Historically Hollow: The Cries of Populism

History textbooks are full of populist complaints about business: the evils of Standard Oil, the horrors of New York tenements, the human body parts in Chicago meatpacking plants. To be honest, I haven't taken these complaints seriously since high school. In the absence of abundant evidence to the contrary, I say the backstory behind these populist complaints is just neurotic activists searching for dark linings in the silver clouds of business progress. When business offers new energy, new housing, new food, the wise are grateful to see the world improve, not outraged to see a world that falls short of perfection.

Still, I periodically wonder if my nonchalance is unjustified. Populists rub me the wrong way, but how do I know they didn't have a point? After all, I have near-zero first-hand knowledge of what life was like in the heyday of Standard Oil, New York tenements, or Chicago meat-packing. What would I have thought if I was there?

If we're talking about the year 1900, I'm afraid we'll never really know. Yet what I've seen with my own eyes during the last fifteen years has done much to cement my out-of-sample confidence.

During this time, I've seen the tech industry dramatically improve human life all over the world.

Amazon is simply the best store that ever existed, by far, with incredible selection and unearthly convenience. The price: cheap.

Facebook, Twitter, and other social media let us socialize with our friends, comfortably meet new people, and explore even the most obscure interests. The price: free.

Uber and Lyft provide high-quality, convenient transportation. The price: really cheap.

Skype is a sci-fi quality video phone. The price: free.

Youtube gives us endless entertainment. The price: free.

Google gives us the totality of human knowledge! The price: free.

That's what I've *seen*. What I've *heard*, however, is totally different. The populists of our Golden Age are loud and furious. They're crying about "monopolies" that deliver firehoses worth of free stuff. They're bemoaning the "death of competition" in industries (like taxicabs) that governments forcibly monopolized for as long as any living person can remember. They're insisting that "only the 1% benefit" in an age when half of the high-profile new businesses literally give their services away for free.   And they're lashing out

at businesses for "taking our data" – even though five years ago hardly anyone realized that they *had* data.

My point: If your overall reaction to business progress over the last fifteen years is even mildly negative, no sensible person will try to please you, because you are *impossible* to please. Yet our new anti-tech populists have managed to make themselves a center of pseudo-intellectual attention.

Angry lamentation about the effects of new tech on privacy has flabbergasted me the most. For practical purposes, we have more privacy than *ever before in human history*. You can now buy embarrassing products in secret. You can read or view virtually anything you like in secret. You can interact with over a billion people in secret.

Then what privacy have we lost? The privacy to not be part of a Big Data Set. The privacy to not have firms try to sell us stuff based on our previous purchases. In short, we have lost the kinds of privacy that no prudent person loses sleep over.

The prudent will however be annoyed that – thanks to populist pressure – we now have to click "I agree" fifty times a day to access our favorite websites. Implicit consent was working admirably, but now we all have to suffer to please people who are impossible to please. Yes, tech firms made a business decision to ramp up privacy protections; but this business decision is tainted by a barrage of thinly-veiled threats of government persecution. In a functional world, we would have a few start-ups catering to privacy fanatics – and the rest of us could enjoy the bounty of the tech industry without this absurd digital red tape.

How, though, do I logically leap from the unreliability of populists on tech to the unreliability of populists on business in general? After all, anyone can make a mistake. My reply: Being negative about the tech industry isn't just a small, isolated mistake. Populists are applying *massive* intellectual energy to *major* issues and ending up *painfully* wrong. This is strong evidence that their whole way of thinking is deeply corrupt. They don't deserve our trust or attention – not today, not yesterday, and not tomorrow.