

# The Ivory Trade



Even though there has been a global ban on trading ivory since 1989, elephants and rhinoceroses are still being slaughtered for their tusks.

[NPR's Weekend Edition Sunday \(February 9, 2014\) included a segment describing France crushing confiscated ivory.](#) Trading in ivory is illegal. But then we got this Fox Butterfield<sup>[1]</sup> moment (near the 1:20 mark):

News flash and a little economics: the animals that produced ivory currently being bought and sold on the black market are already dead. Destroying that ivory will not bring them back to life. It will, however, decrease the supply of ivory, drive up the price, and ... encourage more poaching.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Fox Butterfield was a reporter. He has gained fame courtesy of the Wall Street Journal's James Taranto. His claim to fame is creating headlines which fail to recognize an underlying fundamental relationships. For example, "Crime rates fall despite higher rates of incarceration."

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# Yet Another Labor Force Participation Rate Error



Zanny Minton Beddoes (source: Economist.com)

and that's been one of the really striking things about the U.S. economy in the past few years is that you've seen this very big decline in the share of the labor force that is employed, the share of people that are employed. Now partly that is to do with the fact that the population is aging and the baby boomers are aging. As you get older, fewer people work. But a lot of it probably has to do with the weakness of the recovery itself.

NPR's "Weekend All Things Considered" featured [a story on the state of the U.S. economy](#). Titled "The Long-Term Unemployed, the State of the Economy, and What Can Be Done," the show featured a number of guests. Among those interviewed was [Zanny Minton Beddoes](#) of [The Economist](#) who, in turn, featured a lovely British accent. And, naturally, **there is yet another labor force participation rate error.**

Interestingly, **this passage does not appear in [the official transcript](#).**

Regular readers (both of you) will remember that [I've written about the labor force participation rate before](#). In fact, retiring baby boomers is exactly the wrong explanation for the declining LFPR. The main source of the decline is among the 16-34 age group, but the 35-44 age group also shows a small decline.

The historical data is there for anyone who bothers to look.

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## Meta-Analysis, the Election, and 538

NPR's "On the Media" show today featured Brooke Gladstone interviewing Nate Silver, lately infamous as the analyst and writer at the New York Times 538 blog. Ms. Gladstone asked a question about meta-analysis, the election, and 538.

Paraphrasing, her question was, **"Since you use meta-analysis and include a number of different polls, shouldn't your analysis be more accurate?"**

**This is a common, incorrect belief.** It's often called "regression to the mean." Statisticians will appeal to the central limit theorem. Unfortunately, neither of those apply when it comes to election polling. As a wise teacher once told me, **"Errors don't cancel, they accumulate."** He was right then and is even more correct today. Meta-analysis allows the errors in the various polling methodologies to accumulate.

It's made even worse this year by the non-response rate to polls, hovering near 90 percent. That means for every ten calls a pollster makes, they get one response. So much for the "random sample" assumption.

[I've made my predictions elsewhere.](#) I look forward to watching Mr. Silver eat a large portion of crow Wednesday.

For those interested, [David Burge has written a clear, cogent description of what's wrong with political polling.](#) Just skip past the math – the really good stuff starts about halfway down the article.

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## **KQED Fail**

KQED fail. This morning the San Francisco NPR outlet aired a **five-minute segment on the problems people have finding apartments in San Francisco.** The segment contained two lengthy personal profiles. But there was **not one mention of rent control** which has been in effect in San Francisco for about 30 years.

**Big fail.**

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## **There's No Such Thing As a Free Lunch**



“There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” Who invented this wonderful phrase? NPR’s “All Things Considered” just credited Barry Commoner with inventing the phrase

(<http://www.npr.org/2012/10/02/162176994/paul-revere-of-ecology-sounded-alarms-on-pollution> accessed October 2, 2012).

Transcription is by me from the mp3 file download.

“The late environmentalist Barry Commoner came up with four laws of ecology:

1. Everything is connected to everything else,
2. Everything must go somewhere,
3. Nature knows best, and
4. There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”

I don’t much like Wikipedia, but even they got this one right (footnotes omitted, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There\\_ain't\\_no\\_such\\_thing\\_as\\_a\\_free\\_lunch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/There_ain't_no_such_thing_as_a_free_lunch) accessed October 2, 2012):

“**There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch**” (alternatively, “**There’s no such thing as a free lunch**” or other variants) is a popular adage communicating the idea that it is impossible to get something for nothing. The acronyms “TNSTAFL,” “**TANSTAFL**” and “**TINSTAFL**” are also used. Uses of the phrase dating back to the 1930s and 1940s have been found, but the phrase’s first appearance is unknown.[1] The “free lunch” in

the saying refers to the nineteenth century practice in American bars of offering a “[free lunch](#)” as a way to entice drinking customers. The phrase and the acronym are central to [Robert Heinlein](#)’s 1966 [libertarian science fiction](#) novel [The Moon is a Harsh Mistress](#), which popularized it.[2][3] The free-market economist [Milton Friedman](#) also popularized the phrase[1] by using it as the title of a 1975 book, and it often appears in economics textbooks;[4] Campbell McConnell writes that the idea is “at the core of economics”.[5]

It happens that in my youth I read quite a bit of Mr. Heinlein’s writing. I can well remember both the novel and the use of that phrase. Personally, I’ve always preferred TANSTAAFL (There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch). But, no matter how you phrase it, Mr. Commoner did not invent it. I seriously doubt that he was the first to use the phrase in environmental discussions.

I won’t comment on “nature knows best” except to say that Mr. Commoner apparently never encountered a rattlesnake, ebola, or an active volcano. He needed to get out more.

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**Media            Innumeracy,            Time**  
**Version**



David and Bryn Oh with their three kids on Santa Monica Beach

Today [NPR's "All Things Considered" provided yet another example of media innumeracy, time version.](#) The story was about various scientists on the Mars Curiosity project adjusting their activities to conform to the Martian day (about 40 minutes longer than Earth's). Host Melissa Block interviewed David and Bryn Oh about this. She noted that the interview was being taped at 10 am. Bryn replied that in their house it was 10 pm. David added that the family would be heading for bed immediately after the interview. Ms. Block then responded, "If I've figured this right for about the last three weeks you've added nearly 40 minutes to your clock every day, so you're now, oh, just about half a day off, right? You're at the peak of your upside-downness."

Let's see. 10 am – 10 pm. Ms. Block is sure no rocket scientist.

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# Twitter a Polling Alternative?



Twitter a polling alternative? This idea was [proposed and discussed at great length on NPR's "On the Media" August 12](#). Rather than trying to summarize the show, let me just quote the abstract:

"Twitter has teamed up with Republican and Democratic polling firms, as well as another company called Topsy, to create a new tool called the [Twindex](#). It offers a new way to gauge the political leanings of likely voters. Bob speaks with Adam Sharp, Twitter's manager for government and politics."

This is typical media stupidity. Tweets are public unless you work very hard to keep them private. Most people on Twitter do not reveal much about their personal lives. There are many fake personas, too. Our cat has a Twitter feed (made up mostly of other household pets and other animals). People routinely lie. People will also lie to a telephone pollster, but at least they don't have the incentive of their response being visible to the entire world.

Ironically, most of the comments deal with Twitter users not being representative of the public because they are too technical. Sheesh. If you can't use Twitter, you probably can't really function in today's world at all.

David Burge has [an excellent column on the reality of polling and statistics on his blog](#). I strongly recommend reading it before you sign up for Twindex (or any other social media based metric).

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# Devaluing the Bachelor's Degree

January 3, 2011

Happy new year! OK, that's out of the way. Back to the dismal science.

Coming soon to a college or university next you: graduation rate inflation.

National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" had a feature this morning (Dec. 28, 2010) titled "[States Hold Colleges Accountable For Graduation Rate.](#)" This follows hard on the heels of the New York Times' Christmas Day article "[A Quest to Explain What Grades Really Mean](#)" (a discussion of grade inflation in colleges).

College faculty, particularly in the hard sciences, economics, and some other social sciences, have bemoaned the terrible preparation of entering freshmen for decades. From my view in front of the classroom, the problem has only gotten worse over the years. Many students simply never come to class. Attendance rates in my classes are around 60 percent. From conversations with other faculty and students, I gather it's not just me. It remains a mystery to me how these students expect to graduate – unless, of course, they listened to NPR this morning.

The NPR show included the following statement from [Teresa Lubbers](#), Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education:

"Going to college is not what we want. We want them to leave with a credential. And we're going to hold them accountable for producing those credentials."

Got that? In most states, funds for public colleges and

universities are scrupulously allocated based on enrollment. This incentive has caused administrators to recruit students from all over the world, admit anyone with a pulse (although in some cases I wonder), and do their best to maximize enrollment (thereby maximizing their budgets). Personally, I have failed the same students in several classes, leaving me to wonder why they are still in school. I suspect the rules regarding academic disqualification are being overlooked (to put it politely).

So watch out. Give administrators an incentive to increase graduation rates and they will. The first step is to avoid giving any student a failing grade in any course. One easy step in this direction is to hire more part-time lecturers. These poor folks are the itinerant tinkers of our day, flitting from campus to campus every week in an attempt to earn a halfway decent living. And each of them desperately needs good student evaluations. Otherwise they will not be rehired the next academic term. The easiest way to get good evaluations is to give high grades. An additional benefit of that strategy is fewer complaints from students after final grades are distributed.

Just today I got an e-mail from one of my fall quarter students inquiring about why he had received an F in my class. After all, he said, he had turned in all the homework. I was forced to tell him that flunking both midterms and the final exam pretty much meant the homework was meaningless. Where the heck are they finding these students, anyway?

I just finished skimming an interesting paper that puts a value on an Associate of Arts degree.[\[1\]](#) The paper looks at various regions, metropolitan areas, and does a pretty good job of estimating the rate of return on an AA. It's under 1% per year compared to a high school diploma. How long will it take for the Bachelor's degree to become similarly devalued? How long until a Ph.D. will be a prerequisite for any job that

pays above twice the minimum wage? Most important, how long will taxpayers put up with public institutions succumbing to the type of political pressures being exerted by Ms. Lubbers? A Ph.D. will be *required* to get any job. Even today, more and more students are entering master's degree programs to compensate for the inferior preparation their undergraduate degree provides. And, believe me, there are a lot more M.A. and M.S. programs than just the ubiquitous MBA.

Magical thinking. That's what's going on here. B.A. or B.S. degrees have magical properties. Get one and you're set. Don't worry about whether your major is electrical engineering, computer science, or history.

Well, I'm afraid the party is over. Today NPR shows are flooded with calls from unemployed college graduates. Mostly they seem to be liberal arts majors of one description or another. Perhaps that's just the NPR demographic. Then again, maybe not.

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[\[1\]](#) Natalia Kolesnikova, "Community Colleges and Economic Mobility." Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis *Review*, January/February, 2010 Vol. 92, No. 1, pp. 27-54.