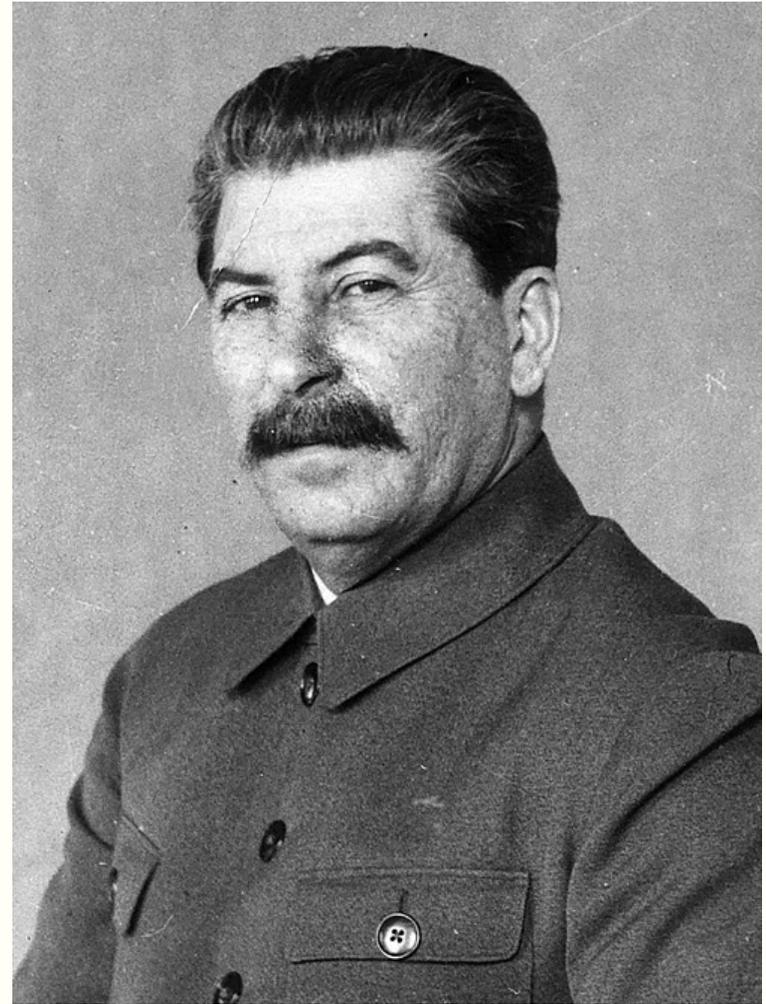


### Men's names



And we also see that the "unusual names" were much more willing to move from (in this case) Scandinavia to the US in the Age of Immigration. Obviously these are pretty minimal examples of empirical evidence for "ambition varies, matters, and can be affected by local enviro"...but they aren't nothing.

Are we sure we want to encourage ambition?



**BUT are we sure ambition matters? maybe it's just resources x people x time? Ambitious people also pursue fantasy - Theranos was ambitious! Heck, STALIN was ambitious!**

Baumol: even if we can't affect the level of ambition, we can affect what ambitious people try to do!

He isn't necessarily saying that the overall level of ambition varies, but just that empirically, what ambitious people try to do is more important.

## Schumpeter's Innovation:

The introduction of a new good

Or of a new method of production

The opening of a new market

A new source of raw materials

The new organization of any industry

Baumol: there are many other things ambitious people who want money and status and honor may do, some of which are useless, and some of which are just outright bad.

An innovative person can do much less socially  
useful things



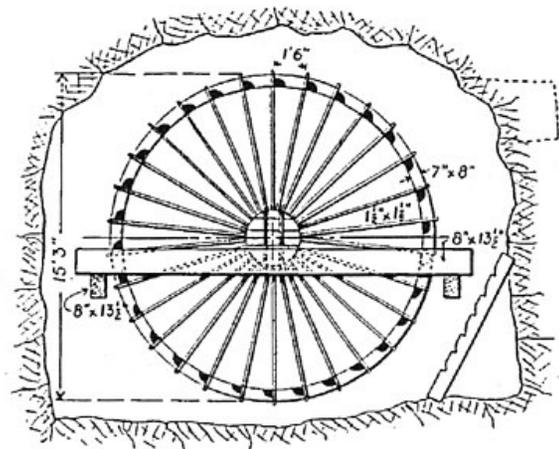


Or maybe just useless; in the great *De Architectura* by Vitruvius, only one mention of some new method of operating more efficiently. Baumol: "There is a story, repeated by a number of Roman writers, that a man-characteristically unnamed-invented unbreakable glass and demonstrated it to Tiberius in anticipation of a great reward. The emperor asked the inventor whether anyone shared his secret and was assured that there was no one else; whereupon his head was promptly removed, lest, said Tiberius, gold be reduced to the value of mud. I have no opinion about the truth of this story, and it is only a story. But is it not interesting that neither the elder Pliny nor Petronius nor the historian Dio Cassius was troubled by the point that the inventor turned to the emperor for a reward, instead of turning to an investor for capital with which to put his invention into production."

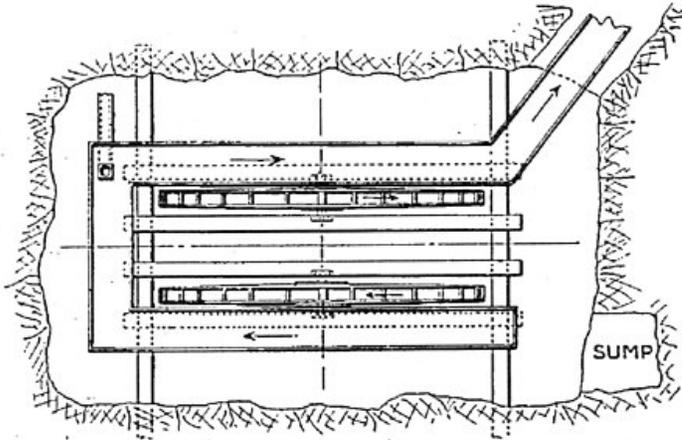
The ambitious can maximize landholding, rent-seeking, political power, piety, status, wealth

No natural law that only productive ambition can get you these things!

Productive, Unproductive, Destructive



ELEVATION



PLAN



They had waterwheels (e.g., at riotinto) and a primitive steam engine (Hero's Aeolipile) and modern gears in 1st century Rome, yet...also, perhaps without true liberty, or scientific consolidation, these remain isolated inventions that aren't improved?

If Baumol is right, then the answer to 'how do we get more progress?' is not 'inspire more people.'  
It's 'fix the incentives.'

Is that true?

Or maybe Baumol is saying the supply of ambition may vary, but incentives or culture determine where that ambition goes? Likely both matter.

# A model of ambition

**Cultural factors (centuries?):** beliefs, frontier experience, the structure of what society values (following Ogburn!)

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**Organizations** (selection - putting high ambition together; permission structure to aim bigger (consider a lab here); who gets resources (are older societies less ambitious?))

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**Individuals** (role models like Noyce encouraging folks to work on higher variance things - maybe naively because those things are really hard!)

This is a first pass here at which factors might affect ambition. The third is easiest to change, second may be affected by policy, first is really really tough.

We try to make this class "positive" not  
"normative"...

With one exception. I do want to raise your level  
of ambition. How many know they *can* contribute  
to progress?

Given what you've now learned, what is one policy you would suggest to raise the level of ambition of society? Of kids? Of your social network?

So, a survey. You are asked by a friend (or policymaker!) "how important are differences in ambition to progress?"

Let's vote: 1-5, where 1 is "not at all" and 5 is "I imagine the most important factor we'll discuss this term". We'll keep track of these votes as we go!

*Average 3.37/5.*

Next Week

*Do Incentives Matter?*

Can we get more progress just by incentivizing it more?

