

The Tyranny of Experts:
Population Scares and Population
Controls

By William Easterly

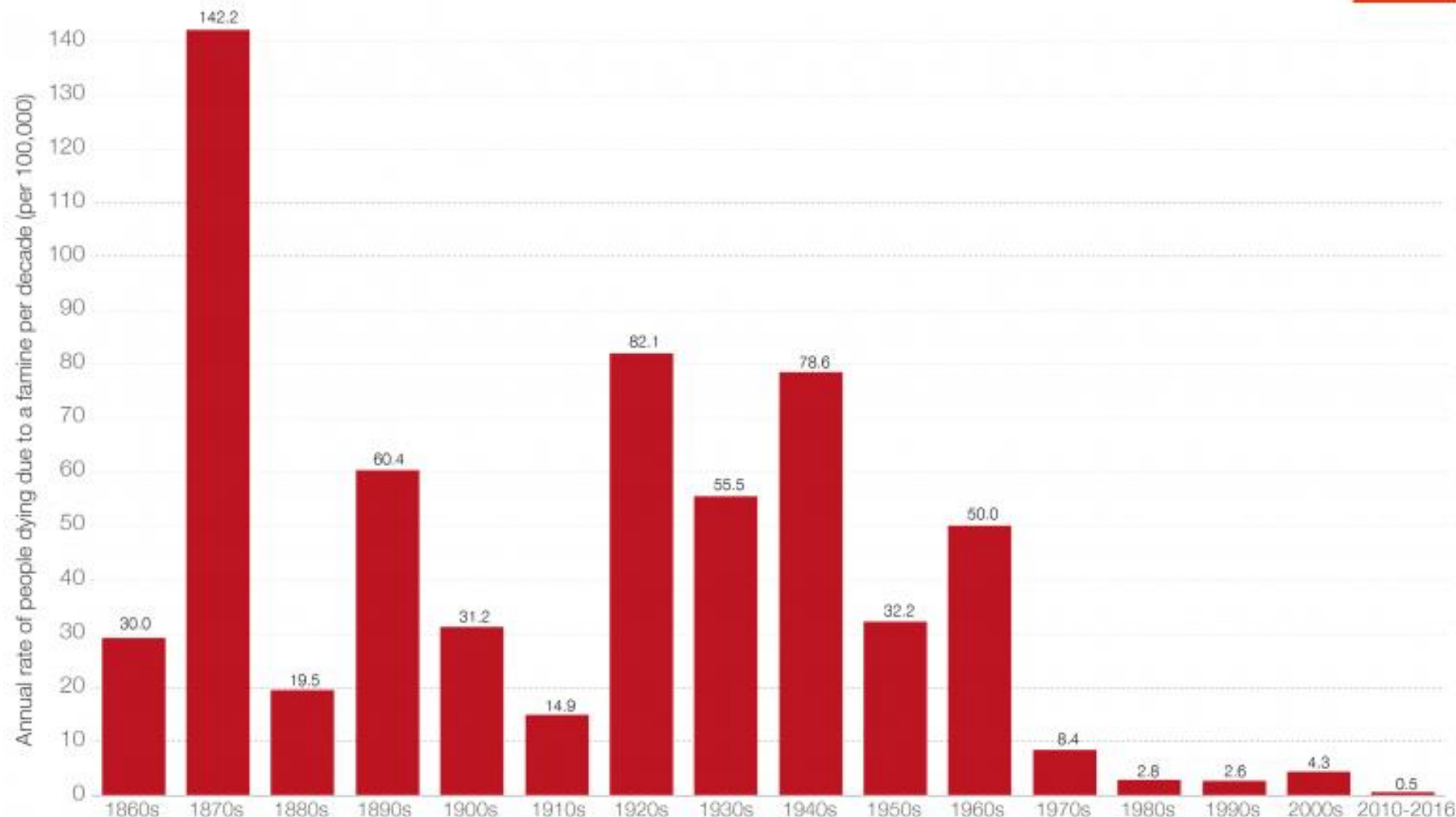
Role of experts in the Malthusian crisis of population growth

- Evaluating coercion on fertility (e.g. forced sterilization in India, One Child Policy in China)
- Positive case for or against population controls
- Normative case also matters

Malthus and later Malthusians predicted that growing world population would lead to:

- Famine
- Malnutrition
- Rising Food Prices

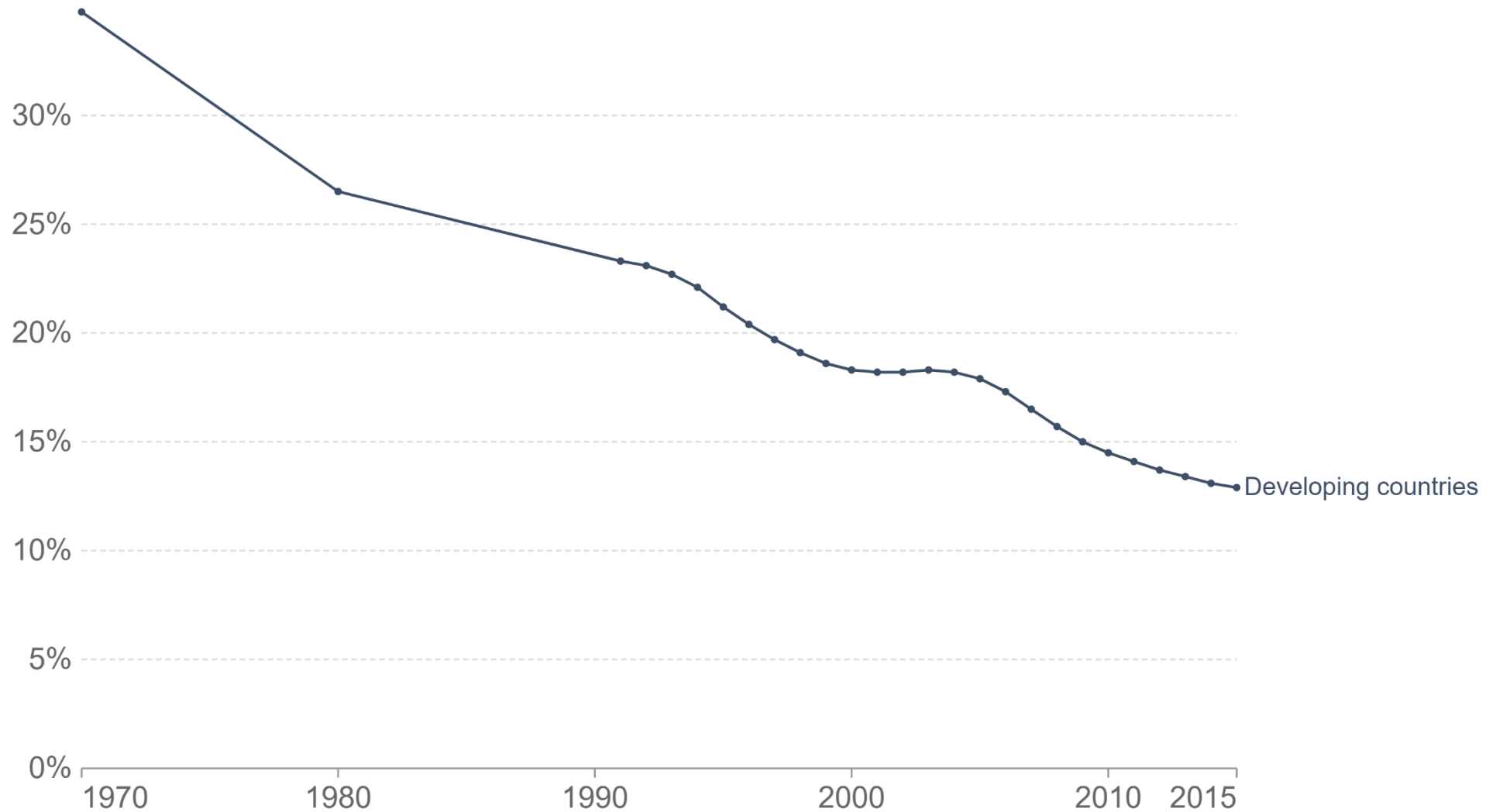
Annual rate of people dying due to a famine globally, per decade



Data source: The rate of the excess mortality due to famines shown here is presented in detail on OurWorldinData.org/famines [The dataset was constructed by Joe Hasell and Max Roser].
How the rate is calculated: The annual rate is calculated for each decade by dividing the total number of famine victims in each decade by the average size of the world population in that decade and dividing the resulting ratio by 10 (and for the data from 2010 to 2016 it is divided by 7) to arrive at a yearly rate. To express it as the rate per 100,000 people, this annual rate is then multiplied by 100,000.
For famines that happened at the end of a decade and the beginning of the next decade the famine victims are split by decade on a year by year basis.
For famines for which different excess mortality estimates are published the midpoint between these estimates was chosen here.
This visualization is available at OurWorldinData.org. There you find the full dataset and more research and visualizations on famines and global development.

Prevalence of undernourishment in developing countries, 1970 to 2015

This is the main FAO hunger indicator. It measures the share of the population that consumes an amount of calories that is insufficient to cover the energy requirement for an active and healthy life (as defined by the minimum dietary energy requirement).



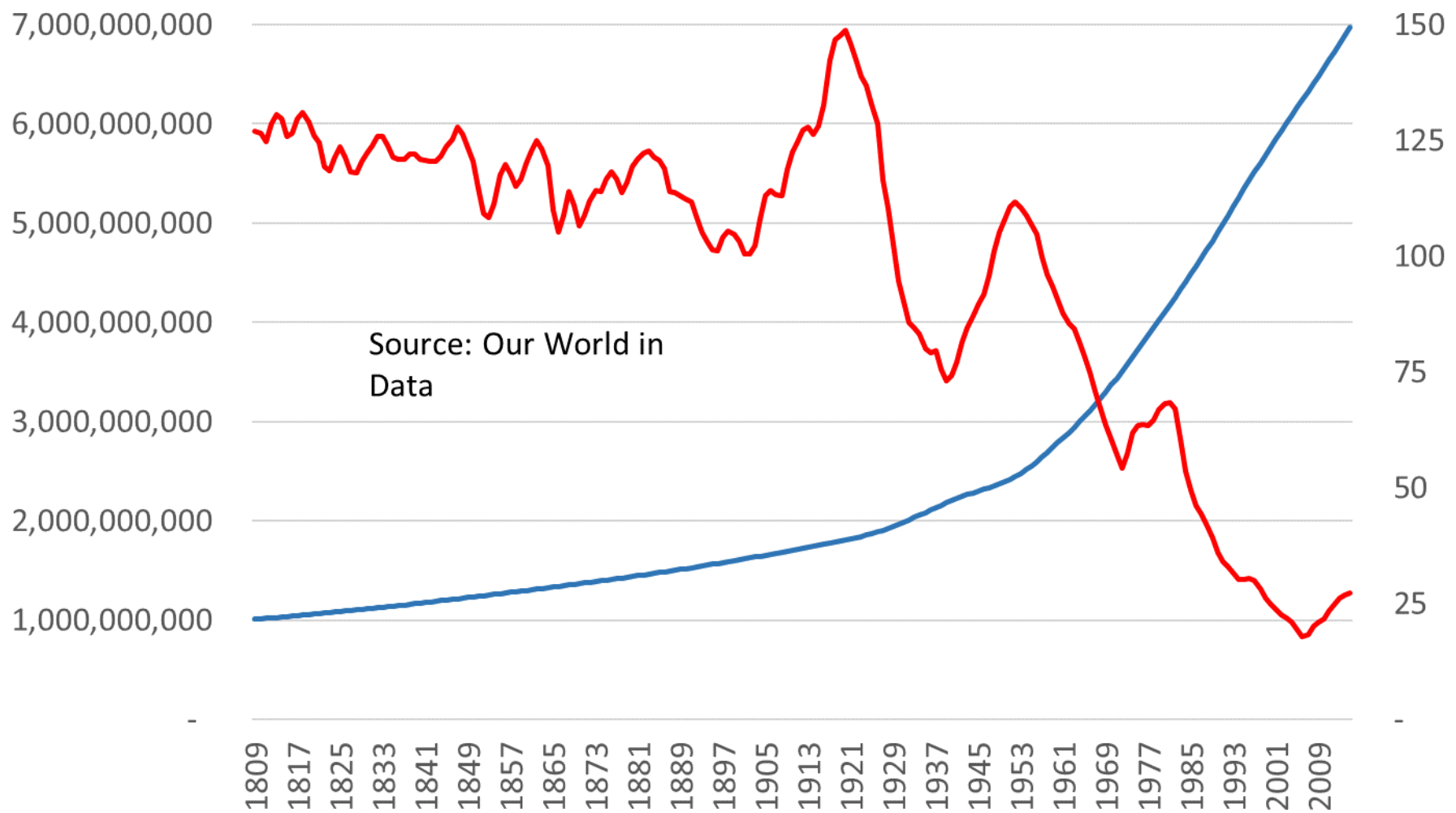
Source: FAO and ESS Indicators

OurWorldInData.org/hunger-and-undernourishment/ • CC BY

Note: Data from 1990 onwards is well-established within FAO estimates. Earlier estimates are significantly more uncertain.

World Population (blue, left axis) and Real Wheat Prices (red, right axis)

10-year Moving Average, 1800-2015



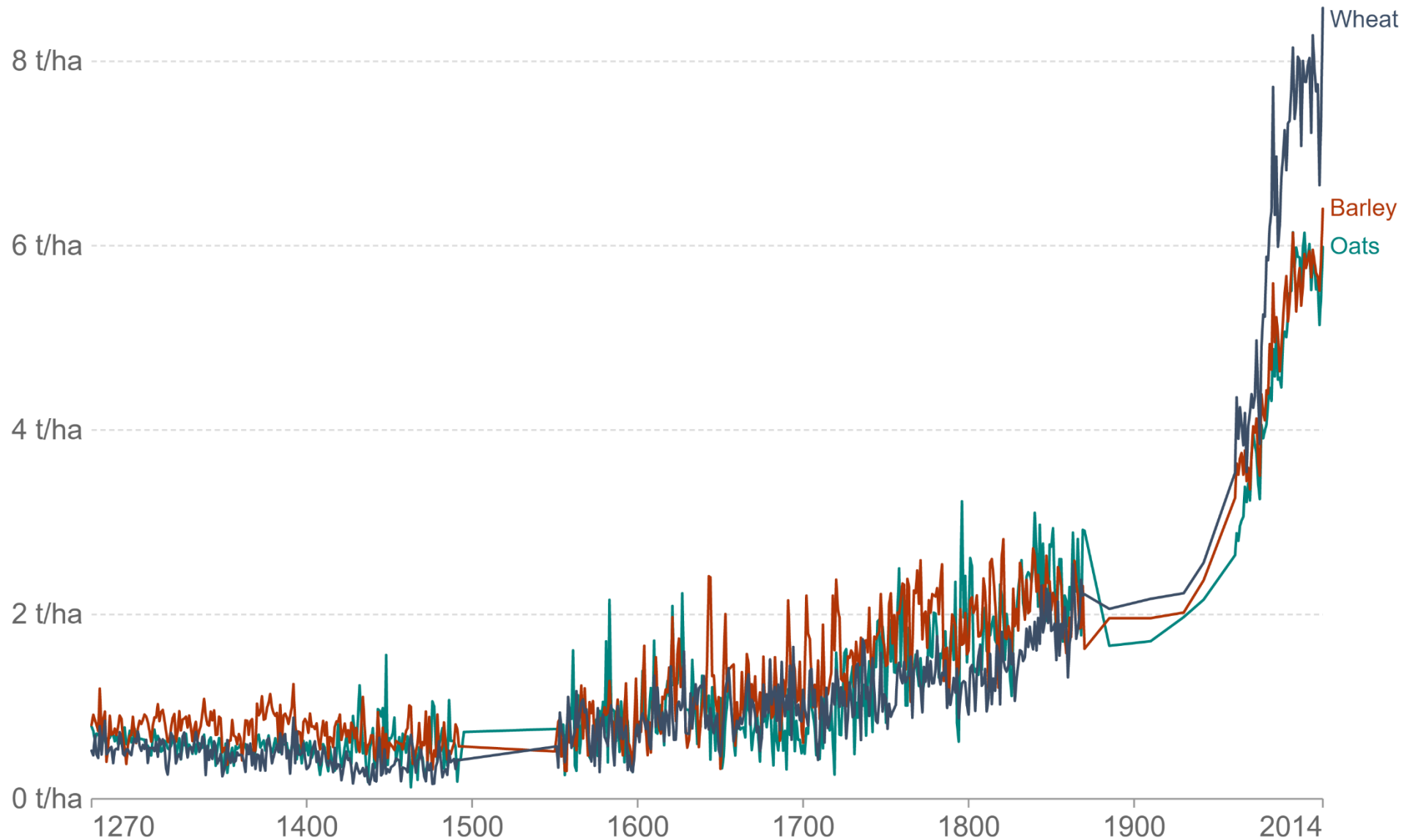
— World Population — Wheat Price Index adjusted for inflation (1900=100)

The Malthusian catastrophe didn't happen
because of:

- Innovation
- Trade

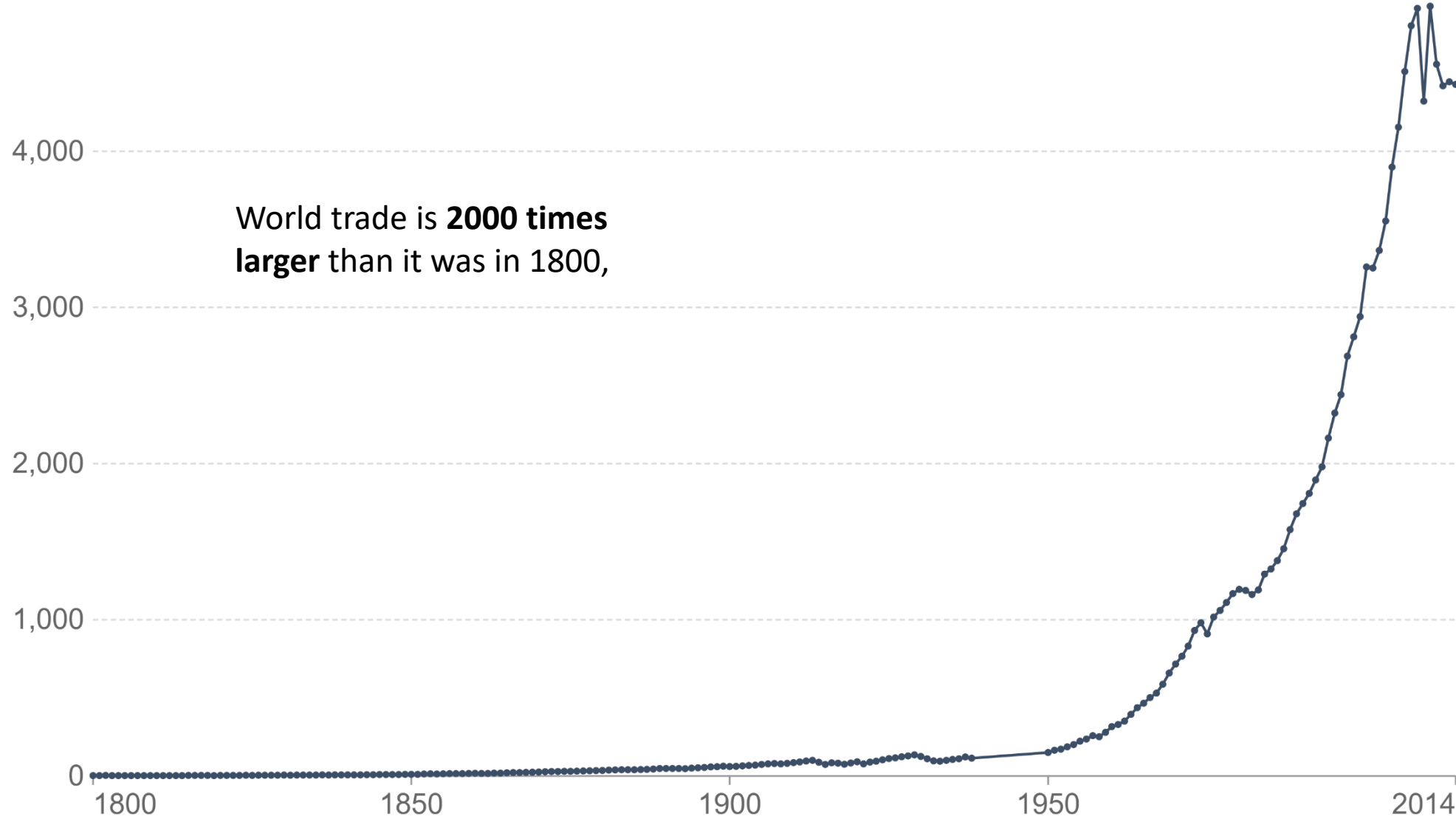
Long-term cereal yields in the United Kingdom

Average agricultural yields in key crops in the United Kingdom, measured in tonnes per hectare.



The value of global exports

Time series of value of world exports at constant prices, relative to 1913 (i.e. values correspond to world export volumes indexed at 1913=100)



Source: Federico and Tena-Junguito (2016)

The Normative Case Against Population Controls

- Evaluation of externalities to fertility decisions
 - Land as a private good vs. Tragedy of the Common
- Rationality of poor people
- Revealed preference on population growth
- Coercion versus consent