

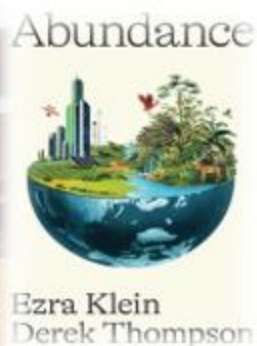
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #212

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

### Roth, ChatGPT Critique Klein and Thompson's 'Abundance'



Two or three months ago, I read Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's "Abundance" in anticipation of writing a **Book Note** about it. Various other projects intruded, including my new series on the history of popular music as a window into the American soul. I never quite got around to writing the review. As things have a

way of unfolding, this Saturday a book group to which I belong will be discussing the book. I thought this a good time to revisit it, highlight all the passages I had checked with pencil for a second look, and finally write the “note.”

Klein is an Opinion Page writer for The New York Times. His articles and podcasts tilt progressive, but he is meticulous about trying to give voice to all sides. If I had to slot him, I’d describe him as a progressive with centrist tendencies. A self-described progressive, Thompson previously wrote for The Atlantic and hosts a podcast. He now writes his own newsletter on Substack titled, simply enough, “Derek Thompson.” [1]

As I began to sketch an outline, I agreed with their warnings to Democrats and the progressive left that if they ever again expect to win elections, they need to accept their share of the responsibility for the difficulty Americans have building anything. Focusing on the housing industry but also glancing at other sectors of the economy, Klein and Thompson lay the cause of our economic challenges at the feet of over a half-century of well-intended but ultimately misbegotten regulations. I happen to think the financialization of the economy also contributed mightily to the fact that if today the United States wanted a new battleship, we would have to buy it from South Korea, but it’s obvious the regulatory octopus commands the stage stifling growth and innovation.

Sounding as if they had channeled their inner-Ronald Reagan, Klein and Thompson essentially prescribe a slightly camouflaged return to the neo-liberalism of Presidents Bush I & II and a well-known cast of others. The camouflage they deploy does contain more than a few progressive modifications of the neo-liberal world view. The result is that the sum of their point-of-view has merit. Their account of Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro’s leadership rebuilding the I-95 bridge in Philadelphia presents a case study of how effective leaders get things done.

Yet, as I sat down to write this more detailed “note” about the topic, I found their prescriptions “wistful.”

Why “wistful”?

Perhaps “naïve” is a better word.

Why naïve?

Because the political solutions they prescribe assume that America’s polarized politics still function as it once, if inconsistently, did in a world of compromise and bargaining; in short, in a world of small “d” democratic politics.

In the past nine months, however, America has changed dramatically.

A year ago (written in 2024 and published in March 2025) when Klein and Thompson wrote the book, American politics, though polarized, were still marginally “normal.” Well, to be honest, I am not sure our politics have been normal since – then. Or maybe not since the 1980s when President Reagan and Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill met to find a middle way.

Now, however, as Klein recently noted in “Stop Acting Like This Is Normal,” these are not normal times, and what we witness every day is not normal politics. [2] Or, as David Brooks, a center-right conservative said last April, “What is happening now is not normal politics. We’re seeing an assault on the fundamental institutions of our civic life, things we should all swear loyalty to — Democrat, independent, or Republican.” [3]

Although the current right-wing, neo-authoritarian administration controlling all three branches of the government leads the assault, left-wing progressives have not been innocent – note New York City’s current mayoralty race. Much of this assault is driven by AI-fueled social media algorithms that increasingly fracture our society into narrower and narrower pods of people nursing their grievances at the expense of the common good.

Setting aside the provincialism of our petty grievances, it is more than possible that AI or AGI (artificial intelligence and artificial general intelligence) are really the two great menaces of our time.

In 500 years, if anyone still writes history, historians will deem the technological revolution in communications media the real story. Our sordid politics will merely be that larger story’s illustrative details.

Most people know what a printing press is, but how many understand that it exploded the medieval worldview and ignited religious (cultural) wars that decimated Europe for two centuries? It is not too much of a stretch to assert that our current cultural wars are the lingering aftermath of those religious wars.

Regardless, for us AI and social media’s civilizational transforming impact are the story of our times.

I have written about this in numerous **Book Notes** and intend to pick up the story of literacy’s decline in a future “note” about Neil Postman’s classic “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” In the meantime, you can learn more about the media revolution during Global Summit XVII on Friday, Nov. 14 when Larry Sabato discusses “The Medium Is the Message: Media’s Impact on National Politics.”

Speaking of AI, at my Tuesday morning breakfast group this week, amid the usual smorgasbord of topics, the conversation turned to the social impact of ChatGPT, AI, and their ilk. Several of the breakfast group members are lawyers. They noted the effect, mostly but not entirely negative, that AI, ChatGPT, and their brethren have had on the legal profession. As many of you reading this know, I spent my career in higher education. It, too, is a profession roiled by the influence of AI on teaching, learning, and scholarship. And, if you are a regular reader of these “notes,” you know I have written a great deal these past two years about ChatGPT. Those **Book Notes** can be found here [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society](#)

In education at all levels, there is growing anxiety that AI and tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft’s “Co-Pilot,” Google’s “Gemini,” and others will completely reshape teaching and learning. Already studies reveal that students no longer know how to read in depth and inferentially. Even at the most academically elite institutions, faculty report that students literally cannot read the texts assigned. [4] There has been a precipitous drop in literacy since the introduction of the smartphone a mere dozen or so years ago. [5] Now, students simply submit “cut-and-paste” AI-generated articles as coursework. In an ironic turn of events in these high-tech times, many faculty have retreated to requiring handwritten assignments and tests to avoid the AI plague. It’s the return of the venerable “Blue Book.”

Almost all people outside of the language-dominated professions (education, law, journalism, etc.) are only now beginning to be aware of AI’s growing social influence.

As I mulled all of this over, I thought, “Aha! Here is an opportunity to share with my very knowledgeable audience just what an AI-generated essay looks like.” For those of you who were once teachers and college faculty but perhaps have had no experience with the likes of ChatGPT, the first exposure to the product might be a surprise.

Although it writes in a bland, almost “flat-voiced tone, “Chat” is good; at least at first glance, “Chat” is very good.

But as I have written elsewhere, “Chat” also makes mistakes, makes stuff up, and frequently fails to cite its sources.

If “Chat” is good, is this really a problem?

The answer to which is “Yes and No.”

The “Yes,” however, is colossal and the “No” a mere whisper. Colossal because if young people do not learn to read and think inferentially in school, then where will they learn it? If they never learn it, then democratic society is doomed. A

functioning democracy requires — more accurately, demands — an educated citizenry. An educated citizenry is one that can think inferentially and shares a common knowledge base. AI eliminates an individual's need to think and social media fractures them into ever smaller pods of narrowminded people incapable of thinking for themselves and sharing only social banalities (sports, fast food, and, well, and “what?”) in common with others outside their pod.

What is good about AI? Let me think about that a bit.

With those caveats in mind, I asked “Chat,” which I think of as a bright but at times unreliable research assistant, to write a 2,500-word review of “Abundance” citing any resources it consulted. It required very little thinking on my part, and unlike a shortcut-seeking undergraduate, I had actually read the book.

My assumption is that the average student wouldn't challenge “Chat” as I did and would accept its first output about the topic. I, however, rejected its first effort and gave it several additional requirements to improve its work. We went back and forth through several iterations. It offered to produce the essay in any format I wanted. When we were finished, it produced the essay reprinted below.

The final product is enough to make an old professor weep.

While its language at times is a bit “studied” and hints at some intellectual posturing, it hits the high points and makes some interesting evaluative comments.

It is good. Based on having read over 10,000 student papers during the past half-century, minimally I'd put it in the top quarter; maybe even the top decile.

So, while not perfect, “Chat” is more than passable. Although it flirts with over-generalizing, it always lands on specific examples. Its conclusion hits the right notes.

Any teachers reading this who might have perchance read “Abundance,” what would you grade it? For the very particular among you, “Chat” did supply a bibliography for the references cited in the “notes.” If you want it, email me at [roth@jeserie.org](mailto:roth@jeserie.org).

My final takeaway, since “Chat” will do most of the thinking for us at some point in the next (not 100 years) maybe 50 years (actually, I am “highballing” these numbers because I think that inflection point much nearer in time), what will humans do?

Oh, by the way, it took less than five minutes, including my old-fashioned challenges, for “Chat” to produce the following essay.

Note the change in style. I asked my editors to print it just as “Chat” wrote it.

Here is ChatGPT on Klein and Thompson’s “Abundance:”

***An Analysis of Ezra Klein’s Abundance: What Progress Takes*** by ChatGPT [6]

Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson’s *Abundance: What Progress Takes* (2025) represents a distinctive intervention in contemporary political and cultural discourse. Where much recent writing about American society has emphasized decline, polarization, and gridlock, Klein and Thompson attempt to reframe the national conversation around what they call an “abundance agenda.” Their central claim is that the United States is not doomed to scarcity, stagnation, or dysfunction, but is instead caught in self-imposed bottlenecks that prevent the realization of progress. If institutions could be reoriented to enable building, experimentation, and scaling of solutions, the authors argue, the United States could confront challenges like climate change, housing shortages, and health care costs with renewed optimism.<sup>1</sup>

The book emerges at a moment of deep political pessimism. Trust in government institutions is near historic lows, populist movements have disrupted conventional politics, and major social indicators—from housing affordability to life expectancy—appear stagnant. In this climate, Klein and Thompson seek to inspire imagination rather than resignation. They argue that abundance is not simply a matter of material goods but a political orientation: a belief that the future can be better than the present, and that collective action can bring such futures into being.<sup>2</sup> As the *Washington Post* editorial board put it in its review, *Abundance* “offers Democrats, and indeed anyone worried about the future of liberal democracy, a new way to think about growth, justice, and hope.”<sup>3</sup>

### ***Scarcity and the Politics of Fear***

A recurring theme throughout *Abundance* is the contrast between scarcity and abundance as political frameworks. Scarcity, Klein and Thompson argue, is the mindset that dominates American politics today. It is visible in budgetary “pay-fors,” in zero-sum arguments about redistribution, and in the way policy debates are framed as questions of dividing limited resources rather than expanding overall possibility. Scarcity breeds defensive politics, in which parties fight over the scraps of a shrinking pie rather than collaborating to enlarge it. In this sense, the authors suggest, scarcity is not merely an economic condition but a cultural and ideological stance.<sup>4</sup>

The scarcity mindset has been particularly evident in debates about entitlement reform, immigration, and higher education. Politicians often warn that the Social Security trust fund will “run out” by a given year, or that immigrants will “take” jobs from native-born workers, or that expanding access to college will “dilute” its value. Each of these arguments assumes a world of fixed, limited goods. Yet, as Klein and Thompson argue, history shows that when societies invest in infrastructure, education, and innovation, the pie can in fact grow dramatically.<sup>5</sup> The post-World War II boom, which combined government investment in highways and research with rapid expansion of higher education, is presented as an example of abundance politics in action.<sup>6</sup>

The scarcity mindset also contributes to polarization. When groups believe resources are fixed, they are more likely to perceive others’ gains as their own losses. This zero-sum mentality feeds resentment and erodes trust. By contrast, an abundance agenda encourages the belief that progress is possible without undermining others’ well-being. Abundance thus offers not just an economic framework but a potential antidote to social fragmentation.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Institutional Bottlenecks and the Failure to Build***

A central claim of Abundance is that the United States possesses the technological and financial capacity to solve many of its major problems, but that institutional bottlenecks prevent these solutions from scaling. Klein and Thompson describe a paradox: “abundance in theory but scarcity in practice.”<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps most evident in housing policy, where restrictive zoning laws and local veto points prevent the construction of sufficient housing units even as rents and homelessness soar. Despite overwhelming evidence that increasing supply lowers costs, NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) politics consistently block projects.<sup>9</sup>

Health care provides another example. The United States spends far more per capita on health care than any other developed country, yet outcomes are often worse. Klein and Thompson argue that this is not primarily a technological failure—American medicine is among the most advanced in the world—but a problem of political will, regulatory capture, and fragmentation of delivery.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in climate change policy, renewable energy technologies have become dramatically cheaper, but permitting delays and fragmented regulatory systems slow their deployment.<sup>11</sup>

This argument resonates with themes in contemporary political science. Francis Fukuyama has described the United States as suffering from “vetocracy,” a system in which too many veto points prevent decisive action.<sup>12</sup> Legal scholar Ganesh Sitaraman has likewise argued that the U.S. political system is designed for stability but has become paralyzing in the face of modern challenges. Klein and Thompson’s contribution is to frame this not only as a problem of governance but

as an obstacle to abundance itself. Institutions designed to protect against overreach now prevent society from building what it desperately needs.

### ***Abundance and the Progressive Imagination***

One of the most distinctive features of Abundance is its attempt to reframe progressive politics. Klein, long associated with the center-left through his work at Vox and The New York Times, and Thompson, a staff writer at The Atlantic, argue that progressives have become trapped in defensive politics. Too often, they write, progressives focus on protecting existing programs or preventing harm rather than articulating bold visions of the future. This defensive posture reflects the scarcity mindset: the belief that resources are too limited, the opposition too strong, or the politics too intractable to imagine real transformation.<sup>13</sup>

Abundance, by contrast, offers a positive agenda. Rather than asking, “How can we prevent things from getting worse?” progressives should ask, “What can we build to make things better?” This orientation echoes strands of American political thought from Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal to John F. Kennedy’s moonshot. In both cases, leaders articulated visions of abundance—whether in social welfare or space exploration—that galvanized public imagination. Klein and Thompson argue that progressives today must recover this tradition.<sup>14</sup>

The abundance agenda also seeks to bridge divides within progressive politics. Some progressives emphasize redistribution, while others stress growth. Klein and Thompson argue that this is a false dichotomy: abundance requires both. Growth without equity fuels resentment and inequality, while equity without growth risks stagnation. Only by combining the two—building more housing, decarbonizing the economy, expanding access to health care—can society achieve genuine abundance.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Role of Technology and Innovation***

Technology plays a central role in Abundance. The authors are not technopians, but they insist that technological innovation is essential to solving the problems of the twenty-first century. For instance, they highlight how solar and wind energy have become cheaper than fossil fuels, offering the potential for rapid decarbonization. Yet without institutional reforms to speed permitting and construction, these technologies cannot scale quickly enough to meet climate targets.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, Klein and Thompson discuss biomedical innovations, from mRNA vaccines to gene therapies, which demonstrate the power of science to deliver breakthroughs. The rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines illustrates how coordinated investment and regulatory flexibility can accelerate progress. But the

slow rollout of testing and the uneven distribution of vaccines show how institutional failures can squander technological advances.<sup>17</sup>

The authors thus propose a dual strategy: embrace technological optimism while reforming institutions to enable scaling. In this, they echo arguments from writers like Mariana Mazzucato, who has emphasized the role of the state in shaping markets and driving innovation.<sup>18</sup> For Klein and Thompson, technology alone is insufficient; it must be paired with governance structures that facilitate experimentation, investment, and deployment.

### ***Critiques of the Abundance Framework***

While Abundance has been praised for its optimism, it has also attracted critiques. Some reviewers have suggested that the framework risks oversimplification. Noah Smith, for instance, argued that while the abundance agenda is appealing, it may underestimate the depth of political polarization and the difficulty of reforming entrenched institutions.<sup>19</sup> Others have noted that abundance rhetoric can obscure questions of power: who decides what is built, who benefits from growth, and who bears the costs.<sup>20</sup>

There is also the risk that abundance becomes a slogan rather than a program. As critics point out, simply declaring the need for abundance does not resolve the political coalitions, trade-offs, and conflicts required to achieve it.<sup>21</sup> Without clear policy roadmaps, abundance risks remaining an inspiring but vague concept. Nonetheless, Klein and Thompson attempt to ground their framework in concrete policy areas—housing, climate, health care, and immigration—where abundance politics can be enacted. Their proposals may not resolve all challenges, but they offer a direction for reimagining politics.

### ***Conclusion: The Promise of Abundance***

Abundance: What Progress Takes is not merely a policy book but a cultural intervention. It seeks to change how Americans think about politics, shifting from scarcity and defensiveness to abundance and imagination. In this sense, it belongs to a tradition of works that aim to reshape political imagination, from FDR's Four Freedoms to Kennedy's New Frontier. Klein and Thompson's distinctive contribution is to link this tradition to the practical challenges of twenty-first century governance: how to build more housing, decarbonize the economy, reform health care, and unlock technological potential.

The book's strength lies in its optimism. At a time when declinist narratives dominate public discourse, Abundance offers a reminder that the United States has repeatedly reinvented itself through investment, innovation, and reform. Its weakness lies in its vagueness: the abundance agenda is easier to describe than to implement. Yet perhaps this is precisely the point. Before political change can

occur, cultural change is necessary. Before policies can be enacted, imagination must be rekindled. In this sense, *Abundance* succeeds: it invites readers to see scarcity not as destiny but as a political choice—and abundance as a future worth fighting for.

### Notes

1. Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance: What Progress Takes* (New York: Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2025).
2. Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*, 15–20.
3. Editorial Board, “Abundance Is What Democrats Need,” *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2025.
4. Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*, 34–41.
5. Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*, 59–61.
6. *Ibid.*, 72–75.
7. *Ibid.*, 85–92.
8. “Build, Interrupted: A Conversation with Ezra Klein,” 99% Invisible, Episode 629, 2025.
9. Foreign Policy Staff, “The Book that Wants Progressives to Build More,” *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2025.
10. Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*, 121–129.
11. *Ibid.*, 140–148.
12. Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 487.
13. Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*, 163–168.
14. *Ibid.*, 172–177.
15. *Ibid.*, 180–188.
16. Klein and Thompson, *Abundance*, 195–202.
17. *Ibid.*, 210–215.
18. Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State* (London: Anthem Press, 2013).
19. Noah Smith, “Book Review: *Abundance*,” *Noahpinion*, Substack, May 12, 2025.
20. Review in *Boston Review*, “Who Decides What Counts as *Abundance*?” August 2025.
21. Smith, “Book Review: *Abundance*.”

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What did Shakespeare say in “*The Tempest*” about a brave new world? With a wee bit of paraphrasing, the Bard said,

*Oh wonder!*  
*How many goodly creatures are there here!*  
*How beauteous AI is! Oh brave new world,*

*That has such (what exactly is a large language learning model?) in't.*

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*"Abundance by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, cover,"* at **Ezra Klein Books** available at [Abundance by Ezra Klein, Derek Thompson - Ezra Klein Books](#) accessed October 2, 2025.

*"ChatGPT circuit board (52917380933).jpg"* at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:ChatGPT circuit board \(52917380933\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed October 2, 2025.

### End Notes

1. Thompson, Derek, at *"Derek Thompson"* on **Substack** available at [About - Derek Thompson](#) accessed October 2, 2025.
  2. Klein, Ezra, *"Stop Acting Like This Is Normal,"* **The New York Times** (September 7, 2025) available at [Opinion | Stop Acting Like This Is Normal - The New York Times](#) accessed October 2, 2025.
  3. Brooks, David, *"What's Happening Is Not Normal. America Needs an Uprising That Is Not Normal,"* **The New York Times** (April 17, 2025) available at [Opinion | What's Happening Is Not Normal. America Needs an Uprising That Is Not Normal. - The New York Times](#) accessed October 2, 2025.
  4. Horowitch, Rose, *"The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books,"* **The Atlantic** (November, 2024) available at [The Elite College Students Who Can't Read Books - The Atlantic](#) accessed October 4, 2025.
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  6. ChatGPT's essay is on my personal account at OpenAI which is not available to the general public.
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