Degrowth and Progress: A Critical Genealogy and Contemporary Analysis of Growthism





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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the relationship between growth—using an expanded definition of the economic concept to mean an ecologically exclusionary mode of sociotechnical metabolism predicated on extraction and expansion—and progress, a metanarrative that facilitates political rhetorics co-reproducing growth. This thesis suggests that Anthropocenic challenges like inequalities in the distribution of human well-being indicators and global ecological harms can be understood as emerging from the historical trajectory of growth, the metaideology ("growthism") that has arisen to systematize and operationalize it, and the metanarrative of progress that has co-reproduced it. As such, the study begins with a (non-Foucauldian) genealogy tracing the lineage of the idea of progress and its relationship to forms of growth(ism) that arose in the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia. Using this lineage, based on Western sources and history, as context, the study then interrogates contemporary attitudes, values, and motivations among practitioners of political, social, and technological change as they relate to growth, degrowth—the discipline and tendency recently risen to critique growth—and narratives of progress. This analysis focuses on materials gathered from in-depth interviews with practitioners. The study finds patterns emerging through time in the relationship between modes of growth and narratives of progress that offer productive insights for degrowth—or "post-growth"—literature and Anthropocene dating. Further, the study finds patterns in practitioners' receptiveness to growth, degrowth, and progress that yield productive insights for degrowth scholarship and activism.

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Contents

ABSTRACT 1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 2

CONTENTS 3

LIST OF TABLES 6

Literature Review 6

Methodology 6

Historical Analysis 6

Contemporary Analysis 6

INTRODUCTION 7

Context and Background 7

Definitions 13
- Growth 13
- Growthism 16
- Progress 18

Aims and Motivations 19

Thesis Structure 20

LITERATURE REVIEW 22

Context 22

Why "Macrohistory"? 25

Anthropocene Historiography 29

Growth/ism Historiography 37

Growth/ism and Progress 49

Contemporary Degrowth 51

Conclusion 58

METHODOLOGY 60

Discourse Analysis **60**

Historical Analysis **63**
Context and Sampling 63
Data Collection 66
Data Analysis 70

Contemporary Analysis **76**
Context and Sampling 76
Data Collection 85
Data Analysis 89

Positionality **92**

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS **97**

Introduction **97**

A Genealogy of Growth & Progress **101**
Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, Old Testament, Classical Empires from 2900 BCE 101
Medieval Islamdom and Christendom from 700 CE 116
Maritime Colonization from 1400 CE 131
Industrialization from 1800 CE 156

Findings **199**
Tables and Patterns 199

Discussion **204**

CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS **210**

Purpose of the Study **210**

Degrowth and / versus Progress **211**

Findings **215**

Interviewees' Openness to Degrowth Values **220**
Ecological Integrity and Biocentrism 221
Political Equality 227
Economic Equality 231

Interviewees' Relation to Progress Narratives **234**
Gender Equality 234
Racial Equality 237
Generational Equality 241
Attitudes Toward Violence 245

Interviewees' Sense of Progress and Growthism **251**

Interviewees' Sense of Optimism and Futurity **261**

Discussion **270**

CONCLUSION **274**

Summary of Findings **274**

Contributions to Literatures **278**

Scope for Further Research **280**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **284**

List of Tables

Literature Review

Table 1—Google Ngram search, June 20, 2022

Methodology

Table 2—Historical Analysis source periodization
Table 3—Theories of Change designations
Table 4—Progress Affiliations designations

Historical Analysis

Table 5—Periodization of growth and progress narratives
Table 6—Progress narrative religiosity through time
Table 7—Primary growth forms and progress narratives

Contemporary Analysis

Table 8—Degrowth Value: Ecological Integrity and Biocentrism
Table 9—Degrowth Value: Political Equality
Table 10—Degrowth Value: Economic Equality
Table 11—Progress Narrative: Gender Equality
Table 12—Progress Narrative: Racial Equality
Table 13—Progress Narrative: Generational Equality
Table 14—Attitudes Toward Violence
Table 15—Sources of Optimism
Table 16—Patterns in Rhetoric

Introduction

"Sustained and inclusive economic growth can drive progress, create decent jobs for all and improve living standards."

—United Nations Sustainable Development Goals[1]

Context and Background

The ecological basis on which all known life depends is in dire condition. The data in virtually every realm of earth sciences show accelerating deterioration. Atmospheric greenhouse gasses are causing temperatures to rise with cascading impacts and at increasing rates.[2] Deforestation is accelerating habitat destruction and driving terrestrial extinctions, while overfishing, pollution, and hotter oceans are collapsing marine life. The extinction rate is hundreds of times greater than the natural rate.[3] Waste is a growing problem, and plastics proliferate across every region, even the remotest parts of the poles, being found in diverse species' tissue and in human breast milk and blood.[4] If we home in on the narrowly human realm,

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[1] "Economic Growth," Sustainable Development Goals, *United Nations*, https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/economic-growth/.
[2] European Environment Agency, "Increasing environmental pollution," 2015, https://www.eea.europa.eu/soer/2015/global/pollution; G. Shaddick et al., "Half the world's population are exposed to increasing air pollution," *npj Climate and Atmospheric Science* 3, no. 23 (2020): https://www.nature.com/articles/s41612-020-0124-2.
[3] Ann Gibbons, "Are We in the Middle of a Sixth Mass Extinction?" *Science*, 2 March 2011, https://www.science.org/content/article/are-we-middle-sixth-mass-extinction; National Museum of Natural History, "Extinction Over Time," *Smithsonian*, https://naturalhistory.si.edu/education/teaching-resources/paleontology/extinction-over-time#:~:text=Extinction%20Rates&text=Regardless%2C%20scientists%20agree%20that%20today's,one%20million%20species%20per%20year.
[4] Peter S. Ross et al., "Pervasive distribution of polyester fibres in the Arctic Ocean is driven by Atlantic inputs," *Nature Communications* 12, no. 106 (2021): https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-020-20347-1 and Oliver Bajt, "From plastics to

the news is not much better. Human welfare is "backsliding" on a number of key indicators: democracy is declining,[5] economic inequality is rising,[6] poverty and slums are growing,[7] global life expectancy is falling,[8] novel infectious diseases are increasing in reach and number,[9] social trust in institutions is declining,[10] the number and rate of economic instabilities is growing,[11] social mobility falling,[12] and general well-being indicators in aggregate are falling.[13] What had appeared to be indicators of long-term progress in human well-being during the latter half of the 20th century may be little more than a brief blip.

Ecological decline and rising inequality are the defining challenges of the 21st century. While the 21st century has undoubtedly seen these problems reach a scale and intensity that is historically unprecedented, ecological devastation and what we could call as shorthand "inequality"—the inegalitarian distribution of

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microplastics and organisms," *FEBS Open Bio* 11, no. 4 (2021): 954-966. doi: 10.1002/2211-5463.13120.

[5] Freedom House, "New Report: The global decline in democracy has accelerated," 3 March 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-global-decline-democracy-has-accelerated.

[6] Zia Qureshi, "Tackling the inequality pandemic: Is there a cure?" *Brookings*, 17 November 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/research/tackling-the-inequality-pandemic-is-there-a-cure.

[7] "End poverty in all its forms everywhere," *United Nations Statistics*, https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-01/.

[8] Patrick Heuveline, "Global and National Declines in Life Expectancy: An End-of-2021 Assessment," *Population and Development Review* 48, no. 1 (2022): 31–50, https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12477.

[9] Institute of Medicine (US) Forum on Microbial Threats, "Infectious Disease Emergence: Past, Present, and Future," *Microbial Evolution and Co-Adaptation: A Tribute to the Life and Scientific Legacies of Joshua Lederberg: Workshop Summary* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2009), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK45714/.

[10] Jonathan Perry, "Trust in public institutions: Trends and implications for economic security," *United Nations*, 20 July 2021, https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/07/trust-public-institutions/.

[11] "Stagflation Risk Rises Amid Sharp Slowdown in Growth," *World Bank*, 7 June 2022, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/06/07/stagflation-risk-rises-amid-sharp-slowdown-in-growth-energy-markets.

[12] Xi Song, et al., "Long-term decline in intergenerational mobility in the United States since the 1850s," *PNAS* 117, no. 1 (2019): 251–258, https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1905094116.

[13] "The 2020 Global Wellbeing Report," *Global Wellbeing Indicators*, https://www.globalwellbeingindicators.com/#:~:text=World%20Analysis,reflects%20a%20steady%20downward%20trend.

wealth, power, opportunity, and agency across multiple demographic traits—have affected an ever-increasing share of human beings for at least four millennia. During this history, individuals and social movements have arisen, often at the peripheries of society, to contest such conditions. Most militant contestation has come from Indigenous resistance on the frontiers of expansive states,[14] but some internal, domestic resistance has won temporary respite as well.

The ecological and inequality problems that we might think of as "modern" iterations are likely as old as—and, in many cases, result directly from—the late-18th century rise of industrialization; as such, we can think of their contestation, in examples like Marxism, environmentalism, anarchism, the suffragette movement, civil rights movement, latter 20th-century women's and LGBT rights movements, abolition movements, and the roots of the labor movement, as the modern iterations of contestation. The primary change that has come with these twin "crises"—or rather, systemic conditions of most states—in the 20th and 21st centuries is their globalness. Ecological devastation and inequality became truly global by, at the latest, the mid-20th century, and they have accelerated since the late-20th century to impact every cubic hectare of the planet's realms of life.

With the complexity of the fully globalized, industrialized economy and the transboundary, intergovernmental institutions—public, private, and mixed—that govern it, there has also risen an equally complex network of institutions—nonprofits, unions, and informal groups—to contest and shape it. A new and

[14] See Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

growing form of contestation has begun to coalesce under the term “degrowth,” which currently includes scholars across disciplines, activists, and public leaders. Giorgos Kallis et al. define degrowth as a “radical political and economic reorganization leading to drastically reduced resource and energy throughput,” aiming to address those two crises, environmental degradation and inequality, under the same framework.[15] Unlike other movements that attempt to confront these crises, degrowth identifies *growth*—itself a shifting and contested term—as its primary target of critique.

Against this backdrop, the concept of progress remains a powerful metanarrative. Progress inflects a colloquial understanding of history, and even, at times, that of professional historians. Historical frameworks based on assumptions of compounding change—with history moving from savage to civilized, primitive to sophisticated, simple to complex, and on toward a perfect imagined end state—remain fixed in understandings of history across disciplines, cultures, and geographies. Progress, too, stands at the center of many of the movements rising to confront the twin crises of this emerging epoch; or, rather, their self-understanding of their own histories and lineages are rooted in progressive narratives. Meanwhile, the very thing many contest, growth, is itself intimately interwoven with ideas and narratives of progress. But these crises and the conditions they are creating, according to an abundance of research across earth and social disciplines, portends an epoch not of progress in well-being, justice, or any other realm of life on earth, but the opposite.

[15] Giorgos Kallis et al., “Research On Degrowth,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 43, no. 1 (2018): 291–316.

These crises and the movements that arise to contest, mitigate, adapt to, and shape them are occurring in an emerging geological epoch. The Anthropocene, the successor epoch to the Holocene in which all recorded history has unfolded, has seen the global economy hitting limits to growth, including energetic limits (represented by climate change), material limits (by mineral and land scarcity), and biological limits (by extinction and biodiversity crisis). These material scarcities have fueled transnational social-political challenges. The neoliberal consensus, predicated on mid-20th century infinite growth economics, the Great Acceleration, and an ideological system that centers economizing, profit, and capital/property concentration, has begun to erode, at least in a sense of maintaining its intellectual hegemony and moral legitimacy, if not in the sense of maintaining its capture over policy-creation and mainstream discourse. In the vacuum that's opening from the erosion of that consensus, several competing narratives are emerging.

The last time global economic liberalism faced such a crisis, at the start and middle of the last century, ideologies like fascism, democratic socialism, state communism, and social democracy competed to supplant, or supplement, it. These ideologies were all centered on specific, competing narratives of progress, and visions of a utopian future. Most of the political communities rising today to challenge the hegemony of neoliberalism are an echoing pastiche of 20th-century ideological movements based on similar notions of progress, even as explicit utopianism has fallen out of fashion. Right-wing parties are growing throughout Europe to uphold economic liberalism while imposing political authoritarianism.

Left-wing movements are embracing the iconography and theoretical contributions of international socialist and communist traditions, but failing to develop the political and policy innovations necessary to achieve their ambitions.

These emerging political communities, like the hegemonic one they seek to displace, have ambivalent, conflicted relationships to the converging ecological crises. They say little about how to deal with the root cause of the effects they are organizing to triage. Those members that are engaged with ecological effects, in all of these communities, are marginal. The unique value of degrowth in the context of these emerging movements and narratives is that it places the source of these problems at the center of its project. Unlike its competitors and even potential allies, the degrowth/ist community is intentionally building a comprehensive, potentially plausible utopian vision, even as it maintains an ambivalent, conflicted, and, above all, under-examined relationship to the idea of progress. The theoretical foundation and practical goal-setting of degrowth has important gaps and is struggling to define its relationship to the idea of progress. This is not to say that it is failing to engage a progressive instinct for a desired alternative whose construction lies in the future, but rather in the sense of its relation to the faith in compounding changes through time leading to a stable and permanent ideal, a teleology, and the myriad concepts embedded in a hegemonic metanarrative of progress.

While there are many material forces that have shaped and spread growth economies, this study contends that a belief in and commitment to progress is a major driving cultural-psychological force in the spread of growth economies, and

that this belief system can be traced, in a Western context, to some of the first recorded myths and philosophies. While degrowth literature has focused on the more recent material forces of growth, particularly as it manifests in capitalist systems, this study aims to contribute to the literature with a focus on longer-term cultural forces—and, in some cases, how they are geographically situated—that have led to the dominance of growth economies, and deploys an expanded definition of "growth" to do so. By better understanding the relationship between growth/ism and progress, degrowth can more aptly situate itself in existing scholarly and activist communities, and proceed from a stronger foundation of its own sense of history.

Definitions

In order to productively disentangle "growth," "growthism," and "progress," as this thesis aims to do, in the interest of contributing to their critique and contestation through the scholarship of degrowth, it is important to begin with definitions of these terms, as the definitions of those terms used in this thesis differ in sometimes subtle ways from contemporary scholarly and colloquial definitions.

Growth

In his defining monograph *Degrowth*, one of the field's most prominent scholars, Giorgos Kallis, defines growth along lines generally accepted in economics, as the

"acceleration in the production of goods and services," an integrated process "that involves the accelerated mobilization of the work of humans and non-humans, the accelerated investment of surplus into machines that produce more, and the accelerated extraction and transformation of matter or disposal of waste."[16] Kallis clarifies that growth is "not only a material process; it is also a cultural, political and social process."[17]

Kallis situates "growth" historically as a primarily 20th-century phenomenon. Drawing primarily from Matthias Schmelzer's *Hegemony of Growth,*[18] Kallis argues that the root of the idea of growth emerged in the 1930s and the institutionalization of growth as a material process first occurred in the 1950s. Kallis also ties growth to the presence of fossil fuels: "It may not be that the more fossil fuels a country has or uses, the more it grows. But without access to fossil fuels, a country could not have sustained growth."[19]

This thesis uses a similar definition of growth with an expanded qualification, but departs significantly from this historical situating of the phenomenon. This thesis concurs that "growth" is both a material process and a "cultural, political, and social process," and that the material process involves an "accelerated mobilization of the work of humans and non-humans, the accelerated investment of surplus into machines that produce more, and the accelerated extraction and transformation of matter or disposal of waste." It further agrees that

[16] Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018), 61-62
[17] Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018), 63
[18] Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth*: *The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)
[19] Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018), 63

growth is often a colonial process, in which a social group extracts linearly and disproportionately from another (human) social group.

One point of divergence is that this thesis puts more emphasis on growth as being “ecologically exclusionary,” meaning processes of extraction for human purposes that systematically, deliberately, and effectively exclude species that are either competitive with or detrimental to processes of extraction.

In another point of divergence, this thesis places emphasis on territorial expansion, whereby a cohesive cultural group engages in some form of conquest to achieve a compounding increase in its control of land, resources, or some form of abstracted value. These forms of conquest take various shapes through historical and cultural examples, and in some cases may represent the expansion of a centralized bureaucracy with compounding territorial boundaries, or it may represent a more decentralized form of invasion whereby a cohesive cultural group attempts to establish settlements without regard to a centralized bureaucracy. Examples are parsed out in more detail in the historical analysis, but in most cases, “growth”—the “accelerated mobilization of the work of humans and non-humans”—becomes an imperative, in some cases to prevent collapse of economies or regimes.

Where this thesis departs more from the common definition of growth in degrowth literature is in its historiography. The historical analysis section asserts that modes of (non-exponential) compounding and increasing extraction, production, and waste excretion can be found in societies as early as roughly 3,000 BCE. The primary difference between these historical understandings of

growth is that Kallis et al. assert that a qualitative change occurs with the introduction of fossil fuels to industrial and extractive processes in the 20th century, and this thesis asserts that this change is quantitative rather than qualitative. This thesis asserts, further, that fossil fuel industrial capitalism significantly accelerates and engorges growth, but does not create it. In this sense, the thesis utilizes a definition of growth that is expansive in both its periodization and understanding of growth processes operating beyond and outside of fossil fueled capitalism.

Growthism

Degrowth scholars have recently begun to purport the existence of an ideology centered on growth.[20] Like the definition of growth, these scholars and others tend to trace the historical source of this ideology to either the origin of capitalism in the 16th century or to the early- to mid-20th century's economic acceleration, as will be discussed in more depth in the Literature Review section.

This thesis departs from these understandings of "growthism" in two ways. The first departure is to define growthism not as an ideology, or even a sub-ideology of capitalism,[21] but rather as a "metaideology." Growthism is a framework or orientation similar to an ideology in that it is based on a shared set of values, empirical beliefs about how the (social and natural) world works, and normative beliefs about how the (social) world ought to work, but remains broad, vague, and

[20] See Timothée Parrique (2019); Jason Hickel (2020); and Matthias Schmelzer (2016; 2022).
[21] See Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Agenda Publishing, 2018), 73: "Growth is the child of capitalism…"

adaptable enough to contain within it a variety of other ideologies, some of which may be contradictory and conflicting. For example, economic liberalism is a growthist ideology in that it is oriented toward justifying and reproducing capitalism, which is predicated on both conventional definitions and this thesis's expanded definition of growth. Meanwhile, Marxian economies, though based on an ideological position directly and self-consciously opposed to economic liberalism, may also be "growthist," in that they, too, are oriented toward growth: ecologically exclusionary expansion and extraction.

The second major departure from degrowth literature is to further backdate, along with growth, the origin of growthism, historically situating it to around 3,000 BCE in Mesopotamia. It remains up for debate—likely unresolvable—whether growth or growthism emerged first. Did the idea of growthism—an urge to conquest, a will-to-power, a political necessity for a ruler to create an enemy to unify his dominion—emerge first, and then invent the process of growth to accommodate those urges? Or did a necessity to grow arise first, in a society that suffered a sudden, unexpected demographic crisis, a famine, some seasonal variation, or a feedback loop of comfort, consumption, and covetousness, or an accident of over-grazing or over-harvesting, which then led to a subsequent need to justify growth, and continue growing to stave off a collapse? It remains an important question for further research.

Progress

This thesis uses the term “progress” primarily to denote a group of ideas and narratives—and can therefore be considered a “metanarrative”—that have taken various shapes across geographies, cultures, and time. These ideas are bound by at least one of several qualities, including a teleological understanding of historical development with history moving from a simple origin to a complex present, an attendant savage/civilized binary (denoting in-group and out-group identities by their place in a historical hierarchy of political, social, or technological sophistication), and a simultaneous and sometimes internally dissonant characteristic of defining a present moment as an apex of history to that point and/or a step toward a more perfect apex that exists only in the future. These narratives, further, often demand a low threshold of empirical grounding, often relying more on faiths than proofs. The term “progress” has been attached to many different meanings, definitions that are often, deliberately or otherwise, left vague and under-interrogated. The definition of “progress” as a metanarrative used in this thesis is my own synthesis following from study of these various definitions and understandings of the concept through time and across geographies.

Aims and Motivations

Progress and growth are both unstudied and undertheorized, particularly given the impact they have on Anthropocene crises and their—often contextual—importance to so many fields of study. Growth has recently come under academic scrutiny in degrowth scholarship, but few major critiques and examinations of progress have come out of *any* discipline in recent decades, including geography. Critically examining these issues together in depth has yet to be attempted at all. Given the importance of growth as a material process at the center of these historic challenges, and given the centrality of progress as a cultural force co-reproducing growth, studies that investigate these concepts in dialogue with one another, with both a historical and contemporary focus, are increasingly needed. This study aims to do that by offering a historical analysis that creates a critical genealogical lineage of the metanarrative that this study calls "progress," which establishes the context for a set of in-depth interviews with practitioners of progressive change and an analysis of their responses. Through these historical and contemporary analyses, this study aims to address the following research questions: **1) How do growth economies relate to progressive narratives through (primarily Western) history?** And **2) How do (de)growthist values relate to attitudes toward progressive narratives and teleology in the present?**

Thesis Structure

This thesis follows the “Book Format” structure of the University of Oxford Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, which begins with this Introduction, followed by a Literature Review, a Methodology chapter, a Historical Analysis section, a Contemporary Analysis section, and Conclusion. The Literature Review begins by examining the place macrohistorical narratives have in society and scholarship and makes the case for utilizing the method and literature in this study. The chapter then examines literature in the two major historiographic categories in which it aims to make an intervention, Anthropocene historiography and (de)growth historiography. This section sets up the literatures and discussions that the Historical Analysis section contributes to. The next section examines the relationship between ideas of growth and progress, which sets up a review of contemporary degrowth literatures and the place in which this study aims to intervene.

The Methodology chapter begins with a look at discursive analyses as appropriate methods, why they are useful for interrogating the relationship between growth and progress, and how they are used to investigate the historical and contemporary discourses around growth and progress. The chapter is then divided into two sections, corresponding with the historical and contemporary analyses, that look at the context and sampling, data collection, and data analysis methods used in both the Historical Analysis and Contemporary Analysis sections. The former utilizes the Discourse Historical method and a critical genealogy. The latter utilizes a thematic discourse analysis and hermeneutical close reading of

interviews with 28 participants. The final section examines the positionality of the researcher and writing.

The next section, the Historical Analysis, is divided into four chapters. The first and last are an Introduction and Discussion. The second chapter contains a critical genealogy that analyzes primary and secondary texts, archival texts including letters and speeches, and other sources, all focused on rhetorics that engage with the metanarrative of progress, as it relates to historical forms of growth. This chapter is subdivided into four sections based on a chronological periodization developed for this lineage. The third chapter, a findings chapter, examines patterns that emerge from the analysis.

The Contemporary Analysis section begins with a context for the analysis and a reminder of the relationship between degrowth and progress, as established in previous sections. The bulk of the Contemporary Analysis section occurs in the findings chapter, which is subdivided into four categories. They examine interviewees' level of openness to degrowth values; interviewees' relations to progress narratives; interviewees' sense of progress and growthism; and interviewees' sense of optimism and futurity. The final chapter is a discussion of the findings and their relationship to one another.

The thesis finishes with a Conclusion chapter that offers final thoughts on the preceding analyses, their place in ongoing scholarly discussions in degrowth, geography, and Anthropocene studies, and suggestions for further study.

Literature Review

Context

Degrowth literature has grown rapidly in recent years, with dozens of new books and hundreds of articles published, dedicated journals and research centers launched, and a rapid entry into mainstream discourse. Since I began this thesis in 2016, 1,056 publications mentioning degrowth have been published.[22] Using Google Ngram to search the corpus of Google Books (totaling around 450 million words) shows degrowth has outpaced similar concepts, like “Green New Deal” and “ecosocialism,” in recent years.[23]

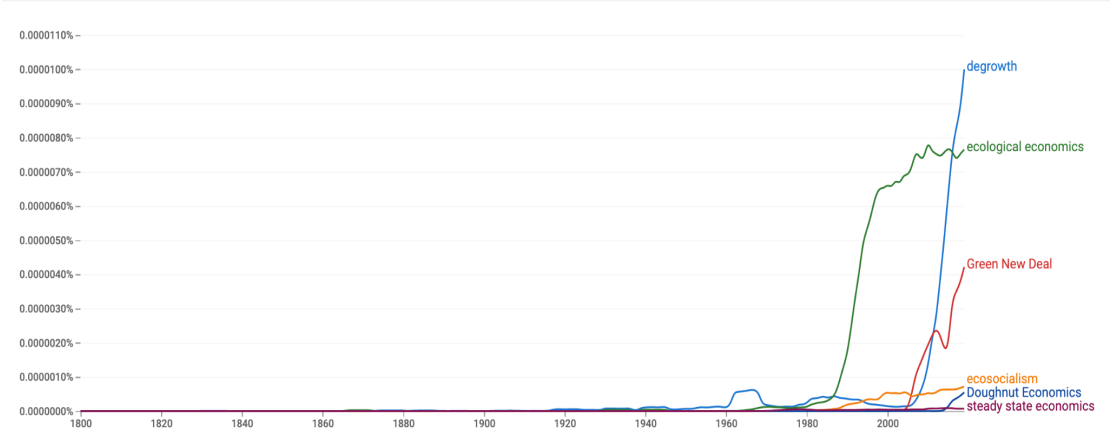


Table 1—Google Ngram search, June 20, 2022

[22] Web of Science search of key word “degrowth” in all documents, on March 16, 2023, from 2016: https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/summary/b3cf27f0-65d0-49ec-b53c-2a243bf087e8-797cbd6b/relevance/1.

[23] I would like to acknowledge Tad DeLay for generating an Ngram with similar terms, which I reproduced. Although the Ngram has weaknesses (see: Eitan Adam Pechenick , Christopher M. Danforth, and Peter Sheridan Dodds, “Characterizing the Google Books Corpus: Strong Limits to Inferences of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Evolution,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 10 (2015): https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0137041), it can give a basic sense of a term’s popularity in recently published books.

The concept has sparked debates and articles—frequently arguing in its favor—appearing in mainstream anglophone news and analysis publications including the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Harvard Business Review*, and commentary by *Bloomberg*, to appearing positively in left-leaning magazines like *Current Affairs*, *Jacobin*, and *Dissent*. Climate activist Greta Thunberg brought attention to the idea when she railed against "fairy tales of eternal economic growth" in a speech given at the United Nations in 2019.[24] Degrowth has an even greater role in political discourses in Continental Europe: in a public opinion survey in Spain, over a third of respondents claimed they supported "ignoring or stopping economic growth."[25] The field this thesis aims to contribute to is primarily contained within this transdisciplinary degrowth literature, which is in a state of rapid change and growth. As such, there remains space in this developing literature, and degrowth discourse more broadly, that will benefit from the historical analysis and qualitative research that has gone into this thesis.

The literature review is divided into two parts that map onto the two main sections of the thesis, the Historical Analysis chapter and Contemporary Analysis chapter. The first part will include the review of historical and historiographic literatures this thesis contributes to. As degrowth literature has begun to solidify in

[24] Jonathan Herz, "The Fairy Tale of Eternal Economic Growth: Swedish Activist Greta Thunberg Brings Attention to the Need to Steward our Planet," *EESI*, 11 October 2019, https://www.eesi.org/articles/view/the-fairy-tale-of-eternal-economic-growth.
[25] Stefan Drews and Jereon C. J. M. van den Bergh, "Public views on economic growth, the environment and prosperity: Results of a questionnaire survey," *Global Environmental Change*, 39 (2016): 11.

recent years, researchers have sought to situate economic growth, critiques of growth, and ideologies of growth in a historical lineage. At the same time, a separate set of literatures in the geological and geographic sciences and the environmental humanities have sought to define a period for a post-Holocene epoch defined primarily by human agency and impact. Anthropocene literatures take a macrohistorical perspective and attempt to situate the challenges of the present and near-future in the timeline of *Homo sapiens'* species history. Although degrowth history and Anthropocene history are not well-linked in either literature, I believe they ought to be in order to cohesively present degrowth imaginaries as a corrective to today's crises of anthropogenic climate change, ecological collapse, and social-economic inequality. The historical section of the literature review will therefore look at degrowth and Anthropocene historiographies and how they can be productively integrated.

The contemporary degrowth section of the literature review, meanwhile, will evaluate some of the latest debates in the degrowth field and situate this study within them. This will correspond with the contemporary analysis chapter of the thesis, which shows how people today who are working as practitioners of progressive change understand their motivations and attitudes, particularly toward issues like growth, progress, and historical change. While the historical section sets up a lineage of dynamic relationships between ideas of progress and growth, the contemporary section explores this relationship in the present with greater granularity of analysis. This literature review contextualizes the thesis and its aims as contributing 1) an attempt to broaden the historical scope in which degrowth

has turned its critical eye, and 2) to investigate how progressive practitioners may understand their work in relation to degrowth and progressive ideas and imaginaries. Degrowth literature focusing on growthism has so far been approached through the lenses of economic history, economic anthropology, and ecological economics. One great value of geography is the field's ability to integrate transdisciplinary insights to assemble novel syntheses, detecting patterns of change over large spatial and temporal spans. The degrowth literature can benefit from a geographic study of the interrelated metanarrative of progress and metaideology of growthism to better understand its target of critique and construct utopian imaginaries. The historical and contemporary analyses of this thesis provide a synthesis that is poised to contribute to debates in degrowth literature and other social science research, including theories of political change and discussions of Anthropocene dating.

Why "Macrohistory"?

There is a widespread interest in analysis that contextualizes the current anthropogenic existential crises within a larger history. This interest is evident not only in the ongoing academic debate around Anthropocene dating, but in the rise of macrohistorical analyses, which occur on a spectrum from mostly academic to primarily popular.[26] Such macrohistories tend to be "big picture" historical accounts

[26] For a few major examples, see: *The Dawn of Everything* (Graeber & Wengrow); *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Graeber); *The Silk Roads* (Frankopan); *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond); *Collapse* (Diamond); *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* (Morris); *Why the West Rules—For Now* (Morris);

that argue in favor of specific patterns that have shaped the direction of historical development for all or a considerable part of human history, often with an aim of using such a framework for nudging that momentum in a different direction. This interest in attaching a coherent narrative to human history—while perhaps newly inflected with an urgency to shift from a plausible doomsday course of runaway warming and biodiversity collapse—is not itself new and may be as old as human beings themselves. Field ethnographies and Indigenous knowledge systems attest to a widespread, if not universal, tendency of social groups to situate their experience of the present, near past, and near future in a larger timeline that frequently takes on narrative forms (even if they make use of nonlinear or non-teleological temporal structures).[27]

Given the wide prevalence of macrohistorical mass market nonfiction books—if market demand is any indication—there is a broad taste for histories that seek to situate the current moment in a larger narrative that can explain today's challenges through historical patterns while reaching with extrapolations of those patterns into the near future. Aside from the innumerable Indigenous cosmogonies that contextualize a people within a coherent narrative, the Western tradition has been grappling with a coherent narrative arc of the human species for many centuries.

Relatively recent examples often echo the three-act structure and the linear progressive form of traditional narratives occurring in Western fictional literature;

Sapiens (Yuval Noah Harari); *Origins* (Dartnell); or even a new methodology and its respective journal, *Cliodynamics: the Journal of Quantitative History*.

[27] See David Leeming, *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005) and *Creation Myths of the World* (ABC-CLIO, 2010).

as such, many macrohistories throughout the history of modern social science and academic history have taken a tripartite, progressive form. Auguste Comte, one of the founders of modern social science, saw human history developing progressively from a so-called theological age, through a metaphysical age, to a positivist age.[28] C. J. Thomsen developed in the early 19th century the three-age system that divides prehistoric levels of development between a semi-chronological stone, bronze, and iron age system. In 1864, John Lubbock published *Pre-historic Times as Illustrated by Ancient Remains, and the Manners and Customs of Modern Savages* in which he coined "paleolithic," "mesolithic," and "neolithic" to complicate the stone age stage. Karl Marx's macrohistorical narrative, too, was progressive and teleological; Marxian historiography could be broadly seen as moving through stages of primitive communism to slavery and feudalism to contemporary capitalism (and positing future developments into classless societies, industrial or otherwise depending on when Marx is writing). Although such systems have received criticism for being Eurocentric or overly simplistic, tripartite arcs have remained persistent. More recently, Ian Morris delineated a macrohistorical epoch system, again in a three-age division, based on energy capture—the extraction of biomass, mass, and energy from the environment—dividing human history broadly between a foraging, farming, and fossil fuel age. In his popular history *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari divides human development into four broadly chronological categories of the Cognitive Revolution, Agricultural Revolution, Unification, and the Scientific Revolution.

[28] The Population Council, "Auguste Comte on the Natural Progress of Human Society," *Population and Development Review* 37, no. 2 (2011): 389–394, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23043288.

Other recent macrohistorians have countered this tripartite structure, most notably the work of David Wengrow and David Graeber, whose *Dawn of Everything* seeks to do away with such linear narrative arcs and neat, simple divisions. While there is a materialism to Morris and Harari that Wengrow and Graeber reject—their argument is predominantly idealist in nature and centers on an Indigenous critique of Western development—there is also a contemporary Indigenous critique of progressive historiography from an Anishinaabe perspective. Kyle P. Whyte has argued against attempts to impose geological periodization like the Holocene and Anthropocene at all: "Indigenous peoples such as the Anishinaabe interpret their history as involving constant migration and transformation, diverging from conceptions of periods characterized by static or stable conditions."[29]

Anthropocene dating and macrohistories, of the past and present, should be seen as linked in important ways. The popular use of "Anthropocene" and other similar epochal designations as a conceptual tool for understanding the near past and future—even in the face of sustained critiques— also likely points to this desire for narrative cohesion and sense-making structure to the challenge of situating today's peculiar challenges in a larger context, extending both backward and forward in time. In its strictest geological usage, Anthropocene dating focuses on the physical systems that leave long-lasting traces in sufficient quantity to be detected by some future sentience, and to shape a number of systems that constitute a planetary impact. In this way, anthropocenic dating is unique: whereas parsing out the deep past into epochs is a matter of present scientists projecting

[29] Kyle Whyte, Jared L. Talley, and Julia D. Gibson, "Indigenous mobility traditions, colonialism, and the anthropocene," *Mobilities* 14, no. 3 (2019): 321, DOI: 10.1080/17450101.2019.1611015.

backward, anthropocenic dating entails scientists projecting forward into the anticipated minds of future scientists projecting back. In other words, the Anthropocene demands a future-memory to imagine current forms of destruction. Stef Craps calls this "anticipated memory," a response "to the challenge of the Anthropocene—an era that requires the future anterior tense for its very conceptualization—to consider human and inhuman scales in relation to one another."[30]

This study is making claims and findings about large spans of historical time and across disparate geographies. As such, it is aiming to contribute to the broad literatures that could be considered "macrohistorical," and is generally in conversation with many of those literatures throughout the text. Only through engagement with these literatures and types of analysis can this research make a worthwhile contribution to both Anthropocene and degrowth historiographies, which themselves are interested in long spans of time.

Anthropocene Historiography

Because degrowth historiography has been so dependent on histories of capitalism, one way of opening up a history of growth to a broader view is by tying it to recent macrohistorical analyses around the idea of a human-governed or -impacted epoch known as the Anthropocene. Understanding Anthropocene

[30] Stef Craps, "Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory," *Parallax* 23, no. 4 (2017): 479, https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1374518.

historiographies, which span geography, geology, and the humanities, can productively inform a new (de)growth historiography.

The Anthropocene has become a paradoxically illuminating and obscuring concept in social science and humanities scholarship and discourse, particularly those focused on macrohistorical trends in the relationship between human systems and ecological systems. With its prefix from *anthropos*—Greek: "human"—the "Anthropocene" suggests a geological epoch, similar in scope and significance to the Holocene or Pleistocene, but one in which human systems play a defining role in the earth systems of the as-yet-unbounded period. Meteorologist Paul J. Crutzen first proposed the term "Anthropocene" to designate the present interval of Earth history at a conference for the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) in 2000, and published briefly on the concept with ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer later that same year.[31] Crutzen and Stoermer sought to emphasize the outsize influence human activity has had on planetary systems, especially since industrialization; accordingly, they suggested the Anthropocene be dated from around the late-18th century on account of "a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several 'greenhouse gases', in particular CO2 and CH4" at this time, and the pivotal role of James Watt's invention of the steam engine in intensifying fossil fuel use. Since then, scholars associated with the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), a research group charged with evaluating the "Anthropocene" as a geological unit of time, have gravitated toward another

[31] Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, "The 'Anthropocene,'" *Global Change Newsletter* 41, The International Geosphere–Biosphere Programme (May 2000): 17–18, http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf.

significant date for the epoch's potential periodization: the "Great Acceleration" of the mid-20th century and its concomitant rise in radioactive, carbon, polymer, and other chemical traces, rapid increases in human population and material indicators of economic growth, and the onset, or perhaps more realistically, intensification, of the sixth mass extinction.[32] Whereas the global heating beginning around 12,000 years ago has characterized the Holocene, the AWG contends, the byproducts of human sociotechnical metabolisms, such as contemporary climate change, chemical pollutants, and radioactive waste or fallout, play the same dominant role in the Anthropocene epoch. While the Anthropocene is only a proposed geological epoch at time of writing, and remains contested by both AWG members and other scholars, its status may be nearing consensus among geologists: in 2019, the Anthropocene Working Group voted in favor of the formal recognition of the Anthropocene as Earth's current and most recent geological epoch with a mid-20th century ("Great Acceleration") start date.[33] To be accepted by the International Commission on Stratigraphy, the AWG research has involved sourcing cores of sediment from around the globe—from seafloors, ice cores, cave minerals, lakes, peat bogs, trees, and corals—and prove that those cores contain geochemical indicators of a rapid transition likely to remain permanent in the rock record: for example, radionuclides from nuclear testing, changes in the carbon chemistry of the atmosphere due to burning fossil fuels, or the sudden widespread emergence

[32] Will Steffen et al., "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 81–98, https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019614564785.
[33] Meera Subramanian, "Anthropocene now: influential panel votes to recognize Earth's new epoch," *Nature*, 21 May 2019, https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-01641-5.

of plastic particles.[34] The core sample with the clearest transition will serve as a Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP)—colloquially a "golden spike"—marking the start date of the Anthropocene. David Farrier has illuminated the practical implications of the Anthropocene on the future fossil record. For example: humans are predicted to have moved as much stone and sediment in 150 years as they did in the preceding 5,000 years; the amount of concrete cast for human-use could spread a kilogram deep layer across every inch of Earth's surface (50 percent of this has been produced in the last two decades); total road surfaces could wrap around the planet 1,300 times; the ash produced from fossil fuels permeate so much of the planet that they may be a more important indicator of the Anthropocene than even nuclear fallout; and societies move more sediment each year than all the world's rivers combined.[35]

As the effects of anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity destruction become more urgent and catastrophic, the question of humankind's cumulative impact on earth systems has become increasingly prominent. Attempts to understand humanity's role in natural history and parse that timeline into epochs have extended beyond the geological sciences, and understanding not just the past, but both the current moment and near future in such epochal terms as well, has spread beyond earth systems sciences. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty posited in his essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," "anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist

[34] Paul Voosen, "Anthropocene pinned to postwar period," *Science* 353, no. 6302 (2016): 852–853, DOI: 10.1126/science.353.6302.852.
[35] David Farrier, *Footprints: In Search of Future Fossils* (London: 4th Estate, 2020).

distinction between natural history and human history."[36] If, as Chakrabarty asserts, "humans now wield a geological force"[37] beyond the agency of mere biological agents, the Anthropocene entails the breaking down of long-held disciplinary distinctions between human and natural history, geological and social history. The concept thus has rippling consequences for numerous academic fields, and has even obtained popularity in media and activist circles, ultimately representing, as Jason Moore puts it, "a wider conversation around humanity's place in the web of life."[38]

In the humanities and social sciences, Anthropocene literatures have speculated on the most appropriate starting point for a human-shaped epoch and debated the value of having such a notion as "Anthropocene" at all. Environmental humanities scholars Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, for instance, have argued that dating the Anthropocene from 1610, coincident with English colonization of North America, would identify the root of contemporary global ecological catastrophe in practices of dispossession, genocide, the introduction of invasive species and elimination of native ones, mass deforestation, and other acts of settler violence many centuries in the making.[39] Indeed, there is also a geological argument to be made in favor of 1610: geologists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin suggest that the "irreversible cross-ocean exchange of species," together with the coolest part of

[36] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009): 201, https://doi.org/10.1086/596640.
[37] Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," 206.
[38] Jason W. Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 595.
[39] Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761–780, https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1539.

the 17th-century "Little Ice Age," marked by the sudden dip in carbon dioxide known as the "Orbis Spike" of 1610, would adhere to the golden spike criteria necessary to define a new geological epoch.[40] Archaeologists, by contrast, have typically been in favor of a roughly 7,000-year-old Anthropocene, initiated with the initial clearing of forests for pastures and cropland; creating this bottleneck of first floral then, as a result, faunal biodiversity leaves a first trace in the fossil record.[41] By such a standard, however, one could also make an argument for the "Homocene," that the rise of *Homo* genus, rather than the *sapiens* species in particular, contributed to major megafaunal extinctions between around 2 and 8 million years ago that have had a considerable impact on global ecologies and earth systems, and thus, the fossil record.[42]

Both the dating and naming of such an epoch is rife with socio-political and ethical implications, and many scholars have criticized the term "Anthropocene" for implicitly holding the human species as an undifferentiated mass collectively and equivalently responsible for climate and environmental crises, rather than identifying those particular practices, classes, corporations, or nation-states most culpable. As a result, some propose alternatives like Jason Moore's (unfortunately

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[40] Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "A transparent framework for defining the Anthropocene Epoch," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 2 (2015): https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1177/2053019615588792.

[41] Michael Balter, "Archaeologists Say the 'Anthropocene' Is Here—But It Began Long Ago," *Science* 340, no. 6130 (2013): 261–262, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.340.6130.261; John Gowdy and Lisi Krall, "The ultrasocial origin of the Anthropocene," *Ecological Economics* 95 (2013): 137–147, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2013.08.006.

[42] See: Felisa A. Smith et al., "Body size downgrading of mammals over the late Quaternary," *Science* 360, no. 6386 (2018): 310–313, DOI: 10.1126/science.aao5987; Julien Louys and Patrick Roberts, "It was growing rainforests, not humans, that killed off Southeast Asia's giant hyenas and other megafauna," *The Conversation*, 7 October 2020, https://theconversation.com/it-was-growing-rainforests-not-humans-that-killed-off-southeast-asias-giant-hyenas-and-other-megafauna-147656.

clunky) “Capitalocene” (i.e., a new age of Capital/ism) to capture the notion that “capital” rather than “humanity” is the primary agent in producing the negative impacts—climate change, pollution, exploitation—that shape the ecological and geological conditions of the future and recent past.[43] The major inadequacy of this framing—like that of the 1610 framing or even the much more recent dating—is that it only backdates the historical source of such impacts to the rise of capitalism, which is a relatively recent phenomenon and ignores the many causes and systems predating capitalism that also contribute to the crises of the Anthropocene, and could perhaps more reasonably be said to mark the beginning of that period. Another potential weakness of this framing is that it simply trades one mass abstraction (humanity) for another (capital), neither of which possess the individual or cohesive collective agency necessary to alter the conditions at the basis of these crises. “Capital” is no more an agent than “humanity,” which leaves little room for a psychological, individual analysis in such a framing, and leaves practitioners of change with the same problem.

Many other versions of this practice have proliferated. For example, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing have both suggested the term “Plantationocene” (new age of Plantations) to highlight both the acts of genocide and slavery inherent to the epoch and its homogenization of people, species, and land.[44] Focusing on the

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[43] Jason W. Moore, ed., “The Rise of Cheap Nature,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, (PM Press, 2016), 78–115; Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44, no. 3 (2017): 594–630, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036; Jason W. Moore, “The Capitalocene Part II: accumulation by appropriation and the centrality of unpaid work/energy,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 45, no. 2 (2018): 237–279, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2016.1272587.
[44] Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159-165; Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

initiation of the sixth mass extinction event, Justin McBrien offers “Necrocene,” a new age of death and extinction, as an alternative naming and framing device.[45] Julian Fernando’s “Virocene” is another proposal that centers the role recent pandemics like COVID-19 have played, and will likely continue to play, in shaping the future.[46] All of these have weaknesses: Plantationocene fails to take into account the much longer history of mass slavery that has occurred prior to the rise of the systematized, transatlantic market plantations of early capitalism; Necrocene fails to take account of the other mass extinctions that have occurred, which in themselves do not necessarily designate new geological epochs; and, given how important microbes, including viruses, have been throughout human and non-human history, it does not necessarily make sense to privilege recent viruses as being uniquely impactful or worthy of naming a new epoch.[47]

All of these terms suffer from weaknesses that prevent any one designation from standing out as superior to “Anthropocene,” while the dating of the Anthropocene itself in fields of history and archaeology suffer from essential weaknesses as well. In this thesis, I propose a different approach to framing and dating “Anthropocene” periodization centered on the phenomenon of growth as a material and ideological force: doing so makes room to account for both the environmental impacts of growth and the sociotechnical impacts of growth/ism. An “Anthropocene” understanding of history is connected to growth, whether the

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[45] Justin McBrien, “Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene,” in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (PM Press, 2016), 116–137.
[46] J. L. Fernando, “The Virocene Epoch: the vulnerability nexus of viruses, capitalism and racism,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 27, no. 1 (2020): 635–684, https://doi.org/10.2458/v27i1.23748.
[47] See Fernando’s paper in “The Virocene Epoch” for a table including more alternatives to “Anthropocene.”

economic growth occurring in the Great Acceleration, when many in the AWG mark the start of the Anthropocene, or in the sense that the through line connecting the many interpretations of an Anthropocenic understanding of history is tied to the increasing proportion of energy and biomass put toward human-use ends and the consequences of that increase. To make this case, I will now chart the possible origins of growth/ism; such a historiography can contribute to the honing of Anthropocene dating while also contributing to a historical narrative that is essential to degrowth literature. Not only does this provide a critical and essential context for degrowth studies today, but it detaches degrowth scholarship's often unproductive reliance on capitalism as a core object of critique and contestation (given the many examples of growthism that are not capitalist).

Growth/ism Historiography

Homo sapiens is a species of ape in the evolutionary family *Hominidae*; other species of the genus *Homo* include Neanderthals, Denisovans, and *H. floresiensis*. These three species went extinct soon after *Homo sapiens* migrated outside of Africa and, in some confirmed cases, made contact with them. Recent archaeological finds have set the date of *H. sapiens* speciation as a maximum of 400,000 years, though dating around 300,000 years ago is commonly accepted.[48] *Homo sapiens* may have evolved in multiple populations throughout Eastern and

[48] Jean-Jacques Hublin et al., "New fossils from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco and the pan-African origin of *Homo sapiens*," *Nature* 546 (2017): 289–292.

Southern Africa. Between 50,000 and 70,000 years ago, the first populations of *Homo sapiens* migrated out of Africa and began permanently inhabiting every continent except Antarctica, starting with Southwest Asia, Australia, and Europe.

When *Homo sapiens* groups arrived in a new region, biodiversity in that area frequently declined. The Quaternary extinctions, for example, saw the destruction of much of the world's megafauna and these roughly coincide with waves of human migration. Debates remain as to the extent of human influence versus (non-human-caused) environmental changes in these areas for such coincident extinctions.[49] Their convergence may be to blame. Humans are effective pack hunters and foragers capable of outcompeting even close evolutionary cousins and other apex predators: as such, humans were a successful invasive species outside of Africa. Greater proportions of African megafauna likely persist today compared with other comparable ecologies in part because they co-evolved with hominins and co-evolved defenses. When other invasive species enter an ecology, disruptions and even extinctions can follow; it is reasonable to assume that highly effective hunters and foragers spreading rapidly—sometimes within a generation—into new ecologies could contribute to extinctions in those areas.[50] A recent paper in *Science* suggests that *Homo sapiens*, unlike other great apes, engage in high-input, high-return energy extractive practices to maintain and increase populations.[51] The methodology of

[49] Scott Hucknall, "Humans did not drive Australia's megafauna to extinction – climate change did," *The Guardian*, 19 May 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2020/may/19/humans-australia-megafauna-to-extinction-climate-queensland.
[50] Felisa A. Smith, et al. "Body size downgrading of mammals over the late Quaternary," *Science* 360, no. 6386 (2018): 310–313, https://science.sciencemag.org/content/360/6386/310.
[51] Thomas S. Kraft et al., "The energetics of uniquely human subsistence strategies," *Science* 374, no. 6575 (2021): DOI:10.1126/science.abf0130.

this finding is limited by a reliance on contemporary proxies, but the general finding can be seen in the steady growth of *H. sapiens* populations globally, which has not been matched by other contemporaneous African great apes like chimpanzees or gorillas.

Several species of the *Homo* genus grew their populations, and the *sapiens* species grew the most successfully. Does this mean we should date the Anthropocene to the evolution of *Homo sapiens* and the start of their population growth? Since biodiversity bottlenecks occur alongside this population growth—whether caused by it or not is, as mentioned, debated—it may make sense to date both the Anthropocene and "growth/ism" to this period. But while these human populations grew, they did so in a particular way. *Sapiens* populations, in many, maybe most, cases eventually developed and maintained a relationship to their ecologies that they could sustain stably; that is, they did not extract broadly and beyond ecological boundaries, moving energy from distant frontiers into a core metabolism. Instead, these groups more often found a level of extraction that avoided population collapses and fractured cultural lineages. We know this in part because there are intact cultural lineages that are tens of millennia old on virtually every continent. There is an important social-political implication of this: without the need to extract and move resources to a core, there were fewer imperatives for hierarchies or authoritarian politics. This is not to fall into the cliche of suggesting all "Indigenous" or foraging cultures are naturally egalitarian—though there is evidence that "natural" human conceptions of fairness that are common to multiple social mammals and even social avians—but rather that these

ecologically stabilized economies typically did not require authoritarian hierarchies to maintain adequate energy capture.[52] Indigenous "modes of production," from a macrohistorical perspective, yielded more sustainable extraction and a human ecology of integrated cultures.[53] Evidence that such cultures were biophilic can be found in both handed-down mores and value systems in contemporary Indigenous cultural proxies, and also in prehistoric cave art, which frequently places human figures at the periphery of the non-human world.[54]

Regardless of the extent to which biophilia can be definitively proven, human groups often displayed a pragmatic sense of self-preservation. While many species of megafauna did often face extinctions when humans first arrived in a region, biodiversity has tended to remain relatively high.[55] By definition, societies that persisted for thousands of years must have found ways of managing *sustainable* arrangements with the other life in their ecologies. While they may have manipulated their ecologies, even with occasionally destructive effects, they did not overburden them to a point of collapse. Jason Hickel points to an example of this process occurring with Austronesian groups. Although Austronesian peoples initially decimated native species in the new islands they invaded, they soon developed strategies to prevent biodiversity collapse:

> as the Austroneasian expansion wore on, settlers… learned that to build a thriving society within a bounded island ecosystem requires a completely different approach to ecology. They had to swap the

[52] See Ian Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[53] Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*.
[54] Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Humanoid Stain," *The Baffler*, November 2019, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-humanoid-stain-ehrenreich.
[55] Ed Yong, "In a Few Centuries, Cows Could Be the Largest Land Animals Left," *The Atlantic*, 19 April 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/04/in-a-few-centuries-cows-could-be-the-largest-land-animals-left/558323/.

> ideology of expansion for an ideology of integration. They had to learn to pay attention to other species—learn their habits, their languages, and their relationships with others. They had to learn how much they could safely take from any given community, and how to give back in order to ensure its continuation. They had to learn not only to protect but to enrich the island ecosystems on which they depended. [...] Societies that took these steps ended up thriving in the Pacific islands.[56]

Research on prehistory is limited by a dearth of evidence, often amounting to little more than interpretations of a smattering of scraps, trash sites, and bone fragments. It is a mostly blank cave wall onto which we project modern agendas, assumptions, and notions. Of one thing we can say with a bit of confidence, there were limits, probably often self-imposed, to the ecological depletiveness and exclusionariness of *Homo sapiens* groups that migrated throughout and from Africa. Although we could say this expansion was a period of "growth" on a species scale, given the ecological stability they achieved by particular cultures, and given that they do not seem to be motivated by a compound growth in the form of accumulated resources, biomass, and energy, they do not meet the definition of "growthism" in this study, an ideological imperative to achieve compound growth in exclusively human-use (often confined to a single cultural group) energy accumulation.

Recent work by David Wengrow argues that many of the epochal breaks or stages of development on which macrohistorical narratives depend are less profound than is sometimes suggested.[57] The so-called "agricultural revolution,"

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[56] Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 255.
[57] See David Wengrow, "Cities before the State in Early Eurasia," *Goody Lecture 2015*, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, https://www.eth.mpg.de/4091237/Goody_Lecture_2015.pdf; and

for example, has been cast as a pivotal moment in human history so regularly by macrohistories that it is taken as conventional wisdom. The materiality of agriculture, the story goes, yields particular political economies. Modes of production that result in or necessitate dense, complex social groups yield hierarchical political economies like monarchies and empires.[58] The agricultural revolution, thereby, led from egalitarian bands of hunter-gatherers, whose mode of production necessitated higher levels of equality in distribution of wealth and decision-making powers, to dense and complex societies that necessitated hierarchy. Wengrow rebuts this idea in his addition to the ongoing debate in archaeology and anthropology around this neat narrative: some form of agriculture, he and others contend, has been practiced widely for far longer than the 10,000-year date often used as shorthand for the agricultural revolution, and did not yield hierarchy even when large cities arose, while some foraging communities have developed hierarchic societies and rampant resource distribution inequalities.[59]

However, the archaeological and anthropological record acknowledged even by critics of epochalism, developmental stages, and materiality *does* suggest an important shift occurring *within* the Holocene (rather than, necessarily, *with* the Holocene) resulting in a change in the sorts of economies, cultures, and societies and modes of production that predominate throughout the world. Even if there is

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David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Penguin, 2021).

[58] See *Oriental Despotism* (Wittfogel), *Cannibals and Kings* (Harris), *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* (Morris), *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels).

[59] David Wengrow, "Cities before the State in Early Eurasia," *Goody Lecture 2015*, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, https://www.eth.mpg.de/4091237/Goody_Lecture_2015.pdf

no clean break from a world predominantly populated by egalitarian foragers, small ecological agrarians, and sporadic hierarchical marine extractors, for instance, to one of solely hierarchical farmers, we *can* point to a shift in the balance of power between the sorts of societies that begin to monopolize biomass regionally throughout the world to the exclusion of those that integrate with non-human biomass less aggressively and monopolistically. Species invasiveness, in this new age, becomes the norm, dominated primarily by one species, *H. sapiens*, and its attendant species (like livestock, dogs, pests, and so on). Since the alternatives to the Anthropocene narrative have critical weaknesses and the predominant dating for the Anthropocene is frequently too heavily dependent on geological factors and recent political factors to the exclusion of the longer ecological, social, and political trends that impact them, this recalibrated historiography of growth offers an alternative dating and understanding that aims to address some of these critical errors. This thesis suggests that a pivotal moment *did* occur, between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, and that the Anthropocene can most productively be understood in light of this particular change. But before we get to that history, it is necessary to say more about "growth/ism" as a cultural force.

Several recent studies have begun to approach social, philosophical, and political commitments to "growth" as an ideology in itself rather than just a facet of another particular ideology, like economic liberalism. Timothée Parrique casts growthism as the "defining dogma of our time," infiltrating institutions as varied as governments, universities, nongovernmental organizations, and commercial

entities.[60] Matthias Schmelzer has sought to situate growthism as a hegemonic ideology of the latter 20th and early 21st centuries, with critiques of growth reaching back to the 18th century.[61] Jason Hickel, too, has contributed to developing a historiography of growthism, linking it with a traditional history and emergence of capitalism.[62] The literature is in need of a broader view that is attentive to human-ecological relationships in its critiques of growth—otherwise, growthism's material and ideological foundations risk being misdiagnosed. By fixating on capitalism in its historiography, degrowth literature often overlooks the environmental impacts of economies that predate or operate in conflict or parallel with capitalist ones, such as the expansionist classical empires that led to extinction crises, or modern productivist socialist economies that have been as growthist as capitalist ones. This thesis traces growthism to a human-ecological form at least as old as the rise of the first empires around 4,000 years earlier by looking at both the material and ideological aspects—like progress—of growthism through time.

Growth is most typically understood in degrowth literature and the economic literatures they draw from as a compounding increase in economic activity. As mentioned, the ideological commitment to that goal as prioritized above other policy goals, or understood as the primary way of achieving other policy goals, is what some in the degrowth literature call *growthism*.[63] But from where and when

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[60] Timothée Parrique, "The Political Economy of Degrowth," (PhD diss., Université Clermont Auvergne and Stockholms Universitet, 2019).
[61] Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth*: *The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Matthias Schmelzer, "From Luddites to limits? Towards a systematization of growth critiques in historical perspective," *Globalizations* 20, no. 3 (2022): 447–464, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2106044.
[62] Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020).
[63] See Timothée Parrique (2019); Matthias Schmelzer (2016; 2022).

does growthism come? When understanding a phenomenon empirically, it is natural to seek to understand its origin and history. The question of when growthism became a hegemonic imperative for the first time in history, and when it became the predominant ideology as a proportion of existing economies are two separate but related questions. The first question of when growthism first appears in human society is likely unanswerable, given that there may not be material evidence left behind over the species' 300,000-year history that would indicate such a phenomenon. There is currently no other methodology but those provided by archaeology to determine whether a society adopted a growthist objective in a prehistoric context. The second question, of when growthism started to become a predominant way of organizing economies and left a traceable record—in contrast to forms of social, political, and economic organization not dependent on growth—is easier to answer given the existing archaeological and historical record, and is the question the historical analysis section of this study is most concerned with.

As mentioned, degrowth literatures have primarily seen growth and growthism as products of either the Great Acceleration or the traditional rise of capitalism. Matthias Schmelzer, one of the foremost historians of the degrowth movement and scholarship, has proposed that growth was "initiated in the context of the rise of capitalism from the 17th century onwards."[64] He, along with co-authors Aaron Vansintjan and Andrea Vetter, claim in their recent book *The Future is Degrowth*:

[64] Matthias Schmelzer, "From Luddites to limits? Towards a systematization of growth critiques in historical perspective," *Globalizations* 20, no. 3 (2022): 447–464, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2106044.

> growth is a relatively recent idea, the hegemony of which is the core ideology of capitalism, justifying the belief that growth is natural, necessary, and good, and that growth, as the increase of output and the development of productive forces, is linked to progress and emancipation.[65]

And, further, that:

> 'Economic growth' thus not only describes the increase and acceleration of the monetary production economy—that which is measured as GDP—but also a comprehensive material, social, and cultural process of mutually constitutive dynamics of expansion. This process of expansion has transformed life and the entire planet over the last five centuries.[66]

Schmelzer is opening the definition of "economic growth" to one relevant to the growth historiography, while hewing to a traditional view of capitalism as the genesis of growth. Timothée Parrique's *Political economy of degrowth*, meanwhile, treats briefly with a degrowth historiography, writing:

> When it comes to Western countries, there is a consensus among economic historians that economic growth is (a) a recent phenomenon that began in Western Europe around the time of the Industrial Revolution; (b) an episodic phenomenon that peaked during the Golden Age between the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the Bretton Woods system at the beginning of the 1970s; and (c) a phenomenon that has been unevenly spread geographically among countries.[67]

Angus Maddison, meanwhile, traces comparative growth rates since 1,000 CE, though not growthism as a hegemonic ideology.[68]

There is agreement among degrowth scholars that "growth" is the result of expansionist economies and, in material terms, the compounding transformation of

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[65] Matthias Schmelzer et al., *The Future is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022), 37.
[66] Schmelzer et al., *Future is Degrowth*, 38.
[67] Parrique, "The Political Economy of Degrowth," 60.
[68] Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Volume 1: A Millennial Perspective and Volume 2: Historical Statistics* (Development Centre Studies, Paris: OECD Publishing, 2006), https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264022621-en.

biomass and energy into human-use forms of biomass and energy. There is also a near consensus around tying the emergence of growth and growthism to the emergence of capitalism around five centuries ago, at the earliest (or in some cases, the mid-20th century Great Acceleration). However, there is ample evidence that expansionist economies emerged—and quickly became regionally predominant—between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, during the millennium in which, according to a general historical consensus, that the first empires emerged in Mesopotamia.[69] Empire itself is an administrative form predicated on expansion and extraction, equivalent in most cases to what this thesis defines as "growth." To better understand growth, growthism, and the social, political, ecological, and economic dynamics central to degrowth scholarship, it is important to expand the historical period under consideration. It would likely limit understanding of these phenomena to exclude political economies that predate capitalism by several millennia, or are not traditionally capitalist, from consideration of growthism. A leftist, anti-capitalist bias is apparent when other clearly growthist societies are omitted from analysis, historiographies, or critique.

Contrary to degrowth literatures insisting that growth and growthism emerged in Western Europe in the 16th or 17th centuries, there is sufficient historical and archaeological evidence to justify extending analysis and research further back to at least the Early Dynastic Period of Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE. It is a promising candidate for the region and period in which the

[69] Jean M. Evans, "The Square Temple at Tell Asmar and the Construction of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, ca. 2900-2350 B.C.E.," *American Journal of Archaeology* 111, no. 4 (2007): 599–632, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40025265.

lineage of growth and growthism under scrutiny today first emerged as a proportionately dominant economic organization and ideology, though research further back in time may be fruitful as well. David Wengrow describes the Uruk expansion just over 4,000 years ago in which some of the first examples of imperial colonization appear:

> the first instance of a type of colonial movement—familiar from more recent eras—in which entire communities budded off from an urban metropolis, re-establishing themselves in distant locations, yet maintaining distinct identities and regular trade relations that linked to their cities of origin.[70]

Another indicator that Uruk could be a strong candidate for the birthplace of modern growth is the presence of labor-intensive, value-added goods being produced by a centralized workforce and a thriving textile industry that is environmentally diminishing and exclusionary emerging at this time and region. We might even see ancient Mesopotamia as a birthplace of profit (understood to be an essential component of economic growth/ism not just in the definition used in this study, but by most others as well). Wengrow again:

> Assyrian (north Mesopotamian) traders were thus able to generate substantial profits by using relatively small amounts of Anatolian silver to purchase bulk quantities of tin and textiles from production centres further south. These commodities were then traded back over the Taurus mountains into central Turkey, where they were in high demand, in return for large shipments of silver (Acquired at a highly favourable rate of exchange), which could be reinvested in the purchase of new merchandise to support further commercial ventures of the same kind. This was Bronze Age venture capitalism at its finest.[71]

[70] David Wengrow, *What Makes Civilization? The Ancient Near East and the Future of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 72–73.
[71] Wengrow, *What Makes Civilization?*, 80.

In the world's earliest known recorded literary endeavor, the Epic of Gilgamesh, we also see the first glimmers of a system of thought justifying environmental destruction for the growth of expansionary kingdoms. In the narrative, Gilgamesh, a Mesopotamian king, slew the guardian of the forest and took the lumber for his own property to introduce to markets. This myth roughly coincides with felling of the vast cedar forests around modern Lebanon and Syria, and their distribution through newly emerging markets. The historical analysis section of this thesis will further establish a lineage of such narratives—primarily progressive narratives—attached to examples of growth and growthism through Western history.

Growth/ism and Progress

"Growthism," as a historically situated metaideology—an ideological category containing other subordinate, sometimes competing, ideologies—contains a complicated, ambivalent relationship to concepts of progress, but some important patterns in the relationship between growthism and progress narratives emerge. Despite oft-repeated claims that the idea of progress is in decline, faith in variegated narratives of progress animates policymakers, researchers, activists, and industry leaders from across both Global North and South institutions. Far from endlessly studied and settled, the idea of progress remains remarkably undertheorized and under-studied empirically, particularly given how important and ubiquitous it is, operating as an often invisible metanarrative. "Progress" is far from a set of simple, feel-good homilies deployed for mostly well-intentioned policy

goals; often, it has been a powerful political rhetoric in which economic growthism is couched, thereby contributing to climate, ecological, and socio-political crises. This thesis traces the history and evolution of progress narratives as a means of better understanding growth societies, the shapes they have taken, and how they have changed over time. An in-depth look at progress narratives through time can help better explain how growth societies reproduce themselves culturally, which can provide some of the most compelling and individually relevant—like for exercising individual agency through scholarship, activism, and institutional change—means of intervening in growthism. Given that growth is ultimately a material process that results from human cultures—the social, political, and economic relations that occur within them—reading closely on progress narratives can reveal an intellectual lineage of the cultural basis of growth that cannot be as readily gained from looking only at the history of its material reproduction, or even in the other forms of cultural reproduction, which do not take on such culturally distinctive forms and variety as progress mythologies, while maintaining a common discernible structure.[72]

Economic growth and the metaideology of growthism have long been bound with narratives of progress. These narratives have taken many forms through (as this thesis focuses on, primarily Western) history—which the Historical Analysis section systematizes—and remain powerful today. The Contemporary Analysis section explores the relationship between growth and progress ideologies and narratives in the 21st century, as descendants of this historical lineage, and

[72] "Progress myths / narratives" will mostly be used as shorthand for "metanarrative(s)."

their role in motivating participation in degrowth and progressive political behavior. Examples of current degrowth histories surveyed in this literature review tend toward either idealist or materialist understandings of growth; by bringing growth (materialist) and progress (cultural/idealist) together, this thesis offers a more comprehensive historiography and ideological lineage of growthism.

Undertaking such a tricky maneuver of understanding the role of human systems in impacting the planet through the past and into the future, and situating our current crises in a way that does not privilege only the material or cultural, we have to combine the deeply entwined biological and physical systems, and look beyond the geological to include the ecological, cultural, and sociological. As such, this thesis proposes a historiography that can more appropriately date the Anthropocene with a human-ecological focus, and help to explain and articulate the challenges of the present moment—particularly those of unsustainable economic growth—in a novel way. This can refocus the historical and future context in which this moment is understood, and can offer a practical vocabulary for those literatures and groups seeking to understand and remedy these challenges, particularly those associated with growth.

Contemporary Degrowth

While the historical analysis contextualizes the relationship of growth and progress, the contemporary analysis homes in on their relationship among practitioners of progressive change politics in the present, speaking to motivations

to participate in degrowth politics today. Since the inception of its modern iteration in the 1960s, “degrowth” or “post-growth” has contained a loosely connected complex of ideas, principles, movements, and policy prescriptions rooted in opposition to annual economic growth mandates and the monetary theory measurement regimes that underpin them—primarily, gross domestic product. Today, a small but rapidly burgeoning literature positions “degrowth” beyond exclusively a pragmatic policy mechanism, critique, or rhetorical device. This emerging political economy of degrowth is beginning to construct discrete discourses, ideology, ethical precepts, and policy paradigm in a disparate movement.

Weiss and Cattaneo identify degrowth as an “emerging academic paradigm” with increasingly broad reach across disciplines, but despite the rapid growth in academic discussion of degrowth, its broader discourse penetration in Spain and France, and its small policy footholds in places like Scotland, it remains a niche and contested idea in public discussions in the United Kingdom and North America.[73] Between July 12 and July 21, 2020—a randomly chosen timeframe—1,939 posts on Twitter containing “degrowth” occurred, based on a search for this study conducted using Vicinitas, out of an estimated 4.5 billion posts (in all languages) in the same period.[74] A search report using Union Metrics of the hashtag “#degrowth” yielded a potential reach of 163,063 out of 330 million

[73] Martin Weiss, and Claudio Cattaneo, “Degrowth – Taking Stock and Reviewing an Emerging Academic Paradigm,” *Ecological Economics* 137 (2017): 221.
[74] David Sayce, “The number of tweets per day in 2020,” *David Sayce* (blog), 2020, https://www.dsayce.com/social-media/tweets-day/#:~:text=Every%20second%2C%20on%20average%2C%20around%206%2C000%20tweets%20are%20tweeted%20on,200%20billion%20tweets%20per%20year.

monthly active global users,[75] or roughly 33 million users in the same time period, representing less than 0.5% penetration.[76] Despite its niche status, the concept is growing: degrowth literature has more than doubled between 2016 and 2019,[77] having only emerged as a stable term in anglophone academic discourse in 2006.[78] While the controversial term *degrowth* itself suggests little more than a pithy rejoinder to the theoretical infinite growth mandate currently embedded in neoclassical orthodox economics, the potential for the intellectual and political movement behind the term, and the nascent ideology at its core, sprawls beyond rebuttals to the mid-20th-century economic growth mandate to encompass a wide-reaching selection of policy goals and social values.

In his doctoral thesis *The political economy of degrowth*, Timothée Parrique outlines the difficulty of defining the concept and makes the case that even "degrowthers"—adherents to the movement and ideology—struggle to define their own concept.[79] This is partly because degrowth is a contrarian, even utopian, idea defined by its absolute opposition to hegemonic economic norms; the form that an alternative economy should actually take remains heavily debated, if it even ought to take any one in particular. One of degrowth's major thinkers, Serge Latouche, suggests that degrowth as a "slogan" is meant to target "exponential growth" as a goal that serves "owners of capital," since this goal "has disastrous implications for

[75] Between July 19, 2020 5:16 PM and July 21, 2020 1:23 PM UTC—timeframe randomly chosen.
[76] J. Clement, "Twitter: monthly active users worldwide," *Statista*, 2019, https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/.
[77] Parrique, "The Political Economy of Degrowth."
[78] Weiss and Cattaneo. "Degrowth – Taking Stock," 221.
[79] Parrique, "The Political Economy of Degrowth," 11.

the environment, and therefore humanity."[80] To this end, Latouche argues there should be no compromise in terminology, and that the forthrightness of "degrowth" (translated from the French *décroissance*) deliberately aims to avoid co-optation by green capitalism or consumer market austerity.

A consequence of this "missile word" tactic,[81] however, is that degrowth discourse "has found limited purchase outside existing anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist or scholarly circles,"[82] even as it has provoked broad discussion. There is hesitance to accept the term even among those favorable to degrowth principles. Noam Chomsky observes, "when you say 'degrowth' it frightens people. It's like saying you're going to have to be poorer tomorrow than you are today, and it doesn't mean that. [...] It shouldn't be called 'degrowth.' It should be called 'improving your lives.'"[83] Drews and Antal similarly warn that "using the slogan *degrowth* might create a backfire effect" inducing unfavorable snap judgments and foreclosing possible opportunities to change public and policy attitudes towards economic growth.[84] Indeed, so far the degrowth movement has largely failed to establish itself as a major challenge to existing power structures. Since its emergence in the 1960s, it has seen several false starts, and only recently has

[80] Serge Latouche, *Farewell to Growth*, trans. by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 8–9.
[81] Stefan Drews and Miklós Antal, "Degrowth: A 'missile word' that backfires?" *Ecological Economic*s 126 (2016): 182–187.
[82] David Correia, "Degrowth, American Style: No Impact Man and Bourgeois Primitivism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 23, no. 1 (2012): 106.
[83] Noam Chomsky, "The greening of Noam Chomsky: a conversation," interview by Andrea Levy, Cy Gonick, and Martin Lukacs, *Canadian Dimension*, 22 January 2014, https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/the-greening-of-noam-chomsky-a-conversation.
[84] Drews and Antal, "Degrowth: A 'missile word,'" 186.

regrouped in an updated attempt to assert itself into leftist political communities and broader, mainstream discourses.

At the same time, degrowth ideology extends beyond the neoclassical growth mandate and includes broader calls for reduced working hours and universal basic income, anticapitalism, and workplace reforms, which have seen increasing purchase in Global North polities, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 responses. A premier academic association devoted to the concept, Research & Degrowth, defines degrowth as "a downscaling of production and consumption that increases human well-being and enhances ecological conditions and equity on the planet. Degrowth calls for a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed through new forms of democratic institutions."[85] Degrowth captures reforms necessary to maintaining habitable ecological zones into the future, and prescribes programs that aim to achieve this in a more egalitarian and sustainable way.

It is in definitions like these that we can begin to perceive degrowth as a diverse set of policies and political stances coalescing around a set of broadly egalitarian and environmentally sustainable values. Parrique summarizes degrowth's objectives as values of autonomy, sufficiency, and care, defined as follows:

> In contrast with domination and alienation, *autonomy* is a principle of individual and collective freedom. *Sufficiency* is a principle of distributive justice that informs the satisfaction of human needs within and across generations. As for *care*, it defines a principle of

[85] "Definition," *Research and Degrowth (R&D)*, 2020, https://degrowth.org/definition-2/.

> non-exploitation and solidarity in our relation to other people and nature.[86]

Beyond ethical values, degrowth as policy prescription is more ideologically agnostic, with adherents ranging from Vaclav Smil,[87] whose ideological and analytical background includes the economically liberal to the politically unaffiliated, to scholars of Marxist, democratic socialist, and anarchist traditions. Andreas Exner observes that, "Degrowth spans a considerable range of perspectives on capitalist society and its transformation," and sees an anarchist home for the concept.[88] Max Koch suggests, "The Marxian tradition has an important role to play here if it rids itself completely from the 'growth mania' (Daly 1991) that [...] dominated 20th century socialist attempts."[89] Drews and van den Bergh, meanwhile, found that, "The factor *prosperity with growth* is significantly positively associated with conservative values, religiosity, higher self-rated knowledge about the economy, higher household income, and older age."[90] While there is no clear consensus and degrowth seems to serve as a sort of ideological Rorschach test, the degrowth community tends more toward left-wing political ideologies; but even within the emerging political left in anglophone politics, degrowth remains fairly niche and contested.

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[86] Parrique, "The Political Economy of Degrowth," 252, emphasis in original.
[87] In works like Vaclav Smil, *Growth: From Microorganisms to Megacities* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).
[88] Andreas Exner, "Degrowth and Demonetization: On the Limits of a Non-Capitalist Market Economy," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 25, no. 3 (2014): 10.
[89] Max Koch, "Climate Change, Capitalism and Degrowth Trajectories to a Global Steady-State Economy," *International Critical Thought* 5, no. 4 (2015): 439–452. See also: Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2023).
[90] Stefan Drews and Jereon C. J. M. van den Bergh, "Public views on economic growth, the environment and prosperity: Results of a questionnaire survey," *Global Environmental Change* 39 (2016): 6, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2016.04.001.

Economic anthropologist Jason Hickel has lately used "degrowth" and "postgrowth" interchangeably, and has laid out five steps for achieving a degrowth paradigm, which helps to orient it ideologically, including prescriptions like abandoning GDP as a measure of progress, scaling down throughput, shortening the working week, expanding universal social goods, and distributing national income more fairly.[91] Andreé Reichel distinguishes between degrowth and postgrowth with the latter being a more open-ended vision of restructuring society: "The multitude of post growth futures is broader than degrowth, making degrowth one possible and probably the most well-formulated of these futures."[92] For Jeroen van den Bergh, a key advocate for *agrowth*, the GDP indicator is the main adversary, while GDP *growth* should simply be ignored as an unhelpful distraction from the implementation of sustainable welfare policies. Van den Bergh offers two main policy strategies: large scale renewable energy transition, and full employment—both of which, he proposes, would lower productivity without harming human welfare.[93] In the same paper, Kallis makes the case for degrowth, which concentrates on reducing growth in line with ecological limits as a priority. Rather than aim for full employment to improve welfare, the degrowth vision is one of *less* work, with policy suggestions spanning wealth redistribution, a strengthened social-security system, reduced working hours, and the creation of jobs "with low economic productivity but high social value" in fields like healthcare

[91] Jason Hickel, "Inequality and the Ecological Transition," *Jason Hickel* (blog), 14 January 2019, https://www.jasonhickel.org/blog/tag/post-growth.
[92] André Reichel, "Postgrowth and Degrowth," *André Reichel* (blog), 11 March 2016, https://www.andrereichel.de/2016/03/11/postgrowth-and-degrowth/.
[93] Jeroen C. J. M. van den Bergh and Giorgos Kallis, "Growth, A-Growth or Degrowth to Stay within Planetary Boundaries," *Journal of Economic Issues* XLV I, no. 4 (2012): 909–919, DOI 10.2753/JEI0021-3624460404.

and education.[94] Degrowth calls for a more radical reshaping of the economy "driven by the logic of producing social 'use value' rather than monetary 'exchange value,'" and moving away from formal markets toward local, community-owned goods and services.[95] The contemporary analysis in this thesis engages with these contested meanings and potential roles of degrowth in broader social movement spaces, community renewable groups, and scholarship.

Conclusion

Degrowth literatures that aim to confront growthism rigorously must start with an understanding of their historical origin and lineage. The current literature remains too dependent on histories of capitalism and a fixation on capitalist-focused theory as an origin of growth. Beyond arguing for an older and Mesopotamian (versus European) point of origin for the birth of modern growth(ism), examining progress narratives, as this thesis does, is one way of tracing a lineage of growthism through a Western—Southwest Asian *and* European—context historically. This thesis proposes economic growth—the physical process of economic activity predicated on expansion and ecological exclusion—is between 4,000 and 5,000 years old. Progress narratives—the culturally produced metanarratives that justify expansion and ideological growthism—are just as old. The first central research question developed from the historical section of the literature review, then, is **1)**

[94] Van den Bergh and Kallis, "Growth, A-Growth or Degrowth," 913.
[95] Van den Bergh and Kallis, "Growth, A-Growth or Degrowth," 913.

How do growth economies relate to progressive narratives through (primarily Western) history?

This historiographic intervention aims to contribute both to degrowth literature and to Anthropocene literature. The long view and large historical pattern analysis characteristic of Anthropocene literature is a welcome perspective in developing a more long-ranging degrowth historiography. Doing so, with the historical analysis of progress narratives, aims to reconcile the materiality of a geographic perspective with a cultural, idealist perspective. This historical analysis sets up the contextual framework for analyzing present-day relationships between ideas of growthism and ideas of progress. Degrowth literature and discourses retain an under-examined and under-theorized relationship to ideas of progress, which, as this thesis will show, are integral to ideas of growth. My review of the contemporary degrowth literature prompts my second research question, **2) How do (de)growthist values relate to attitudes toward progressive narratives and teleology in the present?** This thesis aims to offer both an historical and a contemporary analysis that can set some of the boundaries and foundations for future study on the relationship between growthism and progress narratives. Better understanding the growth and progress relationship today can both contribute to further scholarship and also contribute to clarifying the goals, aims, and ultimately the bounds of acceptable success for a cohesive degrowth movement.

Methodology

Discourse Analysis

This thesis sets out to answer two central research questions: **1) How do growth economies relate to progressive narratives through (primarily Western) history?**, and **2) How do (de)growthist values relate to attitudes toward progressive narratives and teleology in the present?**

Research Question 1 is addressed through a discourse-historical approach of primary and secondary texts, which constitutes the Historical Analysis chapter. The historical chapter investigates how growth economies and progressive narratives are co-constituted and mutually reinforcing through time, focusing on a primarily "Western" geographic context. This question is approached by constructing a critical genealogy. Research Question 2 is addressed through a critical discourse analysis and close reading of 28 in-depth interviews with "progressive" practitioners, constituting the Contemporary Analysis chapter. The contemporary chapter investigates how values related to growth and degrowth interact with attitudes toward narratives of progress in the present, primarily among practitioners of these political values—mostly including professional and volunteer activists, scholars, elected and unelected community leaders, and community renewable group organizers—by analyzing a collection of in-depth interviews.

The historical and contemporary analyses that make up this study are methodologically bound by their use of various discursive analyses. In *Key*

Methods in Geography, discourse analysis is described as a method of studying how discourses "shape what is *sayable* and what is not, thus viewing language as a form of social practice that produces both discursive and material effects."[96] Discourse analysis has been identified as an appropriate methodology in cases where "a researcher is interested in the ways knowledge is formulated and validated by society as truth."[97] The methodology was thus deemed particularly well-suited to this study of progress and degrowth discourses, since the former constitutes a hegemonic form of knowledge about the trajectory of history and societal conditions, and the latter, at least ostensibly, constitutes a critical challenge to that dominant metanarrative and form of knowledge.

In critical discourse analysis (CDA), studies focus on the discursive construction of power relations. Ruth Wodak's discourse-historical approach (DHA), according to Wodak, "attempts to integrate a large quantity of available knowledge about the historical sources and the background of the social and political fields in which discursive 'events' are embedded."[98] By combining these methodologies—CDA and DHA—and analyzing both historical texts and contemporary interviews, I aim to contextualize contemporary degrowth discourses within a long history of growth economies and progress narratives, and demonstrate how these discourses interrelate to the material world and narratives of progress over time. Historical analysis of progress narratives adapting through

[96] Meghan Cope and Hilda Kurtz, "Organizing, Coding, and Analyzing Qualitative Data," in *Key Methods in Geography,* ed. Nicholas Clifford, et al. (London: SAGE, 2016), 659.
[97] Jason Dittmer, "Textual and Discourse Analysis," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*, ed. Dydia DeLyser et al. (London: SAGE Publications, 2010), 275.
[98] Ruth Wodak, *The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 65.

time to shape and perpetuate growth economies is particularly important as it reveals how past discourses have influenced present parameters of discussion. Discourse analysis assumes discourses not only influence present and future parameters of discussion—"what is sayable and what is not"—but additionally have real-world material effects. This is why in this thesis, I find the analysis of "progress" discourses an appropriate qualitative approach to understanding the evolution of growth economies over time. Instead of offering a purely idealist or purely materialist analysis, this methodology enables a blending of the human and ecological, historical and contemporary, cultural and material.

Historical Analysis

Context and Sampling

To address Research Question 1, the historical analysis chapter shows how and why growth economies have used progress narratives to reproduce themselves through time. Certain boundaries had to be imposed in order to conduct this study of the interconnection between growth economies and progress narratives. The study focuses on 1) societies where growth economies flourished for a notable period of time, 2) societies with sufficient textual evidence, 3) texts either in original English or with readily accessible translations, and 4) texts that are either influential themselves, published in influential media forms, composed by influential figures, or engaging with politically and culturally important figures. The chapter focuses on a period beginning between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago because this is the historical period within which I propose growth economies became ascendent. These locations—primarily “Western” culturally—are included because these are the regions, I argue within the chapter, where progress and growth are most powerfully and significantly interrelated. Each source’s “influentialness” or cultural significance is typically emphasized and explained within the chapter itself when a source is used. Texts were drawn from a variety of sources, including both scholarly and popular sources, primary sources, archives, and secondary writing.

There were several reasons such a collection of sources was necessary. First, this research period took place for the duration of COVID-19 restrictions,

which limited access to physical research materials, so all archives accessed for analysis were digital-based. Secondary scholarly sources interpreting primary materials relevant to the study further helped fill some of the gaps caused by lack of opportunity to study in-person archival resources. Second, the geographic and temporal scope of the historical study was restricted to mostly anglophone primary sources, but is speaking to phenomena that impact peoples outside of English-speaking cultures. As such, translations and secondary interpretations were necessary to address language and cultural barriers. Third, much political discourse relevant to this study, particularly historically, has taken place outside of academic texts and can therefore best be represented in non-academic texts. In their quantitative survey assessment of degrowth discourse, Ines Cosme et al. note that one limitation of their study is that it "introduces a bias towards academic literature as it excludes non-academic sources of knowledge," and that their results could be expanded by analysis of, for example, "proposals from grassroots movements that may or may not exist in peer-reviewed articles."[99] Given this study's focus on degrowth and other relatively recent grassroots movements such as Democratic Socialists of America and community renewable groups—which do not always have substantial academic counterparts[100]—a variety of source materials have been drawn upon when conducting the discourse analyses,

[99] Ines Cosme et al., "Assessing the degrowth discourse: A review and analysis of degrowth policy proposals," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 149 (2017): 331. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.02.016.

[100] Other qualitative studies of DSA have similarly relied on non-traditional/ non-academic secondary sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, and YouTube videos. See, for example, Nathan James Robinson, "Hostile Territory: Mobilizing Resources and Finding Opportunities in the Contemporary U.S. Democratic Socialist Movement," (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2022), 31.

including political discourse in magazines, speeches, newspapers, and other public fora. When an argument relied on reported facts outside of scholarship, pains were taken to use credible sources that employ professional fact checkers and maintain a transparent process for verifying reported information. Further, as Wodak notes, “One of the main principles of the DHA is that of triangulation, which enables the researchers to minimize any risk of being too subjective. This is due to its endeavor to work on a basis of a variety of different data, methods, theories, and background information.”[101] While academic peer-review is meant to minimize the subjective biases of individual researchers, the process may still embed the biases of the field and the limitations of volunteer-reviewers. Opening the scope of sources to include popular presses and newspapers, for example, helped to mitigate those biases through triangulation. Meanwhile, the political and ideological biases of those secondary and popular sources were also accounted for and frequently noted in the text. The variety of sources drawn upon throughout the thesis does not indicate a lack of academic rigor; rather, my intention is to pay due diligence to the different types of narratives and forums involved in shaping societal metaideologies, and to triangulate sources to ensure subjective biases are minimized.

[101] Ruth Wodak, “Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*, ed. Karen Tracy et al. (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over the course of about a year and involved a broad spread of sourcing. The historical analysis draws on hundreds of sources, which are documented within the chapter itself, but, for an overview, the chapter and its sources can best be divided into four time periods with distinct but overlapping sets of sources, and typically covering common texts within each period.

Period (from)	Source Types
2900 BCE Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, Old Testament, Classical Empires	Original translated texts, encyclopedias, scholarly and popular books, scholarly papers
700 CE Medieval Islamdom and Christendom	Original and translated texts, scholarly and popular books, scholarly and popular articles, newspaper articles
1400 CE Maritime Colonization	Archival letters, diary entries, and speeches, scholarly and popular books, scholarly and popular articles
1800 CE Industrialization	Archival letters and speeches, original translated texts, scholarly and popular books, scholarly and popular articles, newspaper articles

Table 2—Historical Analysis source periodization

In the earliest time period, there are fewest primary sources available. Still, this section drew from translations of original texts and secondary sources both scholarly and popular. The second period contained more anglophone original texts, but also used translated texts, as well as secondary sources both scholarly and popular. The third and fourth sections contain the most primary source material, given the greater number of available sources, and the most sources overall, given that they are the longest chapters.

The collection for these data involved a mutually reinforcing process of inductive and deductive sourcing and reasoning. I began with an observation that contemporary growth/ism frequently engages in building narratives that are progressive in nature, by the definitions used in this study, and that growth and progress are fundamentally and explicitly connected ubiquitously across diverse institutions, ideologies, and discourses. From this observation, I intuited a hypothesis that there have been similar connections historically, even through diverse cultural examples, and potentially sharing a common lineage.

First, I sought to establish a reasonable origin point for growth/ism, as defined in this study, and arrived at the first recorded examples of expansionist imperial bureaucracies. I then sought to identify concepts that make up a progressive metanarrative—distilling them to a small common set of features, like a teleological sense of history, savage/civilized binaries, and a developed sense of futurity—and then find examples of these in cultures that significantly predate this

origin point for growth/ism. Given the scant reliable evidence for things as immaterial as metaphysical beliefs or ideas about how society evolves left over from non-record-keeping—that is, orally transmitted—societies, I conducted a non-comprehensive nor exhaustive, but in my opinion adequate, survey of Indigenous belief systems that are typically considered proxies for prehistoric belief systems—examples like certain circumpolar peoples, Australasian peoples, and African peoples—to identify belief systems that could be reasonably said to meet the definition of a progressive metanarrative so as to falsify or verify a meaningful connection between growth and progressive concepts. Finding no immediate examples from this survey, I then turned to the oldest *recorded* systems of thought—that is, transmitted through some form of writing—represented in the Enuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh, which are associated with some of the earliest examples of growthist states. Understanding them in their cultural and historical contexts suggested that there was indeed a form of progressive metanarrative accompanying expansionist economic modes.

From that starting point, I began to trace the basic outline of a cultural and intellectual lineage of this relationship. There are few histories of the idea of progress, popular or scholarly, in the English-speaking world that attempt this. The only one with such scope, Nisbet's, served as a useful starting point, but was supplemented by other histories of the idea that have a narrower and more recent scope. I then pursued a roughly chronological study of primarily Western sources, due, as mentioned, primarily to the fact that most of the most important growth-oriented economies, and particularly those that are operative today, evolved within

that historical lineage. The major exception to this principle in the text is a brief treatment of 20th-century China. There are two primary reasons for the inclusion of the Chinese example. One reason is that the communist revolution in China drew heavily from European intellectual traditions, first in the form of Marxist-Leninism, then later in the form of economic liberalism that excludes political liberalism. In the former case, this also provided a useful example for examining the relationship between growth and progress in an anti-capitalist context. China is obviously not the only example of a non-Western country radically changing its political trajectory based on European intellectual influences, but given the important role of China today and the vivid way in which progress narratives were used in both its communist and more neoliberal eras, it serves as an illustrative example. The second reason this study includes *contemporary* Chinese examples is because there is ample secondary evidence, in English, to draw from to provide the analysis a more textured dimension, a mix of resources that are largely missing from ancient Chinese examples.

From the many possible examples to draw from within this historic lineage, I focused on those that presented ample evidence, contained direct connections to other examples, have a significant place in current discourse or the public imagination, or were significant—for instance, in their scope, reach, or longevity—in their own time. When I chose an example of a culture that represented a growth/ist regime in a given time period, I then focused on important texts within that culture and period—Virgil in Augustan Rome, Thomas Jefferson in late-colonial, early-independent United States, for instance—and on texts with ample

secondary analysis in order to triangulate data origins and eliminate researcher bias where possible. Cultural examples or texts that may corroborate or complicate the hypothesis—examples like Alexandrian Macedon, Achaemenian Persia, or the Iberian Union in South America—were excluded only in the interest of space, time, and focus, or because they did not meet the above criteria, and were not excluded due to their potential falsification of the hypothesis (I would not know if they did this because I did not study them—as such they would be welcome starting points for future studies). Examples outside of a Western context—like Mongolian or Mesoamerican examples—were excluded for the same reasons, and because there is an advantage to maintaining a consistent geographical focus throughout the historical and contemporary analyses (again with the caveat of the Chinese example mentioned above) for distilling meaningful relationships between abstractions.

Data Analysis

Analyzing discursive patterns through time has entailed constructing a critical genealogy of progress as a metanarrative. In this analytical context, genealogy refers to a method of developing the lineage of an idea, institution, tendency, or other cultural artifact and its social construction through time. It is through a broad accumulation of disparate sources, across geographies and cultures, that we can best investigate and understand how an idea interacts with the cultural, political, and material context in which it is co-evolving. The genealogical method is

appropriate for a study in geography given that it is critical and theoretical, rather than purely historical. Coined by Friedrich Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality*,[102] and developed through multiple works by Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, the genealogical method is particularly suited to deconstructing and better understanding hegemonic ideas, like those related to progress. However, the genealogical method employed in this thesis differs in important ways from a Foucauldian genealogy. Whereas Foucault has attempted to denaturalize and defamiliarize ideas by showing their evolution through time and cultural change—how they have meant different things to different regimes, changing based on how and why they are deployed—this study built a genealogy for the inverse purpose: to analyze the lineage of an idea that has remained consistent, or that has been deployed for consistent purposes, through time and across cultures. There are likely benefits to using a Foucauldian genealogical method in degrowth scholarship—like, for instance, examining the meaning of "growth" through time and across regimes. Because this is not an etymological study nor interested with the word "progress" itself, but rather the many ideas contained within what I am identifying as a progressive framework, and because it is attempting to understand physical forces that have shaped contemporary ecological and social crises through time, to better understand their underlying mechanisms, it made more sense to construct this sort of consistent lineage rather than the more fixed lens of a Foucauldian genealogy.

[102] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Bernard E. Harcourt, further, identifies the genealogical method in critical philosophy and theory as fundamentally oriented toward the support of praxis.[103] Given that this thesis is engaging with degrowth literature, which is itself deeply intertwined with activist communities, and that it is drawing on research within practitioner spaces, it makes sense to utilize a method that has historically been complementary with practitioner groups and goals. Harcourt quotes Saar in arguing that critical genealogies are deployed to "demystif[y], denaturaliz[e], and desubstantailiz[e]" historical critiques. But they are also often deployed to "possibilize"—rather than merely "problematize"—historical concepts, in Harcourt's words, to create "possibilities of different ways of being and thinking, and offer normative direction for change."[104] Given that this study is aiming to contribute to degrowth, which is a scholarship very much oriented to a "normative direction for change," the possibilizing characteristic of this study and its methods is essential.

One might question why any analysis dependent on historical methods would be important for better understanding and explaining the relationship between growth and progress. Why not rely on contemporary methods and data alone? In examining the shortcomings of discourse analysis, Derek Hook notes that the genealogical method offers "a mode of critique better able to accommodate those dimensions of discourse (history, materiality, the conditions of possibility underwriting 'knowledge') less facilitated by more textually focused or

[103] Bernard E. Harcourt, "On Critical Genealogy: An Answer to the Question 'What Good Is Genealogy for Praxis?'" *Columbia Public Law Research Paper No. 14-706* (June 2022), http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4147668.
[104] Harcourt, "On Critical Genealogy."

less historically sensitive models."[105] Understanding the sources, co-development, and various shapes of the relationship between growth economies and progress narratives through time offers a more comprehensive contextual position from which to then study this dynamic in the present. Furthermore, balancing empirical observations from the interviews conducted for the Contemporary Analysis section, which are necessarily localized and detail-oriented, with the Historical Analysis section, which is more abstract and wide-reaching, enhances the likelihood of producing accurate, rigorous results and theory.

While a historian's methodology tends to focus on a narrow timeframe, often only a span of years, the genealogical method necessarily entails examining a broader scope. As such, the method sacrifices some granularity for discerning patterns over broad spatial and temporal scopes. This method fits well with the macrohistorical character of Anthropocene literature, as well as the critical character of degrowth literature, that this study aims to contribute to. The macrohistorical nature of the genealogical method has a precedent in recent geography literatures with scholars like Jared Diamond, Peter Turchin, and Ian Morris engaging in analysis at the scale of "big history," finding patterns over large historical scales through various methods.[106] Diamond utilizes cross-disciplinary methods to arrive at his argument, drawing from geographic, anthropological, historical, and ethnographic research. Turchin, meanwhile, has developed a more

[105] Derek Hook, "Genealogy, discourse, 'effective history': Foucault and the work of critique," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2005): 3–31, DOI: 10.1191/1478088705qp025oa.
[106] Primarily, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) in Diamond's case, *Secular Cycles* (2009) in Turchin's case (with co-author Sergey A. Nefedov), and *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels* (2015) in Morris's case.

quantitative methodology he refers to as “cliodynamics,” which seeks to tease patterns out of large datasets. Morris, finally, is relying on archaeological, geographic, and historical methods to make his arguments. This study uses genealogy, both to construct a cohesive narrative over a long period of time, and to embed an element of critique and “counter-history,” a deconstruction of conventional narratives of historical development.

A genealogical method also fits well within the toolkit of a critical geographer. While historical geography may utilize more conventional methods of a professional historian, critical geography, in which this study is situated, more appropriately benefits from the tools of critical philosophy and theory. Given, also, that this thesis is exploring the relationship between theoretical frameworks—like growthism and progressivism—and their relation to socio-spatial, technological, and ecological phenomena like expansionist extraction, a genealogical method provided the scope and foundation for this analysis. Genealogy as a method is rooted in a rejection of the belief that history develops in a linear progressive way; it is thus well suited fundamentally for a study that explores, deconstructs, and critiques the role of ideas of progressive history. “An entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic),” writes Foucault, “aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity-as a teleological movement or a natural process. ‘Effective’ history, however, deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations.”[107] Though this study departs from a Foucauldian

[107] Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 154.

tradition, the method used in this chapter applies a similar standard to teleology itself.

The chapter is structured primarily by this lineage of growth and progress, dividing the chapter into four major sections that cover each time period. The analysis constructs roughly chronological narratives for each section that include historical contexts, pertinent biographical information, and other relevant historical information.

Contemporary Analysis

Context and Sampling

Investigating the relationship between values related to growth/degrowth and those related to progress narratives could involve a variety of approaches. One might, for instance, conduct a broad survey of randomly sampled participants asking basic questions about self-reported beliefs around growth and progress. Because attitudes toward growth and progress are often personal, emotional, complex, and fraught with political baggage, however, it was in this case important to consider how to tease out meanings, particularly with people who are engaged directly with political-social change practices, or in practices like community renewable-funded social work that is not immediately obvious in its connection to politics, ideologies, or discourses. Further, one might, in keeping with the themes of the historical analysis, seek to interview members of elite institutions to assess their view of progress in a contemporary analysis. However, these views are readily available in the secondary sources that the historical section engages with, and readily available to public and scholarly engagement, such views being frequently expressed publicly across institutional platforms and forms of media. While it would likely be productive to survey members of elite institutions with a similar analytical lens as that deployed in the contemporary analysis of this study, the viewpoints of progressive practitioners, by contrast, are rarely represented in accessible media or scholarship, and it is those opinions that are most pertinent

and practically useful to the degrowth movements and scholarship to which this thesis aims to contribute.

All interviewees have participated in what could be considered "progressive" change actions, that is, actions that are intended to achieve what they consider compounding positive changes in human and beyond-human welfare. Participants engaged in this sort of progressive practice in a variety of ways, through different institutions, political affiliations, and theories of change.[108] These movements, projects, and organizations included community renewable energy groups, municipal government, Democratic Socialists of America (primarily the Ecosocialist Working Group), women's rights activism, private media, and environmental nonprofits. Theories of change included labor and community organizing, leading community projects like those funded by renewable energy revenue, participating in institutional and administrative actions like municipal government, mass media, and private companies, and engaging in professional and informal activism, including protests, civil disobedience, electoral volunteering, and other traditional forms of civic action. Affiliations around sources of progress included vehicles such as energy transition at a local level, climate, environmental, and social justice organizing, and "ecosocialism," or a more explicitly left-wing, anticapitalist, egalitarian ideology informed by ecological concerns.

Given the diversity of interviewees, they could be divided by many factors, from geographic to demographic—generational to racial, for instance—and interesting patterns might emerge. For the purpose of this study, they have been

[108] On theories of change, see: Paul Brest, "The Power of Theories of Change," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 8, no. 2 (2010): 47–51, https://doi.org/10.48558/NPZS-C374.

divided into three categories according to the framework of progress their work focuses on, and divided again according to the theories of change they ascribe to (see Tables 3 and 4 below).

One category is community energy transition (CET). Interviewees in this category identify the energy system and various local-scale issues as the primary targets of contestation, and their method of change is the development of community-scale non-carbon energy projects, or social development projects funded through renewable programs. They attempt to impact the energy system, and/or local issues via the energy system, directly by investing in community energy or organizing community projects funded by community energy.

Another category is climate, environment, justice activists (CEJ). Members of CEJ identify climate change and social injustice as their primary targets of contestation, and pursue a method of change primarily through existing nonprofit organizations and direct action protest. They attempt to impact policy and public opinion on climate change and issues of gender, racial, and economic justice by starting or participating in established organizations, engaging in electoral work, and by attending events like protests that tend to be organized by these established organizations.

The final category are volunteers affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), particularly the Ecosocialist Working Group, referred to here as DSA members or Ecosocialists. These participants are bound by their identification of capitalism as their primary target of contestation. Their method of change is via labor movement organizing and other direct challenges to the flow of

capital, as well as electoral strategies that endorse political candidates. As members of DSA, a national nonprofit, this takes many forms, some of which can appear similar to the nonprofit protests of the CEJ, but which are guided by a Marxist ideological basis more often absent among CEJ members.

CET represents an emerging and growing means by which individuals, companies, and communities produce and distribute electricity.[109] Utility-scale and privately-owned renewable electricity production remains dominant, but community renewables are increasing as a means of new generation. As a novel mechanism, CET remains a fragmented and non-standardized form of generation in both the United States and Scotland, where interviewees in this study are drawn from. Versions of CET in Scotland range from models like cooperative ownership of generation infrastructure, to private nonprofit ownership and profit-sharing schemes, to private corporate ownership that apportions grants derived from generation profits to community programs.

Renewable energy has played an often contradictory role in progress narratives of the 21st century. Renewables can be cast as both high-tech saviors that slot into existing grid systems while maintaining existing political relations—i.e. maintaining a growth-based, hierarchic economy—or, by contrast, as a material disruptor of existing power relations—political and energy— that serve as a starting point to the broader reshaping of material civilization, with cascading effects on both politics and culture. One principle that emerges from Morris's value

[109] Peter Capener, "Community Renewable Electricity Generation: Potential Sector Growth to 2020," *Report to Department of Energy and Climate Change* (January 2014), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/274746/20140108_Community_Energy_Modelling_FinalReportJan.pdf.

evolution framework,[110] Harris's analysis of the materiality of political form,[111] and Wittfogel's[112] hydraulic civilization theory is that controlling the means of basic material survival necessities can contribute to empowering—or disempowering—populations. Given the central role of electricity in economic activity in a "modern" economy, and given that access to electricity is a central factor in accumulating and controlling capital, the ability to centralize and control access to electricity can translate into immense political and economic power. Timothy Mitchell illustrates this principle in his historical review of the role coal miner strikes played in developing democratic mass politics, and the transition to greater dependence on petroleum as a means of generating fossil capital by states and elites.[113] More direct evidence of this principle can be found in battles within the United States over who governs utilities, whether private corporations or public commissions, or, as is often the case, a complex mixture of the two.

In addition to the relationship between political forms and energy capture, Morris's framework for identifying transitions in dominant cultural values and attitudes can be seen demonstrated in the motivations of CET participants. As their testimonies suggest, there is a complex dynamic in which post-carbon, degrowthist values are both initiating and initiated by participation in CET in a feedback relationship. For some interviewees, community energy represents a way of distributing money, resources, and support locally and in a way separate to

[110] Ian Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[111] Marvin Harris, *Cannibals and Kings: Origins of Cultures* (London: Vintage Books, 1991).
[112] Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).
[113] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011).

government distribution. Often values of justice, democracy, and fairness are expressed in this redistribution among groups perceived as vulnerable that might be otherwise neglected by local councils.

Renewable energy can, as mentioned, often be incorporated into progress myths that would ultimately strengthen the ideological basis of growthism. Interviewees frequently associated renewable energy with progress or "saving the planet" while continuing to make money for those communities, producing a kind of "green growth" philosophy (as noted, renewable energy has primarily served to supplement rather than replace fossil fuel energy as total energy use continues to increase; a green growth approach would likely continue such a pattern). For some, community energy represented little more than a private investment scheme to increase personal wealth, something entirely compatible with the expansion and extraction of growthism. At the same time, CET-style energy production has been central to degrowth principles and often has an important role in degrowth imaginaries of post-growth civilization, a relationship that will be explored more in the degrowth section below. In their 2015 study of collective ownership in renewable energy and its relationship to degrowth, Kunze and Becker propose that "an alteration in the mode of a given society's energy production is highly significant for a general shift towards degrowth."[114] Furthermore, in the case of energy initiatives that utilize "collective forms of ownership and decision-making," the authors urge that "the debate on degrowth can benefit from a careful look at these specific sites of renewable energy

[114] Conrad Kunze and Sören Becker, "Collective ownership in renewable energy and opportunities for sustainable degrowth," *Sustainability Science* 10 (2015): 425.

production."[115] Community renewable groups were therefore prioritized as target interviewees for examining the relationship between renewable energy, (de)growth paradigms, and investment in progress ideologies.

In addition to progress metanarratives and metaideologies, important techniques for the cultural reproduction of growthism are social inequalities like patriarchy and other caste systems mediated by features like ethnicity, geography, and religion. Climate change and environmental crisis—both direct results of the expansionism and extractivism of growthism—are also both forms of material reproduction of growthism, as such crises create necessities for maintaining or intensifying growth. Activists and organizers who see themselves as intervening in these processes of cultural reproduction—by challenging patriarchy, racism, and climate change, for instance—also often see their struggles as part of a progressive metanarrative. Such interviewees can help to illuminate this complex relationship between degrowth values and goals emerging from the progressive historiography that has primarily served to reproduce growthism. Climate, environment, justice activists present a useful set of values, motivations, and backgrounds from which to explore this relationship.

Community renewable group participants primarily engage in interventions in the material reproduction of growthism, and see their motivations somewhat in those terms (if not a degrowth framework explicitly). They do this by investing in a localism and small-scale energy compatible with a degrowth imaginary and goals. They have less to say about cultural interventions in growthism, and sometimes

[115] Kunze and Becker, "Collective ownership in renewable energy," 435.

even speak in support of certain growthist principles, like profit-making. The CEJ activists tend to primarily engage in interventions in the cultural reproduction of growthism, contesting such tools of reproduction as patriarchy, racism, and the effects of growthism like climate and environmental harm. The final category, those affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, particularly the Ecosocialist Working Group, are in a sense combining concerns of cultural and material interventions in growthist (though they do not use that term) reproduction. Most of the DSA members are approaching their anticapitalism from at least an ostensible Marxian materialism while also confronting many of the overlapping cultural issues confronted by the other transition activists. Meanwhile, Ecosocialists are also largely concerned, at least to some extent, with similar energy issues that CET members address. In a sense, they are in the center of a Venn diagram between the two previous groups.

Labor / community organizing	**Direct community projects**	**Institutional / administrative**	**Formal Activism**	**Informal Activism**
Sven	Scott	Daniel	Malcolm	Jane
Kiran	Anne	Kevin	Liam	Edward
Dean	James	Victor	Karen	Sue
Maya	Jonathan	Tom	Peter	Stella
Jo				Eric
Farouk				
Evie				
Jean				
Aaron				
Robin				

Table 3—Theories of Change designations

Community Energy Transition	Climate / Environment / Justice	Ecosocialism
Scott	Jane	Sven
Anne	Edward	Kiran
James	Sue	Dean
Daniel	Liam	Maya
Jonathan	Kevin	Jo
Malcolm	Victor	Farouk
	Karen	Evie
	Peter	Jean
	Tom	Aaron
	Stella	Robin
	Eric	

Table 4—Progress Affiliations designations

Tables 3 and 4 show the interview participants grouped under their preferred theories of change, which refers to the primary ways in which they went about impacting the issues they are concerned with. *Labor/community organizing* refers to those who are involved in labor actions like union organizing and DSA and community organizing. *Direct community projects* refers to community renewable groups and the community projects they are associated with. *Institutional / administrative* refers to those who primarily seek to shape the professional organizations they work for. *Formal activism* refers to those who are employed, primarily in a nonprofit setting, to engage in various forms of activism. *Informal activism* refers to those who volunteer in (non-labor/organizing) forms of activism,

like protests and direct action. “Progress affiliations” refers to the primary issue categories participants are concerned with. *Community energy transition* refers to those who are interested in developing non-carbon energy sources, primarily through community and institutional pathways to change. *Climate / environment / justice* refers to those who are primarily interested in climate change, environmental issues, and justice issues like gender, race, and sexuality. *Ecosocialism* refers to those who are interested in issues similar to those in the above category, but who are primarily interested in the economic justice intersection of climate and environmental issues.

Data Collection

Over the course of a year from autumn 2017 to autumn 2018, 24 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted in-person with 28 participants, with each interview lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. In an examination of recently published qualitative human geography research, Richard Hitchings and Alan Latham decry the general lack of transparency about interview methods in the field. They note a huge diversity in interview sample sizes, “ranging from a parsimonious 4 people to a much more capacious 160,” with little said about why those numbers were deemed sufficient.[116] The number of participants in this study was deemed manageable given the scope of the project and offered a fairly balanced mix of demographics, ideologies, theories of change, and affiliations.

[116] Russell Hitchings and Alan Latham, “Qualitative methods I: On current conventions in interview research,” *Progress in Human Geography* 44:2 (2019): https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132519856412.

Many more interviewees may have proved cumbersome, while many fewer may have excluded diverse voices or missed out on niche progress affiliations.

The study received CUREC approval and was carried out according to standard ethical qualitative research principles. All participants read and signed an information-consent form agreeing to be interviewed, audiotaped, and in some cases video recorded, their identities anonymized in transcripts. All data were stored securely. Interviewees were found through professional databases in Scotland with the help of Local Energy Scotland and Community Energy Scotland. Interviewees affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) were discovered via internet communities associated with the Ecosocialist Working Group of DSA, on both a Slack group and Twitter Direct Message Group. The remainder of interviews were sourced through personal and professional networks, and through a snowballing technique in which interviewees volunteered suggestions for other interviewees. While interviewees were not selected according to a random sampling methodology, and there may be sampling bias given that some participants were solicited through my own networks, no interviewees who volunteered were turned away nor their interviews omitted (except in one case due to a technical problem with the audio recording).

Geographic representation includes swathes of Western Scotland and the Eastern United States, including participants in Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Georgia, Florida, Virginia, Washington, D.C., New York, and Connecticut. The study informally welcomed diversity in gender, sexual orientation, race, and economic class without specifically excluding anyone on this

basis or specifically recruiting anyone on this basis. Most participants are of European descent or nationality, but the study sought to represent non-European voices as well, and includes participants from backgrounds including U.S. nationals with second-generation migrant ethnic backgrounds from Kenya, Lebanon, Bangladesh, and India.

The participants' ages ranged from their twenties to seventies. Five generational cohorts, including Silent Generation, Baby Boomer, Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z, are represented. As attitudes toward intergenerational equity are examined—being central to many progress narratives—representation across generations was important. Further, tracing a temporally emergent value system phenomenon must entail understanding the motivations, values, and worldviews of participants across a spread of time including births from mid-20th century to late 1990s, across at least 60 years. Although not planned prior to the study, the snowballing technique yielded the opportunity to interview members of several parent-child relationships, which helped to both compare and trace value systems between two generational cohorts more directly.

Interviewees were invited to select their interview locations to maximize their comfort and openness, and to help mitigate any power imbalance between the researcher and the interviewees. This resulted in a range of interview locations, including public libraries, private homes, outdoor spaces including public parks, and community spaces including a hall and church. The physical context inflected the interviews in interesting ways. Sometimes the locations were significant for the topics covered: for example, one participant chose to meet at a

city-center park and talked about wanting to deconstruct the idea of environmentalism as a white middle-class enterprise, emphasizing the strong connections to nature held by urban Black, Latinx, and Asian-American communities. Sometimes these place-based resonances were more coincidental: on a university campus in Bloomington, an interview about fossil fuel industries and extractivism was interrupted by the sound of trees being cut down for development projects, which directly influenced the content of the discussion. And sometimes these locations were detrimental to the gathering of interview data, as in one instance in which an interviewee chose Whitelee Wind Farm in central Scotland and the audio recording was consequently rendered unusable by the volume of the wind. These instances served as reminders of the "'embodied' nature of field research,"[117] connecting the interview discourses with the material realities of energy production, local environments, and human bodies.

All interviews were conducted in person by the researcher. Questions evolved over the course of the interview period and took on a dynamic characteristic such that questions were adjusted to the course of conversation and to the backgrounds of the participants. While this dynamic quality of qualitative methods has been criticized as more vulnerable to researcher bias, or less scientific/objective than quantitative methods, it crucially allows geographers to be attentive to how these contextual details—the specificity of participants' demographics and of the interview place—shape cultural beliefs and discourses. Interviews typically included questions about participants' political engagement,

[117] Hitchings and Latham, "Qualitative methods I."

concern for the environment/climate crisis, and causes for hope/optimism (central emotional components to progressive ideology and psychology). In general, the interviews sought to elicit the common language of participants' movement community, identify the concepts commonly drawn on by those participants, and to better understand the various motivations behind their participation in their projects, organizations, and movements.

The data collected were handled carefully, anonymized, and stored digitally, and interview transcripts that are quoted have been superficially edited to preserve anonymity and enhance clarity for readers (i.e. place names and organization names are redacted where they would potentially reveal an interviewee's identity, and filler expressions and duplicate words have been removed), but otherwise these remain faithful to participants' own words. Interviewees were anonymized using an online-based random name generator with ethnically-correct bias and using a two-step anonymization process where pseudonym information was stored separately to the full names of participants.

Data Analysis

By selecting for "progressive practitioners," those who are engaged in positive social change with stated goals related to what they deemed making social-political progress, it was then possible to analyze the data to determine the extent to which their views toward a variety of political and economic subjects suggested commitments to ideological "growthism." With the help of artificial intelligence-augmented transcription software Otter.ai and NVivo12, the interview transcripts

were coded and analyzed for patterns in key words, values, and concepts used. First-order coding sought to determine the major concepts, frameworks, and values that participants used to articulate their motivations to engage in the projects they spent a considerable amount of their time on.

The coding process began by assigning descriptive codes to relevant passages through a method of "open coding," which involved scrutinizing the transcripts "line by line, word by word" to open up possible meanings and connections.[118] Such first-order in vivo codes included, for example, *Democratized ownership, Socialist organization, Social safety net, Empower local people, Grassroots, Local action, Communities, and Neighborhood advocacy*. Assigning descriptive in vivo codes rather than interpretative codes at this early stage intended to reduce researcher bias or inclinations to try to fit the data to pre-existing hypotheses. This helps to avoid "cherry picking" quotations since every interview was coded in its entirety to enable patterns to be drawn. These descriptive codes were then grouped together into broader analytic codes: for instance, in vivo codes like *democratized ownership*, *power to vote*, *grassroots organizing*, *no corporate money* were grouped under "Political Equality," while others such as *clean air and water*, *worry about climate change*, *respecting the earth*, *sustainability* were grouped under "Environmental Integrity and Biocentrism." These were then grouped under a handful of values like Democratic Localism and Establishment Wariness. In this way, the study was able to discern

[118] Anselm Strauss cited in Meghan Cope and Hilda Kurtz, "Organizing, Coding, and Analyzing Qualitative Data," in *Key Methods in Geography,* ed. Nicholas Clifford et al. (London: SAGE, 2016), 651.

patterns around interviewees' openness to degrowth and growth, and attitudes toward progress narratives.

Like Heidi Toivonen's recent study of climate change agency, in which she combines discourse analysis of interview transcripts with thematic analysis to evaluate how interviewees discursively constructed their (non)agency with regards to climate change, this study similarly involves "group[ing] coded extracts into broader meaning patterns," to establish overarching "themes" from related codes.[119] These themes can speak to the more abstract, conceptual frame of the thesis and connect with the historical discussion. An initial search for keywords at the core of the thesis including "progress," "growth," and "degrowth," produced limited results, and it became clear that explicit mentions of degrowth were outliers in the data. The data was subsequently re-coded with a "selective coding" method: a more systematic approach once the key ideas had been identified through evaluation of both the interview transcripts and historical and academic literatures. This selective coding focused on identifying values pertaining to growthism, such as *profit*, *development*, *economic growth*, *population growth*. While interviewees rarely talked about progress and degrowth in explicit terms, unless prompted, these codes helped to illustrate the various ways participants *did* often invoke growthist values or belief in a progressive teleology, even while promoting or engaging in an activity often included under degrowth umbrellas. When discussing renewable energy, for example—a technology frequently cited as necessary to a

[119] Heidi Toivonen, "Themes of climate change agency: a qualitative study on how people construct agency in relation to climate change," *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 9, no. 102 (2022): 1–11.

degrowth future—interviewees would commonly remark positively on the profit-generating capacities of renewable energy sources and their continued expansion (a growthist value), and invoke the belief that fossil fuels will soon be outpaced and replaced by renewables as part of a more sustainable, less polluting—but nevertheless high-tech, energy-dense—future (a progressive belief).

In addition to NVivo analysis, the interviews were also analyzed through a hermeneutic methodology akin to "close reading" in literary criticism to tease out nuances that open and analytic coding might miss. This additional method was particularly beneficial for identifying ironies and inconsistencies within and across interviews: for example, one interviewee worked for a primarily fossil-fuel based energy company while also voicing support for his son, another interviewee who campaigned for ending fossil-fuel use. This connection could not be easily coded for, yet it is representative of complexities important to the discourse analysis, where beliefs about growth, progress, development, and energy are often in tension.

Positionality

Discussion of researchers' membership roles has long been a consideration in ethnography and observation, but the relevance of this discussion extends to other qualitative methods including interviews.[120] Mike Crang notes that in place of "the

[120] Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle, "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2009): https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105.

God-trick of the invisible, omnipresent narrator" that once dominated academic writing, "the bodily presence of the researcher is now acknowledged" in qualitative research as an embodied interpreter and maker of meaning.[121] Who the researcher is, where they come from, their experience and expertise, all inflect the relationships fostered with participants, the kinds of questions that are asked, how they are answered, and how those responses are interpreted by the researcher. It is the responsibility of the researcher to be self-reflexive about the ethical implications and relationships fostered in the course of the research process, and so I comment here on my positionality.

In contrast with many ethnographies that take place with major economic and geographically mediated asymmetries, all interviews took place in regions comparable in average per capita income to those in which I have lived. While quantitative data collection relies on the facade of "objectivity" and often attempts to conceal the identity of the researcher, qualitative data collection operates more on principles of trust and rapport between the researcher and those being researched. I was likely viewed as an "insider" among many of the interviewees. At the time of interviews, I was a dues-paying member of DSA,[122] a public advocate of renewable energy and degrowth, and have had extensive experience practicing climate and environmental activism. This information was sporadically disclosed to interviewees. Some of the interviewees were themselves professional researchers

[121] Mike Crang, "Qualitative methods: touchy, feely, look-see?" *Progress in Human Geography* 27, no. 4 (2003): 499, https://doi.org/10.1191/0309132503ph445pr.
[122] I have held no leadership positions and have not been an active participant in any campaigns, particularly given that I have been residing outside the country for the vast bulk of my membership in the organization.

and may have seen me as a colleague. As such, I started from a position of rapport with most interviewees and a sense of being "on the same team." My identity and role as an academic was to some interviewees likely a point of connection, whereas with others, this may have created distance, particularly in groups that tend to be wary of institutional authority. Further, some interviewees were personally close to me, and so may have been influenced by that intimacy.

While sometimes differences can be anticipated and to an extent mediated, unexpected differences can become evident during the interaction.[123] Drawing from feminist geography and psychoanalytic research, Liz Bondi acknowledges that researchers should be aware of how these differences—especially structural inequalities—can impact research relationships, but foregrounds the "importance of empathy as a process that enables the creation of interpersonal and intrapsychic spaces in which similarities and differences can be mobilised, expressed and explored."[124] To make the research more interactive and to reduce the gap between researcher and researched, some of the interviews were more conversational and involved me answering interviewees' questions and us collectively sharing knowledge and experience.[125]

Max Liboiron advises that identifying oneself through land relations and connections to colonial structures helps readers "understand where authors are speaking from, what ground they stand on, whom their obligations are to, what

[123] Liz Bondi, "Empathy and Identification: Conceptual Resources for Feminist Fieldwork," *ACME* 2, no. 1 (2003): 66.
[124] Bondi, "Empathy and Identification," 67.
[125] Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle, "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (2009): https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105.

forms of sovereignty are being leveraged, what structures of privilege the settler state affords, and how we are related so that our obligations to one another as speaker and listener, writer and audience, can be *specific enough to enact obligations to one another*."[126] In the historical analysis, most arguments being made are with regard to the "West," drawing primarily from Euroamerican texts and contexts. Given that I was born, raised, and have lived most of my adult life in the Midwestern and Eastern United States, and have lived in the United Kingdom for nearly seven years, anglophone sources were most heavily engaged with and the analysis is careful not to make too many universalist claims beyond that scope. My academic background allows me to speak on Western histories and contexts and my aim has been to approach these critically, rather than to impose conclusions from these literatures on other parts of the world, which have their own epistemological traditions. Indeed, Indigenous authors are given voice where their authority is more appropriate, and the primary critique is leveled at Euroamerican elite intellectual and political figures.

In addition to a Midwestern American upbringing, I was raised in a secular household whose primary stand-in for religious belief was progressive politics. Being a lifelong progressive activist and environmentalist with "degrowth" sympathies,[127] turning analytical scrutiny to the idea of progress itself has required acting against my deeply held biases. These biases have not hindered my ability to find and analyze these connections. Given that the degrowth community is

[126] Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 4.
[127] That is, sympathies in favor of ecological well-being trumping economic growth, even when those sympathies were not called "degrowth."

small and that my values are sympathetic to its goals, I have probably tempered, consciously or otherwise, my language in critiquing degrowthism, but have not omitted any scrutiny that is warranted from the evidence presented. Despite my origins and the sets of values those origins entail, I have aimed to point a critical eye toward them and to avoid imposing those values on other cultures, literatures, and perspectives.

Historical Analysis

Introduction

By constructing a critical genealogy, this chapter investigates the central historiographic research question: **How do growth economies relate to progressive narratives through (primarily Western) history?** As discussed in the literature review, this historical analysis is based on the hypothesis that growth economies emerged between the third and fourth millennia BCE in Mesopotamia. Growth economies are here defined as sociotechnical metabolic systems in which extraction, production, and excretion occur in a linear and ecologically exclusionary, non-sustainable process with compounding growth as a necessary component for stability. The chapter aims to show that such growth-oriented political economies have typically depended for their material and cultural reproduction on metaideological narratives of progress. To show this codevelopment, the chapter traces an intellectual lineage through various cultures and geographies, primarily in a Western context, over the span of history in which growth economies gained ascendance.

As the first growth economies entailed a major break in the material relations between humans and other life on earth, so with it came a break in cultural relations and the narratives that were developed to explain and justify why things were the way they were, including phenomena like hierarchies, societal origins, technologies, and notions of human purpose. The aim of this chapter is to show how the shift to growthist political economies entailed the birth of new

mythologies that sought to reproduce entirely new ecological and cultural relations. Chief among them, and of greatest interest here, is a progressive metanarrative based on the compounding conquest of new territory and resources, linear advancement to an improved future, and a progressive historiography—an understanding of history unfolding from categories often understood as "savage to civilized" or simple to complex—which accompanied the economic mandate of growthist logics and provided the theoretical and cultural justification for their extractive imperatives. As Robert Nisbet argues, "No single idea has been more important than [...] the idea of progress in Western civilization for nearly three thousand years."[128] He goes on to suggest that, "from Hesiod and possibly Homer on, the faith in progress has been [...] the dominant faith."[129]

Such progress narratives carried a new cosmogony distinct from the primarily animistic ones of Indigenous cultures. Progress myths have always been important for growth-based states and economies—and those conditions in which people must be compelled to forego their immediate needs—because they tap into notions of "greater good" that justify present deprivation for future reward, they serve as foundations for intellectual and ethical systems that can convincingly explain the necessity of harms and wrongs, and they place the focus on a faraway frontier, rather than the immediate present space and time, around which otherwise competing classes can unify. Progress is gratifying because, in a sense, it grants a sense of immortality and meaning, or at least a sense of softening mortality: one's toils are not in vain because they are contributing to future

[128] Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.
[129] Nisbet, *Progress*, 4.

paradise, whether earthly or heavenly. Because progress myths have frequently been the founding, motivating intellectual systems behind growth economies, understanding their evolution can serve as a proxy for understanding the evolution of growthism itself, helping to put a cultural, intellectual contour around the different material shapes such economies take.

The genealogy is organized in a largely chronological structure, separated into four periods. These categories are delineated according to a periodization developed for the analysis. Each period represents the introduction of new paradigmatic progress narratives. The first period traces the rise of theological progress narratives, primarily those found in early Mesopotamian and Abrahamic myths systems, as well as semi-secular Classical Mediterranean ideologies. This section draws on material from primary holy texts, theological writings, and secondary analysis. The second period examines the roles of Christianity and Islam as forces enabling certain kinds of consolidation and growth during the Medieval period and their relationship to secular ideas of growth and progress. This section draws primarily on secondary analysis and material from holy texts and Medieval scholarship. The third period investigates the ideas of growth and progress that arise during the “Age of Discovery,” primarily in the European Enlightenment, and their role in maritime growth that occurs during this period. This section utilizes letters, diaries, primary texts, and secondary analysis. The final section looks at the ideas of growth and progress arising during industrialization, drawing from original and secondary texts, and tracing lineages of more modern growth/progress narratives to their antecedents. Following the four

sections of the genealogical analysis, a Findings section illustrates patterns that emerge from analyzing this lineage of progress narratives. Finally, a Discussion section tends to some remaining questions raised by the analysis and suggestions for further research, as well as considering the advantages and limitations of the definition of growth/ism used in this study.

In all of the cases used in this study, each progress narrative or concept adheres to at least one of the criteria included in the definition above, while each example of a “growth” or “growthist” society adheres to at least one of the criteria included in the definitions above, at least during the time they are examined in this analysis. For instance, one could make a historical argument that Athens, in the time as it has existed as a political entity, has not always been “growthist,” in the sense used in this study, nor in more conventional definitions of “growth.” However, during the time examined in this analysis, when savage/civilized discourses are deployed and Athens is seen as the pinnacle of civilization, justifying its position in racial terms as pure and superior, justified in enslaving other populations, I argue that it is also a growth oriented economy because it is engaging in wars of conquest, enslavement, and a market economy predicated on profit, technological development, and expansion. In the Findings section below, each example is organized according to a typology of growth/ism.

A Genealogy of Growth & Progress

Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, Old Testament, Classical Empires from 2900 BCE

An early version of progress metanarratives arose in Babylonia, along the Tigris-Euphrates that was the likely home of the world's first urban centers, settled market economies, and empires. The Enuma Elish may be the earliest such progress myth dedicated to the cultural reproduction of growthism.[130] The story was read each New Year in Babylon by priests and leaders to celebrate "the progress of the cosmos from initial anarchy to government by the kingship of [the god] Marduk."[131] Marduk was one of a pantheon of gods commonly adopted by aspiring rulers. The god was also deeply entwined with the rise of other growthist political economies in Mesopotamia, like Assyria, but Babylon was where the Marduk cult was strongest, helping to usher its development from a city-state to the nucleus of an expansive empire.[132] The myth sought to establish a sense of forward momentum in Babylonia, "resonating with an audience who understood Babylon as a city breaking with the traditions of the past to create a new and better future."[133] The Marduk cult and broader theology and cosmogony espoused in

[130] L. W. King, trans.,"Enuma Elish: The Epic of Creation," *The Seven Tablets of Creation* (London, 1902), https://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm.
[131] Richard G. A. Buxton, "Functions of myth and mythology," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 3 November 2020, https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth/Functions-of-myth-and-mythology#ref386978.
[132] Joshua J. Mark, "Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text," *World History Encyclopedia*, 4 May 2018, https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/enuma-elish---the-babylonian-epic-of-creation---fu/.
[133] Mark, "Enuma Elish."

Enuma Elish was central to a new understanding of societal and historical progress.

Babylonia represents a typical example of the growthist empires of the classical world, in that it depended on expansion and the use of forced labor and conscription to extract energy through exclusionary agriculture. Though the precise proportion of enslaved people in the population is not known, wealthy households regularly held many people enslaved, and slaves in Babylonian society rarely left servitude.[134] Backlash to such conditions could be modulated and mitigated with the cult of Marduk and the promises made by this progressive myth system a useful tool for rulers to justify to peasants or slaves their place at the bottom of a hierarchy of energy capture. This burgeoning mythology was combined with newly codified, systematized civil law—Hammurabi's Code—serving as powerful psychological and social mortars holding together Babylonian civil society. Ian Morris calls the social contract that solidified these systems the "Old Deal," writing that it is, "a simple idea: that nature and the gods required that some people should give commands while others obeyed them, and as long as everyone played their parts properly, all would be for the best in the best of all possible worlds."[135] In other words, this belief system was predicated on the assumption that material and spiritual progress could only be achieved with rigid adherence to established hierarchies of extraction. Such gods like Marduk, and the promises of progress priests made on their behalf, were a critical element of

[134] H. D. Baker, "Degrees of Freedom: Slavery in Mid-First Millennium BC Babylonia," *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (2001): 18–26, https://www.jstor.org/stable/827886.
[135] Ian Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 72.

this Old Deal social contract, which remained remarkably consistent through millennia of contiguous growth.[136] In a similar vein, and as mentioned in the literature review, the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh tells the story of a Mesopotamian king who opens forests to markets by slaying the ecological-mythological guardian of the forest. This myth shows up in the record around the time the vast forests around modern Lebanon and Syria are deforested.[137]

While Babylon and Enuma Elish may have been the site of the first known progress narratives, other growth-oriented progress narratives arrived with the sloughing away of peripheral polytheistic pantheons, and the rise of monotheism with the Abrahamic religions. The Genesis of the Old Testament refers to that cosmogony at the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, whose adherents make up more than half the world's population today.[138] The Old Testament may be a direct descendant of the Enuma Elish, containing similar themes and narratives including an original void and ecological cataclysms like the flood myth. Whether directly inspired or not, the two myths evolved to serve a similar function: the reproduction of social relations conducive to an extraction- and expansion-dependent political economy. In some ways, Genesis provided an even more explicit justification for the sundering of humanity and ecology, and rebutting the animism of non-growth beliefs directly:

> **26** And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air,

[136] Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels.*
[137] David Wengrow, *What Makes Civilization? The Ancient Near East and the Future of the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[138] Conrad Hackett and David McClendon, "Christians remain world's largest religious group, but they are declining in Europe," *Pew Research Center*, 5 April 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/.

> and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. **28** And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.[139]

The God of Abraham granted humans souls separate from nature, and with them, stewardship and supremacy over it. The "dominion" of the Genesis myth, or the "cultural mandate," provided a divine justification for humanity's control of nature, in contrast to animistic beliefs and more centrally than polytheistic ones, the former of which ascribe to nature intrinsic rather than purely instrumental value. Dominion transformed ecologies into discrete units—livestock, productive grain fields—with only instrumental value: the worth of non-human life and ecological systems derives only to the extent that they serve human needs or reflect God's glory. Suddenly, nature ceased to exist as an irreducible reality: God instead became the atomic form of existence, the beginning and totality from which nature merely springs. With energy capture in these early imperial economies occurring through vast agricultural projects, which necessarily pared biodiversity down to a few productive species, people in extractive roles no longer needed to understand the intricate mechanics of nature as long as they understood the will of God (and the many practical agrarian lessons imparted by the divine and included in theological texts).

The Book of Genesis provides the theological basis for the Abrahamic progress myth, but it also models practically, for contemporaneous and future adherents of scripture, what it looks like to put one's faith into promises of divine

[139] Genesis 1:26–28, King James Version, *Bible Gateway*, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201:26-28&version=KJV.

progress, showing in detail what rewards may come from obeying this particular god:

> **12** Now the Lord had said unto Abram [later Abraham], Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: **2** And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: **3** And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.[140]

That promised land was Canaan. Canaan was not an empty territory given over to the Israelites by God; rather, it was populated by a different people and identified as a target of conquest. The Israelites, according to the Old Testament, used the divinely ordained and sanctified justification to expand and extract another land and people through force.[141] That is to say, this early form of progress myth was explicitly used as social and moral justification for opening a frontier of imperial growthism. "Promised land" has become a ubiquitous metaphor for many progress myths that have come after. As with all such narratives, the original promised land did not suffice—limits are reached and expansion must continue, new rulers require new targets of conquest—and a new land was promised. Abraham's grandson Israel was guaranteed similar plenty in Egypt where his own son Joseph had been made governor:

> **46: 2** And God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob. And he said, Here am I. **3** And he said, I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great

[140] Genesis 12, King James Version, *Bible Gateway*, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+12&version=KJV.
[141] Mordechai Cogan, "Israel's Incomplete Conquest of Canaan," *The Torah*, 25 January 2022, https://www.thetorah.com/article/israels-incomplete-conquest-of-canaan.

> nation: **4** I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again.[142]

The tale of the Messiah and the Promised Land is the central progress myth driving events in Genesis, and continues in Exodus, with Moses leading Hebrews out of Egypt and into the Levant. Clifford Backman notes that at this stage the mission of the messiah was still largely an earthly progress narrative, "one designed to secure for the Jews security and prosperity in this life, rather than spiritual rewards in a life hereafter."[143] The promise of a better future would sustain even decades-long wandering in a desert, an instructive lesson for subjects of growthist political economies: if you mirror such faith through the travails of poverty, deprivation, and collective suffering, you too can be rewarded with a land of plenty, eventually. Of course, it is a cliche to proclaim religion a form of social control, from Marx's famous declaration that religion is the opium of the people, or sigh of the oppressed,[144] to contemporary macrohistorian Yuval Noah Harari claiming, "The crucial historical role of religion has been to give superhuman legitimacy to [...] fragile [social] structures. Religions assert that our laws are [...] ordained by an absolute and indisputable authority. This helps place at least some fundamental laws beyond challenge, thereby ensuring social stability."[145] Peter Turchin, meanwhile, joins a long line of scholars pointing to religion as a social adhesive to maintain unity among sprawling empires: "World religions first appeared during the Axial Age and provided a basis for integrating multiethnic

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[142] Genesis 46, King James Version, *Bible Gateway*, https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2046&version=KJV.
[143] Clifford R. Backman, *Worlds of Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.
[144] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," *Marx: Early Political Writings*, Joseph J. O'Malley, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57–70.
[145] Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2015), 234.

populations within first mega-empires, such as Achaemenid Persia (Zoroastrianism), Han China (Confucianism), and Maurya Empire (Buddhism)."[146] But it's important to note that this social control does not happen due to some *a priori* or intrinsic dysfunction in human psychology, a "god gene"[147] or some other will-to-divine-subservience. It develops across time, culture, and geography, according to a specific logic and imperative of maintaining the expansion necessary to maintain or increase rates of energy capture. These *particular* theologies have functioned as tools of growth, which provides the rationale necessary to compel masses of people to impose that logic of extraction on frontiers of conquest. We can therefore understand these narratives in a new light: as part of a lineage of thought promising better futures that expansive states use as a means of morally laundering and practically justifying their rule, and compelling workers and soldiers necessary for such projects to go along with activities that may otherwise violate the ethical principles of those classes.

While scholarship on progress narratives tends to place the origin of secular progressive historiography around the European Enlightenment, and casts earlier European historiographies as more cyclical, Robert Nisbet convincingly traces the origin of a progressive historiography in Western thought to Greek antiquity.[148] The idea that society emerges from a primitive past into sophisticated civilization, and

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[146] Peter Turchin, et al., "Evolution of Old World complex societies," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 41 (2013): 16384–16389.
[147] See Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired Into Our Genes* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), largely dismissed by M. Goldman, "The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired Into Our Genes," *Nature Genetics* 36, no. 1241 (2004): https://doi.org/10.1038/ng1204-1241.
[148] See titles including: Matthew W. Slaboch, *A Road to Nowhere: The Idea of Progress and its Critics* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 4; Peter Wagner, *Progress: A Reconstruction* (Polity Press, 2016); and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (W. W. Norton, Inc. 1991), 54.

is gradually moving toward an idealized golden age, comes not from the capitalist states of 18th-century Europe, but from one of the earliest thinkers of the Western canon, Hesiod, and again develops through such thinkers as Protagoras, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Zeno, Lucretius, and Seneca.[149] Hesiod's eighth-century didactic poem *Works and Days* marks the beginning of the European epistemic tradition of *secular* societal progress.[150] In this narrative, Hesiod puts forth a history of societal development that leads from a chaotic past to a more stable present, mirroring that of the *theological* Semitic and Babylonian myths that predate it by several centuries. Thucydides, meanwhile, begins his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* by reminding readers that the Greeks had once been like barbarians, but through the progressive momentum of history they had ascended to the pinnacle of civilization.[151] Like others of his class, time, and nation, Thucydides saw Greek civilization at the apex of history (one might even imagine some scholar describing an "end of history" in the Periclean golden age). Even if there is merit to some claims to "advancement"—like an increase in knowledge production—it served the Athenian state's material political ends to place itself in such heights.

Benjamin Isaac observes in *The Origins of Racism in the West* that classical Greece and Rome developed racial theories to rationalize imperial territorial expansion and domination of other peoples, much like their Enlightenment descendants would. Athenians, for instance, believed themselves

[149] Robert A. Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (London: Routledge, 1994).
[150] Nisbet, *Progress*, 13.
[151] Nisbet, *Progress*, 26.

to be endowed with exceptional racial "purity," in contrast with other peoples whom they considered lesser, due to being "mixed" and degraded:

> the essence of this is first encountered in the treatise Airs, Waters, Places (16, 23), which insists that the inhabitants of Asia are soft because of their good climate and resources. They are less belligerent and gentler in character than the Europeans, who are more courageous and belligerent. Aristotle (Politica 1327b) then claimed that the Greeks, combining the best qualities of both groups, were therefore capable of ruling all mankind – an early, if not the first, text to suggest that Greeks should achieve universal rule. No less important: these ideas were taken over, suitably adapted, by the Romans.[152]

Athenians promoted these arguments to countenance slavery, in which those targeted were "described as collectively having the qualities which slaves of the Greeks should have." Being considered subhuman, their enslaved people "live best in a symbiotic relationship with fully human masters."[153] The labor of workers, farmers, and soldiers was a common component to most, or all, ancient growthism. Racial hierarchies served growth in a dual function: they provided justification for conquest by framing it as the act of civilizing otherwise savage, barbaric races, and it served as a means of ethnically classifying and distinguishing those working in forced labor internally, whether agricultural slaves or house servants or otherwise. This racialism would continue to remain vital to growth societies, and elements of progress narratives, well into the 20th century, as we will see in later sections.

Lucretius, a Roman poet who influenced later Augustan poets like Virgil, left only one work, *On the Nature of Things*, written in the first century BCE. This work

[152] Benjamin Isaac, "Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," *World Archaeology* 38, no. 1 (2006): 32–47, www.jstor.org/stable/40023593.
[153] Isaac, "Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity," 32–47.

influenced European Enlightenment thinking and anticipates Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Lucretius offers a prime example of a Roman philosopher of progress, whose work was "designed to have a reassuring effect upon the Romans of his day."[154] Lucretius promoted a secular philosophy espousing reason, rationality, and republican politics. His tale of humanity's progress begins with the notion of a primitive savage whose cunning in building weapons enabled him to gradually construct civilization, which then birthed kings, property, and gods. Lucretius departs from a strictly linear path: society descends into mob rule for a while, but civilization reasserts itself, triumphs, and, in Nisbet's words, a new phase appears with "genuine government and law, with settled principles existing where once only arbitrary, monarchical power had prevailed."[155]

While Lucretius himself favored republican government, the ideas of human progress and the intellectual lineage he contributed to would be co-opted by those ruling the Roman political class for the assertion of monarchical power and expansionism. Six years after Lucretius died, Julius Caesar seized the city, marking Rome's symbolic tipping of power from republican institutions toward a new class of emperors. Rome's economy had long been growthist, aggressively expanding into Europe, North Africa, and the Levant while ruled by an oligarchy of Senators and generals. Ashley Dawson notes, "the Roman Empire was probably responsible for the greatest annihilation of large animals since the Pleistocene megafauna mass extinction. As was true of the Sumerians, Rome annihilated most of the large animals it could get its hands on and reduced most of the lands it

[154] Nisbet, *Progress*, 38.
[155] Nisbet, *Progress*, 41.

conquered to desert."[156] Dawson illustrates this growthism through their resource-driven expansionism:

> First Egypt, then Sicily, and finally North Africa were turned into the granary of the empire in order to provide Rome's citizens with their free supply of daily bread. Deforestation caused by the Romans' agricultural enterprises spread from Morocco to the hills of Galilee to the Sierra Nevada of Spain. Like the Sumerians, the Romans failed to engage in sustainable forms of agriculture, seeking instead to expand their way out of ecological crisis.[157]

Caesar's nephew Octavian, taking the imperial name and title Caesar Augustus, ushered in nearly two centuries of relative internal peace that has come to be called *Pax Romana*. Ali Parchami describes the ideology of Pax Romana like this:

> Ideologically, the Pax Romana was predicated upon the universality of Rome's political and military authority, as well as its laws, institutions, customs, and cultural mores. It was a conceptualization which claimed that Providence had ordained the Romans with the task of conquering and civilizing the world. The mythological stories surrounding the foundations of the city of Rome suggest that from the earliest times the Romans firmly believed in Providence and in their national destiny.[158]

Augustus justified his rule in part with an aggressive propaganda campaign that styled his administration a Golden Age of expansion, order, and progress, using poets to glorify it. Virgil, one of the most important poets of the time, insisted that the gods willed Roman rule, and that the Empire "should bring the entire world under its laws."[159] The *Aeneid*, Parchami notes, is "littered with the notions of manifest destiny, providence, and divine will," and not just the works of Virgil, but other important Augustan writers like Livy and Horace. Virgil's Jupiter proclaims:

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[156] Ashley Dawson, *Extinction: A Radical History* (London: OR Books, 2016), 34.
[157] Dawson, *Extinction*, 32–33.
[158] Ali Parchami, *Hegemonic Peace and Empire: The Pax Romana, Britannica and Americana* (London: Routledge, 2009), 26.
[159] Parchami, *Hegemonic Peace and Empire*, 26.

"To the Romans I assign limits neither to the extent nor to the duration of their empire; dominion have I given them without end."[160]

The founding of the Roman Empire coincides neatly with the life of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. While the historical Jesus may have been a political zealot who sought to undermine the growthist imperial economy of Rome and its extractive incursions in Judea,[161] within three centuries, the Empire found it expedient to co-opt the message of Christianity—as it had done with its own paganism—and turn the growing religion toward the ends of Rome's ever-expanding imperial economy.

Although there remains some debate around his conversion, it is clear that Roman Emperor Constantine I converted the Empire to Christianity for primarily political motives: to maintain control of the state, to grow it, and to ensure it stayed intact long-term. As he saw it, a monotheistic empire would be more effective at both unity and continued growth than a more pluralistic pagan one. Garth Fowden writes, "Constantine does not just Christianize the Roman Empire; he unifies it too. And he expounds a worldview to which, though it was not absolutely original, he gave new force: one god, one empire, one emperor."[162] Its built-in evangelism and

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[160] Theodor E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (1951): 346–374, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2707751.
Pax Romana would be invoked many centuries later by Austrian aristocrat Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi as apologia for "Pax Americana" and U.S. military supremacy in the 20th century, emulating Augustus's reign bringing centuries of, in his words, "peace and progress"—it's no coincidence that this Pax Americana rhetoric accompanies the world's greatest period of growth, the Great Acceleration. See: Richard Nicolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi, *Crusade for Pan-Europe: Autobiography of a Man and a Movement* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1943), 299–304.
[161] Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Penguin Random House, 2014).
[162] Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 88.

notion of the Christian "mission" helped spread the Empire, as well as the faith, as Constantine aimed to replace the paganism of Rome with Christianity, "beyond as well as within his own frontiers—an entirely new understanding of the Roman emperor's role."[163] Constantine's ambition was not theological; he sought to take advantage of what he considered, in Fowden's words, an "unprecedented opportunity" for building "world empire," and the "infinite expansion of the dominions he had inherited and conquered." He could achieve this "by the union of imperial impetus and missionary monotheism, Christianity and Rome."[164] The mission embedded progress in Christianity: missionaries brought a message of eternal peace and joy in heaven in exchange for submission on earth.

The new religion was at home in Rome's growthist economy and culture. Dawson writes:

> By the time Christianity became the official state religion of Rome in the late 4th century, there was little to differentiate Roman philosophy from the dominant attitude of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, in whose creation myth God grants human beings absolute dominion over the world he has made. Humanity, the Bible and Christian tradition held, was placed apart from nature by God, gifted with an immortal soul and a capacity for rational thought that legitimated the transformation of the natural world in the pursuit of human self-interest.[165]

Constantine's empire fulfills the promise of Abraham, becoming "the definitive force of providence in history," which, in Nisbet's interpretation, "promises to the Christian the prospect of an ever triumphant and ever improving society."[166] That is to say, Christianity guarantees progress; Christianity becomes one of the central

[163] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 91.
[164] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 139.
[165] Dawson, *Extinction,* 35.
[166] Nisbet, *Progress*, 53.

means of fueling the engine of extractivism and expansion in Europe. This began the process of exterminating and supplanting alternative belief systems in central Europe, and allowed for the continued expansion of Rome's economy. This process was non-linear: 30 years after Rome officially adopted Christianity, pagan Visigoth King Alaric sacked the city, leaving the future of Christian hegemony in doubt. This proved a temporary setback, however; the Christianization of Europe was deeply imbued in power structures, of which Constantine set the stage by instituting quasi-judicial powers for bishops, through changes to marriage and divorce law, and by introducing new punishment for heretics.[167] Constantine's immediate successors swung between pagan and Christian rule until, in the latter fourth century, Theodosius I launched an aggressive campaign of destroying pagan temples and purging the Empire of heretics. His administration employed a paramilitary force of Christian monks who attacked pagan sites of worship. According to Libanius, where these monks invaded, "utter desolation follows, with the stripping of roofs, demolition of walls, the tearing down of statues and the overthrow of altars."[168]

If Constantine provided the political foundation for a Christian progress myth at the heart of expansive economies in Europe, Augustine of Hippo provided its philosophical foundation. Born Aurelius Augustinus in the Roman province of Numidia, in what is today Algeria, Augustine became one of the most important figures in establishing the intellectual basis of Western Christendom. He was

[167] For details of Constantine's "Pro-Christian Legislation," see Chapter 6, no. 5 in Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine: Dynasty, Religion and Power in the Later Roman Empire* (Wiley, 2011).
[168] Libanius, "Pro Templis (Oration XXX.8-10)," in *Libanius: Selected Orations*, ed. and trans. A. F. Norman (Loeb Classical Library, 1977).

among those thinkers formulating the concept of original sin and "just war" theory, the latter of which was an attempt to reconcile Christian pacificism with the intrinsically violent imperative of growthist states to wage war and conquest. This was an essential moral and philosophical contribution if Christian states like Constantine's were to maintain their position. Nisbet compares a passage from Book 22 to Lucretius, nodding to Augustine's commitment to heavenly progress myths: "What wonderful [...] advances has human industry made in the arts of weaving and building, of agriculture and navigation."[169] And such wonders may continue, he suggests, but only if they are accomplished through Christianity: "For over and above those arts which are called virtues, and which teach us how we may spend our life well, and attain to endless happiness—arts which are given to the children of the promise and the kingdom by the sole grace of God which is in Christ."[170]

Theodor E. Mommsen suggests that early Christian thinkers tied the material prosperity of Pax Romana and its embedded narrative of progress to Christianity: "As the appearance of Christ coincided with a marked improvement of all things secular, so, the early apologists argued, the growth of the new faith will be accompanied by further progress."[171] Eusebius and Tertullian, important early Christian thinkers and polemicists, also argued that the progress of Pax Romana could be directly tied to the rise of Christianity. In Augustine's *City of God*, Nisbet notes that "all of the really vital, essential elements of the Western idea of progress

[169] Nisbet, *Progress*, 55.
[170] Nisbet, *Progress*, 54.
[171] Theodor E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (1951): 346–374.

are present: [...] the unfolding, cumulative advancement of mankind [...] the idea of time as a unilinear flow [...] the conception of stages and epochs [...] the idea of conflict of cities, nations, and classes as the motor spring of the historical process."[172]

This section has examined how progress narratives emerged with the first stirrings of states, empires, markets, and commercial economies. From mostly polytheistic and semi-secular origins in Mesopotamian and Classical Mediterranean societies—including works like Enuma Elish, the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the monotheistic Old Testament, to the ideology of Pax Romana—progress narratives evolved into a co-opted imperial Christianity, which served to consolidate the latter Roman Empire in Europe and provide a framework for uniting disparate polities. The next section examines how this process was taken further through Christianization of European pagans and the expansion of Islamic empire through the progress narratives embedded in Islam.

Medieval Islamdom and Christendom from 700 CE

Classical growth economies like Athens and Rome that developed techniques for traversing large bodies of water to maintain growth underwent a process of semi-secularization in their understanding of progress as it relates to growth. Part of this process occurred through the development of distinct political ideologies that maintained ambivalent relationships to dominant religious beliefs, variably hostile,

[172] Nisbet, *Progress*, 76.

appropriative, and deferential. The Islamic world developed a complex and illuminating relationship between secular and theological progress as it experienced an intellectual "golden age" and large, wealthy empire that spanned the eighth through the 13th centuries.[173] This period marks perhaps the first, or at least longest and most productive, foray into the marriage of Abrahamic theology with secular ideologies to produce a progress metaideology to justify the maintenance and expansion of growth economies, which would prove an important inspiration for the European Enlightenment that followed.

During the Islamic Golden Age, Baghdad became a global center of trade, scholarship, and invention. Algebra was developed, classical texts were recorded, preserved, and translated, new writing systems emerged, degree-granting universities were founded, and new theories of law were developed, joined by foundational ideas in philosophy, psychology, and logic. Medicine developed thoroughly during this time: Ibn Sina's *Canon of Medicine* remained an authoritative text for half a millennium.[174] Fields including astronomy, mathematics, and chemistry saw important refinements.[175] Al-Sufi provided a scientific description of the Andromeda Galaxy and Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf translated Euclid's *Elements* from Ancient Greek. Contrary to perceptions in the West of science and religion as fundamentally opposed in their explanations for natural phenomena,

[173] Some may balk at a "golden age" framing, especially when contrasted against a subsequent "dark age," but there can be no doubt that this period produced an abundance of scholarship and learning—and also gold. For a contrary opinion, see Asad Q. Ahmed, "Islam's invented Golden Age," *openDemocracy*, 28 October 2013, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/openindia/islams-invented-golden-age/.
[174] Matthew E. Falagas, Effie A. Zarkadoulia, and George Samonis, "Arab science in the golden age (750–1258 C.E.) and today," *FASEB* 20, no. 10 (2006): 1581–1586, https://doi.org/10.1096/fj.06-0803ufmopen_in_new.
[175] Falagas et al., "Arab science," 1581–1586.

Islamic scholars perceived no such conflict, or found useful reconciliations. As Dennis Overbye reflects, “Commanded by the Koran to seek knowledge and read nature for signs of the Creator, and inspired by a treasure trove of ancient Greek learning, Muslims created a society that in the Middle Ages was the scientific center of the world.”[176]

Polymaths akin to those of the later European Renaissance arose. Frequently compared with Leonardo da Vinci, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni is credited as the first anthropologist and father of geology.[177] Though a pioneer of comparative religions, Biruni was confident that Islam was supreme, in one work imploring the reader to consider “how much superior the institutions of Islam are, and how more plainly this contrast brings out all customs and usages, differing from those of Islam, in their essential foulness.”[178] This view was no aberration, with Islam springing from a similar sense of historical progress as that embodied in Christianity. Most Islamic sects see Muhammad as the final prophet—*a la* a sort of end of history following from Old Testament origins—in a lineage of prophets occurring throughout the Abrahamic tradition, rendering the political leader the culmination of historical and spiritual progress. Like Constantine using Christianity as a political tool of unification and domination in Europe three centuries before him, Muhammad founded this new branch of Abrahamic monotheism to unite

[176] Dennis Overbye, “How Islam Won, and Lost, the Lead in Science,” *The New York Times.* 30 October 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/30/science/how-islam-won-and-lost-the-lead-in-science.html.
[177] Jim Al-Khalili, “It’s time to herald the Arabic science that prefigured Darwin and Newton,” *The Guardian*, 30 January 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jan/30/religion.world.
[178] Mihai Andrei, “Meet Islam’s Da Vinci: Al-Biruni, father of geodesy, anthropology, and master of pharmacy,” *ZME Science*, 27 November 2020, https://www.zmescience.com/other/feature-post/meet-islams-da-vinci-al-biruni-father-of-geodesy-anthropology-and-master-of-pharmacy/.

disparate polities: to build and strengthen what became a growthist empire. Like its Christian cousin, Islam contains the same promise of off-world after-death paradise reserved for believers who correctly and fully submit ("Islam" is an Arabic word meaning "submission") to Allah.

The Abbasid Caliphs encouraged the high degree of learning during the Golden Age. These rulers, however, were not benevolent philosopher kings, but the same sorts of rulers that governed growthist economies in the Classical world. Bernard K. Freamon notes that the caliphs demanded absolute loyalty from the population, punished disobedience with public executions, and lived in palaces staffed by slaves. Male slaves were often castrated, enslaved, and shipped from Africa, India, and the Caucasus Mountains, while female slaves were seized from surrounding localities by the caliphal armies and put to work as concubines.[179] As Freamon writes, "[Most] of the imperial conquests accomplished by the Abbasids [...] were simply aggressive wars designed to subdue local populations and gain control of a new territory's land and resources. Conquest and imperial plunder was the norm."[180] The Abbasid Empire also took slaves from East Africa to harvest salt from the marshlands of southern Iraq, work that Freamon describes taking place under "horrific conditions."

The Mongolian Empire's sack of Baghdad in 1258 CE initiated the end of the Islamic Golden Age, but it was not the end of the Islamic Empire's progress, or belief therein. Ibn Khaldun arose in Tunis toward the western edge of Islamdom.

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[179] Bernard K. Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Brill: 2019), 197–198.
[180] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, 199.

Writing after Mongol invasions, Khaldun introduced more secular economic and sociological theories that anticipated many of the secular progressive ones that would emerge in the European Enlightenment. Like macrohistorians and sociologists to come, Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* sought to describe laws of societal change over large periods of time. He placed great importance on the concept of *asabiyyah*, or social cohesion, and is credited with developing both early versions of what have become Keynesian economic principles and supply-side economic theories. His historical writing also develops a secular progressive historiography:

> One should then look at the world of creation. It started out from the minerals and progressed, in an ingenious, gradual manner, to plants and animals. The last stage of minerals is connected with the first stage of plants, such as herbs and seedless plants. The last stage of plants, such as palms and vines, is connected with the first stage of animals, such as snails and shellfish which have only the power of touch. [...] The animal world then widens, its species become numerous, and, in a gradual process of creation, it finally leads to man, who is able to think and to reflect. The higher stage of man is reached from the world of the monkeys, in which both sagacity and perception are found, but which has not reached the stage of actual reflection and thinking.[181]

Khaldun's history anticipated social Darwinism, which will be addressed later, with his notion that "civilization progresses gradually" by similar processes as biological evolution.[182] Having witnessed the beginning of the Golden Age collapse, Khaldun was cognizant of the decline of civilizations and developed a cyclical theory of social change as well: from simple tribes, civilizations rise, and within no more than four generations, by his accounting, begin to decline and fall, coming about as a result of the decline in *asabiyyah*: "[a society's] group feeling decays because

[181] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N. J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
[182] Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*.

the people who represent the group feeling have lost their energy. As a result, the dynasty progresses toward weakness and senility."[183] He speaks explicitly of the scientific progress delivered by the Islamic Golden Age: "Muslim scientists assiduously studied the (Greek sciences). They became skilled in the various branches. The [progress they made in the] study of those sciences could not have been better."[184] While Adam Smith would describe how division of labor increases worker productivity in his *Wealth of Nations* published in 1776, Khaldun "presented almost exactly the same argument 400 years earlier," according to Dieter Weiss.[185] Khaldun, Weiss observes, developed a modern, proto-liberal economic theory, presenting arguments for low taxation, market regulations, economic growth and development, and describing a precursor to the Laffer curve.

Khaldun, meanwhile, anticipates Hobbes by writing that people need strong rulers to keep from a war of all against all,[186] but he is also presaging Hobbes's antipode Rousseau, claiming the Bedouin are less tainted by civilization: "they are closer to the first natural state and more remote from the evil habits that have been impressed upon the souls (of sedentary people) through numerous and ugly, blameworthy customs." He even prefigures Marx, stating, "Profit is the value realized from human labor." But he is also arguing in favor of the racial hierarchy useful in both classical and Enlightenment European growth economies,

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[183] Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*.
[184] Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*.
[185] Dieter Weiss, "Ibn Khaldun on Economic Transformation," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995): 29–37.
[186] "Ibn Khaldun and Thomas Hobbes both present the pre-political state as characterized by intolerable violence, and view the establishment of a strong political authority as the best hope of stability." From Alexander Orwin, "Dawla and Leviathan: Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes in Defense of State Authority," *İbn Haldun Çalışmaları Dergisi* 3, no. 1 (2018): 47–64.

classifying humans into groups of “savage” versus “civilized”: “Beyond them to the south, there is no civilization in the proper sense. There are only humans who are closer to dumb animals than to rational beings. They live in thickets and caves and eat herbs and unprepared grain. They frequently eat each other. They cannot be considered human beings,” and later, “Negroes of the first zone dwell in caves and thickets, eat herbs, live in savage isolation and do not congregate, and eat each other.”[187]

Many of the basic principles underlying secular European Enlightenment ideas, including civilizational progress, can be found embedded in Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, and they seem to have served the same purposes. This is not to remark on Khaldun’s superiority to European Enlightenment thinkers, but rather to show that such ideas are useful for the imperatives of growth economies across time, geography, and culture. Ultimately, however, Khaldun’s role came to be not simply that of an impartial scholar but a champion of ideas of societal progress, a role intimately tied to the moral laundering of the growthist logic that governed his society. This logic included the key tenets of extractivism, imperial conquest, and slavery, which Islam was explicitly used to morally sanction. Khaldun reminds the reader of Muhammad’s admonition: “Whoever dies confessing that there is no God but God, enters Paradise.”[188] As a specific example, he praises the opportunity given to Mamluks—slave soldiers brought to serve in Egypt—to convert to Islam and become military leaders:

> cured by slavery, they enter the Muslim religion with the firm resolve of true believers and yet with nomadic virtues unsullied by debased nature,

[187] Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 123.
[188] Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*.

> unadulterated with the filth of pleasure, undefiled by the ways of civilized living, and with their ardor unbroken by the profusion of luxury.[189]

The values of the faith served as an adhesive, creating an ostensibly classless collective more effective at conquest. The faith was also used to justify ecological conquest; like the Old Testament, Islam grants humanity dominion over other life: "It is He Who made you vicegerents in the earth."[190] Some animals are granted by God for human use: "It is Allah who created the cattle for you that you may ride some of them, and some of them you eat. / and there are [numerous] uses in them for you, and that over them you may satisfy any need that is in your breasts, and you are carried on them and on ships."[191]

Like the European Enlightenment and the growth of Christendom, the Islamic Golden Age was fueled by the conquest of peoples and land: over the course of 1,400 years, Islamic empire spread over thousands of miles, stretching east into Asia and west into Europe and Africa, conquering noteworthy portions of three continents (and Islam today is the world's fastest-growing and second largest religion). Islam—and the notions of progress embedded in it—provided an important vehicle for Arabic-speaking people to rapidly spread from small tribes in Syria and the Arabian Peninsula across Southwest Asia, North Africa, and Southwest Europe. The ideological cohesiveness of Islam, its attractive promises of spiritual and earthly progress, and adaptability in melding with secular intellectual products like civil law, science, and philosophy enabled Arabs to build

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[189] Cited in Bernard K. Freamon. *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Brill: 2019), 220.
[190] *The Qur'an*, 35:39.
[191] *The Qur'an*, 40:79–80, http://al-quran.info/#40:79.

one of the largest pre-modern empires. The relationship between conquest and such ideas was circular: great wealth from spoils funded the exchange and discovery of knowledge through trade routes and markets, and made possible the enlightenment in the Arab world as it would in the European Enlightenment centuries later, just as similar ideas—sometimes the very same ideas—laundered, explained, and facilitated more conquest.

Saladin, one of the most famous of the Islamic emperors, at least in the Western canon, defeated European Christian crusaders in the Levant, and went on from that victory to found the expansive Ayyubid dynasty. Despite their oppositional relation, these two statist religions were not so different. They were both extremely effective in carrying the qualities of a growth economy to the animistic Indigenous groups in their path of conquest, imposing policies ranging from intense agrarianism and environmental extraction, to church hierarchies and patriarchy. As Christianity wielded by kings and emperors in Europe conquered Celts, Britons, and Sámi, so Islam wielded by emperors in Southwest Asia and North Africa conquered Moors, Somalis, and Amazighs. Fowden argues:

> Muhammad shared Constantine's ability to perceive the historical moment, but was both more radical and luckier. On the political level he was able to set in motion a sequence of conquests that resulted in world empire. And on the cultural level he did not merely choose one religion rather than another and then rewrite history accordingly. Instead he gave history new impetus by proclaiming a new revelation and a new religion, while cleverly drawing on the momentum built up by earlier monotheist prophets.[192]

To this point, growthist economies occurred primarily through regional imperial conquest that entailed contiguous growth, with frontiers spreading from a city-state

[192] Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 139.

at the nucleus, pulling resources into the urban core through land routes. The rise of naval forces and trade routes soon enabled a sort of growth that set frontiers of extraction far from core states. While Athens experimented with this sort of growth in the Mediterranean world, the first growthist society to cross the Atlantic was from Northern Europe. Norse settlers, unlike the maritime empires that would follow from Britain and Iberia, were less centralized, but no less hungry for resources and narratives that would enable expansion and extraction.

The first Europeans to begin colonizing the Americas were settlers from Norway. Leif Eriksson reached what is today Canada, his conquests spurred on by demand for timber to fuel the ship-building that maritime economies like his depended on. There Vikings met Indigenous peoples, which likely included the Beothuk and Inuit Thule, and began trading and living side by side. The Vikings forcibly opened new frontiers to fuel their growth; certainly the "impulse to conquer and colonise" sent Erik the Red and his son Leif ever westward.[193] This impulse of conquest was due to the fact that Norse settlers were driven by the imperatives of economic growth.

Norse settlers represent a growth economy adopting the more disparate colonial mode, carried out through maritime raiding and long-distance transport. What makes this example unique is that it is an economy based on growth that is not imperialist. With the short-lived exception of what some historians refer to as the "North Sea Empire"[194]—which existed for about 40 years toward the end of the Viking Age—Norse settlers did not expand their territory on behalf of a centralized

[193] Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (London: The Folio Society, 1989), xvii.
[194] Timothy Bolton, *Cnut the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

authority like an imperial bureaucracy. Scandinavian kings sometimes took tributes, but did so without exercising the sort of administrative control over conquered territories that Rome and other contiguous growth empires had done prior, or like the maritime empires that would come after. Nevertheless, they were without doubt *growthist* in the same sense: theirs was a boom-and-bust economy dependent on linear, compounding, and ultimately ecologically unsustainable extractivism. Norse settlers pushed Indigenous peoples out of their land: in this case, the Sámi people in Scandinavia to Arctic fringes. They quickly deforested the places they colonized, like Iceland, to feed their growth. Erik Thorvaldsson set up colonies in Greenland that devastated the walrus populations there, overhunting the animal to population collapse for ivory traded in Europe.[195] Such over-hunting played a significant role in the colony collapses of the Greenland Norse. And like growthist economies before them, they extracted energy in the form of forced captive labor.[196]

Norse settlers were propelled not only by material imperatives of lumber and military advantages like technologically advanced longships, but also cultural traditions that made them "adventurous and aggressive and scornful of death," in the words of Kevin Crossley-Holland, which "must have given added momentum to the impulse to raid and trade, conquer and colonise."[197] The Vikings' pagan myths of cosmic battle and combat death rewarded in afterlife—the purgatorial Valhalla

[195] James H. Barrett et al., "Ecological globalisation, serial depletion and the medieval trade of walrus rostra," *Quaternary Science Reviews* 229 (2020): 1–15.
[196] Andrew Lawler, "Kinder, Gentler Vikings? Not According to Their Slaves," *National Geographic*, 28 December 2015, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/12/151228-vikings-slaves-thralls-norse-scandinavia-archaeology/.
[197] Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, xvii.

and end times battle Ragnarok—propelled marauders from medieval Scandinavia across vast areas of the globe. Norse colonies brought Germanic paganism to North America nearly 500 years before Christian monarchies arrived there. When combined with promises of material wealth and fertile homelands, Norse myths helped galvanize berserkers, making them some of the most feared warriors in Europe. Vikings settled across the British Isles, Western Europe, and even into the Levant; they named Russia and places as far-reaching as Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland in modern Newfoundland.

Soon after the Vikings set forth from Scandinavia and began plundering Europe, they added a new god to their pantheon: the God of Abraham. There is evidence of Islamic Vikings from Norse funeral garments bearing the word "Allah" to Islamic coins circulating in the far north of Europe.[198] But Christianity is the Abrahamic religion that most captured Norse populations throughout Europe. Christianization of the Norse can be traced to many causes, but political leaders motivated by social control and growth imperatives was paramount. Just as Christianity had served Constantine as a useful political tool for expanding Rome, so the Norse saw profit in adopting this religion that promised an afterlife of paradise for all converts submitting to a rigid, but practical, power structure. Jason Hickel writes that "As Christendom expanded through Europe it sought to repress [pagan] ideas wherever it encountered them."[199]

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[198] Tharik Hussain, "Why did Vikings have 'Allah' embroidered into funeral clothes?" *BBC News*, 12 October 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-41567391.
[199] Jason Hickel, *Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: William Heinemann, 2020), 65.

Norse kings adopted Christianity for the benefits of political centralization and trade: famed figures like Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, Rollo of Normandy, and Olafs Tryggvason and Haraldsson were important agents in this process, and by the 12th century, all the Scandinavian nations would be officially Christian.[200] Prohibitions on public pagan practices soon followed. The Christian Norse participated in the Crusades, raiding with promises of afterlife buoying them along in the same way: as Caitlin Ellis notes, "Instead of an afterlife of feasting in Valhalla as a reward for dying in battle, those who died on Crusade would go straight to Heaven."[201]

While Norse pagans had a complex relationship with the Indigenous Sámi, sometimes intermarrying, Christianization transformed this into a more consistently hostile relationship.[202] Noaidi-shaman drums were a tool used by Sámi to communicate between worlds of the human, animal, ancestral, and divine, as well as for divination and fortune-telling, to represent cultural memory and local histories, and often contained a symbolic language interpreted by the *noaidi* (spiritual figures who used the drums). The *noaidi* entered trances in which they believed in a free soul traversing other realms and taking other forms, typically to restore harmony with the spiritual world in times of crisis. In the 17th and 18th centuries, missionaries confiscated and destroyed large numbers of the sacred

[200] Caitlin Ellis, "Vikings didn't just murder monks and pillage monasteries – they helped spread Christianity too," *The Conversation*, 23 December 2019, https://theconversation.com/vikings-didnt-just-murder-monks-and-pillage-monasteries-they-helped-spread-christianity-too-128910.
[201] Ellis, "Vikings didn't just murder monks."
[202] James Gormon, "The Vikings Were More Complicated Than You Think," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/science/vikings-DNA.html.

drums, punishing and sometimes executing those who used them.[203] This period grew brutal enough to earn the name the "burning time" because of harsh punishments for using traditional drums.[204] The driving force behind this campaign was not just the suppression of competing religious beliefs, but the "complete destruction" of the "old worldview."[205] By the end of the 18th century the Sámi came fully under the formal control of the Christian Church. Like other Indigenous peoples in the path of expansionist states, their worldview and communal animistic rituals were virtually eradicated.[206]

The Sámi and North American Indigenous were not the only fraught interactions the Norse had with Indigenous peoples: banished from Iceland on multiple charges of murder, Erik the Red and his loyal marauders made it as far as Kalaallit Nunaat, which they named "Greenland." While Erik remained pagan, Leif and his wife converted to Christianity and founded the aforementioned short-lived colonies in North America. A smattering of Christian Norse communities resided in Greenland for a few centuries before their colonies collapsed. The Indigenous societies there, in contrast, did not collapse. The Indigenous peoples of Greenland—the Kalaallit of the west, Inughuit of the east, and Tunumiit of the north—make up the vast majority of the island's population today. Jared Diamond concludes that a convergence of factors led to the Norse downfall. Climate variability was one cause: the Norse arrived during the Medieval Warm Period in a

[203] Francis Joy, "The disappearance of the sacred Swedish Sámi drum and the protection of Sámi cultural heritage," *Polar Record* 54, no. 4 (2018): 256, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247418000438.
[204] Joy, "Swedish Sámi drum," 256.
[205] Joy, "Swedish Sámi drum," 256.
[206] Joy, "Swedish Sámi drum," 256.

climate amenable to cultivating livestock. Their homogeneous reliance on this single resource was another contributor to their collapse.[207] The colonists burned the woodlands for pasturing and soon found that the trees could not regenerate because the livestock trampled and grazed young shoots. Deforestation meant that firewood, lumber for building settlements and ships, and charcoal needed to work iron into tools were soon depleted. The Greenland Vikings lost their military advantage of steel swords and armor. With livestock ill-suited to the climate and kept indoors, fed intensively on hay for up to nine months of the year, they became smaller and weaker with each generation.

The Christian Norse shunned the Inuit, calling them wretches and barbarians, eschewing trade and contact.[208] Due to their reliance on agriculture and livestock, individual Greenlanders were bound to their social structure: their way of life was dependent on the order imposed by a handful of rich chiefs and bishops, who owned most of the land, controlled access to the boats and trade, and ruled over the majority of settlers, which was made up of small farm owners, tenants, and slaves. The voraciousness of those chiefs led to the collapse of their society. As Diamond summarizes,

> There were many innovations that might have improved the material conditions of the Norse, such as importing more iron and fewer luxuries, allocating more boat time to Markland journeys for obtaining iron and timber, and copying (from the Inuit) or inventing different boats and different hunting techniques. But those innovations could have threatened the power, prestige, and narrow interests of the chiefs.[209]

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[207] Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 219.
[208] The etymology for their word for the Inuit, "Skraeling," may have gone from meaning "dried skin" after the furs worn by Arctic peoples, to gaining meanings like barbarian and weakling, the latter of which is ironic given that the Arctic peoples survived where the Vikings could not and constantly defeated the Vikings in combat.
[209] Diamond, *Collapse*, 276.

This section has explored how the progress narratives embedded in Christianity and Islam served as accelerators for the consolidation and expansion of Medieval empires, kingdoms, and non-state growthists (like the Norse). As these entities coalesced into nation-states and increasingly commercial, capitalist economies, they began to develop new, and in some cases, more secular progress narratives. The colonization of the Americas served as a major testing ground for the deployment of narratives of progress and modes of growth.

Maritime Colonization from 1400 CE

Driven by an economic growthist imperative—finding gold, accumulating appreciative resources, introducing new products to a global market—the first thing Christopher Columbus did upon reaching the Americas was take slaves and commit murder. Howard Zinn has popularized a notorious passage from Christopher Columbus's diary, in which Columbus describes his first contact with the Arawak peoples:

> They willingly traded everything they owned. [...] They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. [...] They would make fine servants. [...] With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.[210]

[210] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 1.

He took as his prisoners the first Arawak people he could in the hope that they would lead him to gold.[211] During Columbus's exploration of the island he named Hispaniola (now Dominican Republic and Haiti), he came upon other peoples living there. When those Natives refused to trade their bows and arrows, he ordered two of them stabbed to death. His slaves, meanwhile, he attempted to take back to Europe, but, through neglect, they froze to death on the way.[212]

Not long thereafter, the Atlantic Slave Trade began, in which between 12 and 15 million Africans were captured and sent across the Atlantic. As many as 2.4 million died in the process.[213] The United Nations estimates that, in total, 17 million people died in connection with the Atlantic Slave Trade, whether in transit on slave ships, in holding camps, or in the conflicts between societies in Africa that resulted.[214] In addition to theft of human and non-human life, Spanish colonists in the Americas stole 16 million kilograms of silver, which more than tripled the reserves of silver in Europe.[215] While the humanitarian impact was devastating, the ecological impact also resulted in the rapid mass eradication of dozens of species of megafauna and the clear-cutting of millions of acres of forest. For example, at the end of the 18th century, there were between 30 million and 60 million wild bison in North America. Within a century, there were fewer than 500

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[211] "As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first Island which I found, I took some of the natives by force in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts," Columbus wrote, cited in Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 2.
[212] Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 3.
[213] Jason Hickel, *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and its Solutions* (London: Windmill Books, 2018), 73.
[214] "The International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," *United Nations*, 25 March 2008, https://www.un.org/en/events/slaveryremembranceday/2008/background.shtml.
[215] Hickel, *The Divide*, 71.

individuals. Part of this mass annihilation of bison was driven by settler demand for hides and bones to turn into fertilizer, glue, ash, or bone china.[216] But another reason settlers engaged in such a deliberate process of exterminating vast herds was to eradicate the Plains Nations cultures that depended on bison for their material survival. One settler colonel declared, “Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.”[217]

One of the consequences of hoarded fortunes in Africa and the Americas by European colonists was “the catastrophe experienced by small farmers in Europe and England,” in the words of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.[218] In Ireland, the Great Famine killed a million people, and displaced more than twice as many.[219] This was the result of concentrated land ownership and the growth imperative to sell commodity crops in international markets.[220] In Scotland, lords and professionals benefited from the wealth generated by growth, but tenant farmers, workers, and the poor often did not: the Highland Clearances, for example, saw thousands of Scots killed and displaced. Both the Great Famine and Highland Clearances were, like those committed in Africa and the Americas, carried about

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[216] Danielle Taschereau Mamers, “Historical photo of mountain of bison skulls documents animals on the brink of extinction,” *The Conversation*, 2 December 2020, https://theconversation.com/historical-photo-of-mountain-of-bison-skulls-documents-animals-on-the-brink-of-extinction-148780.

[217] J. Weston Phippen, “‘Kill Every Buffalo You Can! Every Buffalo Dead Is an Indian Gone,’” *The Atlantic*, 13 May 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2016/05/the-buffalo-killers/482349/.

[218] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 43.

[219] John Dorney, “The Great Irish Famine 1845-1851 – A Brief Overview,” *The Irish Story*, 18 October 2016, https://www.theirishstory.com/2016/10/18/the-great-irish-famine-1845-1851-a-brief-overview/#.YBsFXpP7S1Q.

[220] Ocean Malandra, “EarthRx: The Irish Potato Famine Was Caused by Capitalism, Not a Fungus,” *Paste*, 13 March 2017, https://www.pastemagazine.com/science/irish-potato-famine/earthrx-the-irish-potato-famine-was-caused-by-capi/.

by aristocrats, merchants, and monarchs with the purpose of extracting wealth from land and bodies. As Chris Bambery notes, a new agricultural system was developed at this time in Scotland to dramatically increase yields, but it could only be achieved by mass eviction.[221]

In order to achieve political buy-in necessary to administer such an economy smoothly, those benefiting from the logic of growth needed to cloak their endeavors in a powerful ideology, to quell the protests of their own consciences and those of potentially revolutionary populations. From this influx of wealth, the unequal distribution of that wealth, and the imperative to both understand and justify the growth economies that led to such wealth (and destruction), the European Enlightenment arose. Enlightenment thinkers were never monolithic. Their debates ranged across many topics, traditions, and geographies. They often vehemently disagreed and many such thinkers deplored and decried the abuses of growthism. But from this period emerged intellectual infrastructures whose dominance derived from the extent to which they could fortify the growth economy's success and accelerate its conquest of the globe, transforming environmental systems into human systems, and transforming more diverse human systems into homogeneous possessions. As in the Islamic Golden Age and in empires past, progress metanarrative played a significant role.

Many of the period's most prominent thinkers published ideas that provided the secular foundation for progress narratives to be built upon. Some thinkers explicitly contributed to this project of mythmaking, while many others likely did not

[221] Chris Bambery, *A People's History of Scotland* (London: Verso, 2014), 73.

intend for their words to be put toward the imperatives of growth; as with Augustus usurping the words of Lucretius—or like those Axial Age thinkers, Buddha, Lao Tse, Confucius, Zoroaster, and others who had their sermons bent toward Old Deal divisions of wealth and power[222]—Enlightenment thinkers had little control over how their words would be used.

The first Enlightenment figure credited with propounding a progressive historiography was Anne Robert Jacques Turgot. Robert Nisbet notes that, for Turgot, "self-interest, ambition, vainglory" and the like are the primary drivers of progress. Like virtually all others of his time, as we will see, Turgot crafts a narrative of history moving from early primitive savage stages through to classical civilization and then modernity. It is from self-interested impulses that history and society move inevitably "towards greater perfection."[223] Turgot illuminates the early connection between Christianity and secular progress narratives in his works, *On the Benefits which the Christian Religion has conferred on Mankind* and *On the Historical Progress of the Human Mind.* Soon after giving a lecture on these papers at the Sorbonne, where he was pursuing a theological career, Turgot pivoted away from the Church and toward a career in the French government. This personal shift coincides with the secularization of the idea of progress itself at the time, a shift in which Turgot had a major hand. The Christian monopoly on such myths in the European context was eroded and gave way to one based more on

[222] Karl Jaspers, who coined "Axial Age," puts the date of the era from around 800 BCE to 200 BCE, a period in which virtually all the world's major philosophical debates arise, and the world's major religions have their roots. The anthropologist David Graeber extends the era from 800 BCE to 600 CE in his book *Debt*, to include the founding of Christianity and Islam. Ian Morris discusses the absorption of Axial Age ideals into dominant regimes in *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*.
[223] Nisbet, *Progress,* 180.

reason, observation, and natural philosophy. As Nisbet puts it, “Turgot’s experience within a single year can be seen as the very epitome of processes of intellectual development [...] which take us, as it were, from Providence-as-progress to progress-as-Providence.”[224] But while Turgot played an important part in building a progressive historiography for the Enlightenment, other thinkers provided critical elements as well.

René Descartes has little to say about progress itself, but the Cartesian dualism that emerges from his thought provides the secular basis for a notion approximating Christian Dominion and serving a similar practical purpose.[225] By casting all beings not endowed with self-conscious mind—that is understood to be every animal except for humans—as unfeeling and unthinking automata to be exploited, Descartes provided one of the secular rationales for growth economies to dispassionately denude ecologies to the point of mass extinctions. This idea also provided rational-sounding justification to colonists who sought to destroy or displace the animistic peoples who occupied the land they wished to enclose, peoples they could more readily dismiss as enemies of progress, and peoples more akin to animals. While there is ambiguity and complexity in Descartes’ argument, the portion that could be readily co-opted was explicit: Animals 1) are machines, 2) are automata, 3) do not think, 4) have no language, 5) have no self-consciousness, 6) have no consciousness.[226] They are therefore no more victims of suffering than rocks that are quarried. While these propositions contradict the

[224] Nisbet, *Progress,* 182.
[225] Nisbet, *Progress*, 117.
[226] John Cottingham, “‘A Brute to the Brutes?’: Descartes’ Treatment of Animals,” *Philosophy* 53, no. 206 (1978): 551-559, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3749880.

best research today—which finds that many species of non-human animals differ little from humans in their cognitive, emotional, and sensory structures—the empirical truth or falsehood of these assertions was beside the point. They were practically useful to justify the mass exploitation of environments and animals, to reduce a population of tens of millions of bison to hundreds, for instance, or to destroy billions of passenger pigeons for market in a single century.[227]

Thomas Hobbes is another important Enlightenment thinker who contributed philosophical arguments to the purpose of economic growth, primarily by building a powerful justification for a centralized state. A state with a complex bureaucracy and strong central authority, Hobbes argued, is necessary for producing organized civilization and escaping the state of nature that all those outside of such civilization are doomed to suffer.[228] Hobbes is often contrasted with Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his conception of the state of nature. This tendency casts Hobbes as portraying humanity as corrupt and redeemed by the "thin veneer" of civilization, versus Rousseau seeing civilization corrupting the inherent goodness of humanity.[229] But Rousseau was as invested in Enlightenment progressive historiography as Hobbes: he contended that "savage" man evolved through stages—agriculture, metallurgy, private property—toward civilized (even if unequal, unhappy) man. Unlike many other Enlightenment

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[227] Stanley E. Hedeen, "From Billions to None: Destruction of the Passenger Pigeon in the Ohio Valley," *Ohio Valley History* 10, no. 3 (2010): 28.
[228] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or, The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiastical and Civill* (Project Gutenberg, 2002), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm, e-Book.
[229] Frans de Waal, *Our Inner Ape: The Best And Worst Of Human Nature* (Granta Books, 2014); also see "veneer theory," Emily Rios, "De Waal sides with Darwin: Morality is instinctual, evolved," *Emory Report* 59, no. 27 (2007): https://www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/erarchive/2007/April/April%2016/DeWaal.htm.

thinkers, Rousseau was less optimistic about this trajectory, and was among the few to offer critiques of progress. He suggested that a more "primitive" society was more likely to yield individual happiness, but rather than arguing for a retreat from civilization, as his argument is often depicted, Rousseau argued instead for a kind of progress that would be achieved through a state apparatus not unlike Hobbes's central authority. In place of the whims of a sole monarch, a collectivist sovereign entity must rule—a "general will"—even if a monarch or "elective aristocracy," he conceded, must be engaged as administrators.[230]

Meanwhile, the much-misunderstood Adam Smith provided a quasi-religious justification for markets. A moral philosopher, Smith was interested in notions of human progress and mentions them frequently in his works, arguing that society follows a linear progressive course through time. His invisible hand metaphor, still invoked in the 21st century, conflated the Christian God with the secular forces that move markets, with the former still retaining a supreme spiritual authority even as the latter served practical ends. The famous metaphor—of which Smith wrote a total of only three times—is today taken as a primarily secular notion of the natural power of a fictitious abstraction, the market, to efficiently and perfectly distribute wealth and resources. Smith's own meaning was more engaged with the Christian divine and, as with much of his work, was more complex than is given due today or by his contemporaries who sought to use his writings for expedient political ends.[231] Smith went as far as describing his most

[230] Christopher Bertram, "Jean Jacques Rousseau," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2020): plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/rousseau/.
[231] Paul Oslington, "God and the Market: Adam Smith's Invisible Hand," *Journal of Business Ethics* 108, (2012): 429–438.

enduring work, *The Wealth of Nations*, as a "violent attack […] upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain,"[232] and, far from an apologist for capitalism and the market, Smith was in his own time a sharp critic of European conquest and enslavement.[233] But whatever his intentions, Smith's work has been co-opted by those who wish to promote the idea that the market is a source and indicator of societal progress. As will be shown in greater detail below, this was an important belief to hold (or appear to believe) for those whose market investments were enriched by processes of growth.

Enlightenment historian and politician Edward Gibbon also contributed to developing a historiography of progress. He wrote, for example, in *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, "We may therefore acquiesce in the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue of the human race."[234] Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis of Condorcet went even further, espousing a similar hard faith in the secular progress of humanity rising through specific stages. His so-called "law of progress" aligns with the other Enlightenment progressives: primitive man gradually develops into civilized man, but he posited ten stages of societal development, predicting such change would lead to technocracy. He even anticipated early futurist notions of transhumanism, the capacity of technology to enhance or advance beyond the human body, and

[232] Paul Sagar, "The real Adam Smith," *Aeon*, 16 January 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/we-should-look-closely-at-what-adam-smith-actually-believed
[233] William Easterly, "Progress by consent: Adam Smith as development economist," *The Review of Austrian Economics* 34 (2019): 179–201, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11138-019-00478-5.
[234] Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000).

technologically-derived immortality. Condorcet envisaged progress as culminating in "The advantages that must result from the state of improvement, of which I have proved we may almost entertain the certain hope, can have no limit but the absolute perfection of the human species."[235]

Today, Thomas Malthus is often interpreted as offering a pessimistic view of history, humanity, and the future, even as a critic of ideas of growth and progress. As Giorgos Kallis has documented, this is a misreading.[236] Malthus writes, "although we cannot expect that the virtue of happiness of mankind will keep pace with the brilliant career of physical discovery, yet if we are not wanting in ourselves we may confidently indulge the hope that...they will be influenced by its progress and will partake in its success."[237] Further, Malthus, like Smith and Turgot, echoes the idea that self-interest yields a gradual improvement in society's development: "the apparently narrow principle of self-interest which prompts each individual to exert himself in bettering his condition, we are indebted for all the noblest exertions of human genius, for every thing that distinguishes the civilized from the savage state."[238] The notion of self-interest yielding progress is useful for those most invested in doing harm for their personal enrichment. As such, it is an obvious means of not only soothing the consciences of those in elite positions committing harm, but those who are the recipients of harm. In the former case,

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[235] Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, *Outlines of an historical view of the progress of the human mind* (Philadelphia: M. Carey, 1795), https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/condorcet-outlines-of-an-historical-view-of-the-progress-of-the-human-mind.
[236] Giorgos Kallis, *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).
[237] Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: John Murray, 1826), https://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPlong.html?chapter_num=56#book-reader, e-Book.
[238] Malthus, *Essay on the Principle of Population*.

elites can take comfort from the idea that they are contributing to progress; in the latter case, those extracted from can take comfort in the notion that their suffering is still contributing to some collective improvement and their salvation looms in the future. This idea—that individual self-interest yields collective improvements—will be perfected by thinkers during industrialization in which Enlightenment reason becomes scientized and Darwinian evolution emerges to explain progress, explored in the next section.

The idea of civilization advancing from barbarity toward sophistication was central to Enlightenment progress mythology. Embedded in this narrative was a particular sort of racialism that parceled out humans into types according to their supposed level of "barbarism," thus making it easier to justify exploiting those deemed less civilized and to achieve growth from the extraction of their labor-time and resources. The racial theory of Enlightenment progress narratives was integral to the economic growthist logic and practice of enslaving African workers for agricultural labor and killing or displacing Indigenous people to appropriate richly productive land. This racialism, similar to that seen in the Islamic Golden Age scholarship, possessed an essentialism: darker skinned people frequently represented stand-ins for the "savage inferior races," contrasted against paler Europeans. Popular historian Rutger Bregman notes that Enlightenment thinker David Hume considered "negroes" to be "naturally inferior to whites," while Voltaire agreed that nonwhites' understanding of the world was "greatly inferior."[239]

[239] Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 248.

But even Europeans with pale skin were not exclusively considered "white." Roxanne Dubar-Ortiz observes that Scotland, Wales, and Ireland served as proto-colonies for the British Empire, where practices of cultural assimilation, dispossession, and genocide were honed before being deployed against Indigenous peoples in colonies elsewhere. She writes of Ireland in the 16th century,

> The English government paid bounties for the Irish heads. Later only the scalps or ears were required. A century later in North America, Indian heads and scalps were brought in for bounty in the same manner. Although the Irish were as "white" as the English, transforming them into alien others to be exterminated previewed what came to be perceived as racialist when applied to Indigenous peoples of North America and to Africans.[240]

The Irish, too, were racialized, with mid-19th century race science that sought to prove Anglo-Saxon superiority through published ethnographic studies of Irish skull measurements that associated the Irish with apes. Newspapers published images of the "simianized Celt" of a lesser evolutionary stage than the English.[241] Victorian anthropologist John Beddoe created an "Index of Nigrescence," based on hair and eye color, seeking to "confirm the impressions of many Victorians that the Celtic portions of the population in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, and Ireland were considerably darker or more melanous than those descended from Saxon and Scandinavian forebears."[242] The idea of "dark Celts" served to position largely light-skinned—yet colonized—populations as less evolved and less civilized than "Anglo-Saxon" agents of empire.

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[240] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 38–39.
[241] Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism: Gender, Violence, and Empire in India and Ireland, 1914-2004* (New York University Press, 2012), 30.
[242] Cited in Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism*, 31.

The Highland Clearances in Scotland in the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries was an offshoot of this internal colonization for the sake of economic growth: the British monarchy dispossessed thousands of Scots of ancestral land, replacing them with sheep and deer for elites to hunt on massive estates. The Clearances largely depopulated the rural Highlands, and ended Scotland's clan society, with state leaders demanding fealty to the Crown over clan chiefs. This land-use pattern still shapes Scottish geography: fewer than 500 people own half the country's privately-held land, making it one of the most concentrated nations for land ownership in Europe.[243] The Clearances, too, drew on pseudoscience to cast Highlanders as racially inferior. One journalist referred to Highlanders as an inferior race to "the Lowland Saxon," while Edinburgh surgeon Robert Knox wrote that Highlanders should be "forced from the soil" by what he considered the superior "Anglo-Saxon race."[244] In all of these cases, a colonial relationship was established for the purposes of extraction and expansion, and Enlightenment racial hierarchies based on dubious science were deployed as a means of "rationally" justifying and mediating that relationship. Thus, racial hierarchies were not originally constructed according to skin color—though skin color was, and continues to be, a significant component of racialism[245]—but instead focused on other indicators like language, religion, bloodlines, culture, and politics to mark a population as either *colonizer* or *colonized*. Such racial hierarchies were used by colonial growth states to countenance slavery and genocide everywhere they

[243] Kevin Keane, "Study into impact of land ownership in Scotland," *BBC News*, 28 September 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-41414706.
[244] Bambery, *People's History of Scotland*, 111.
[245] Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 36.

became established, from Europe and the Americas, to Africa, to Asia. Identifying a superior race was essential to the progressive historiography, in which colonial entities situated their own actions in a history in which racial and ethnic groups were increasingly bringing more land and peoples under the governance of their dominion, akin to the Athenian supremacy of the Classical world, or the Roman belief that "no limits" be granted to Roman dominion.

It is important to note that many Irish and Scots people—many of whom themselves would have been a colonized population—who emigrated to the United States went on to commit atrocities in service of growthism and imperial ambitions. Sikata Banerjee notes that Irish people contributed to imperial expansion in India as missionaries, soldiers, and bureaucrats: "As both colonized and colonizer, the Irish, although deemed barbaric and ape-like at certain times, at other times were seen as worthy allies in the British imperial project."[246] Such notions as racial hierarchies are almost infinitely flexible and are easily repurposed to serve the imperatives of growthism and whatever political expedients will deliver on them.

Perhaps the most important intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment period was the cohering of various Enlightenment ideas and ideals bound to a single ideological ballast: liberalism. Liberalism is full of contradictions. A central innovation of the development of this ideology is the fusing together of two mutually contrary tendencies: political liberalism and economic liberalism. Political liberalism promotes civil liberties like freedom of speech, assembly, and religion,

[246] Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism*, 44.

while economic liberalism champions economic entitlements, like private property ownership and open trade and markets. But the maintenance of these two sets of principles prove mutually exclusive: the consolidated wealth and power that economic liberalism yields lead to policies that directly undermine individual political liberty, or even prevent them in the first place. Political liberalism, in a sense, came to serve as a means of morally laundering economic liberalism. In exchange for free speech, a partially, imperfectly representative government, and freedom to practice any religion, revolutionary populations would have to accept wealth concentration, enclosure of land, heavy rents, debts, and for a while, market-efficient genocide and slavery. The tensions intrinsic to these two conditions means that liberalism is—or, at least, has been—ever doomed to fracture. For political liberalism to triumph, a society must abandon economic liberalism; if economic liberalism is to triumph, a society must abandon political liberalism.

Few personally embody this contradiction better than John Locke, popularly dubbed the "father of liberalism." Locke inspired Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau as well as American revolutionaries. He advocated for political liberalism on one hand, including a separation of powers, religious tolerance, and natural civil rights, while he practiced economic liberalism on the other. This was a clear microcosmic example of one of the founders of this ideology using the virtues of political liberalism to morally soften the vices of economic liberalism. Locke was a major investor in the Royal Africa Company and the Bahama Adventurers Company, two of the biggest traders in enslaved people

from Africa. No single company captured and transported more people than the R.A.C. in the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade.[247] The company captured nearly a quarter of a million people, more than 40,000 of whom died before reaching slave markets. In addition to his early support of slavery—he later rejected it, except as a severe punishment—Locke's theories of labor helped legitimize the seizure of land from Native Americans. And like other forms of Enlightenment thought, Locke's liberalism was racially hierarchical. Locke used theories of racial hierarchies and an epochal, progressive idea of historical development to rationalize the slavery of native Africans and the eradication of Native Americans, placing white Europeans at the top.

Enlightenment thinkers can be interpreted in many ways: as lending their voices to revolution and democracy or aristocracy and monarchy, speaking eloquently on broad liberty and reason while sanctioning racial and political hierarchies and expounding on the reasonableness of subjugating "lesser races." While the legacy of Enlightenment thinkers is complex, Enlightenment *political actors* bear contradictions in both their thought and their actions that are worth considering in depth to better understand this relationship between progress and growth in the Enlightenment, and how such mythologies were deployed to great effect in furthering growthism and conquest.

The United States is one of the best case studies for examining the way in which progress myths and growthism work together; the nation was founded on

[247] Locke's involvement in the Royal Africa Company was at least partly politically motivated and he sold the stocks within a couple of years. There is reason to believe his views evolved over time, as Holly Brewer writes in "Slavery-entangled philosophy," *Aeon*, 12 September 2018, https://aeon.co/essays/does-lockes-entanglement-with-slavery-undermine-his-philosophy.

both growthism and robust myths of societal and historical progress. Looking at some of the founding fathers' rhetoric can give clear insight into how these figures justified the expansion of Euroamerican growth economies across the continent. Colin Woodard traces one of the first unified projects of national mythmaking to George Bancroft, a descendent of Puritans and author of the ten-volume *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent* (1854–1878).[248] His *History* places at the heart of the national identity he sought to construct a sense of inevitable progress. "Bancroft's vision," Woodard writes, "combined his Puritan intellectual birthright with his German mentors' notion that nations developed like organisms, following a plan that history had laid out for them. Americans, Bancroft argued, would implement the next stage of the progressive development of human liberty, equality, and freedom."[249] Progress has been at the heart of the United States' national mythology since even before the myth was codified in its founding document, the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and for as long as it has been a project of growthism. Four important politicians in particular illustrate the contradictions and progressive aspirations of the country and its connection to growth, including Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln.[250]

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[248] Colin Woodard, "Determining America's National Myth Will Determine the Country's Fate," *Zocalo Public Square*, 22 February 2021, https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2021/02/22/america-nationhood-george-bancroft-frederick-douglass/ideas/essay/.
[249] Woodard, "America's National Myth."
[250] While Jackson and Lincoln are not exactly "Founding fathers," they are early presidents who administered, in the former case, major growth and conquest of Indigenous peoples, and in the latter case, both conquest of Indigenous peoples and a sort of "second founding" with the culmination of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Thomas Jefferson, one of the United States' most important Founders and the country's third president, drafted the most vital document to the nation's founding identity. The Declaration of Independence was a radical document, calling for the end of monarchical rule and establishing natural rights and freedoms. Yet in addition to famously remaining a lifelong slave owner and believing women to be unequal to men, he was also one of the major architects of the genocide of Indigenous peoples in the west of the continent.[251] In the Declaration of Independence, he refers to Natives as "merciless Indian savages." In an 1807 letter to Henry Dearborn, Jefferson writes, "If ever we are constrained to lift the hatchet against any tribe, we will never lay it down till that tribe is exterminated, or driven beyond the Mississippi…in war, they will kill some of us; we shall destroy them all."[252] As President, Jefferson made it a federal priority to pursue the permanent "removal" of Creek and Cherokee peoples from Georgia.[253] Guiding his administration was a policy of, at worst, extermination and, at best, forced migration and assimilation into ever-expanding American growth economies. Patrick Wolfe argues that assimilation projects like this often constitute a "logic of elimination" or "structural genocide" through the deliberate diluting of Indigenous blood, knowledge, and lifeways: "Though 'softer' than the recourse to simple violence, however, these strategies are not necessarily less eliminatory."[254]

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[251] His respect for women's intelligence was such that he suggested they should be educated only in "the amusements of life," like "dancing, drawing, and music." From Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 118.
[252] Thomas Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, 28 August 1807," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-6267.
[253] Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 126.
[254] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 401

Jefferson's aim of expanding the economy across North America was rooted in notions of progress—his mind, according to Nesbit, being "steeped in faith in human progress."[255] The Jefferson Foundation—an institution aimed at maintaining a generally positive legacy for the former president—claims that "Jefferson believed that if American Indians were made to adopt European-style agriculture and live in European-style towns and villages, then they would quickly 'progress' from 'savagery' to 'civilization' and eventually be equal, in his mind, to white men."[256] By forcing Natives to adopt Euroamerican agriculture and to take on debt that could only be discharged by giving up more of their land (presaging structural adjustment policies and World Bank/IMF loans of the 20th-century), Jefferson suggested that Natives would inevitably be led "to manufactures [sic], and civilization." As Zinn notes, "Jefferson's talk of 'agriculture … manufactures … civilization' is crucial. Indian removal was necessary for the opening of the vast American lands to agriculture, to commerce, to markets, to money, to the development of the modern capitalist economy."[257] In other words, it was necessary for economic growth. Jefferson died content with his role in, as he saw it, advancing this human progress. Two years before his death, he wrote the following in a letter to William Ludlow:

> Let the philosophical observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains eastwardly towards our seacoast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association, living under no law but that of nature …. He would next find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state,

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[255] Nisbet, *Progress*, 193.
[256] Thomas Jefferson Foundation, "Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment and American Indians," *Thomas Jefferson's Monticello*, https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/origins-of-the-expedition/jefferson-and-american-indians/jefferson-s-enlightenment-and-american-indians/.
[257] Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 126.

> raising domestic animals … and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. And where this progress will stop no one can say. Barbarism has, in the meantime, been receding before the steady step of amelioration, and will in time, I trust, disappear from the earth.[258]

The passive language of "disappearance" in this text transforms the often conscious and deliberate acts of genocide into a mythic event, a natural course of history, devoid of human agency, culpability, and responsibility, something that a progressive sense of history can bolster.

The nation's first president, George Washington, meanwhile, general of the American Revolutionary War and the then-richest man in America, concurred with Jefferson's view of Natives, proclaiming, "Indians and wolves are both beasts of prey, tho' they differ in shape."[259] As a wealthy land speculator, Washington bought up huge tracts of Native land and owned over 100 enslaved people. The Iroquois dubbed him "Destroyer of towns" (an Algonquian translation: "Devourer of villages"). As part of military campaigns to remove Indigenous peoples, Washington ordered more than 40 Native villages destroyed in just one expedition with more than 10,000 Natives dying in a single winter as a direct result.[260] Washington was motivated by the idea that he was contributing to a grander view

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[258] Thomas Jefferson, "From Thomas Jefferson to William Ludlow, 6 September 1824," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-4523; and Nisbet, *Progress,* 198.
[259] Levi Rickert, "U.S. Presidents in Their Own Words Concerning American Indians," *Native News Online*, 16 February 2020, https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/us-presidents-words-concerning-american-indians/.
[260] George Washington, "From George Washington to Major General John Sullivan, 31 May 1779," *Founders Online*, National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-20-02-0661. See also: Barbara Alice Man, *George Washington's War on Native America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

of human progress, and that his atrocities could be understood as necessary preconditions for achieving this greater good. In a 1786 letter to his friend, French aristocrat and military officer Marquis de Lafeyette, Washington wrote:

> I endulge [sic] a fond, perhaps an enthusiastic idea, that as the world is evidently much less barbarous than it has been, its melioration must still be progressive—that nations are becoming more humanized in their policy—that the subjects of ambition & causes for hostility are daily diminishing—and in fine, that the period is not very remote when the benefits of a liberal & free commerce will, pretty generally, succeed to the devastations & horrors of war.[261]

It was from this faith in progress that Washington confided to his fellow aristocrat in tones perhaps strangely sanguine and self-satisfied for one who had engaged in war, slavery, and genocide. In another letter to Lafayette three years later, he wrote explicitly tying the expansionist ambitions of the emerging state with progress:

> While you are quarreling among yourselves in Europe—while one King is running mad—and others acting as if they were already so, by cutting the throats of the subjects of their neighbours: I think you need not doubt, My Dear Marquis we shall continue in tranquility here—And that population will be progressive so long as there shall continue to be so many easy means for obtaining a subsistence, and so ample a field for the exertion of talents and industry.[262]

To his followers, meanwhile, Andrew Jackson was known by the laudatory nickname Old Hickory for his ostensible fortitude, but to the Creek, he was known as "Sharp Knife" and "Indian killer."[263] Born 35 years after Washington, Andrew

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[261] George Washington, "From George Washington to Lafayette, 15 August 1786," *Founders Online, National Archives,* https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-04-02-0200.
[262] George Washington, "From George Washington to Lafayette, 29 January 1789," *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-01-02-0198.
[263] Gale Courey Toensing, "Indian-Killer Andrew Jackson Deserves Top Spot on List of Worst US Presidents," *Indian Country Today*, 10 September 2017, https://indiancountrytoday.com/archive/indian-killer-andrew-jackson-deserves-top-spot-on-list-of-worst-us-presidents-q-Qg-O3lJUCE1bdhzyeS-A.

Jackson, the country's seventh president shares important features with the first. Like Washington, Jackson was a land speculator and merchant of humans, and, according to Zinn, the country's most aggressive enemy to Natives.[264] Jackson burned a Creek village, killing men, women, and children, and stole 23 million acres of land that would later become cotton plantations worked by enslaved Africans. Of all the First Nation wars in which U.S. forces seized Native land, the Seminole Wars in Florida lasted the longest, nearly 40 years. Jackson's General, Thomas S. Jesup, made the intentions of the U.S. army in these campaigns explicit: "The country can be rid of [the Seminoles] only by exterminating them."[265] Jackson justified these campaigns to Congress using the same progress myth rhetoric that had been deployed to defend growthism during the Enlightenment:

> What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization and religion?[266]

By the end of the Seminole Wars, between 3,000 and 4,000 Seminole people had been forced from their land and in their absence, the U.S. government began draining the Everglades, clearing its biodiverse subtropical wilderness to make way for agricultural land and development. Patrick Wolfe speaks to this era:

> In the Cherokee's case, two dimensions of their civility were particularly salient. They had become successful agriculturalists on the White model, with a number of them owning substantial holdings of Black slaves, and

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[264] Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 127.
[265] Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 97.
[266] Andrew Jackson, "On Indian Removal," Speech to Congress, 6 December 1830, *Records of the United States Senate, 1789-1990*, Record Group 46, National Archives and Records Administration, https://www.nps.gov/museum/tmc/MANZ/handouts/Andrew_Jackson_Annual_Message.pdf.

> they had introduced a written national constitution that bore more than a passing resemblance to the US one. Why should genteel Georgians wish to rid themselves of such cultivated neighbours? The reason why the Cherokee's constitution and their agricultural prowess stood out as such singular provocations to the officials and legislators of the state of Georgia—and this is attested over and over again in their public statements and correspondence—is that the Cherokee's farms, plantations, slaves and written constitution all signified permanence. The first thing the rabble did, let us remember, was burn their houses.[267]

It is important to note that these politicians were not necessarily or always imposing policies of expansion on a recalcitrant public; indeed, they were politicians often actively responding to the reality that many settlers were independently seizing Native lands in a sometimes-decentralized process of expansionism. Washington once complained that a "Chinese Wall, or a line of troops" would be necessary to prevent settlers from spreading into Native lands.[268] By the time Jefferson assumed the presidency, 700,000 settlers had already pushed beyond colonial borders. It is difficult to imagine that the progress myths of the savage Native pit against civilized Euroamerican settlers occupying a higher, more advanced stage of history, an idea ubiquitous at the time, did not serve as a moral salve that assuaged the guilt settlers may have felt, as much as it did politicians', to contribute to acts of land theft and murder.

Although President Lincoln's administration postdates the period generally designated as the Enlightenment, he was born at the tail end of it and his beliefs, actions, and contradictory behaviors align him closely with the period's thinkers

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[267] Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism," 396.
[268] Gillian Brockell, "George Washington owned slaves and ordered Indians killed. Will a mural of that history be hidden?" *The Washington Post*, 25 August 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2019/08/25/george-washington-owned-slaves-ordered-indians-killed-will-mural-that-history-be-hidden/.

and politicians. Lincoln is often held up today as a paragon of liberal democratic virtue, credited as one of those most responsible for abolishing slavery in the United States, earning him nicknames like the "Great Emancipator" and the "Liberator." Lincoln was an admirer of Karl Marx and once made the Marxian statement, "Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."[269] In his first inaugural address, Lincoln sounds more like an anarchist than a liberal: "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing Government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."[270]

But Lincoln, too, carried the contradictions of American liberalism, and believed in progress myths, Enlightenment historiography, and racial hierarchies as others of his time. Like Washington, Jefferson, and Jackson before him, his administration sanctioned acts of settler violence, and Lincoln himself was a captain in the Black Hawk War. While Lincoln did not see combat in this conflict, his administration oversaw the 1862 Homestead Act, which legally empowered settlers to seize Native land. He oversaw the Dakota War of 1862, which was a campaign to remove and exterminate Sioux Natives that resulted in a mass hanging of Sioux men, the largest mass execution in the nation's history. Lincoln administered the Whitestone Hill massacre of 1863, in which between 100 and

[269] Abraham Lincoln, "First Annual Message, December 3, 1861," *The American Presidency Project*, eds Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/202175.
[270] Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861," *The Avalon Project* (Yale Law School: Lillian Goldman Law Library), https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp.

300 Sioux people were killed, including women and children. In 1864, Lincoln's administration enforced the "Long Walk of the Navajo," a death march that forced 9,000 people to walk 300 miles in the arid Southwestern United States and killed at least 200. In the same year, U.S. soldiers carried out the Sand Creek massacre, in which between 200 and 500 Natives—up to two-thirds of whom were women and children—were killed and mutilated. The Cheyenne and Arapaho people in the Sand Creek reservation complied with the Colorado Governor's orders to stay within the reservation; nevertheless, an army of Colorado Volunteers attacked "Without provocation or warning."[271]

While Lincoln participated in an intensive and often violent, dispossessory form of growth, he also participated in a process of liberation that many could rightly consider a form of progress. These were not in contradiction. The result of the Civil War and emancipation was an increased industrial labor force and a professionalized, partially-mechanized military trained and equipped to open more land in the United States' westward frontier. It is no coincidence that many of the same Union soldiers who fought to maintain the unified country and to emancipate southern enslaved peoples also participated in some of the most brutal massacres of Indigenous Americans.

This section examined the role of new and more secularized narratives of progress—and the various ideas like liberalism, race theory, market agency, and Cartesian dualism, that bolstered these narratives—emerging during the European Enlightenment. Through the words and actions of some of the most important

[271] Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History*, 137.

growthist leaders in the conquest of North America examined in this section, violent growth and extraction and narratives of progress were explicitly linked. The next section looks at how these ideas continue to evolve, and how new progress narratives emerge, as the commercial empires of the period solidify and fossil fuels begin to augment growth through the industrialization period.

Industrialization from 1800 CE

Considered "the most famous philosopher of his time,"[272] Herbert Spencer produced a prolific body of work in the 19th century, which, like the Enlightenment thinkers from whom his thought descends, is rife with contradictions.[273] He coined his famous idiom, "survival of the fittest," not to describe how biological speciation occurs based on the impassive observation of wild ecologies, but rather applied the principle to his theory of societal progress via evolution. Spencer's writings on evolution as applied to human systems predate Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Even so, he wrote in conversation with Darwin: Spencer ultimately imbued his work with a certainty that social policy ought to resemble his understanding of biological evolution; that is, it should weed out the "unfit." In a passage from *The Man Versus the State*, Spencer writes:

> All legislation which assists the people in the satisfaction of their natural wants—which provides a fund for their maintenance in illness and old age, educates their children, takes care of their religious instruction, looks after

[272] Henry L. Tischler, *Introduction to Sociology* (Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010), 12.
[273] Steven Shapin, "Man with a Plan," *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2007, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/08/13/man-with-a-plan.

> their bodily health [...] arises from a radically wrong understanding of human existence [...] Instead of diminishing suffering, it eventually increases it. It favours the multiplication of those worst fitted for existence, and, by consequence, hinders the multiplication of those best fitted for existence.[274]

Spencer was one of the first theorists to move beyond Enlightenment notions of progress—and the form of colonial growthism they supported—and develop what we might think of as industrial-era, scientistic progress rhetoric. This rhetoric was better suited to promoting a new form of economic growth that, instead of favoring centralized monarchies or legislatures, and instead of fueling regional imperial growth, heralds centralized corporations as the prime movers of progress and growth, and can be used to eliminate sectors of the domestic population who may be inimical to economic growth(ism). Spencer wrote eight years before Darwin's *Origin*:

> Progress, therefore, is not an accident, but a necessity. [...] The modifications mankind have undergone, and are still undergoing, result from a law underlying the whole organic creation; and provided the human race continues [...] these modifications must end in completeness. . . . So surely must evil and immorality disappear; so surely must man become perfect.[275]

The social world of citizens, companies, and captains of industry mirrors the competition between variably fit individuals that he imagined occurring in the natural world.[276] Darwin eventually followed Spencer's lead and declared in his

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[274] Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus The State* (Indianapolis: Library of Economics and Liberty, 1992), https://newlearningonline.com/new-learning/chapter-4/herbert-spencer-on-the-survival-of-the-fittest.
[275] Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: or The Conditions essential to Happiness specified, and the First of them Developed* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1868), 80.
[276] Herbert Spencer, *Progress: Its Law and Cause* (New York: Humboldt Library, 1857).

1871 book *The Descent of Man* that "the wonderful progress of the United States" was the "result of natural selection."[277]

The laissez-faire capitalism that spread fossil fuel industrialization across the anglophone world and beyond drew on Spencer's ideas of competition and naturalistic progress. These ideas aided in morally reasoning and psychologically justifying the often harmful actions taken by the steel, railroad, coal, oil, and finance magnates who drove growth and admired Spencer's work. These actions in the 19th and early 20th centuries included fatal strike-breaking; the perpetuation of unsafe working conditions and toxic products; trust-building, which consolidated the economy into a few monopolies; political corruption, by which these monopolies captured the federal government and shaped policy; and—for more than half a century into industrialization—slavery. According to the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, 35,000 workers were killed in industrial accidents in 1914 alone, and a further 700,000 were injured.[278]

Other thinkers drew on similar scientistic notions of progress to explain and justify growth economies. One of the most comprehensive, internally cohesive narrative of human progress to emerge in the 19th century was that of Karl Marx. Instead of a chaotic wilderness of competing individuals depicted by Spencer, Marx saw historical development consisting of conflicting social-economic classes. Marx believed in an inevitable progress of history (in his earlier writing). Marx argued that not only was the social development that had created industrial

[277] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 179.
[278] As reported in Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, 327.

societies an inevitable form of progress-by-class-struggle that all civilizations would eventually go through, but that we could predict, with variable degrees of certainty using historical materialist analysis, their course into the future. Marx abandoned his more strident determinism in later life, even as the Marxian analyses that have followed, even into the 21st century, often hold a sense of inevitable progress toward a state in which class struggle will culminate in an end-of-history proletarian victory.[279]

Like Spencer, Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels almost certainly saw their work in conversation with the scientific description of biological evolution. Marx wrote in a letter, "Darwin's work is most important and suits my purpose in that it provides a basis in natural science for the historical class struggle." Engels later suggested that, "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history."[280] Marx was, in his own words, a "sincere admirer" of Darwin's. Marx's vision contributed to the growth progressivism of the time, developing a narrative of history progressively unfolding from savagery and barbarism, primitive communism, to slavery and feudalism, through capitalism to socialism and the culmination in industrial communism. Nisbet positively compares Marx's conception of historical progress with that of Augustine and *City of God*, in the struggle between the two cities of man and God carried in spirit by the struggle between the classes. But

[279] Karl Marx, "Letter from Marx to Editor of the Otecestvenniye Zapisky," 1877, *Marx and Engels Correspondence* translated by Donna Torr (International Publishers, 1968), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/11/russia.htm.
[280] Ian Angus, "Marx and Engels...and Darwin? The essential connection between historical materialism and natural selection," *International Socialist Review*, 65 (2012): https://isreview.org/issue/65/marx-and-engelsand-darwin.

even for the philosopher of the proletariat, the allure of inevitable historical progress could lead Marx to offer apologia for the growthism that spurred the English colonization in India:

> England, it is true, is causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia. If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.[281]

In other words, the British Raj may itself be morally corrupt when viewed in isolation, but when viewed as a necessary step toward global communism, it becomes an unfortunate "tool of history," a step toward collective betterment. This argument resembles the liberal justification for colonization as a means to civilization rooted in the same historiographic progress myth that spurred on American conquest and industrial growthism.[282]

Fossil fuels arrived as organic economies were beginning to hit material limits. With the Americas stripped of resources produced without synthetic additives and much of Europe long since harvested, and with wood-and-cloth sailing vessels extracting fish and shipping goods at the speed of the wind and nets of natural fibers, limits to further growth were beginning to show themselves. The growth economy was bumping up against ecologically-imposed barriers to further expansion and extraction. The only way to break through these boundaries was to find some source of energy outside the ecologies, wild and cultivated, that,

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[281] Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India," originally published in *New-York Daily Tribune*, 25 June 1853, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/06/25.htm.

[282] Though that isn't to say India hadn't had its own history of imperialism, colonization, slavery, and repression; but such a history shouldn't necessarily justify an increase in those things.

after many extinctions and overgrazing, had little left to increase compounding yields. Fossil fuels are the biomass of plants and animals, buried and compressed over millions of years: the condensed wild biomass of past ecologies. What resulted from the technology that could utilize these new stores of hidden biomass was a huge injection of energy into an economy that had otherwise been confronting a growth-constrained future. The burgeoning technology of rail and steamships were used to transport colonists westward and to move mass commodities like cotton grown and processed by the hands of enslaved people more quickly than they could have been otherwise. This fossil economy also supercharged warfare; at the heart of this warfare was a competition between ideologies of progress.

Graham T. Allison's "Thucydides trap" concept can offer fresh insight when looked at through the conflicts between ever expanding growth economies, particularly those in the 20th century. Fifth-century BCE Athenian historian Thucydides—a progress-minded Greek who, as noted, saw Athens as the height of civilization—sketched out the main principle of his eponymous trap: when a major, hegemonic power is challenged by a rising power, the challenge usually culminates in war. Through the lens of growthism, we might interpret this another way: when one growth state's frontier of expansion grows to be adjacent to that of another, the two tend to end up in conflict. The early-to-mid-20th century was rife with such Thucydides traps, as growthist nations came to grips with oil-fueled industrialization, alongside colonial boundaries and their spoils passing through a more complex global network of production chains, and bumping up against one

another. These conflicts were not just wars between physical armies and economies, but cultural wars between political ideologies and the progress narratives that underpinned them. The anglophone world saw tension between its homegrown Darwinian liberalism and democratic socialism, while much of continental Europe was riven by conflicts between Marxism, fascism, liberalism, and others. After a series of left-right conflicts, Germany and Italy turned decisively to futuristic fascism while Russia and China ultimately adopted authoritarian state communism. These ideological battles offer insight into how progress myths reproduced growthism in the early-to-mid-20th century.

Fascism arose in Europe out of an obsession with a certain kind of progress akin to that described by Herbert Spencer: a survival-of-the-fittest social Darwinism. Their program sought the expansion and restoration of Italian colonial territory in Africa, and across the whole of the Mediterranean. One of the main tenets of Fascist Italy was the restoration of a polity akin to Imperial Rome, with a central concept being *spazio vitale*, or "living space," a principle not substantively different from the settler colonialism deployed by other Western empires. The ideology consisted of a state collectivism they called "corporativism," a "third-way" (*terza via*) economic ideology offering an alternative to liberal capitalist and socialist ideologies. They sought to more intensely centralize the economy while maintaining the labor hierarchies integral to growth and expanding colonies abroad. Like other such growthist ideologies, the fascists used progress narratives to justify their actions and motivate their supporters.

One of the central documents at the foundation of the movement was *The Doctrine of Fascism*, co-written by Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile. They wrote, "If the 19th century was the century of the individual (liberalism implies individualism) we are free to believe that this is the 'collective' century, and therefore the century of the State."[283] For fascists, the State served as the primary vehicle for achieving expansion, extraction, and progress. Mussolini writes, "A nation, as expressed in the State, is a living, ethical entity only insofar as it is progressive….For Fascism the State is absolute, individuals and groups relative...Instead of directing the game and guiding the material and moral progress of the community, the liberal State restricts its activities to recording results. The Fascist State is wide awake and has a will of its own."[284] Though the essay claims to reject liberalism and its dream of "indefinite progress," it only really rejects democratic political liberalism. Despite the frequent attempt to cast fascism as "illiberal" and of liberals to distance their worldview from fascism, the corporatist, growth-oriented economic policy of fascism resembles the economic liberalism that spread Euroamerican growth economies across the globe over the more than three centuries prior. Italian fascists like Giuseppe di Michelis, an influential writer at the time, acknowledged their intellectual debts to liberal thinkers. Di Michelis cites liberal politician Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, further, as an inspiration for ideas of "Eurafrican" integration, which became important for

[283] Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile, "The Doctrine of Fascism (1932)," in *Fascism Doctrine and Institutions* (Rome: Ardita Publishers, 1935): 10.
[284] Mussolini and Gentile, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 11.

Italian fascist ideology and established a colonial hierarchy critical for resource exploitation in Africa.[285]

Fascist imperialism employed not only technological trappings of progress like cars and aeronautics, but cast itself as a vehicle for *social* progress. Like the narratives embedded in futurism, the Italian fascists pitched the third way corporatist economic program as a new kind of imperialism morally superior to others, less exploitative than those of the past. Within a few years of Mussolini seizing power in a 1922 coup d'état, tens of thousands of Italians moved to colonies in Italian East Africa, which included modern states like Libya, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. Mussolini "intended to forge the empire following a strict hierarchy of racial relations," and sought to segregate Italians from Africans by law.[286] This sort of racial imperialism was core to the Fascist doctrine. Empire generally was seen by Mussolini as "not only territorial, or military, or commercial; it is also spiritual and ethical. [...] Fascism sees in the imperialistic spirit—i.e., in the tendency of nations to expand—a manifestation of their vitality."[287] Other contemporaneous authors tied this sort of growthism to progress explicitly as well; Mario Govi, for example, in favor of the corporativist vision of the early fascists, justified this newly intensified colonial growthism as the "unavoidable condition for the economic (as well as intellectual and moral) progress of the nations."[288] The

[285] Jens Steffek and Francesca Antonini, "Toward Eurafrica! Fascism, Corporativism, and Italy's Colonial Expansion," *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. Ian Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 158. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137520623_7.
[286] Giulia Barrera, "Mussolini's colonial race laws and state-settler relations in Africa Orientale Italiana (1935-41)," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8, no.3 (2003): 425–443, DOI: 10.1080/0958517032000011377O.
[287] Mussolini and Gentile, "The Doctrine of Fascism," 13.
[288] Steffek and Antonini, "Toward Eurafrica!" 152.

technocratic language of the fascists often sounds indistinguishable from modern economic liberal discourse on the burden of "developed" countries to help "less developed countries" achieve economic growth: "They conceived of some sort of 'white man's burden' falling to the Europeans who have the task of helping the native populations on their path to development."[289]

By the early-20th century, fascist Italy, as mentioned, developed *spazio vitale,* or "living space," which sent Italian colonists into East Africa in droves. Imperial Japan, too, had a similar concept: *Hakkō ichiu*, meaning "the world under one roof," which sent Japanese soldiers to conquer parts of Korea and China. The Japanese Empire arose through its industrialization, expanded its borders across the Japanese Archipelago seeking to extract natural resources and labor from conquered territories, and claimed territories in coastal China, Korea, and island nations of Southeast Asia. The country's economic downturn led to a rise in expansionist and nationalist movements in Japan, and, as with Manifest Destiny, the binary of savage-civilized was deployed. This narrative was perhaps most clearly captured in the policy of *Sonnō jōi*, literally: "Revere the Emperor, expel the barbarians."

The German fascism of the National Socialist German Workers' Party, meanwhile, was an even more microcosmic version of utopian progress to fuel growth than Italian fascism; perhaps the most aggressive of these 20th-century Manifest Destinies was the *lebensraum* of Nazi Germany, which also means "living space." The Nazis met the global economic downturn of the 1920s and 30s with a

[289] Steffek and Antonini, "Toward Eurafrica!" 157.

policy of intensified industrial growth and, ultimately, frontier expansionism. Progress narratives would come to play a vital role in that process. The Nazis deployed their own progress/growth narratives to capture land and resources and the imageries they used, the legal frameworks and territorial concepts at the heart of their myth of progress resembled others through history. Interestingly, as a primarily land-based expansionism rather than maritime growth, they relied on frontier progress myths more akin to those deployed in North America by U.S. settlers expanding from the Eastern U.S. westward, suggesting, as will be explored in the Findings section, that different progress narratives may be more or less effective, or judged by leaders as more or less appropriate, depending on the type of growth being administered

While Imperial Germany had long admired American Manifest Destiny, Adolf Hitler pursued it more intensely than his predecessors. The basic idea behind *lebensraum* was that a conquering state had the right to evict existing populations from their homelands, either by extermination or removal, and turn that land into agrarian parcels for citizens of the conquering state. The Nazi Party ramped up this policy, made it a central tenet of their political philosophy, and infused it with a racial hierarchy akin to that used by their predecessors in the anglophone and classical world, but now with the “Aryan,” instead of Anglo-Saxon, at the global zenith. Nazi notions of progress saw the success of Aryans tied in with the perfecting of humanity; Germanic cultures, they conjectured, have a right to conquer because they are genetically and culturally superior to others, and, through the progressive passage of history would ultimately benefit all of humanity

through their conquest. Hitler drew inspiration from American settler colonial expansionism to pursue this line of thinking. As Robert J. Miller writes, "Hitler envisioned the 'German East' of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia as an analogy to the American frontier of the 'West,' and he expected to expand the German empire eastwards in the same fashion as the United States had westward. Hitler and other Nazi leaders often referred to Jews, Poles, and Ukrainians as 'Indians.'"[290] "There is only one task," Hitler himself proclaimed in 1941, "To set about the Germanization of the land by bringing in Germans and to regard the indigenous inhabitants as Indians."[291] Norman Rich, too, has argued that, "The United States policy of westward expansion…served as the model for Hitler's entire conception of *Lebensraum*."[292]

Nazism was built on the same historiographic sense of progress used to justify the conquest of the Americas and Africa. Hitler writes in *Mein Kampf*:

> The entire human culture, as well as man himself, is only the result of one long single development, during which every generation added to, and built in, its building stones. The meaning and the aim of revolutions is not to wreck the entire building, but rather to take away unsuitable stuff which has been badly fitted in and to continue to build on and add to the healthy spot that has been made free. Thus alone will one be able and allowed to speak of a progress of mankind.[293]

Hitler's manifesto mentions "progress" as a form of teleological historical development explicitly at least a dozen times, and implicitly many more. The idea is not merely a propaganda term arising now and then; it is deeply embedded in

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[290] Robert J. Miller, "Nazi Germany's Race Laws, The United States, and American Indians," *St John's Law Review*, 3, no. 94, (2021): 756.
[291] Cited in Miller, "Nazi Germany's Race Laws," 771–772.
[292] Cited in James Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 10.
[293] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Houghton: Mifflin Company, 1941), 358.

the Nazi worldview. Racialism is also embedded in this sense of progress; for Hitler, the very foundation of culture itself arises from the Aryan race:

> The progress of mankind resembles the ascent on an endless ladder; one cannot arrive at the top without first having taken the lower steps. Thus the Aryan had to go the way which reality showed him and not that of which the imagination of a modern pacifist dreams. [...]Therefore, it is no accident that the first cultures originated in those places where the Aryan, by meeting lower peoples, subdued them and made them subject to his will. They, then, were the first technical instrument in the service of a growing culture.[294]

One of the most substantive inspirations the Nazis took from the United States was for building racial segregation into their legal system. James Q. Whitman quotes the famous segregationist John C. Calhoun (a man admired by the Nazis) justifying race-based slavery because it serves as "the best guarantee to equality among the whites."[295] In other words, by giving poor and rich whites alike a singular identity, those wealthy whites who benefited from slavery could maintain the support of poorer whites—or at least defend against class solidarity between poor people of various ethnicities—by casting working Black, Indigenous, and other nonwhites as an out-group threatening their already meager economic status.

The Nazis deployed similar strategies: eugenicist race science was one method they used for unifying otherwise competing classes, casting the Jewish population as the primary outgroup against whom non-Jewish Germans, rich and poor, could unite. The Nuremberg Laws, which codified much of the repression of German Jews, were substantially modeled on American legal precedents: "It is

[294] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 405.
[295] Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, xii.

particularly startling to discover," writes Whitman, "that the most radical Nazis … were the most ardent champions of the lessons that American approaches held for Germany."[296] He shows further that "the ironic truth is that when Nazis rejected the American example, it was sometimes because they thought that American practices were overly harsh: for Nazis of the early 1930s, even radical ones, American race law sometimes looked *too* racist."[297]

Alexandra Minna Stern reflects, "The Third Reich's 1933 'Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases' was modeled on laws in Indiana and California. Under this law, the Nazis sterilized approximately 400,000 children and adults, mostly Jews and other 'undesirables,' labeled 'defective.'"[298] American support for eugenics declined after the Second World War, but forced sterilization continued as standard practice for several decades thereafter, with "procedures thought to have been performed on one out of every four Native American women [in the 1960s and 1970s], against their knowledge or consent."[299]

It is not simply that the Nazi Party was inspired by American example to an extent that they would not have committed such crimes without it; rather, it is to say that the U.S. government and Nazi government were often motivated by the same thing—expanding economies, or, growth—and used many of the same legal and rhetorical justifications: both claimed to represent a more "civilized" society, a

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[296] Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 2.
[297] Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, 5.
[298] Alexandra Minna Stern, "Forced sterilization policies in the US targeted minorities and those with disabilities – and lasted into the 21st century," *The Conversation*, 26 August 2020, https://theconversation.com/forced-sterilization-policies-in-the-us-targeted-minorities-and-those-with-disabilities-and-lasted-into-the-21st-century-143144.
[299] Jane Lawrence, "The Little-Known History of the Forced Sterilization of Native American Women," *JSTOR Daily,* 25 August 2016, https://daily.jstor.org/the-little-known-history-of-the-forced-sterilization-of-native-american-women/.

"higher race," than those whose land and lives they stole through enslavement, murder, or genocide, and to be advocating for the progress of humanity. They both justified their actions using racial pseudoscience and the evolutionary progress myth that claims any wrong done by a superior race is justified because it is contributing to the long-term progress of humankind toward perfection.

If authoritarian ideologies like fascism and economic liberalism were infatuated with progress narratives to support their version of growthism, more egalitarian ideologies of the time were also enamored with a sense of forward momentum and historical progress. Whether they were invested in growth*ism* is a more complicated question, revealing the sometimes convoluted relationship between growth and progress, particularly in egalitarian political projects.

First let's look at where progress fits in. The socialist pamphlet *Proceedings of the 1932 National Convention of the Socialist Party* (of America) confidently proclaimed:

> Above all things we need new and revolutionarily different philosophy and loyalty to remake our world into a federation of cooperative commonwealths instead of a chaos of quarreling nations, suspicious races and contending classes. The more complete is the acceptance of this revolutionary philosophy the sooner the class struggle will end in victorious establishment of a classless society….The hope of the world is Socialism.[300]

The United Kingdom's Labour Party manifesto of 1924 made similar promises. Using what appears to be a self-consciously religious heading, *The spirit that giveth life*, the manifesto states:

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[300] "The March of Socialism 1928-1932," *Journal of the Seventeenth National Convention Socialist Party*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1932. (Chicago: Italian Labor Publishing Co., 1932), https://ia800502.us.archive.org/33/items/ProceedingsOfThe1932NationalConventionOfTheSocialistParty/1932sp2_text.pdf.

> We appeal to the People to support us in our steadfast march [...] using each success as the beginning of further achievements towards a really Socialist Commonwealth, in which there shall at least be opportunity for Good Will to conquer Hate and Strife, and for Brotherhood, if not to supersede Greed, at least to set due bounds to that competition which leads only to loss and death.[301]

Socialists were interested in the more equitable distribution of the fruits of growth, if not particularly critical of growth itself. Marxian progress myths were based on this more equitable and just distribution of value, but they were not without risk of authoritarian co-optation and growth imperatives. Communism in Russia almost immediately descended into assassinations, executions, purges, and authoritarianism while espousing its own version of progress and growth (which will be explored in more detail later). What Marxian progressives did when they seized power was ultimately similar to what other growthists did: continued to run their society by an imperative to expand and extract from both human and non-human populations. Lines between 20th-century progress ideologies—particularly fascism, communism, liberalism, and socialism—were often unclear, with ideas, rhetorics, and allegiances overlapping, flipping, and cross-pollinating. Anglophone economists collaborated with Nazi and fascist counterparts in the interwar period; Mussolini was a socialist politician before founding the National Fascist Party; Oswald Mosley joined the democratic socialist Independent Labour Party before founding the British Union of Fascists; Adolf Hitler and his associates, meanwhile, co-opted working-class populism and socialist language in often successful efforts to siphon members of leftist parties, even going as far as naming their party

[301] Dennis Kavanagh and Iain Dale, *Labour Party General Election Manifestos 1900-1997: Volume Two* (London: Routledge, 2015), 31.

National Socialism.[302] Meanwhile, many thinkers and writers who are frequently considered liberals today, like Leonard Woolf, Norman Angell, and George Orwell, at the time self-identified as socialists.[303]

After two world wars fought between competing progress myths and their adherents—that is to say, competing visions for how to administer the increasingly wealthy fossil fuel, growth-based economies—a bipolar world emerged. With communist states led by the Soviet Union and China and liberal states led by Europe and the anglophone world, the fossil fuel growthism of the industrialization period accelerated in an arms race of growth, what has come to be called the Great Acceleration.

Soviet Union

According to Robert C. Allen, prior to 1970, "the Soviet economy was one of the most successful in the world using per capita GDP as the measure of performance," coming in second only to Japan in its rate of growth.[304] Between 1928 and 1970, the USSR's annual gross national product grew at a rate of nearly

[302] For any bad-faith commentators still hoping to connect Nazism with socialism, Nathan J. Robinson definitively puts that argument to rest in "Putting The "Nazis Were Socialist" Nonsense To Rest," *Current Affairs*, 24 January 2020, https://www.currentaffairs.org/2020/01/putting-the-nazis-were-socialist-nonsense-to-rest.
[303] Lucian M. Ashworth, "Democratic Socialism and International Thought in Interwar Britain," *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. Ian Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 75.
[304] Robert C. Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Soviet Economy," *The Canadian Journal of Economics* 34, no. 4 (2001): 859–881.

five percent per year, a rate higher than the average U.S. growth rate at the time, or at any time in the 21st century.[305]

The Soviet Union's Communist Party under Josef Stalin guided the economy via Five-Year Plans, which, for a time, were critical to achieving such rapid growth: one such plan involved centralizing control of settlement patterns, industry, and agriculture, which forced millions of peasants to work on state-owned farms. The political repression involved in the collectivization and mechanization of agriculture resulted in millions of deaths in the 1932–33 famine.[306] (The introduction and mechanization of agriculture in the Americas also yielded millions of deaths, as already covered, though over a longer timespan.) Despite the supposed abundance delivered by progress, the 20th century was uniquely defined by hunger, with more dying of famine in the 20th century than in any known century prior. Of the estimated 70.1–80.4 million deaths, 80 percent died in just two countries: the Soviet Union and China.[307] Given that Stalin's rule upended the egalitarian, progressive promise of Marxism, and could no longer justify his rule based on wartime leadership, he would need growth to justify his autocracy and would use progress to argue for growth.

In an address to Soviet citizens in 1946, Stalin illustrates this use of progress narrative.[308] Stalin started with the triumphs of the state and party: "the

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[305] "United States GDP Annual Growth Rate," *Trading Economics*, U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/gdp-growth-annual.
[306] Massimo Livi-Bacci, "On the Human Costs of Collectivization in the Soviet Union," *Population and Development Review*, 19, no. 4 (1993): 743–766.
[307] Felix Wemheuer, *Famine Politics in Maoist China and the Soviet Union* (New Haven: Yale Scholarship Online, 2015), 1.
[308] Joseph V. Stalin, "Speech Delivered by Stalin at a Meeting of Voters of the Stalin Electoral District, Moscow," 9 February 1946, *Speeches Delivered at Meetings of Voters of the Stalin*

Soviet social system has proved to be more viable and stable than the non-Soviet social system, [and] that the Soviet social system is a better form of organization of society than any non-Soviet social system." Given the GDP growth rates of the time, he was justified in making this claim. Despite the devastating loss of life suffered by the USSR during World War II, Stalin frames the event as a victory proving the superiority of state communism: "our victory signifies that our Soviet *state* system was victorious, that our multinational Soviet state passed all the tests of the war and proved its viability." Stalin praises the three successive Five-Year Plans with producing sufficient materials, like pig iron, steel, grain, fuel, and other goods, necessary to win the war, and goes into great detail about how far the country had come since Bolsheviks first gained power. Stalin's government, he proclaims, can be thanked for such economic growth and progress: "This unprecedented growth of production cannot be regarded as the simple and ordinary development of a country from backwardness to progress," he said, but instead represented "a leap" that transformed the country "from a backward country into an advanced country, from an agrarian into an industrial country." As in liberal societies during this time of scientistic understandings of progress, Stalin exalted "science," building utopian progress on the past scientistic progress narrative: he cast growth as both a scientific concept and the result of progress brought about by science. Stalin reserved a special mention for science and scientists and the role they play in progress in this speech: "I have no doubt that if we give our scientists proper assistance they will be able in the very near future

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Electoral District, Moscow, 19–44 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1940), Wilson Center Digital Archive, http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116179.

not only to overtake but even outstrip the achievements of science beyond the borders of our country."

Stalin also touted the need to "put an end" to the "backwardness in agriculture,"—nodding to his sense of teleology—and introduce large-scale, collectivized, mechanized farming. Like most growth societies, Stalin's regime targeted Indigenous societies—primarily reindeer herders and walrus hunters in the Siberian Arctic—who they branded "backwards" and in need of modernization via integration into industrial state agriculture. One particular local Party leader tasked with imposing the collectivization policy in Anadyr, just below the Arctic circle, stated that treating "kulaks and shamans with kindness, will make them spawn like flies. We must seize all of them so they will not be hostile to our work."[309] The USSR attempted a version of the United States' reservation system, forcibly resettling Indigenous groups like the Yupik into concentrated villages.[310] They justified persecution of Indigenous populations the same way liberals did in the West, suggesting that they represent a primitive past and must be violently pulled into a civilized modernity; "in Marxist terms," as Bathsheba Demuth puts it, "they [the Indigenous people of Chukotka] lived on the first rung of history's ladder, before the rise of agriculture and industry, let alone socialism….the Bolsheviks preached liberation to people who did not see themselves as oppressed."[311] "With

[309] Cited in Bathsheba Demuth, "When the Soviet Union Freed the Arctic from Capitalist Slavery," *The New Yorker*, 15 August 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/when-the-soviet-union-freed-the-arctic-from-capitalist-slavery.
[310] Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov, *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900-1960* (University of Alaska Press, 2013).
[311] Bathsheba Demuth, "When the Soviet Union Freed the Arctic from Capitalist Slavery," *The New Yorker*, 15 August 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/when-the-soviet-union-freed-the-arctic-from-capitalist-slavery.

the assistance from the new Soviet state," writes Dennis Bartels, "Northern Peoples could, theoretically, 'progress from vestigial clan-based social organization to socialist nations, skipping the socio-cultural evolutionary stages of feudalism and capitalism.'"[312] Even on the basis of propagandized Soviet sources, scholars have "characterized Soviet resource extraction in the north as a form of colonialism that excluded Northerners."[313]

The Soviet state imposed not just economic but *cultural* imperialism upon Siberian peoples as well, developing what was called "Sovietization," which required the adoption of the Russian language and state education. Even as Indigenous children were forced into separate schools, the state kept educational standards in Indigenous schools subpar. Regarding the impact on the Russian Yupik in particular, "The psychological shock of the relocations, of bidding farewell to one's homeland, and the shutting down of old villages curtailed people's ability to resist further governmental actions," as Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov write, and, "After 1958, all Native children were ordered to be placed in state-run boarding schools and daycare centers."[314] Outsiders from the state took over at all levels of government, banned Native subsistence whaling in the 1960s, and authorized the end of Yupik language teaching in the 1970s.

Another part of this project of cultural assimilation involved coercing Indigenous students—along with the rest of the Soviet population of men—to model themselves in the image of the "New Soviet Man," an ideal recalling

[312] Dennis Bartels and Alice L. Bartels, "Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North and Cold War Ideology," *Anthropologica* 48, no. 2 (2006): 265–279.
[313] Bartels and Bartels, "Indigenous Peoples of the Russian North," 265–279.
[314] Krupnik and Chlenov, *Yupik Transitions*, 289.

Spencer's perfect man, or Hitler's invocation of an Übermensch, or the Italian fascists' futuristic masculine ideal. The New Soviet Man, or "man of the future" in Trotsky's words, would reflect the values of Soviet communism: a muscular evangelist of Marxism who adored exertion, austerity, and manual labor, glorifying self-sacrifice for benefit of the regime. The New Soviet Woman was purported by propagandists to be emancipated and equal to her male comrades. A corollary progress narrative was developed and much publicity was devoted to the recruitment of women in traditionally male-dominated professions like medicine and the sciences, aviation and factories.[315] But the USSR adopted more conservative values as time went on and the New Soviet Woman came to be idealized as a full-time worker *and* a homemaker—maximizing extraction from her labor—finding her destiny to be a loyal wife and mother who contributed to both the economic productivity of the state and the reproduction of its work force and armies.[316] So-called chivalry and "family values" dominated, and abortion was banned. The New Soviet Woman represented a progress myth of women's advancement and gender equality that in reality was never meant to be implemented; the Soviets justified enacting policies of cultural imperialism against Muslims and Indigenous peoples by claiming to fight what they deemed the gender "backwardness" of those peoples, even as they expected Soviet women to languish under Soviet patriarchy.[317]

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[315] Catriona Kelly, "The New Soviet Man and Woman," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Russian History*, ed. Simon Dixon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[316] See: Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999).
[317] See Bonnie G. Smith, ed., "*Hujum*," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia: Women in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),

As is common with other growth economies, the Soviet Union harmed the environment in the name of growth and progress. The USSR's industrial economy caused numerous major environmental disasters, including oil spills, chemical and heavy metals pollution, radioactive contamination, desertification, deforestation, and more. Like their Western counterparts, the USSR practiced a systematic repression of environmentalists, suppressing environmental activism while privileging polluting industries, into the present.[318] At times, the rapid economic growth and unimpeded industry of the USSR, combined with their more successful repression of environmental dissent, led to a harmful environmental record. Although the United States was the greatest emitter of harmful air pollution, the

https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195148909.001.0001/acref-9780195148909-e-467.

[318] Russia's polar bears, Amur tigers, and Caucasian leopards are nearing extinction. For the myriad environmental harms of the USSR, see: Renfrey Clarke, "The ecological disaster that was the USSR," *Socialist Alliance*, December 2011, https://socialist-alliance.org/alliance-voices/ecological-disaster-was-ussr-0;
Ankit Panda, "How the Soviet Union Created Central Asia's Worst Environmental Disaster," *The Diplomat*, 3 October 2014, https://thediplomat.com/2014/10/how-the-soviet-union-created-central-asias-worst-environmental-disaster/;
Paul Quinn-Judge, "Soviet Union's Environmental Disasters Mount," *The Seattle Times*, 30 January 1990, https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19900130&slug=1053482;
"Environmental collapse before Soviet's fall," *Down to Earth*, 26 December 2016, https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/environment/environmental-collapse-before-the-soviet-s-fall-56642;
Armine Sahakyan, "The Grim Pollution Picture in the Former Soviet Union," *HuffPost*, 6 December 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-grim-pollution-pictur_b_9266764;
Quirin Schiermeier, "Soviet Union's collapse led to massive drop in carbon emissions," *Nature*, 1 July 2019, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02024-6;
Douglas Weiner, "Ecology in the former Soviet Union," in *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation, and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Union* (Indiana University Press, 1988);
"Changing Forest Cover Since the Soviet Era," *NASA Earth Observatory*, 16 July 2015, https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/86221/changing-forest-cover-since-the-soviet-era.

Soviet Union was a close second[319] and contributed to a "severely degraded environment" throughout the Soviet bloc countries.[320]

China

Communist China bears insightful parallels with the Soviet example. Like the USSR, China experienced rapid mechanization of agriculture fairly soon after its revolution, and like this process in the USSR, it led to famines and autocratic pressures that yielded mass mortality. Taking cues from both Stalin and the liberal West, Mao drew heavily on progress narratives to build popular support for this new industrial growth economy. The "Great Leap Forward"—a name often applied to Mao's Second Five-Year Plan, which focused on mechanizing and collectivizing China's agricultural system following the Soviet example—contained a promise of progress in its very name, and probably deliberately echoed Stalin's use of a "leap forward" rhetorical flare in his aforementioned speech. The policy resulted in potentially 30 million famine deaths from mismanagement and ecological harm, but is not the only example of Mao's use of progress rhetoric for justifying growth.[321]

Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong, or, "The Little Red Book," one of the most widely printed books in history, was first published in 1964. The book

[319] Maria Shahgedanova and Timothy P. Burt, "New data on air pollution in the former Soviet Union," *Global Environmental Change* 4, no. 3 (1994): 201–227, https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-3780(94)90003-5.
[320] Arran Gare, "The Environmental Record of the Soviet Union," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 13, no. 3 (2002): 52–72.
[321] Vaclav Smil, "China's great famine: 40 years later," *British Medical Journal* 319, no. 7225 (1999): 1619–1621.

helped solidify Mao's cult of personality while laying the theoretical foundation of his contribution to Marxist-Leninist thought through around 200 short aphorisms. The book became required reading for Chinese citizens under his rule, with China's Ministry of Culture attempting to distribute a copy to every citizen.[322] The book uses extensive invocations of progress to sanction various activities, for instance, to justify war: "History shows that wars are divided into two kinds, just and unjust. All wars that are progressive are just, and all wars that impede progress are unjust. We Communists oppose all unjust wars that impede progress, but we do not oppose progressive, just wars."[323] But, progress is also used to assure readers that war is soon to be abolished or obsolete: "War, this monster of mutual slaughter among men, will be finally eliminated by the progress of human society, and in the not too distant future too."

"Progress" is repeated throughout the text like a mantra; in another passage from the Little Red Book, Mao writes: "The world is progressing, the future is bright and no one can change this general trend of history. We should carry on constant propaganda among the people on the facts of world progress and the bright future ahead so that they will build their confidence in victory." But, like the promises of progress made by other growth states, this one must defer its fulfillment: "At the same time, we must tell the people and tell our comrades that there will be twists

[322] "Who, What, Why: What is the Little Red Book?" *BBC News*, 26 November 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34932800.
[323] All quotations from *The Little Red Book* cited from David Quentin and Brian Baggins, eds, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung ("The Little Red Book")*, Marxists Internet Archive (transcribed from Peking Foreign Languages Press, 2019): https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/mao/Quotations_from_Chairman_Mao_Tse-tung.pdf.

and turns in our road. There are still many obstacles and difficulties along the road of revolution."

As with Stalin, Mao's sense of progress is rooted in nationalism:

> ...the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people were neither cowed nor conquered nor exterminated. [...] Holding high the great standard of revolution, they rose in armed resistance and over a vast territory in China they set up people's governments, carried out land reform, built up a people's army [...] and preserved and expanded the revolutionary forces of the Chinese people.

Mao's avowed definition of "progress" involves developing a "classless society," but the vehicles he valorizes are the same ones that growthists use today: science, industrial production, and inevitable technological advancement. Economic growth, for Mao, is the explicit goal of this progress: "the social conditions are being created for a tremendous expansion of industrial and agricultural production." And like many in the West writing on progress today, Mao has no patience for pessimism about such goals:

> In the fields of the struggle for production and scientific experiment, mankind makes constant progress [...] Ideas of stagnation, pessimism, inertia and complacency are all wrong. They are wrong because they agree neither with the historical facts of social development over the past million years, nor with the historical facts of nature so far known to us.

These sorts of homilies, strikingly similar to Western liberals' rhetorics of progress, were valuable vehicles in propelling the dictator to power. His image, after all, can frequently be found looking to a bright future, presenting himself as the embodiment of hope.[324] The quotations in Mao's book stretch back to the 1920s and were central to Chinese Communist Party rhetoric in the lead up to the

[324] Unknown Artist, "Collection of Chinese propaganda material from the mid-late 20th century," *Art Fund*, 2013, https://www.artfund.org/supporting-museums/art-weve-helped-buy/artwork/12202/collection-of-chinese-propaganda-material-from-the-mid-late-20th-century.

revolution. David Shambaugh notes that "The Chinese Communists learned much from their study of the Soviet, Nazi and other totalitarian states' propaganda methods"—both of whom, as shown, leaned heavily on progress myths.[325]

The environment has also suffered under the industrialization and growth-as-progress economy of Communist China. The Little Red Book contains many quotations attesting to Mao's disdain for nature, casting society as fundamentally in conflict with ecologies, such as: "the contradiction between society and nature is resolved by the method of developing the productive forces," and "For the purpose of attaining freedom in the world of nature, man must use natural science to understand, conquer and change nature and thus attain freedom from nature." One of the first programs implemented in Mao's Great Leap Forward was the Four Pests Campaign, which sought to eradicate sparrows, mosquitos, rats, and flies. The result was ecologically disastrous and one of the primary contributors to the mass famine that followed.[326] The widespread destruction of sparrow populations led to a boom in locusts, which decimated crops. The mechanization of agriculture, meanwhile, and increase in industrial intensity were accompanied by all the familiar effects of soil degradation, habitat destruction, and air and water pollution. This use of progress rhetoric was not confined to Mao's reign: the CCP today continues to use progressive language as a political tool. As the *Wall Street Journal* notes, they do this by "invoking the woke themes of American

[325] David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *The China Journal* 57 (2007): 25–58.
[326] George Dvorsky, "China's Worst Self-Inflicted Environmental Disaster: The Campaign to Wipe Out the Common Sparrow," *Gizmodo*, 18 July 2012, https://gizmodo.com/china-s-worst-self-inflicted-environmental-disaster-th-5927112.

progressives as a propaganda weapon against the U.S."[327] The *Global Times*, a CCP-owned newspaper, runs editorials with critiques like "the Trump administration is an extremely typical white supremacy government," meanwhile administering policies of Han supremacy.

As in the Soviet Union and the West, growth-as-progress narratives in China have had harmful effects on ethnic minority groups. Indigenous people in Taiwan, for instance, clashed with China throughout the 20th century and suffered imperial incursions by the Chinese (and other empires, including the Spanish, Dutch, and Japanese).[328] Uyghur people have suffered under CCP policies with more than a million being detained in "reeducation" camps.[329] Once in these camps, Uyghurs are reportedly tortured and coerced into unpaid labor. In 2020, as many as half a million people were forced to pick cotton in Xinjiang, which produces about a fifth of the world's cotton.[330] The booming technology industry has also profited from abusive labor conditions in China. The iPhone, for instance, has become the best-selling product ever made, with over 2 billion IOS Apple products having been sold worldwide. As a result, Apple has become one of the most profitable companies in history, and has experienced high levels of growth.[331]

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[327] "The Woke Chinese Communist Party," *Wall Street Journal Opinion*, 7 March 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-woke-chinese-communist-party-11615153949.
[328] Isabella Steger, "Taiwan's indigenous people remind Xi Jinping that it has 'never belonged to China,'" *Quartz*, 9 January 2019, https://qz.com/1518787/taiwans-indigenous-people-remind-xi-jinping-it-has-never-belonged-to-china/.
[329] Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 March 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang.
[330] See: "Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide?" *BBC News*, 21 June 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-22278037.
[331] While outside the scope of this historical analysis, there is much to be considered on the state-corporate networks that have been developed, largely since Industrialization, to govern global economies and their integrated polities. State actors and non-state economic actors are intricately integrated through legalistic, cultural, and political connections.

Investigations into Apple's Chinese supplier found that working conditions had led to hundreds of instances of chemical poisoning from exposure to substances like mercury and lead, as well as suicides—so many that "large nets [were] installed outside many of the buildings to catch falling bodies."[332] The factory in question, Foxconn Longhua, employs more than 1 million employees and deploys "military-style discipline characterized by verbal and physical abuse."[333] Apple, it should also be noted, has leaned heavily on marketing strategies that emphasize their unique role in technological development and innovation—itself part of a broader progress narrative—despite the potential and credible downsides of Apple's technology.[334]

The Soviet Union and Communist China can trace the lineage of their primary ideological base to Marxist-Leninism. As noted, early in Marx's career, he and his co-author Engels built a progressive macrohistorical narrative in which history develops according to laws of linear momentum—from savage to complex, through stages of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. But Marx's later writing equivocates far more and his neat narrative of progressive history becomes less prevalent, even disavowed. Lenin, on the other hand, seemed to recognize the

[332] Brian Merchant, "Life and death in Apple's forbidden city," *The Observer*, 18 June 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/18/foxconn-life-death-forbidden-city-longhua-suicide-apple-iphone-brian-merchant-one-device-extract.
[333] Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85.
[334] A study of corporate use of progress narratives in spurring company growth and justifying company actions could be a whole study in itself. The scope of this study does not allow for more than a few lines about this phenomenon, but invoking various forms of progress—from social change, to technological innovation, to simply the word, "progress,"—is a widespread practice across industry marketing strategies. See: Claire Jenik, "The World's Most Valuable Brands 2020," *Statistica*, 26 October 2020, https://www.statista.com/chart/14022/brand-value-most-valuable-brands/.

rhetorical, propagandistic potential of such a progress narrative and implemented Marx's earlier historiography in his own writing. Lenin writes, in the *Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx*, "Since the appearance of Marxism, each of the three great periods of world history has brought Marxism new confirmation and new triumphs. But a still greater triumph awaits Marxism, as the doctrine of the proletariat, in the coming period of history."[335] The Soviet Union stuck more or less to this story until its dissolution, but China ultimately took a different path. Though Mao's Great Leap Forward promised growth and progress, it failed to deliver it. Growth stagnated during Mao's rule. His death in 1976 was well-timed to allow China to break from its Marxist-Leninist ideological basis and adopt tenets from an ideology more equipped to pursue economic growth in the latter 20th-century.

Western Neoliberalism

In 1957, the U.K.'s Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan gave a speech to the nation in which he declared "most of our people have never had it so good," and called for increasing production so as to ensure the continuation of economic growth.[336] In a different speech given that same year, Macmillan declared, "We've been in the lead of industrial and scientific progress at least since James Watt invented the steam engine and we are still in the lead in these days of atoms and

[335] Vladimir Lenin, "The Historical Destiny of the Doctrine of Karl Marx," *Lenin Collected Works, Volume 18* (Progress Publishers, 1975), 582–585, via *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1913/mar/01.htm.
[336] "1957: Britons 'have never had it so good,'" BBC: ON THIS DAY, 20 July 1957, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/july/20/newsid_3728000/3728225.stm.

aeroplanes, so we have no reason to be frightened of temporary difficulties."[337] He continued, "Expansion and freedom, trade and progress, remain our main theme and objective." Macmillan used this speech to promote "Free Trade Area" proposals, attempts to avoid British economic integration with Europe and to allow Britain to introduce competition.[338]

There was some cause for Brits to be optimistic: the war that had claimed at least 60 million lives and birthed numerous atrocities was over. Meanwhile, a new mechanized era appeared set to enrich Western economies beyond precedent. From the middle of the 20th century, petroleum became proportionately more important in the global sociotechnical metabolism. Being significantly denser and more versatile than coal in important ways, oil and gas supercharged the economy. Combined with postwar reconstruction of Europe and the return of a significant proportion of the labor force from the war, the economy grew rapidly. Vaclav Smil calculates that, "Between 1913 and 1950 per capita GDP growth slowed down to 0.76% in western Europe and 1.61% in the US, but between 1950 and 1973 it reached record highs of 4.05% in western Europe, 2.45% in the US."[339] Economic growth, quantified through gross domestic product, or GDP, which "expresses the monetary value of all final goods and services that are produced or provided within the borders of a country during a specified period of time," became the measure of nations' success and wellbeing.[340] GDP was first

[337] British Pathé, "Macmillan's Speech From 10 Downing Street (1957)," *YouTube*, 13 April 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suyoCrj1XbA.
[338] John W. Young, "Macmillan, the Free Trade Area and the First Application, 1957–63," In *Britain and European Unity, 1945–1992* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993).
[339] Vaclav Smil, *Growth: From Microorganisms to Megacities* (London: MIT Press, 2019), 411.
[340] Smil, *Growth*, 399.

used widely to measure the growth of post-WWII economies, and an expectation of perpetual compound annual growth of at least three percent became the norm for a "healthy" economy. The Second World War marked the beginning of a greater redistribution of wealth that continued for nearly three decades. By the close of the 1970s, "the personal wealth belonging to the richest 1 per cent had fallen to only one-fifth of the total [wealth], compared to over half in the late 1930s, and two-thirds before the First World War."[341] Wealth held by the poorest four-fifths of adults, meanwhile, increased from eight percent in the 1930s to 35 percent in the 1970s[342]: "Until the 1970s, top tax rates often remained at levels close to those reached during WWII."[343] In the United States, union membership peaked in 1945 and wealth taxes prevented the immediate restoration of large fortunes: "WWII created both the political will and the fiscal and organisational capacities required for ambitious redistributive programmes."[344] Though the New Deal reflected the country's legacy of racial exclusion, new wealth forged the largest "middle" class in the country's history.[345] This injection of wealth and economic activity is sometimes referred to as the Great Acceleration, which was accompanied by growth in populations and economies all over the world.[346] The combination of infrastructure (re)building efforts, plus a flood of petroleum-based

[341] Charles Feinstein, "The Equalizing of Wealth in Britain Since the Second World War," *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 12, no. 1 (1996): 102–103.
[342] Feinstein. "The Equalizing of Wealth," 103.
[343] Walter Scheidel, "Inequality: Total war as a great leveller," *VoxEU & CEPR*, 2 September 2019, https://voxeu.org/article/inequality-total-war-great-leveller.
[344] Scheidel, "Inequality."
[345] Adolf Reed Jr, "The New Deal Wasn't Intrinsically Racist," *The New Republic*, 26 November 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/155704/new-deal-wasnt-intrinsically-racist.
[346] Will Steffen, et al., "The Trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration," *The Anthropocene Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): https://doi.org/10.1177/20530196145647.

technology, like automobile and air travel, spurred what may be the largest middle-class expansion not just in U.S. history, but in all of recorded history, or for as long as "middle class" has been a meaningful category. Much of the mid- and latter-20th century narratives of progress in material well-being, social welfare indicators, and other quality of life derive from this brief period of equalizing of wealth.

It was also at this time that economics as an academic discipline explicitly began to take the growth of the postwar economic boom for granted, and positioned itself at the center of policymaking and progress myth-making. As Christopher F. Jones notes, "The founding fathers of economics—luminaries including Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill—shared a belief that growth was finite, and that the reason for limits lay in the natural world," but in 1957, economist Robert Solow published a pair of articles that departed from these intellectual foundations of growth-limited economics.[347] Solow's models deliberately ignored natural resources like land, fossil fuels, forests, rare metals and minerals: when mentioned at all, they became abstracted as elements of capital, an intangible and theoretically inexhaustible fiction, rather than calculated as real, material entities. By removing limited natural resources from the equation, Solow argued that growth could continue perpetually. This narrative proved to be very powerful. Solow's papers and the idea of infinite growth became a foundational tenet of much subsequent modeling. Such models, however, reached far beyond their mandate in economics and began to serve as the basis for

[347] Christopher F. Jones, "The Delusion and Danger of Infinite Economic Growth," *The New Republic*, 1 October 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/155214/delusion-danger-infinite-economic-growth.

policymaking. In 1991, Lawrence Summers—then Chief Economist of the World Bank and later the U.S. Treasury Secretary and President of Harvard University—stated, “There are no… limits to the carrying capacity of the earth that are likely to bind any time in the foreseeable future. There isn’t a risk of an apocalypse due to global warming or anything else. The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit, is a profound error.”[348] In place of biological evolutionary science as the basis for progress myths in the form of Spencer’s “social Darwinism,” economics became ascendent as the primary set of theoretical frameworks through which to understand and communicate growth imperatives and progress. As evolutionary theory claimed to discover laws of nature in biology, economics claimed to discover laws of nature in economies. The midcentury economists’—and their contemporary descendants’—position is well-illustrated by Solow’s famous 1974 pronouncement: “The world can, in effect, get along without natural resources.”[349] Solow explained his work’s omission of material realities as simply the “natural assumption” to make.[350]

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[348] Summers, it should be noted, has consistently written controversial statements, economic and otherwise: for example, writing memos that include comments like, “the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that. [...] I’ve always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly underpolluted.” In: “Furor on Memo at World Bank,” *The New York Times*, 7 February 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/07/business/furor-on-memo-at-world-bank.html. Summers was also a major voice in the Clinton administration arguing against taking action to curtail greenhouse gas emissions; see Robert Wampler, ed., “Kyoto Redux? Obama’s Challenges at Copenhagen Echo Clinton’s at Kyoto,” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book* no. 303, 11 December 2009, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB303/index.htm; Lawrence Summers, cited by William E. Rees, “Footprints to Sustainability,” *The University of British Columbia News*, 6 April 2006, https://news.ubc.ca/2006/04/06/archive-ubcreports-2006-06apr06-footprints/.

[349] John M. Hartwick, “What Would Solow Say?” *Journal of Natural Resources Policy Research* 1, no. 1 (2008): 91–96. https://doi.org/10.1080/19390450802504451.

[350] As cited in Christopher F. Jones, “The Delusion and Danger of Infinite Economic Growth,” *The New Republic*, 1 October 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/155214/delusion-danger-infinite-economic-growth.

This ascendancy of economics set the stage for an economistic growthist ideology and progress metanarrative to achieve a hegemonic role in policymaking and politics of the next half century. Ten years before Macmillan gave his "never had it so good" speech, 39 scholars convened by Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek met with the purpose of discussing the future of what Hayek termed "classical liberalism." The purpose of the meeting was to determine how they could ensure that *economic*—as opposed to *political*—liberalism would continue to dominate while stopping the spread of social welfare policies like those contained in the New Deal. These policies were contested by those who, like Hayek, would be targeted by redistributive policies, and so sought a way to undermine them. The group also acted in anticipation of the Labour Government's looming "Five Giants" reforms in the United Kingdom that would create the National Health Service and many other social welfare programs a year later. These welfare state interventions and those like them have been generally cast under the ideological umbrella of "Keynesianism," after British economist John Maynard Keynes. "Keynesianism" encompasses a broad social democratic tendency that fuses corporate market policy with social good regulations. In reality, Keynesianism was a modification of liberal capitalism rather than a deviation from it, one that sought to achieve a more stable system; it was just these interventions, after all, that helped to stabilize the economy during the Great Depression and in the wake of the Second World War. Hayek believed that these relatively modest social welfare programs represented not a slightly different, competing form of liberalism from the one he ascribed to,

but instead, to use his words (and title of his most famous polemic), a "road to serfdom."

The Great Depression and the almost decadal recessions that occurred throughout the 19th century made it clear that the "classical" liberalism of Herbert Spencer and the Gilded Age, a figure and period Hayek's acolytes vocally approved of, was not capable of successfully guiding the state or economy in a way that ensured long-term stability, even for its own stated ends of peaceful, open commerce. Keynesianism was an attempt to stabilize the crises caused by classical liberalism and institute a social democracy more suited to protecting political liberalism. In continental Europe, a parallel project, called ordoliberalism, helped to guide the establishment of welfare states during postwar reconstruction and aimed to build a stable "social" capitalism.

As alluded to above, one of the consequences of Keynesianism in the anglophone world and ordoliberalism in continental Europe was a partial redistribution of wealth. The share of income held by the top ten percent in the United States dropped from 45 percent in the 1930s to its lowest point of just under 35 percent in 1970.[351] When Hayek had convened his meeting in 1947, this share was already nearing its low, at around 34 percent.[352] Similar inequality trend lines were occurring in Europe as well where these new Keynesian and ordoliberal interventions were taking place. This increased equality in wealth had real-world positive impacts for a majority of Americans, Britons, and Europeans, from

[351] Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Inequality in the Long Run," *Science* 344, no. 6186 (2014): 838–843, https://eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/piketty-saezScience14.pdf.
[352] Piketty and Saez, "Inequality in the Long Run," 838–843.

increased life expectancy to greater access to healthcare and nutrition, to more leisure time.

While the New Deal built a larger middle-class funded by both wealth taxes on the very rich and by increasing production and wealth generally as measured by GDP, perhaps more importantly, it played a major role in accelerating carbon emissions, the mechanization of agriculture, the development of high-polluting industries like the chemical and personal vehicle industries, and initiated the modern culture of consumerism.[353] This process, part of the Great Acceleration, had a predictably harmful impact on Indigenous Americans, who were further dispossessed, dislocated, and betrayed by expanding development driven by the federal government.[354] This is because Keynesian politics, like communism in China and the USSR, and like its liberal forebears, remained rooted in logics of extraction, expansion, and growth (the economist Solow, who first popularized infinite growth, was himself a left-of-center Keynesian.[355]) Keynesianism effectively *delayed* crises of liberalism by redistributing some concentrated wealth for a few decades before the incompatibilities of economic and political liberalism would return.

The meeting Hayek convened in Mont Pelerin, Switzerland set off an intellectual and political movement to restore the supremacy of economic

[353] For a discussion of lessons on the New Deal and pitfalls we must avoid today, see: Samuel Miller McDonald, "The Green New Deal Can't Be Anything Like the New Deal," *The New Republic*, 31 May 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/153996/green-new-deal-cant-anything-like-new-deal.
[354] Nick Estes, *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso, 2019), 9-11.
[355] Christopher F. Jones, "The Delusion and Danger of Infinite Economic Growth," *The New Republic*, 1 October 2019, https://newrepublic.com/article/155214/delusion-danger-infinite-economic-growth.

liberalism over social democracy's political liberalism. Seeing themselves as builders of a "new" liberalism, proponents came to call themselves "neoliberals" and their ideology "neoliberalism." From this early movement, a trans-Atlantic network grew consisting of think tanks, media organizations, research institutes at universities, and industry trade groups who conspired to promote this "new" ideology. The central tenets of neoliberalism spread rapidly, in part due to their stripped down simplicity. Adherents evangelized these tenets through their media networks and, eventually, through global, intergovernmental institutions like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, where such values and beliefs came to dominate.[356] These values included belief in the primacy of the market backed up and enforced by heavily armed states, plus an emphasis on privatization—transforming public commons or public goods into private property for the purpose of extraction—the belief (or at least the stated belief) that self-interested profit-making "lifts all boats," and infinite compound growth yields continual progress.

Hayek and other leading neoliberals like Milton Friedman and Ludwig von Mises understood the inherent contradiction between economic and political liberalism. Instead of seeking to reconcile the two as Keynes had attempted, they focused on advancing economic liberalism over political liberalism. Hayek explicitly claimed that "economic freedom" is more important than political freedom. "Personally," Hayek once told an interviewer in *El Mercurio*, "I prefer a liberal

[356] For a definitive history of neoliberalism, see Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

dictator to democratic government lacking liberalism."[357] Neoliberals also understood that privileging economic liberalism over political liberalism would lead to increased economic inequality. The American Enterprise Institute and Institute of Economic Affairs, two leading neoliberal think tanks, argued, as Daniel Stedman Jones renders it, "that social and economic inequality was necessary as a motor for social and economic progress."[358] Stedman Jones suggests that the neoliberals' "fundamental acceptance of substantive inequality" as something inevitable and "even desirable" is one of the main principles distinguishing the Keynesians from Hayek's neoliberals.[359] Hayek defends the existence of extreme wealth from a standpoint of achieving progress, writing, "in any phase of progress the rich, by experimenting with new styles of living not yet accessible to the poor, perform a necessary service without which the advance of the poor would be very much slower."[360] This sounds much like Herbert Spencer, who wrote, "the poorest today owe their relative material well-being to the results of past inequality."[361] Neoliberalism can trace a clear intellectual lineage reaching back to Enlightenment liberalism and 19th-century laissez-faire thinkers like Herbert Spencer. One central text in particular puts forward a clear ideological position: three years before

[357] Friedrich Hayek, "Extracts from an Interview with Friedrich von Hayek (El Mercurio, Chile, 1981)," *Punto de Vista Economico*, 21 December 2016, https://puntodevistaeconomico.com/2016/12/21/extracts-from-an-interview-with-friedrich-von-hayek-el-mercurio-chile-1981/. For more on Hayek's comfort with dictatorship, see: Benjamin Selwyn, "Friedrich Hayek: in defence of dictatorship," *openDemocracy*, 9 June 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/friedrich-hayek-dictatorship/.
[358] Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 9.
[359] Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 63
[360] Friedrich Hayek, "The Common Sense of Progress," *Foundation for Economic Education*, 1 November 1960, https://fee.org/articles/the-common-sense-of-progress/.
[361] Eugene F. Miller, *Hayek's* The Constitution of Liberty: *An Account of Its Argument* (London: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 2010), 83.

founding the Mont Pelerin Society, Hayek published *The Road to Serfdom*. It was popular on publication and is likely the closest thing to a foundational text the neoliberal movement has.

Like Spencer and many Enlightenment thinkers, Hayek starts from a progressive view of history and presumes that the unfolding of time has been a teleological process of ever-increasing freedom:

> It may merely be pointed out that up to the present the growth of civilisation has been accompanied by a steady diminution of the sphere in which individual actions are bound by fixed rules. The rules of which our common moral code consists have progressively become fewer and more general in character. From the primitive man who was bound by an elaborate ritual in almost everyone of his daily activities, who was limited by innumerable taboos, and who could scarcely conceive of doing things in a way different from his fellows.[362]

Historical and prehistoric Indigenous peoples frequently practiced forms of government and social organization that made them freer than the states that displaced them.[363] Not only were many such freedoms associated with control of personal (rather than necessarily rent-generating private) property and modes of production widely practiced, but civil freedoms like direct democracy and relative parity across genders and sexualities compared with the largely patriarchal and heteronormative states that supplanted them, which practice much narrower norms in these realm. The freedom to leave a group and join another was a vital and broadly practiced exercise of agency that has been greatly diminished with the advent of the sorts of structures Hayek puts forward as engines of greater

[362] Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge Classics, 2001), 61.
[363] For discussions on this, see Sahlins ("Man the Hunter" symposium, "original affluent society"), Harris (*Cannibals and Kings*), Graeber and Wengrow (*Dawn of Everything*), Morris (*Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels*).

freedom. Though the greater or lesser, broader or narrower distribution of freedom has never been strictly mediated by the linear passage of time, it was only with the rise of ordered growthist states that individual freedoms began to be systematically curtailed on a global scale, and only with the rise of growth that fences and borders enclosed land across the world as the rule rather than the exception. Many early cities practiced egalitarian politics and respected individual freedom to an extent that would be the envy of the many democratic states in existence today, directly contrary to Hayek's assertion that history has moved teleologically from lesser to greater individual freedom.[364]

Hayek's form of neoliberalization has also contributed to the rise of despotic rulers like Augusto Pinochet in Chile. Pinochet is notorious for his abuse of political rivals: kidnapping them and dropping them from helicopters to their deaths was one method of execution,[365] while sending rivals and dissidents to a death camp run by a former Nazi and cult leader was another.[366] Augusto Pinochet was an example of Hayek's maxim that economic liberalism is more important than political liberalism, or to paraphrase Hayek, that he would rather have a liberal dictatorship than democracy without economic liberalism. On Chile, Hayek had only praise: "I have seen in some South American countries the most

[364] David Wengrow, "Cities before the State in Early Eurasia," *Goody Lecture 2015*, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, https://www.eth.mpg.de/4091237/Goody_Lecture_2015.pdf.
[365] "Chile's Caravan of Death: Ex-army chief Cheyre convicted for Pinochet-era crimes," *BBC News*, 10 November 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-46160437.
[366] See Marella Oppenheim, "Excavations at Chile torture site offer new hope for relatives of disappeared," *The Guardian*, 2 May 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/02/chile-disappeared-excavations-colonia-dignidad; Kyle Swensen, "Chilean Victims of ex-Naxi's Cult of Horrors May Finally Get Some Answers," *The Washington Post*, 14 July 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/07/14/chilean-victims-of-ex-nazis-cult-of-horrors-may-finally-get-some-answers/.

extraordinary progress. [...] In that much condemned country, Chile, the restoration of only economic freedom and not political freedom has led to an economic recovery that is absolutely fantastic."[367] Milton Friedman, the most prominent acolyte of Hayek's, referred to circumstances in Pinochet-run Chile as an economic "miracle."[368]

The neoliberal movement was not an immediate nor, as Stedman Jones argues, an inevitable success.[369] For over 20 years, the neoliberal cadre remained marginal in policymaking circles. Aside from the popular public programs initiated with the postwar consensus, during the 1940s and 50s the Keynesian state yielded massive investments in public research institutions, which led suddenly to technological changes, producing precursors to much of the high-tech, communications, aeronautics, digital tech of the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Keynesianism enjoyed a political consensus in the United States and United Kingdom until the 1970s, and the neoliberals waited explicitly for a crisis to undermine it. The oil shock of 1973 and simultaneous inflation hysteria was just such a convergence of crises. Stedman Jones observes: "Neoliberalism was a particularly powerful theory, almost a faith, for true believers in the free market and its possibilities. Friedman's monetarist analysis and market solutions grabbed

[367] Hayek quoted in John M. Geddes, "New Vogue for Critic of Keynes," *The New York Times*, 7 May 1979 https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/07/archives/new-vogue-for-critic-of-keynes-von-hayek-still-abhors-big.html.
[368] Richard Davies, "Why is inequality booming in Chile? Blame the Chicago Boys," *The Guardian*, 13 November 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/13/why-is-inequality-booming-in-chile-blame-the-chicago-boys
[369] Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*.

people's attention as a ready-made and plausible alternative strategy when the economy began to unravel under the weight of stagflation."[370] He goes on to write,

> The Keynesian economic elite had by then lost credibility with the public and with policymakers. Friedman instead was able to offer a solution with a set of policy prescriptions that could immediately be put into effect. Technical policy ideas burst the dam of Keynesian dominance, and Chicago neoliberal philosophy rushed through.[371]

With Keynesian social democracy came limits to what the institutions and corporations that developed new technologies could do with them: there were self-imposed environmental limits, cultural limits, and a common good ethics that restrained the invisible hand of corporate commerce.[372] Neoliberalism was a cultural-political revolution whose primary aim was to unleash the extractive potential of the Keynesian technological revolution, dedicated to building a moral system that could justify removing those self-imposed limits to growth and expansion. This is the central reason the neoliberal consensus coincides with increasing rates of deforestation, extinction, greenhouse gas emissions, and inequality; suddenly land in the Global South that had been owned in commons were closed to citizens and opened to global markets. Claims of growth leading to progress, and claims of neoliberal interventions—global and domestic debt and debt markets, enclosure, marketization, financialization, and corporate governance structures—leading to both growth and progress, remain hegemonic today.

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[370] Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 212.
[371] Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe*, 212.
[372] It was during the Keynesian period, for instance, that many of the United States' most rigorous environmental regulations, like the Clean Air and Water Acts and Endangered Species Act, were passed.

Findings

Tables and Patterns

Period (from)	Progress Narratives
2900 BCE Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, Old Testament, Classical Empires	Enuma Elish and the cult of Marduk, imperial propaganda like Pax Romana, and Athenian supremacy, Old Testament Dominion and myths like the Promised Land, Augustine's *City of God*, Constantine's Christian unification
700 CE Medieval Islamdom and Christendom	Christendom expansionism and missionism, Islamic Golden Age scholarship and theology, Norse paganism and Christianization
1400 CE Maritime Colonization	Manifest Destiny, Cartesianism, Whig historiography, Enlightenment liberalism, Market divinity / "invisible hand," Malthusianism, racialism

1800 CE Industrialization	Social Darwinism and racial evolutionism, Marxism, futurism and fascism, Nazism, neoliberalism

Table 5—Periodization of growth and progress narratives

This system of periodization is designed to align with the emergence of new major paradigms of progress narrative in the Western historical record. This periodization does not necessarily indicate periods in which narratives cease being used in meaningful ways and substantial numbers. Even as secularization has occurred in dominant myths, which is explored below, theological ones, like those embedded in Christianity and Islam, remain politically potent today. In the case of the latter two periods, these also coincide with major paradigmatic changes in the forms of growthism that emerge, which will be discussed further below. Because the chapter is interested in the relationship between growthism and progress narratives, it does not include an analysis of progress narratives that are used exclusively in contestation of elements of growthism.

Narratives and Theory	**Religious Orientation**	**Period**
Enuma Elish / Marduk	Primarily Theological	2900 BCE - 700 CE
Pax Romana	Primarily Secular	2900 BCE - 700 CE

Athenian Supremacy	Primarily Secular	2900 BCE - 700 CE
Old Testament Dominion	Primarily Theological	2900 BCE - 700 CE
New Testament Afterlife	Primarily Theological	2900 BCE - 700 CE
Christendom Expansionism	Primarily Theological	700 CE - 1400 CE
Islamic Golden Age scholarship	Secular and Theological	700 CE - 1400 CE
Norse Paganism	Primarily Theological	700 CE - 1400 CE
Manifest Destiny	Secular and Theological	1400 CE - 1800 CE
Cartesianism	Secular and Theological	1400 CE - 1800 CE
Malthusianism	Primarily Secular	1400 CE - 1800 CE
Market Divinity	Secular and Theological	1400 CE - 1800 CE
Racialism	Primarily Secular	1400 CE - 1800 CE
Social Darwinism	Entirely Secular	1800 CE - Present
Racial evolutionism	Entirely Secular	1800 CE - Present
Marxism	Entirely Secular	1800 CE - Present
Futurism and fascism	Primarily Secular	1800 CE - Present
Nazism	Primarily Secular	1800 CE - Present
Neoliberalism	Primarily Secular	1800 CE - Present

Table 6—Progress narrative religiosity through time

Table 6 shows the extent to which progress narratives secularize over time. The first progress narratives emerge from polytheistic belief systems of Southwest Asia during the Early Dynastic period in Mesopotamia. As the Classical Mediterranean

empires emerge, progress narratives take on semi-secular forms, combining Greco-Roman polytheism with more secular political rhetoric around themes like Athenian cultural supremacy and Pax Romana. Monotheistic narratives first emerge with the Old Testament. Offshoots of these original Abrahamic narratives, Christianity and Islam, largely displace or replace polytheistic ones (in the Western context) through time. As new narratives emerge, they tend to be increasingly secular, a process which occurs gradually and produces narratives that combine secular and theological belief systems and rhetorics.

But even as they change, narratives accumulate and compound. In some cases, old narratives go extinct, either by conquest and the extinction of cultures, or by their internal displacement with alternative narratives, as in the case of polytheistic ones mentioned above. The Christianization of the Norse is a prime example of this. But in other cases, new narratives accommodate themselves with old narratives and either create hybrids or sit side by side, sometimes more uneasily than other times. For example, the more secular narratives of progress that emerge during the European Enlightenment accompany existing Christian narratives. In some cases, they are reconciled and used in tandem, whereas at other times the more secular narratives are used instead of Christian ones.

Narratives and Theory	**Primary Types of Growth/ism**	**Period**
Enuma Elish / Marduk	Imperial / Regional	2900 BCE – 700 CE
Pax Romana	Imperial / Regional	2900 BCE – 700 CE

Athenian Supremacy	Imperial / Regional	2900 BCE – 700 CE
Old Testament Dominion	Imperial / Regional	2900 BCE – 700 CE
New Testament Afterlife	Imperial / Regional	2900 BCE – 700 CE
Christendom Expansionism	Imperial / Regional	700 CE – 1400 CE
Islamic Golden Age scholarship	Imperial / Regional	700 CE – 1400 CE
Norse Paganism	Maritime / Settler colonial	700 CE – 1400 CE
Manifest Destiny	Maritime / Settler colonial / Regional	1400 CE – 1800 CE
Cartesianism	Maritime / Commercial / Settler colonial	1400 CE – 1800 CE
Malthusianism	Maritime / Commercial / Settler colonial	1400 CE – 1800 CE
Market Divinity	Maritime / Commercial / Settler colonial	1400 CE – 1800 CE
Racialism	Maritime / Commercial / Settler colonial	1400 CE – 1800 CE
Social Darwinism	Maritime / Commercial / Settler colonial	1800 CE – Present
Racial evolutionism	Economistic / Industrial / Settler colonial	1800 CE – Present
Marxism	Economistic / Industrial / Regional	1800 CE – Present
Futurism and fascism	Economistic / Industrial / Settler colonial	1800 CE – Present
Nazism	Economistic / Industrial / Settler colonial	1800 CE – Present
Ordoliberalism/Keynesianism	Economistic / Industrial	1800 CE – Present
Neoliberalism	Economistic / Industrial	1800 CE – Present

Table 7—Primary growth forms and progress narratives

Table 7 shows that while there are not necessarily hard rules, patterns emerge in which narratives accompany which forms of growth/ism. For example, when

growth occurs in a primarily imperial consolidation and terrestrial expansion first occurs, theological narratives—and eventually primarily monotheistic ones—tend to predominate. For example, the consolidation of European territories under Constantine's Christianization and consolidation of Arab, North African, and Southern European territories under Islamic rule fit this pattern. As these polities mature, they incorporate more secular narratives as in the case of the European Enlightenment and Islamic Golden Age. But this is not necessarily a teleological process. For example, in the conquest of North America, as settler colonists break from imperial administration, they rely more heavily on theological narratives to justify the consolidation of their westward consolidation and expansion. As commercialization and industrialization begin to dominate forms of growth, secular narratives become increasingly important. The role of evolutionary scientism and economistic narratives of progress grow in importance through industrialization. But with the primarily terrestrial expansionism of Nazi Germany, there is an adoption of a more mythical set of narratives, with Adolf Hitler's rhetorics drawing heavily on mysticism, Germanic pagan mythology, and Christianity.

Discussion

Given that this study is primarily looking at progress myths that are either designed from the beginning or are co-opted to facilitate the mutual reproduction of growth, it has been more narrowly focused than a broader survey of progress narratives that take into account rhetorics used to contest growth/ism, or other negative

results of imperialism, settler colonialism, racism, monarchy, capitalism, and so forth. Progress narratives have certainly been used to support egalitarian goals, and some of them, like those in democratic socialist, abolitionist, and labor movements, have been mentioned in the historical analysis above. The Contemporary Analysis that follows will also explore some of the relationship dynamics between those working for “progressive” or egalitarian goals and attitudes toward de/growth. Further research that conducts a broader survey of progress narratives could yield compelling insights into how they have served to mutually reproduce, or successfully contest, growthism in its various forms.

Even so, this historical review has sought to establish the presence of a significant connection between growth-oriented political economies and rhetorics of progress, the latter including both teleological historiographies and aspirational political goals around growth, extraction, and expansion. This analysis has done so by examining an intellectual lineage of progress narratives that have occurred through the speeches, writings, and letters of political leaders, the mythological, fictional, and philosophical literatures of multiple cultures, official policies, scientific research, and the foundational texts of various ideologies in primarily, though not exclusively, Euroamerican geographic contexts. This study aims to improve our understanding of how various political rhetorics tap into a long-running metaideology of progress to defend, maintain, and expand physical and cultural reproductions of economic growth, as it is understood in this study. This research is relevant to ongoing research and discussion in the burgeoning field of degrowth

and how it relates to ideas of progress and practitioners of “progressive” politics into the future.

There are advantages and limitations to using the broadened definition of growth/ism that this thesis relies on to build this historical analysis, and the attendant backdating of the emergence of growth/ism to a date far preceding the timing generally proposed by degrowth scholars (which is usually either the 16th or 20th centuries CE).

One limitation is the risk of naturalizing growth/ism, in the sense of depicting it as an inescapable component of human nature. By tying the phenomenon to the rise of (primarily) Western empires and kingdoms, examples of alternative modes of living not dependent on growth/ism in the historical record grow scant. Contemporary activists who contest growth may find such a naturalizing process disempowering, trapping humanity in inevitable cycles of growth and collapse, and thus limiting imaginaries for future liberation. If growth/ism has managed to succeed for so many millennia, to successfully reproduce itself with limited success in its contestation, what chance do contemporary activists have of overthrowing it? This naturalization is intrinsically somewhat deterministic: growth/ism as a material process driven by both ideation and material, geographic biological or evolutionary necessity, makes contesting it purely through ideas—critiques, scholarship, discourses, activism—less plausible. Treating growth as a material process with material imperatives, an orientation shared in the definition of growth in this thesis and by other degrowth scholars, inherently undermines

idealist approaches to addressing the problems rooted in growth, though, one hopes, not terminally.

Another limitation is the risk of universalizing phenomena that are more culturally distinct and deserve more granular parsing. Any attempt to find patterns across large historical spans risks oversimplifying, overgeneralizing, and ignoring meaningful differences in examples. This is a limitation shared by all macrohistorical accounts, whether those found in Morris, Diamond, Turchin, or otherwise, and one not minimized by its being itself universal.[373] This broadening of growth/ism does not only risk being universalizing, but also reductionist in finding patterns across what may be very distinct examples.

But this broadening of the definition of growth/ism has advantages as well. As Ian Morris argues, "*all* scholarship is reductionist," for the very act of capturing what is in reality an impossibly chaotic, complex phenomenon in the net of concepts, frameworks, and word counts on an inevitably limited number of pages entails a process of reductionism. The question is how much reductionism is too much, and how much is necessary to build a useful and explanatory framework? Or in Morris's words, "what level of reduction is required to resolve the problem being posed."[374] Through the historical analysis, I have sought to acknowledge exceptions where they occur, and to draw on a variety of diverse sources, while engaging at a scale of high granularity where it was practical and illuminating, by my judgment, in order to mitigate unnecessary reductionism. But given the scope

[373] For a good discussion of this tradeoff, see Chapter 1 of Morris (2015),
[374] For this and the previous quote, see: Ian Morris, *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 9-10.

of the problems treated here—and the spans of time and space they cover—a level of reduction is necessary.

As to the limitation of naturalizing growth/ism and creating a sense of its inescapability, there are two issues worth addressing, an academic and a practical one. The academic issue is whether it is more accurate or useful to scholarship to define growth broadly enough to include classical empires. It is my opinion that understanding growth in this sense is more accurate and useful, or to put it another way, there is not a strong empirical or theoretical reason to exclude precapitalist, anti-capitalist, or expansionist classical and medieval empires or kingdoms from consideration as "growth" oriented objects of study. Nor do I think it makes sense to consider the expansionism and extractivism—when it is ecologically exclusionary and exploitative—that occurs in pre-fossil fuel societies as being qualitatively, rather than quantitatively, different from the expansionism and extractivism that occurs in fossil fuel economies.

The practical problem is how this framing of growth/ism as an older phenomenon may impact the morale of activists. First, I do not think that this problem, if it is a problem, should overrule the importance of scholarly rigor or seeking a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Activists must be trusted with facts and knowledge, even if it is dispiriting. But, further, I do not see how degrowth can claim to be an emancipatory program if growth, understood as a mid-20th century phenomenon, and capitalism are its only targets of contestation. Much like capitalist and fossil fuel states, communist states and pre-capitalist kingdoms and empires have been environmentally harmful, genocidal, and

exploitative of human labor, sometimes very much so. Overcoming 20th-century growthism only to be ensnared in 12th-century slavery and expansionism is difficult to consider liberatory. Turning this analysis to a critique that extends to social forces that were similarly environmentally destructive and oppressive, despite being early in the historical record, offers a more robust framework for building an appropriate corresponding utopian imaginary, one that is truly ecological and emancipatory, which is a stated claim of degrowth scholarship.

Further, this study makes it clear that the period of human history in which "growthism" is a driving force consists of only about 5,000 years, which is only about 1.6% of the whole history of *Homo sapiens*. This analysis also takes pains to distinguish between the migratory expansion of human populations throughout the world from the expansionist extractivism of empires as qualitatively distinct phenomena. Due to size and scope limitations of this thesis, prehistoric human societies receive little attention, but they are alluded to and should offer solace by showing that a vast, vast majority of human societies and history have not been "growthist" by the definition used in this thesis, and therefore indicating that growth is far from "natural."

Contemporary Analysis

Purpose of the Study

This chapter aims to address the second of this thesis's central research questions: **How do (de)growthist values relate to attitudes toward progressive narratives and teleology in the present?** As they have been over the past four to five millennia, ideas of growth and progress remain complicatedly interwoven in the 20th and 21st centuries. As detailed in the Historical Analysis chapter, in the past, different forms of historical growth mediated the narratives of progress that became dominant, and vice versa, each co-reproducing the other in a complicated dynamic relationship. This dynamic remains steadfast today. There is a tension in public discourse today around these interwoven concepts of economic growth and societal progress. By analyzing these dynamics at an individual discursive level, I propose we can better understand the role "progress" can play in developing (or hindering) degrowth agendas and actions.

Because growthism and progressivism are so deeply internalized and ubiquitous, and have such a long lineage of being so, we can only begin to answer these questions by teasing them out through close analysis. The interviewees in this study have been drawn from diverse movements, institutions, and geographies. What unifies them is that all interviewees are broadly working on issues related to these twin crises, ecological collapse and social inequalities. As detailed in the Methodology chapter, they do so through different theories of change and "progress affiliations," or the primary frameworks through which they

understand their attempts to achieve progressive change. The theories of change are divided into five rough categories, which include labor and community organizing, direct community leadership projects, institutional and administrative, formal activism, and informal activism. The affiliations are roughly divided into three categories: community energy transition, climate, environment, justice, and ecosocialism. By interviewing these broadly diverse individuals and deeply analyzing and comparing their self-reported motivations, beliefs, and attitudes, this study aims to arrive at a better understanding of the relationship between ideologies associated with growthism and metanarratives of progress. By better understanding this relationship, the study can contribute to both degrowth literatures that seek to develop a cohering theory of change and ecological political economy, while better enabling advocates to engage with a public and policymaking community long enamored with uncritical, and often destructive, understandings of growth and progress.

Degrowth and / versus Progress

This study's historical analysis shows that there is an intricate, mutually reinforcing, and longstanding relationship between the metaideology of growthism—and physical process of growth—and narratives of progress. "Progress" today can mean many different things to different people, but it remains a ubiquitous invocation. Even as some intuitively presume that a sense of hope and progress are necessary ingredients in building a broad-base of public support

for radical interventions, this study contributes to a growing body of work that suggests otherwise.[375] Indeed, as the historical analysis suggests, progress faith has often been deliberately deployed as a placating force rather than a rousing rhetoric in addressing injustices, inequalities, or environmental harm. It has often contained embedded racial supremacies and human supremacist views, used to justify practices of colonialism, slavery, and genocide, contrary to much of what "progressive" communities advocate for today.

Degrowth, which aims to address both environmental harms and inequalities, has in its discourse and literature a mostly unexamined relationship to ideas of progress. This is an important gap in the theory and broader movement, given the complicated dynamic between growth and progress. Even as we might understand the material and economic nature of growth, there is a cultural element of "growthism" that would be difficult to understand fully without interrogating ideas, narratives, and histories of progress. Although some—likely bad-faith—actors in public discourse have attempted to attach to degrowth imaginaries a "Malthusian" pessimism or regressive attitude toward futurity, degrowth scholarship tends to be opposed to Malthusianism,[376] and there is neither a baseline assumption within the literature that degrowth is "deprogress" or anti-progress, nor is there a consensus that degrowth advocates ought to simply co-opt the sorts of progress narratives that have been historically used to achieve growth.

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[375] Matthew J. Hornsey and Kelly S. Fielding, "A cautionary note about messages of hope: Focusing on progress in reducing carbon emissions weakens mitigation motivation," *Global Environmental Change* 39 (2016): 26-34, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2016.04.003.
[376] See Giorgos Kallis, *Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

The Future is Degrowth, one of the recent quasi-academic contributions to degrowth literature—a book Timothée Parrique has called "the best available literature review on the topic"[377]—orients itself, with its very title, to a progressive teleology, or at least to a conviction that futurity will be dominated by a more desirable degrowth paradigm. Yet the book mentions "progress" rarely, and leaves unexamined and uninterrogated what it means to engage in progress narrative-building. In their paper "Imaginaries of Hope: The Utopianism of Degrowth," one of the few recent works of scholarship to grapple directly with ideas of progress and hope with regard to degrowth, Giorgos Kallis and Hug March turn to fiction as a modeling space for degrowth in the absence of an actual "spatialized 'degrowth world' in its full plentitude," arguing that while there is not an extant version of a degrowth society in the world today, we can find one model in Ursula K. Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*.[378] We see a similar move in one interviewee's reference to Hobbiton ("A lot of people, when they think about happiness, they think about Hobbiton,") a village in J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth, as a model for many degrowth values, like simplicity, community, *joie de vivre*, conviviality, and minimal environmental extractiveness: not to mention its local community scale, pastoral setting, ample leisure time, and appreciation for food and drink. Such fictional models offer potential counter-narratives to hegemonic growthist, technocentric, Anthropocentric, and productivist progress myths by "decoupling

[377] Timothée Parrique, "Book review: The future is degrowth," *Timothée Parrique* (blog), 3 July 2022, https://timotheeparrique.com/book-review-the-future-is-degrowth/.
[378] Giorgos Kallis and Hug March, "Imaginaries of Hope: The Utopianism of Degrowth," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105, no. 2 (2015): 361, DOI: 10.1080/00045608.2014.973803.

utopia from a one-way future of material abundance."[379] Kallis argues that geographers can take inspiration from the potential of fictional literature in developing utopian imaginaries within a degrowth framework. But fiction is only one, if important, realm in which practitioners of change may think about futurity, or situate their struggle within an imaginary. This chapter examines how individuals think about connections between (de)growth, progress, hope, and utopia in their activism and social change projects in their own lives, connecting such struggles with existing frameworks, or notably eschewing explicit mention of particular frameworks.

This thesis as a whole aims to help reconcile the as-yet unexamined relationship between degrowth and ideas of progress. This chapter does so by examining a series of interviews conducted with people who are ostensibly primed to support a degrowth movement, but who currently carry an ambivalent relationship to ideas of growth, degrowth, and progress. The findings suggest that a certain segment of activists and community leaders, at least within the realms represented in these interviews, could be productive communities motivated to take actions favorable to a degrowth agenda without faith in, or commitment to, any particular progress narrative.

[379] Kallis and March, "Imaginaries of Hope," 362.

Findings

The study finds various patterns emerging with regard to interviewees' investment in equality of multiple forms—including political, economic, gender, racial, generational, and environmental equalities—and finds patterns in their openness to degrowth/ist ideals, their relation to progress narratives and teleology, and patterns in how their affiliations impact their attitudes toward progress, degrowth, and hope or optimism with regard to futurity.

Interviewees come from a diverse range of geographies and movements. They adhere to different ideologies and theories of change. In a sense, they are primarily politically "progressive": they often identify as such, largely because of the categories available in anglophone political discourse ("progressive" being colloquially equated with left or center-left values, including "egalitarian" and "environmentalist").[380] There were many indications that interviewees from across these different movements and theories of change are open to the basic tenets of degrowthism, even if they avoid that term to describe their motivations or alignments. Analyzing the interviews by searching specifically for mentions of "degrowth" resulted in very little material: only 6 out of 23 interviews mentioned "degrowth," with total mentions tallying only 25 times. "Growth", meanwhile, appeared 48 times across 11 of the interviews. These mentions of degrowth thus represented outliers in the data. Among the most frequently mentioned words (including stemmed words) were "climate" (534), "energy" (488), "change" (414),

[380] See a discussion here: Jonathan Rowson, "What is a 'progressive?'" *openDemocracy UK*, 11 June 2015, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/what-is-progressive/.

"community" (375), "politics" (358), "organizing" (265), "money" (176), "local" (167), "jobs" (145), "productive" (133), indicating that conversations typically focused on political responses to climate change and energy concerns as well as the economy and its localized impacts. While interviewees rarely talked about progress and degrowth in explicit terms unless prompted, these codes helped to illustrate the various ways participants *did* often invoke growthist values or belief in a progressive teleology, even while promoting or engaging in an activity often included under "degrowthist" umbrellas. Given that the study is attempting to disentangle the often complicatedly intertwined commitments to growth and progress, questions sought to find proxies for these metaideologies and -narratives, which will be discussed below.

Among interview participants, many of those who expressed support for degrowth economics in theory simultaneously expressed hesitance or disagreement with its rhetorical framing as *anti-progressive*. As urban forester Victor put it, "I think degrowth is a horrible word because it sounds like it's going backwards. It sounds like we're trying to turn back time and [...] go to before the Industrial Revolution." As might be expected given the findings from the Historical Analysis chapter, Victor powerfully associated "growth" with societal progress: a feeling of "moving forward" to a better state. As such, he advocated a model more akin to "green growth" or "green capitalism," whereby renewable energy industries take over the primary role in growth economies:

> I think that we do need to look at countries like the social democracies of Northern Europe as models of more restrained capitalism. But even the word restraint is not quite what I would like to think of. [...] We are heavily pouring money to prop up coal and oil and gas right now, when those

> industries are just as problematic as solar and wind and hydro and nuclear. We could be pouring all that money into more sustainable industries [...] And it's still growth, it's still moving forward.

Victor's comments indicate how powerfully reinforcing the ideologies of growthism and progress continue to be in the 21st century.

Other interviewees also described degrowth as a topic of contestation among their social movements. Sven, a co-chair of a regional Democratic Socialists of America chapter, said degrowth was a subject of ongoing debate within the organization's national group:

> One thing we've been talking about a lot lately in the national group is degrowth. And something that we and others are struggling with is the framing of that because it scares people a lot. [...] Even people who are socialists have some level of status quo bias and think like, "Oh, how will I take my medicine?"

Sven attributed DSA members' wariness of degrowth to "status quo bias" or fear of the unknown, and he suggested that people negatively associated the concept with a reduction in medical and technological sophistication. His comment that "even people who are socialists" are scared of degrowth indicates a belief that leftists are typically more receptive to degrowth ideas, even if this receptivity has clear limitations. Kiran, an academic associated with a different DSA chapter, also highlighted the anti-degrowth strain of discourse in socialist circles: "When folks […] talk about reducing consumption, reducing economic growth, they are met with this counterargument, 'Why do you hate poor people? There's people that need more energy.'" Much of contemporary socialist discourse recognizes an egalitarian imperative to redistribute wealth and resources from the Global North to the Global South, which policies seeking to reduce global production and

consumption can appear to undermine. Kiran suggested that arguments about "energy poverty," however, "miss the political economy of the world." He elaborated on his degrowth position:

> How is fracking and building nuclear plants in Germany going to alleviate poverty in Malawi? It's not, because the cause of that isn't a technical issue of lack of energy production. It's rooted in histories of colonialism. It's derived from the incursion of capital and the dominance of capital in those economies today. It's derived from deeply racist policies today and in the past. There's all these factors that just wouldn't be eliminated by this kind of technocratic thinking.

Kiran was critical of the limited thinking shown by both socialists and mainstream environmentalists who refuse to engage with degrowth concepts:

> "We're not going to talk about population because that's too problematic. We're not going to talk about reducing economic growth because it's simply not going to happen." That's the starting position of most liberal environmentalists. Which means that we can only talk about energy efficiency, which is already happening under [the] status quo, so everything's fine.

This kind of circular argument, Kiran suggests, reinforces commitment to status-quo foreign policy and energy transition.

Degrowth is clearly a loaded term, or simply an unknown term, to many of the interviewees; as seen in the Literature Review, this may stem partly from its relatively recent emergence, and partly from its deliberately inflammatory terminology: the "missile word" tactic. To gauge support for degrowth, one could simply ask interviewees if they support degrowth. Given that the meaning of degrowth is still unsettled in the literature, still being debated by scholars, and carries with it negative connotations, this would not necessarily yield accurate insights into interviewees' openness to degrowth goals and agendas. One could instead list those aspects of degrowth that are beginning to find consensus

support among scholars of degrowth. But this approach risks introducing a bias in the questioning while restricting degrowth to a purely scholarly exercise or academic circles. Instead, this study sought to tease out peoples' values with regard to some of the central components of both degrowthism as a cultural value system and political tendency or orientation. Similarly, with regard to progress, because the term is so loaded with historical connotation and carries with it embedded meanings, themselves contested and complex, a study that simply asked interviewees what their self-reported attitudes toward progress are would likely not arrive at a very useful or accurate understanding of this question. Instead, this study sought to tease out interviewees' attitudes toward progress by homing in on particular issues and the extent to which interviewees felt optimistic about them, what their opinions about the future of those issues were, or generally how they saw those issues unfolding.

Interviewees' Openness to Degrowth Values

A common thread across all categories and geographies of interviewee was a commitment to at least some of what could be considered foundational degrowthist values and goals, grouped into three central categories: Environmental Integrity and Biocentrism, Political Equality, and Economic Equality. Even when interviewees showed skepticism for "degrowth" rhetoric, or paid lip service to "growth," their actions and other rhetorics tended to support degrowth principles, which at a more granular level involved commitments to democratic localism, profit-sharing, community energy, and egalitarian or "socialist" social and economic policy, as well as investment in renewable energy, ecological health, sustainability, and action on climate change. A tendency to promote and value these degrowth policies and principles, *even while rejecting explicit "degrowth" terminology*, indicates the complexity of studying degrowth discourse in the 21st century, as well as the limitations of existing academic studies like Weiss and Cattaneo's, which excluded potentially relevant studies that did not mention "degrowth" in their title.[381] Conversely, as this study found, an inclination to support degrowth programs may be couched in other vocabulary, which a critical discourse analysis approach is better able to identify than, for instance, quantitative survey methods.

[381] Martin Weiss & Claudio Cattaneo (2017) "Degrowth – Taking Stock and Reviewing an Emerging Academic Paradigm," *Ecological Economics*, 137, 220–230, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.01.014.

Ecological Integrity and Biocentrism

Selected representative quotations	First-Order Codes (in vivo coding)	Second-Order Themes (pattern coding)
● "*You talked about the fact that your fucking water pipes were contaminated, that the air was nasty, that your neighbors and their children were getting asthma, you talk about these material impacts that often [...] line up with the causes of anthropogenic climate change, the very things that will 20, 30, 40 years from now, I guess already now*" (Kiran) ● "*But we're trying to protect more of that for tourism because that's a lot of what our base is up here for economies. So I think we want to be greener, we want to have that pristine look and feel of 'up North' clean air, clean living, all that kind of stuff.*" (Daniel) ● "*We can all agree that we want clean water and we want clean air and we want like a safe and happy environment for our families.*" (Evie) ● "*We've got the problem that Scotland has quite a lot of nice scenery and it's a decent looking country, and the worry is that is going to be spoiled, that iconic views and areas are going to suffer if energy companies have their way.*" (Scott)	● Lamenting pollution and disasters ● Desire clean air and water ● Protect pristine look and feel ● Questioning even renewable development ● Persistent worry about climate change	● Ecological Health and Beauty

● "*I stay awake at nights thinking about it [climate change] and worrying about it. It's part every day, it's part of my consciousness.*" (Edward)		
● "*For me, it's a question of respect, ethics, morals, are we respecting the earth? And by respecting your earth, we are respecting the Creator. And not only that, but we're respecting future generations. [...] It's our responsibility to be good stewards of this earth. That's something that a lot of religious people, a lot of Christians in this country can get on board with.*" (Kevin) ● "*Being here on earth is a profound gift, and comes with a huge responsibility to protect each other and all, all life. [...] it's like a new dimension of morality [...] You cannot be a good person, and also contribute to the death of all things.*" (Karen) ● "*So do we want to continue just taking more and more of the basis for life from the sun and the soil and the land, and using it exclusively to produce food for human beings? Since we know that, that will mean that there's less and less available for other species.*" (Eric) ● "*When we talk about the increase of the human production [...] what it*	● Respecting the earth ● Respecting the creator ● Responsibility to protect earth ● New dimension of morality ● Being a good person ● Biocentrism instead of Anthropocentrism	● Ecological Ethics

means is converting the biomass of the planet into human biomass." (Eric)		
● "*We have strong connections to nature as well. And I think kind of working to center that just in the lives of people in cities goes a long way to sort of deconstructing the narrative that environmentalism is a elite white enterprise*" (Kiran) ● "*What I would love to see something that would affect sustainability would I'd like to see more local food things and local produce and public gardens, to not only address you know, cutting down on how the food industry and food production affects our environment, but affects the homeless problem and the hunger problem in Louisville.*" (Maya)	● Broad connections to nature ● Local produce and public gardens ● Address homelessness	● Place Attachment
● "*We need to be thinking urgently, also, about those places on earth that are providing a critical backstop against the worst excesses of climate change by sequestering carbon into their soils and forests and woody biomass, to make sure that people that have been safeguarding those lands for centuries and millennia, despite the best efforts of colonial states to displace, enslave, eliminate them, are able to continue to do those things into the long run.*" (Kiran)	● Safeguarding Indigenous lands ● No racial justice without solving environmental racism	● Environmental Justice

• *"we can't have racial justice without resolving environmental racism." (Dean)*		

Table 8—Degrowth Value: Ecological Integrity and Biocentrism

Interviewees presented certain aspects of ecological health—such as clean air, clean water, local food production and distribution, and access to natural spaces from national wildernesses to urban parks—as "common sense," bipartisan goals that could also be used to address socioeconomic inequalities. For some, these aims were couched in growthist language of profit-generation and development: a desire to preserve green spaces for tourism and to uphold particular areas' reputations as sites of natural beauty. Renewable energy was a fraught issue in this discussion, with some seeing renewables as a necessary part of ensuring long-term sustainability and climate mitigation, and others lamenting the intrusive appearance of wind farms in the landscape. Although some interviewees contributed to a pattern of describing the environment and renewable energy as an opportunity for profit and development, however, others saw sustainability programs as opportunities to reinvest in local communities and to tackle the dual crises of climate/ecological collapse and socioeconomic inequality simultaneously. These issues were often explicitly connected, for example in Maya's comment: "I'd like to see more local food things and local produce and public gardens to not only address cutting down on how the food industry and food production affects our environment, but affects the homeless problem and the hunger problem in

Louisville." Broad connections to nature in communities outside a white, middle-class, environmentalist demographic were emphasized as possible starting points for activating grassroots organizing.

Pursuing environmental justice was an explicit concern of multiple interviewees. Kiran drew attention to the work of Indigenous land and water protectors: "to make sure that people that have been safeguarding those lands for centuries and millennia, despite the best efforts of colonial states to displace, enslave, eliminate them, are able to continue to do those things into the long run." One interviewee to *explicitly* hold degrowth, or anti-growth, values, Eric, expressed sympathy for non-agrarian modes of production, and was attracted to the egalitarianism, simplicity, and high-leisure potential of Indigenous social and political forms.

Biocentrism was also a motivating value for some interviewees, who couched their language in terms of ethics, morals, and purpose. Eric ascribed inherent value to nonhuman life and biodiversity, and suggested human population growth must be curbed to enable other species to live: "do we want to continue just taking more and more of the basis for life from the sun and the soil and the land, and using it exclusively to produce food for human beings? Since we know that that will mean that there's less and less available for other species?" His discomfort with this scenario also caused him to advocate for a gradual decrease in consumption intensity. He disputed the assumption that human happiness and wellbeing are connected to economic growth and high consumption, "The amount of electricity that we have now, that largely comes from fossil fuels. But again, it's

tied to the idea that our happiness is tied to that and that anything other than what we're doing right now is misery." But even interviewees less directly focused on reducing economic growth recognized the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, though they arrived at this position from different perspectives. Protecting environmental health and biodiversity was often described as a spiritual project or moral responsibility. For Karen, "being here on earth is a profound gift, and comes with a huge responsibility to protect each other and all life." For Kevin, biocentrism was interconnected with Christian mission: "For me, it's a question of respect, ethics, morals. Are we respecting the Earth? And by respecting your Earth, we are respecting the Creator. And not only that, but we're respecting future generations. [...] it's our responsibility to be good stewards of this Earth."

These issues were given particular urgency, and often intense emotional weight, by anxiety about climate change. Edward described climate change as part of his everyday consciousness, a daily worry. For some, desire to take action on climate change was their primary way into thinking about environmental integrity, while for others this value came from their attachment to local places; others had little interest in "nature" or traditional environmentalist goals, but became motivated by human-centered concerns: inequality in access to food, clean water, or the disproportionate impacts of pollution on poor, nonwhite populations. Kiran suggested that focusing on local impacts was an important political tactic for engaging people in degrowth programs, emphasizing those effects that are most directly relevant to people who might be otherwise uninterested in climate change or wealth equality:

> the causes of anthropogenic climate change, the very things that will, 20, 30, 40 years from now, I guess already now, cause massive sea level rise, cause cities to be evacuated globally, cause all kinds of horrific consequences from increasingly severe and frequent natural disasters […] Well, those same things are also causing short-term acute adverse impacts on people's lives.

Connecting international concerns about global climate change with localized struggles around contaminated water pipes and air pollution was envisaged as a recruitment strategy for grassroots community organizing around issues of environmental and socio-economic inequalities: a means of engaging the public with degrowth programs without necessarily discussing degrowth explicitly.

Political Equality

Selected Representative Quotations	**First-Order Codes (in vivo coding)**	**Second-Order Themes (pattern coding)**
"*I think democratized ownership of the grid and of energy production would stimulate a lot of civic participation, because I think counter to conventional wisdom, communities actually care a lot about how their energy sources affect their environmental quality.*" (Dean) "*I knew what this was doing what governments are supposed to be doing or what they're not willing to do, and what councillors are struggling to do*" (Scott) "*it's a socialist organization, so I mean, leadership isn't controlling what we're doing.*" (Evie) *"all over the world, the right-wing governments and parties are becoming exterminist in practice, or at least in ideology. So, on the left, there really needs to be a counter organization.* [...] *we're already seeing all over the world*	● Democratized ownership ● Socialist organization ● Social safety net	● Democratic Localism

how it's socialism or barbarism, socialism or cataclysm" (Farouk) "*a socialist lens, and DSA in particular, is about [...] surfacing questions of power.*" (Jean) "*when you have a robust social safety net, we will be better able to weather the storm of climate change, as it's starting to be more dramatically present in [our] lives. And people will also be more accustomed to the idea of like, we're all in this together, and let's invest in things as a country that are going to benefit everybody like, large scale, renewable energy, large scale grid transformation.*" (Liam)		
"the vision was to empower local people to make decisions and have sovereignty over their supply of energy and their supplies, their sources of fuel." (Kiran) "*Since the federal government doesn't really want to address climate change, and in many ways, the federal government's starting to make it worse, it's amazing how local cities, local communities, everyday people, including myself, have kind of stepped up to the plate.*" (Kevin) "*if we want to get where we want to go to in terms of like capturing power at the political level, we need to start at the grassroots and start building them up in a way that allows us to like, actually wield some sort of power over politicians.*" (Liam) "*having proof of concept that communities can take power over resources that they can expropriate the resources of a private company is absolutely critical right now, because that type of local action, I think we crave it.*" (Kiran) "*it's really exciting for folks who don't really think about themselves as politicians and may not even want to pursue doing politics later on but they know people and they know what's up in their neighborhood and they want to*	● Empower local people ● Grassroots ● Local action ● Communities ● Neighborhood advocacy	● Grassroots Organizing

advocate." (Jean)		
"*if you don't have the power to vote at the table* [...] *I don't know what else you can do. And I don't know how much longer we'll have a democracy to do it. If you know, the powers that be stay in power.*" (Jane) "*she took the no fossil fuel money pledge that we've been working on, which is essentially saying she's not going to be taking fossil fuel money. But it was in the context of a no corporate money at all pledge, which I think is even better.*" (Liam) "*It's discouraging when you see so much money in politics, that it's really hard to have an impact.*" (Stella)	● Power to vote ● Democracy ● No corporate money	● Democratic Participation ● Establishment Wary ● Anti-corruption

Table 9—Degrowth Value: Political Equality

Interviewees largely, though not entirely, ascribe to degrowthist values around democratic governmentality, localism, egalitarian distribution of political agency, opposition to elite corruption, and grassroots organizing. Commitment to democratic localism was often framed as a response to the failings of federal or local governance. As Kevin put it, "Since the federal government doesn't really want to address climate change, and in many ways the federal government's starting to make it worse, it's amazing how local cities, local communities, everyday people including myself, have kind of stepped up to the plate." Sometimes frustration was directed at governments' lack of action on climate change, sometimes their lack of support for vulnerable communities, and sometimes these issues intersected. In Scotland, community renewable energy groups were frequently rationalized as providing a service to local communities in

the absence of official support: “I knew this was doing what governments are supposed to be doing or what they’re not willing to do, and what councilors are struggling to do” (Scott). Profits were shared or used to support community programs like children’s scout groups, AA meetings, and mobility support for the elderly. In this way, desire for democratic localism, profit sharing, and support for vulnerable groups encouraged participants to support community energy and sustainability projects—and vice versa. Kiran, a DSA member in the US, says, “I think that having proof of concept that communities can take power over resources, that they can expropriate the resources of a private company is absolutely critical right now.” For Anne, her support for wind energy derived from her participation in its grant system, after she had seen the benefits to her community. While not as widespread as the CRGs in Scotland, the prospect of community-owned energy production appealed to interviewees in the United States, too: “I think democratized ownership of the grid and of energy production would stimulate a lot of civic participation because I think, counter to conventional wisdom, communities actually care a lot about how their energy sources affect their environmental quality” (Dean). Control of energy production became a site of political contestation, where local communities could test their grassroots power: “the vision was to empower local people to make decisions and have sovereignty over their supply of energy and their supplies, their sources of fuel” (Kiran). This movement away from appealing to national governments and towards local movements was reflected in large-scale nonprofits, too:

> that’s a relatively new thing in the climate movement, and it was actually 350[.org] in part that made that intentional decision to step away from the

> D.C. world and say, actually, if we want to get where we want to go to in terms of like capturing power at the political level, we need to start at the grassroots and start building them up in a way that allows us to actually wield some sort of power over politicians. (Liam)

These interviews also showed the limitations of categorizing degrowth as an exclusively socialist or anticapitalist project. Among the interviewees, self-proclaimed socialists were sometimes reluctant to promote degrowth, while those with no stated political affiliation expressed degrowth values more explicitly. Political equality was a value shared across the theories of change groups and progress affiliations, regardless of whether they ascribed to explicitly leftist ideologies or frameworks.

Economic Equality

Selected representative quotations	**First-Order Codes**	**Second-Order Themes**
"*we see the disparity with the income, how the very few, you know, top 5 per cent control virtually 50 per cent of all income in the United States. And to me, that's unjustifiable.*" (Edward) "*We need to get the hell away from anything that smells of support for the establishment, for corporations, for the millionaires and the billionaires, right? Like, it's terrifying, the amount of wealth accumulation that continues unabated in this country.*" (Liam) "*We take like, most of the billionaires' money and give it to workers in the global north and then take a bunch of it and give it to the global south.*" (Kiran) "*We're all the working class, we're all fucking one missed paycheck away from being like the proletariat.*" (Robin)	● Income disparity ● Democratic control of economy ● Anti-billionaire ● Wealth distribution ● Working class	● Wealth equality/distribution

"*watching people who, they're trying to not just navigate having a life threatening illness, but, you know, through different grants, and subsidies, and what happens when their insurance runs out? [...] When your insurance runs out, they kick you to the curb.*" (Jo) "*Republicans are always going to point out the guy on the street who goes and buys some beer with the money you give him. But then there are the hundred people who go out and start a small business, because that's been their dream their entire lives, and they just haven't had the opportunity to do so.*" (Liam) "*Who am I always leaving out of the conversation? I'm leaving out virtually anyone who can't afford to live in this city.*" (Robin) "*This is a community that is upper middle class. But we are now seeing homeless. We had to open a shelter for women. For the first time I am seeing homeless people.* [...] *That should not happen here.*" (Sue)	● Social safety net ● Welfare state ● Entrepreneurship ● Homelessness	● Welfare state
"*Any kind of system that puts greed or short term profit as the main goal and not considering anything else is just stupid*." (Peter) "*So this environmental emergency is turning into an economic emergency for Florida.*" (Kevin)	● Greed ● Economic emergency	● Economic sustainability

Table 10—Degrowth Value: Economic Equality

Economic equality is a central value in degrowth/ism. The redistributive aspect of degrowth, from top earners to the rest of the public within polities and from the Global North to the South more broadly, has been a major plank of the emerging

degrowth political tendency.[382] Although not as universal as political equality, it was a value represented among all of the progress affiliations among interviewees. Such a value is to be expected among members of Democratic Socialists of America, but it was commonly expressed even among the other groups, from professional and informal activists to community renewable group organizers to a media professional.

Some spoke favorably not only of redistributive practices but of other proposed degrowth policies such as a shorter working week and a universal basic income, policies envisioned as uplifting the vulnerable through a strengthening of welfare states—articulated particularly across lines of class, race, homelessness, and medical debt—and expanding opportunities for entrepreneurship. Values pertaining to economic equality often intersected with political equality. Participants resented the influence of corporate money on national politics and either sought to expose corruption in electoral politics through their activism, or tried to establish their own redistributive work to compensate for failing government support, such as among the CRGs in Scotland and local grassroots organizing via the DSA. Environmental integrity also sometimes overlapped with economic equality, as interviewees expressed concerns about short-term profiteering at the expense of natural resources, and of environmental emergencies increasingly becoming economic emergencies.

[382] See a comprehensive discussion in Matthias Schmelzer et al., *The Future is Degrowth* (London: Verso, 2022).

Interviewees' Relation to Progress Narratives

To analyze participants' relationships to progress narratives, the data was coded to identify descriptions of political improvements or signs of regression, often colloquially expressed by participants in terms of progress being "rolled back" or rights being "taken away." The section is organized according to the areas in which progress was most often described to have taken place or been reversed: Gender Equality, Racial Equality, and Generational Equality. These are evaluated as indicators of participants' investment in the progress metanarrative. Next, the study identifies expressions of, and interventions in, teleological narratives: instances when participants described optimism or pessimism about the future, their expectations for whether progress would be manifested and how. Taken together with the degrowth values analyzed above, these examples of attitudes towards progress are used to evaluate the relationship between degrowth values and progress narratives among activists in the present.

Gender Equality

Selected representative quotations	**First-Order Codes**	**Second-Order Themes**
● "*equal rights for both sexes was very important to me. And I still see the extent to which that has not happened. But I'm not as fervent as I was. Because I think young people need to pick that up. And I think young women, and their men, should be on the streets right now, because they're this close to losing their rights to their own bodies*." (Jane)	● Equal rights has not happened ● Losing rights to their own bodies ● Women set up to fail ● Everyone lonely, men can't express	● Progress absence

• "*Maybe socialism gotta be about reaching people in the heart, like, everybody's lonely as fuck, and a lot of men want to talk about their feelings, but they can't talk about their feelings.*" (Robin) • "*Because I've worked for women's rights and children my whole life and you don't know how to react. You get angry a lot, write a lot of letters and make a lot of phone calls. And then you get discouraged. You think, all these years I've worked and now I'm seeing it all being taken away.*" (Sue) • "*If they could have seen some of the women's lib meetings that we had in the [19]60s and heard those people, those women, they were angry. I can remember being at one meeting, which I thought 'ah, I don't think I'll go to this one again' where somebody said, 'if blood has to run in the streets, we will get our rights.' We've got to see that passion again*." (Sue) • "*Some of the forums I'm on there are women who've been dealing with this for 18, 20 years and they're still being told it's [post-mastectomy pain syndrome] in their head.*" (Jo) • "*We have only one abortion clinic in Kentucky. And we've had people all the way from, the [activists' lobby], and all these different like pro-life people coming and just harassing patients*." (Maya)	emotions • Rights being torn away • Seeing it all taken away • Reduced passion	
• "*When a narrative is advanced by DSA that does not resonate with communities of color, with non-men, with immigrant communities, I see a genuine interest in immediately reframing the narrative or reshaping the policy program to make sure that it is*	• Narrative that does not resonate • Inclusiveness is a political imperative	• Narrative failure

inclusive in that way. [...] Inclusiveness is not a matter of moral signaling or virtue signaling. It's a political imperative at this point." (Kiran) ● "*There's a contract between genders of like, women will do all the sacrificing to make the family happen, right? But when that's not recognized as a sacrifice in the dating market, then it's like, women are just set up to definitely fail.*" (Robin)		

Table 11—Progress Narrative: Gender Equality

Interviewees from across the various progress affiliations cited gender equality as a value. Some of the older interviewees claimed to have witnessed progress in women's rights and other gender issues in their lifetime, but also expressed dismay at some of those rights being challenged and stripped. Sue said, for instance, "This is a community that is upper middle class. But we are now seeing homeless. We had to open a shelter for women. [...] That should not happen here." Sue also said, "In fact, in the [19]60s, when they started having women's lib[eration] meetings [...] we saw a lot of things happen for women, which I see being torn away now which breaks my heart." This offered a clear example of one common progress narrative in the latter 20th and early 21st centuries failing to fulfill its original promise and even being confronted with facts that undermine the narrative entirely. Sue lamented, "I've worked for women's rights and children my whole life and you don't know how to react. You get angry a lot, write a lot of letters and make a lot of phone calls. And then you get discouraged. You think, all these years I've worked and now I'm seeing it all being taken away." Jane similarly

expressed dismay at the lack of progress made in terms of gender equality, and spoke of passing on that burden to the next generation: “I’m not as fervent as I was. Because I think young people need to pick that up. And I think young women, and their men, should be on the streets right now, because they’re this close to losing their rights to their own bodies” (Jane). Many respondents, particularly those who grew up during the latter 20th century in a time of rapid growth and redistributive policies, expressed a simultaneous faith in progress and a confusion and frustration when their direct experience contradicts that metanarrative.

Racial Equality

Selected representative quotations	**First-Order Codes**	**Second-Order Themes**
● “*And the class and economic character and racial character [of Brooklyn] is just fundamentally different with all these mostly young white hipsters moving in.*” (Farouk) ● “*it would be more black, still white, but it was more black. And we never felt threatened. When I was in high school, I worked on 16th Street, which was really tough neighborhood in a small factory. And it was like, kind of the 1800s with the belt so that was dark. And they warned us not to leave at lunch. I did anyway, just because I had to get out. I never felt threatened. I never felt that it was a bad place.*” (Edward) ● “*I really am sorry that I lived in such a white community, I think it would have been to the benefit of, well my benefit and*	● Gentrification as decline ● Race and economic intersection ● De facto segregation ● Forthcoming Anthropocene racism ● I have seen progression and seeing it taken away ● Hidden racism and hatred	● Progress absence

the benefit of all of us, to live with people of other colors and races and religions. I just think that would have been better for everybody." (Jane) ● "*insular, populist, xenophobia is preemptively addressing, in a totally fucked up and absolutely morally reprehensible way, the impending ecological catastrophes that we're going to see and the massive migratory movements, forced migratory movements, that we're going to see this century. What role does the left play in getting ahead of that and dealing with it? I don't know exactly. But I do know that it's the only hope that we have, and that only a committed moral movement that is rooted in a strong and unwavering commitment to solidarity with all humans, and all people on earth can possibly deal with this type of traumatic shock that we are about to experience, that we are already experiencing*." (Kiran) ● "*Suddenly a lot of people in the U.S. woke up to just how much violence is happening against African Americans on daily basis, and now there's a lot more tension and activism to confront police abuse and other violence, state violence and other racism, but the other hand, not much is changing really around policies*." (Peter) ● "*If you think about my age, I grew up in this town when there were white restrooms, public restrooms. At one point, I can remember my mother talking about the Klan. So I have seen progression. And then now I'm seeing it being taken away*." (Sue)		

● "*we're seeing that there was a lot of underlying racism and hatred there that people have been keeping hidden*." (Sue) ● I can only imagine what's going to happen, 0, 30, 40, 50 years from now, when there are a billion refugees around the world, trying [to] move out of places that are too hot to live, places where we can't grow food anymore, places where we can't even get water anymore. There's going to be a lot of refugees moving into Europe and some of them will be trying to get into America. And Americans haven't proven to be very tolerant of these changes that are inevitably going to happen. [...] And to cope with that I think our political systems will become more extreme in the future. So I am a little concerned, because things are not yet that bad, but our politics are extreme already." (Kevin)		
● "*I'm on the steering committee. I'm actually the youngest member on there, and I'm the only non-white person on there, like one of the only non-white people on that steering committee. So that's very important.*" (Maya) ● "*this whole area is a very diverse area, we have so many different people like, and so many amazing just backgrounds and that's why Mayor Fischer calls us a compassionate city because we're a city, we are a city of immigrants, Louisville is. And like, that's something that's really cool about us and we have different ideas because of that.*" (Maya) ● "*where folks didn't grow up outside hiking in glorious*	● Representation politics in DSA ● Representation politics in Louisville ● Diversity in nature connection	● Mixed Representation

mountains all the time, people still have deep connections to nature. In the city of Chicago, people in Brownsville, people in Pilsen, folks in the black and Latinx community, they have strong connections to nature too. In the Asian American community, we have strong connections to nature as well." (Kiran) ● "*we had tried to pass an ordinance here, a fairness ordinance that we would not discriminate because of race, gender, all that. Just one line, and the ministers came out in force [against it].*" (Sue)		

Table 12—Progress Narrative: Racial Equality

Racial progress is frequently cited as an example of teleological improvements in well-being. Indeed, many interviewees cited racial equality as a major value, and felt it was positive that issues of racial inequality, legacies of slavery, state violence, and police brutality were being more openly discussed and protested. But again, the tension between expectations of progress and narratives to that effect come out with declines in racial harmony and rise in animus, and attempts to resolve faith in progress and belief that the future holds mostly negative changes: "insular, populist, xenophobia is preemptively addressing, in a totally fucked up and absolutely morally reprehensible way, the impending ecological catastrophes that we're going to see and the massive forced migratory movements, that we're going to see this century" (Kiran). More than one interviewee indicated that they expected racial inequalities and violence to increase in response to the climate and environmental crises as people are displaced by disasters, further polarizing

electoral politics. Despite increasing racial representation in elite positions—in universities, media, government, and corporations—there remains ubiquitous examples of systemic and felt racialized harm, both existing and anticipated.

Generational Equality

Selected representative quotations	**First-Order Codes**	**Second-Order Themes**
● "*Millennials are being crushed in a way. Well, let's put it this way. Senator Warren did a study that showed a family today with two people working is less financially stable than it was with a family with children in the [19]50s with only one person working*." (Aaron) ● "*Almost everybody I know has grandchildren, and they love their grandchildren. [...] I don't think they at all have in mind that there's going to be wars over water and food and space to live. I think they're completely in denial and/or ignorant about that. And I think if that reality was made clear to them, and they believed it, I think things would change*." (Jane) ● "*I tell my friends and people our age, you know, 'no, you don't need to save for retirement, actually, we're not getting there.'*" (Karen) ● "*especially with [redacted name], like my daughter, now, it is kind of freaky, putting things in perspective in terms of like, there is this long term game here, where there's somebody in my life,*	● Millennials less stable than parents' generation ● Forthcoming Anthropocene generational decline ● Young peoples' pessimism about future ● Acknowledgement of culpability of older generation ● Millennial pessimism about present	● Progress absence

who's going to be dramatically impacted, and that's even more dramatically than I'm going to be. And I'm already a young person who's gonna be more impacted than all the people making the decisions about this." (Liam) ● "*If you're 60 years old right now, your legacy right now is destruction of a whole bunch of ecosystems, period. That's really sad to say, 'I'm going to die in 10, 20 years and what I left behind is 10,000 years of environmental hell.'*" (Peter) ● "*They're sending these 21 year olds out into the world that's just falling apart left and right, like, why bother?*" (Peter) ● "*We're watching millennials, constantly lose their job and move back in with their parents.* [...] *if they're not lucky, they get to move to like rural New Jersey and take any job and live in the middle of nowhere, alone.*" (Robin) ● "*Everybody thinks I'm absolutely out of my mind. They're like, you have a doctorate degree from Harvard, like, why would you become clergy? Like millennials don't believe anything anymore? And I'm like, 'Yeah, I know. That's the problem. Millennials don't believe in anything, so they don't do anything.'*" (Robin)		
● "*The corporate control over old school generation, that's been the big hurdles that we've had to get over. But as we change leadership and*	● Generational transfer of authority and its absence ● Finding hope	● Older generation reliance on younger generation

as we change staffing in our programming, where we're actually trying to invest in our future by hiring and appointing new thinking, younger ideas, younger people, new technology, and that's all coming in." (Daniel) ● "*Young people, the passion that people feel, that young people are running for office, that young people are saying 'enough' and meaning it. That's hopeful to me. I think it is your age group and younger that will provide change.*" (Jane) ● "*When you look at behaviors, I mean, boomers are sociopaths. And they've kind of put us in this mess, they were perfectly happy to mortgage our futures for their comfort. And so I really hope that there's enough time that as their power wanes, that we can scrabble to pick something up.*" (Jo) ● "*I think the younger generation has grown up in the climate change era. And most of them are educated enough to realize that humans are now a force of nature. [...] Older people are really just trying to live out the last couple of decades of their life in an enjoyable manner. They've worked really hard. And they want to, deserve the spoils, they want to enjoy their life.*" (Kevin) ● "*there's all these articles and analysis about the average age of nonprofit boards, like just in New England, is like 65 years old. And, you know, what's up with that? I mean, why aren't younger people starting other*	in young people ● Generational resentment toward older generation ● Older people retiring ● Young people need to start organizations ● Young learning from old	

organizations?" (Peter) ● "*it really takes a lot of intentionality on both ends, I think to open that, you know, so the people who've been doing this forever, kind of open to new ways of thinking, new language around things that all changes. But also for young people to say, 'Okay, this fight has been going on for really generations, and it's morphed and it's changed. But what wisdom can we, can we learn?'*" (Stella)		

Table 13—Progress Narrative: Generational Equality

Generational equality, or even generational improvement, is one of the main ways narratives of progress seek to incorporate long-term change and data to bolster their claims of teleology. "Progress" can be perhaps most clearly measured transgenerationally: if new generations score better on well-being indicators, this would be a strong source of evidence that progress is occurring across large portions of well-being metrics and across geographies. But, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, well-being indicators have been consistently decreasing since after the Baby Boomer generation, beginning with children born in the early 1960s. The responses by interviewees reflect this fact. There were frequent comments from older participants—typically in the Baby Boom or older—who expressed a sense of dependence on younger generations to address the crises of environmental harm and inequality, while comments from younger participants

frequently express resentment toward older generations and a sense that material well-being is being eroded through time.

Attitudes Toward Violence

Selected representative quotations	First-Order Codes	Second-Order Themes
● "*They're closing borders, they're vilifying immigrants, they're starting ethnic cleansing and at various stages in America, I think we're still in pretty early stages, but in India recently, like 4 to 5 million people just had their citizenship revoked because they're not 'real Indians,' even though they've been there for decades. [...] all over the world, the right wing governments and in parties that like, you know, are becoming exterminist in practice, or at least an ideology.*" (Farouk) ● "*I don't want violence. I don't want to start killing people. Because [...] what goes around comes around. So if one group gets violent against one, that group has every right and excuse to become violent back.*" (Edward)	● Closing borders ● Ethnic cleansing ● Right-wing growing in exterminism ● Avoiding violence in civil and activist conflict	● Anticipated Anthropocene violence
● "*The whole idea of abolishing ICE is very understandable when you have a president who's using terror to divide families to keep them from moving into the U.S. Sadly, some of the people who are trying to get in are willing to lose their childre, because it's so bad in there and figure, if the children end up in the US, they're better off. That's our bar, you know, I would call it*	● President using terror ● Horrors of war ● National mission that's not killing people ● Police supporting far right protesters ● Riot police against	● Authority-to-Citizen Violence

terrorism as a presidential policy." (Aaron) ● "*And he told us the horrors of the war, all the things he went through. And he said he didn't want us to be a part of that. And that was enough to open my eyes, beyond the white, kind of lower middle class that we were*." (Edward) ● "*Can humanity, can the United States [...] come together around a shared national mission that is only about saving ourselves and not about killing other people? And I don't know, but I hope so.*" (Karen) ● "*I was literally on the front lines watching this happen. The LMPD [Louisville Metro Police Department] had their backs completely to the Three Percenters and the Proud Boys and had their eyes focused on a row of clergy from different religions that came to support us and lead an interfaith prayer*." (Maya) ● "*We were met with 20 cops with bully clubs and paddy wagons for a peaceful march because we went past the permit. [...] their cars were also driving recklessly around people during the march and hitting their legs.*" (Maya) ● "*If you were anywhere to the left of Obama, and you dissented against some of the things he did, you could have been like, 'This drone shit is bad! We shouldn't be killing people by drones.' And people would just look at you like, 'Yeah, it's bad. What are you gonna do?*'" (Robin) ● "*There is a deep anti war commitment and an anti*	peaceful protesters ● Apathy toward drone strikes ● Anti-war and anti-imperialist sentiment	

imperialist commitment that I see in all of my friends." (Kiran)		
● "*What you then ended up with was a real feud in the community, people's windows being smashed, cars being scratched, paint being chucked, things like that. And it was because the incomers who, or the people who didn't have an interest, were really fed up that everybody else but them was going to gain from this and they saw themselves as losing.*" (James) ● "*And people who make the mistake of walking out their front door and get shot because anybody can have a gun. Any crazy person can have a gun, anybody who wants to. I just think this culture is very sick, and their values and priorities and that nobody's doing enough about it.*" (Jane) ● "*we know that humans have this capability to not just function as individuals, but to come together and function as a group for an overriding purpose. However, we've seen that in history, by far the most often, almost exclusively in the context of war, right? The systematic murdering of other humans.*" (Karen) ● "*suddenly a lot of people in the U.S. woke up to just how much violence is happening against African Americans on [a] daily basis, and now there's a lot more tension and activism to confront police abuse and other violence, state violence and other racism, but the other hand, not much is changing really around policies.*" (Peter) ● "*I was protesting the Iraq War*	● Feud within community over renewables ● Gun culture in the US ● Human collectivism primarily for war ● State imposed racial violence ● Child getting death threats from parents over Iraq war protest ● Political vandalism ● Death threats over gay marriage	● Citizen-to-Citizen Violence

in my rural public high school, I got death threats from the parents" (Robin) ● "*This is Trump country. And during the last election, I was afraid to put a sign out for Hillary. Because you didn't know what would happen. Whether you know, somebody would vandalize your house or what would happen, and that's not right*." (Sue) ● "*when we had the first wedding, two guys, they got death threats and they've moved. Of all places, Florida, which is worse than here I think*." (Sue)		

Table 14—Attitudes Toward Violence

Violence plays a central role in the dynamic relationship between growth and progress. As detailed in the historical analysis, violence has long been an indispensable tool for achieving growth. Violence, in this case, takes many forms, including the violence committed by extractive workers against the non-human life in the ecologies being extracted from, to the internal violence practiced by state authorities against slaves, workers, and, often, women, to the external violence practiced by militaries and mercenaries in frontiers of extraction. Progress narratives, indeed, are themselves frequently developed through history to justify those very forms of violence, whether Abrahamic dominion sanctioning extraction and dominance of non-human life by human life, or the Enlightenment narratives that helped to justify conquest of the Americas. Further, one of the more commonly cited progress myths in the 21st century has been the claim that

violence has been gradually declining.[383] Finally, though it is beyond the scope of this study, there is space to debate the necessity of political violence—particularly in the form of environmental defense and Indigenous self-defense—in the process of halting growth economies. Violence is therefore at the center of the material and cultural co-reproduction of growth and progress, and must be part of discourse around degrowth political strategy.

Interviewees discussed their attitudes and experiences with regard to three forms of violence in particular: anticipated Anthropocene violence, authority-to-citizen violence, and citizen-to-citizen violence. Participants alluded to the violence—of both the latter kinds—that they anticipate occurring in an increasingly volatile Anthropocene, with Farouk lamenting "they're starting ethnic cleansing and at various stages in America, I think we're still in pretty early stages." Participants frequently discussed authority-to-citizen violence, largely in the form of their experience with hostile police forces, or the US government deploying state forces like the Immigration and Customs Enforcement department imposing "terror" on immigrants and refugees, with Aaron calling ICE violence "terrorism as a presidential policy." Maya, meanwhile, discusses being confronted by heavily

[383] This argument received its most comprehensive treatment in Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), but similar sentiments have been shared more recently in other big history books, like Ian Morris's *Geography is Destiny* (2023). Pinker's book inspired a whole scholarly movement that sought to verify the statistical claims made in the book. For examples, see: Pasquale Cirillo and Nassim Nicholas Taleb, "The Decline of Violent Conflicts: What Do The Data Really Say?" *Nobel Foundation Symposium 161: The Causes of Peace*, 27 November 2016, https://www.fooledbyrandomness.com/violencenobelsymposium.pdf; R. Brian Ferguson, "Pinker's List: Exaggerating Prehistoric War Mortality," in *War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views*, ed. Douglas P. Fry (Oxford University Press, 2013), https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199858996.001.0001/acprof-9780199858996-chapter-7; Douglas P. Fry, "Peace in Our Time," *Book Forum* (Dec/Jan 2012), https://www.bookforum.com/print/1804/steven-pinker-offers-a-curiously-foreshortened-account-of-humanity-s-irenic-urges-8575.

armed riot police, “We were met with 20 cops with bully clubs and paddy wagons for a peaceful march because we went past the permit.” Experiences with citizen-to-citizen violence were broader, with some citing political conflict between citizens leading to death threats, and others discussing feuds that resulted in property destruction—including, James said, “people’s windows being smashed, cars being scratched, paint being chucked”—over new wind turbine construction in Scotland’s Western Isles.

Interviewees' Sense of Progress and Growthism

Although most or all interviewees might see themselves as colloquially "progressive," part of a progressive coalition, or aiming to improve conditions through changes to the status quo, there was not such a straightforward discursive commitment to ideas of progress. Instead, interviewees frequently lamented a decline in conditions won by what they framed as past progress, or discussed the dark view they hold of the future, one which will almost inevitably be worse than the present. At the same time, few interviewees expressed particular skepticism of progressive teleologies or narratives, despite frequently discussing ideas of hope, positive future change, and their own motivations. Multiple interviewees expressed notions of a non-teleological or non-linear/non-progressive timeline by which status quo political and economic systems will be interrupted by collapse scenarios. These beliefs were sometimes expressed alongside progressive beliefs in competing or contradictory ways.

The combined crises of the environment and economy caused many to view the future as a time of anticipated rupture, violence, and upheaval, *not* accumulating social progress. Jane even suggested that belief in progress, or at least ignorance of deteriorating conditions, has placated people and made them less likely to work for improvements, saying:

> almost everybody I know has grandchildren, and they love their grandchildren. [...] I don't think they at all have in mind that there's going to be wars over water and food and space to live. I think they're completely in denial and/or ignorant about that. And I think if that reality was made clear to them, and they believed it, I think things would change.

Some went further and recognized the role they played, even if minor, in contributing to deteriorating conditions, with Peter saying, “if you’re 60 years old right now, your legacy right now is destruction of a whole bunch of ecosystems, period. That’s really sad to say, ‘I’m going to die in ten, 20 years and what I left behind is 10,000 years of environmental hell.’” Such confessions suggest that Anthropocene thinking—knowledge of the likely consequences of the ongoing climate and ecological crises—meant interviewees no longer saw a possible future for the growthist mode of production that has prevailed for the past 5,000 years, despite sometimes repeating talking points that aid in its reproduction.

In almost all the interviews, participants described a belief that social progress was being rolled back. For example, Sue and Jane lamented the reversal of gains in women’s rights that they campaigned for in their youth (“we saw a lot of things happen for women, which I see being torn away now”) as well as racial equality: “If you think about my age, I grew up in this town when there were white restrooms, public restrooms. I can remember my mother talking about the Klan. So I have seen progression. And then now I’m seeing it being taken away” (Sue). Jane, meanwhile, expresses doubt that even basic rights like voting will remain intact into the near future, saying, “if you don’t have the power to vote at the table I don’t know what else you can do. And I don’t know how much longer we’ll have a democracy to do it.” Even as Farouk sees that humans are a force of nature, he also sees a lack of agency in being able to prevent authoritarian gains: “all over the world, right-wing governments and in parties that are becoming exterminist in practice, or at least an ideology.” Maya also spoke of witnessing rising right-wing

groups: “I was literally on the front lines watching this happen. The LMPD had their backs completely to the Three Percenters and the Proud Boys and had their eyes focused on a row of clergy from different religions that came to support us and lead an interfaith prayer.” Many interviewees spoke of rising economic inequality and expressed disillusionment with dominant modes of assessing progress, whether railing against economic growth, population growth, or capitalist consumption as markers of societal progress. This is particularly striking given that the interviewees were selected from groups anticipated to be deeply invested in notions of creating positive, progressive change like activists, community leaders, and politicians, who tend to be both committed to and communicators fluent in the language of sequential, linear progress narratives. Yet even as they espoused a dark view of the future—sometimes explicitly in confidence to me, against a more public persona they may be cultivating—they still participated frequently, and in some cases full time, in action intended to deliver social and/or political change.

In some instances, anticipated collapse was depicted as an opportunity for instituting new political and economic systems. For Daniel, a city mayor in Michigan, optimism about the ascendency of renewable energy in the future clashed with more apocalyptic imaginaries. He believed it was valuable for his city to run its own power plant for greater resilience and self-sufficiency in the case of disaster scenarios or political insurgency events:

> What happens when the revolution happens? What happens when we need to produce more power? …if something major happens in the world, I mean, will they be able to shut us off? I do think that we need to produce power locally and, and know that we have a local resource that we can control.

Dean, a graduate student and DSA member, was supportive of a disaster event that might enable an "ecosocialist" reshaping of society: "one thing that keeps me hopeful is that at some point, something's gonna go really wrong. But we're going to be there. And we're probably going to know what to do….if you can't lead people with [a] positive vision, maybe you can push them with a little bit of disaster." Meanwhile, Eric disputed a teleological, progressive understanding of history by describing pre-modern societies in terms of less labor intensive food production, less energy-intensive lifestyles: "more leisure, free time, time for family." Eric seeks to debunk the idea that a life before the invention of electricity and advanced technology would have been miserable, and suggests returning to a less energy-dense and more leisure focused lifestyle would be desirable ("what it means to be a modern human needs to change").[384]

What these interviews indicate is that to a certain extent, and among certain groups of people, the Anthropocene forecloses the possibility of progress. One way this was persistently demonstrated among the interviewees was in expressions of hopelessness and despair. For example, Karen described telling friends not to save money for retirement because she did not expect the current generation to live into old age ("I tell my friends and people our age […] no, you don't need to save for retirement […] we're not getting there.") This sentiment was echoed by Peter, who remarked "they're sending these 21 year olds out into the world that's just falling apart left and right, like, why bother?" Sven claimed that with regard to the climate crisis, "if you're really engaging with these ideas and the

[384] He echoes the "original affluent society" theory first espoused by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins at the "Man the Hunter" symposium in 1966.

reality of them […] it's very depressing and hard to deal with." When asked what gave him cause for optimism, particularly in light of having recently become a father, Liam replied "you're gonna make me reveal my deep dark secret, which is I think we're probably screwed." And Kevin had a grim view of the future owing to the rise of extreme right-wing approaches to foreign policy and climate refugees: "we're already moving to these extremes, politically, at this hour, when things aren't yet so bad, I can only imagine what's going to happen, 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now, when there are a billion refugees around the world trying move out of places that are too hot to live."

Indeed, new narratives for addressing the future emerged that were either a-progressive or anti-progressive: narratives like degrowth, Luddism, reducing personal consumption, and reducing human population growth. That is not to say that these narratives are not trying to effect change in a positive way, but rather that they are consciously divorced from the kinds of progress myths that growthism has historically advanced in order to achieve the continual expansion and extraction it relies upon to be reproduced. These narratives often championed the intrinsic rather than instrumental value of both human and nonhuman life, and expressed interest in the quality, not just quantity of that life in terms of, for instance, a labor versus leisure time balance (e.g. "cutting back work hours and sharing work more" (Peter)). Voicing support for degrowth policies, shorter working weeks, and reparations, Liam said "People get this idea that all of a sudden, they're gonna have less. And that is so dramatically untrue because if we do it in the right way, they are going to have a lot more." Others gestured to historical

social movements grounded in negative affective modes like mourning, melancholy, and rage, rather than promises of hope and affirmation; for example, Karen discussed the die-in strategies of ACT UP in the late 1980s, in which gay rights activists feigned mass deaths to shame governments into action on the AIDS pandemic.

These interviews also displayed a broad turning away from optimistic or utopian narratives in favor of an extreme practicality or acceptance of the sufficiency of survival. For example Karen said, “people even within my organization say we need more of an inspiring vision […] but to me, the key inspiring vision is we will have [the] chance to continue living and building and trying for a better world.” There is also a repeated notion of self-sacrifice as integral to sustainability tied up in a negation of personal ego or reward (Robin describes climate work as “thankless”; Kevin noted that when making sustainable personal choices “you can’t possibly see how what you just did, which was a good deed, could benefit the earth. And you don’t get rewarded for it.”) But even as Robin, for instance, operates with pessimism about the future, she also laments the dearth of belief in something, ostensibly something progressive or transcendent, and connects this lack of belief among Millennials as a cause of apathy: “Everybody thinks I’m absolutely out of my mind. They’re like, you have a doctorate degree from Harvard, like, why would you become clergy? Like millennials don’t believe anything anymore? And I’m like, ‘Yeah, I know. That’s the problem. Millennials don’t believe in anything, so they don’t do anything.’”

Nevertheless, traces of the progress narratives of growthism also persisted in the interviews. Whereas in some instances community renewable energy offered a material model of energy production and distribution compatible with, and encouraging of, decentralized governance and localism, in other instances renewable energy was conceived of merely as a replacement for fossil fuels that could be plugged in to enable the continuation of centralized governance, profit generation, and increased energy consumption under a status-quo growthism, illustrating the aforementioned juggling of interventions in reproduction.

For Aaron, who worked for the U.S. Department of Energy before participating in setting up the organization that later became DSA, the fossil fuel industry was seen to be a bigger problem than fossil fuels themselves. He believed government-owned, public infrastructure would be less corrupt than private energy. While Aaron did not see working for fossil fuel departments as anti-progressive because he was involved in labor organizing and setting up a union, he did acknowledge the irony of co-operative owned energy groups relying on fossil fuels: “there are energy cooperatives all over the Midwest and West, there’s a good chance that most of them are using coal.” Most indicative of an underlying growthist ideology, however, were Aaron’s comments about the inherent and inevitable good of “development.” He expressed a view that “you need to develop the world,” and specifically that “developed countries” should be in charge of “developing” other countries:

> we need a Marshall Plan for all developed countries to help developing countries, because if we don’t, they’re going to energize using fossil fuels. Coal is easy to use, and doesn’t take a lot of learning. The solar technologies, which haven’t all been invented, need further education and

> an understanding. So if you want to defeat climate change, you need to develop the world in a way that doesn't pollute.

Aaron's comments betrayed some contradictions; for example, he explicitly rejects the "imperialism" of old communist parties, yet talks about needing to "develop" other countries and bar them from fossil fuel use in a way that sounds like imperialism, or like the justifications used for modern growthism. At the same time, he recognizes that young people today are worse off than they were when he was a young man: "Millennials are being crushed in a way. Senator Warren did a study that showed a family today with two people working is less financially stable than it was with a family with children in the [19]50s with only one person working."

Another way that growthist values emerged in interviews was in the ways participants' discussed renewable energy. Aaron alluded to the invisible hand of the market when he asserted that energy companies will be forced to switch to renewables eventually, because "the economics is beginning to be overwhelming that you need to go that way." Frequently, the necessary end of fossil fuel use was understood as an opportunity for more development. Daniel, a city mayor, described "tearing down that horrible coal plant that was on the lake shore and maybe you're repurposing the land [...] let's put a different industry or a different resource in there that's going to, you know, benefit our community." Renewable energy was seen primarily as a business venture: "we're using our asset [municipal-owned utility] and using our fund balances to further our capital improvements to build more and make things better [...] that's kind of why you get into energy is to make money." As such, Daniel was sympathetic to homeowners who expected to see economic gains on their property investments and worried

solar panels would threaten that. Similarly, a clean environment and natural spaces is valued primarily in terms of tourism and the landscape's potential to generate revenue: "we're trying to protect more of that for tourism, because that's a lot of what our base is up here for economies. So I think we want to be greener, we want to have that pristine look and feel of 'up North:' clean air, clean living, all that kind of stuff." Renewables were a source of faith in progress as well: Dean voiced a progressive faith in the inevitable replacement of fossil fuels with renewable energy: "these green renewable companies are growing very, very quickly…and the fossil fuel companies know this, they know that this is the future and that they are being outpaced, and I think that comes from the fact that their commodity is non-renewable."

For others, growthism was present in how they understood the necessity of urgent action to address climate and environmental problems, emphasizing threats to businesses, property, and development. For one interviewee in Miami, the prospect of increased flooding in the city was an issue primarily for business- and property-owners: "this environmental emergency is turning into an economic emergency for Florida" (Kevin). Sometimes political pragmatism was deployed as a reason for avoiding actions that may be considered radical or anti-growthist. While sympathetic to calls to abolish ICE in the United States, Aaron indicated he did not think this was a realistic or pragmatic aim: "you've got to temper your political objectives to what you can do politically, electorally." Daniel similarly suggested that progress is delivered through political pragmatism and patience rather than radical ruptures: "we just need to have level heads, cool minds,

breathe…this is going to be a long road, but every day, we're sort of getting towards the top of that hill....And I think we're close to the top...on energy policy and the future of this." In this case, renewables are again a source of faith in progress.

Interviewees' Sense of Optimism and Futurity

One of the main questions asked of all participants and uniting them was some variation on, "What makes you feel optimistic or hopeful?" First, it is important to note that the question was not *whether* participants felt a sense of optimism or hopefulness, or what nature those feelings may have within them and their experience, but what specifically could conjure those feelings. When dealing with issues of Anthropocene change, questions of futurity come into doubt. A sense of expansiveness in futurity is likely, by definition, a prerequisite for internalizing narratives of progress without severe cognitive dissonance. Progress depends on an expansive future and the possibility that such a future could be positive, beneficial, and even superior to the present; awareness of Anthropocene issues can foreclose such a belief. What does this Anthropocene awareness do to progressive practitioners and their theory of change and progress affiliation? If they feel cognitive dissonance, what does that look like? Can a lack of belief in progress—a sense that the future is almost certainly going to be worse than the present and immediate past—sit productively alongside motivations to work to try to improve life and well-being, and to even feel hopeful or optimistic that such work can be positive? As mentioned above, some recent research has suggested that a sense of hope is not necessary for participating in positive change actions, and when it comes to climate action, may even be counterproductive, serving more as a placating force than a motivating one.[385]

[385] See, for instance, Matthew J. Hornsey and Kelly S. Fielding, "A cautionary note about messages of hope: Focusing on progress in reducing carbon emissions weakens mitigation

Participants (anonymized)	Sources of Optimism	Historical Progress Narrative (and those represented elsewhere in their interviews)
Fergus	N/A	N/A
Scott	“it's difficult to catalog this but that's just kind of examples of the fact that we are seeing now in wee small ways, a greater coming together in the community and appreciating what each other is doing, you know, the different groups.”	N/A
Anne	N/A	N/A
James	“if people don't actually care a damn about the wind farm, or the solar panels or whatever, beyond what the money coming in is then I have no confidence. So it does come back to getting them young and getting them to feel that this actually, you know, they have ownership as individuals of some of these opportunities and it can be as much to do with them as getting a job or getting a house or anything else. Whether the culture will allow that to happen I don't know…Comes back to if you want to do anything about it, you do it yourself, which I'm trying to do, and others like me are trying to do, but for the for the majority of the country, I have no confidence that anything sensible is being worked on.”	N/A
Daniel	“So we just need to have level heads, cool minds, breathe, and then just know this is going to be a long road, but every day, we're sort of getting towards the top of that hill. Soon we can start rolling down the hill, because it's going to be so much better. And I think we're getting real close to the top on energy policy and the future of this. I think it's changing…And economics is a huge part of it.,,when you drive through rural Midwest and see these miles and miles of wind towers…they're making money off of it. So I think the power companies and the entrepreneurs that are in this, it's like we're helping them by saying, "hey, let us do this, you're going to get money in your pocket." And it was the same with land protection and buying development rights, you know, you know, "we're offering you something to help protect the view shed or protect the environment." So there's money in it, and so I think it's getting better.”	Neoliberalism

motivation,” *Global Environmental Change* 39 (2016): 26–34, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2016.04.003.

Jonathan	“And I think that's all positive. So I don't see any major hurdles, as long as we have a transparent outreach, everybody, all the stakeholders are understanding what you're doing and how you're going to do it, then it [more community renewables] can happen.”	N/A
Malcolm	“There are energy economics, you know, the trends, the technology is is improving constantly, the cost of wind energy is is declining precipitously…We're going to electrify transportation, which is going to, you know, 28% of greenhouse gas emissions by all the expert prognostications, that's going to occur remarkably quickly once it really starts in earnest…We have the demand side, the corporate demand side, we have all these corporations…declaring 100% zero carbon energy goals, and that's a huge force.”	Neoliberalism
Jane	“Young people, the passion that people feel, that young people are running for office, that young people are saying "Enough" and meaning it. That's hopeful to me.”	N/A
Edward	“You know, Michigan's doing something interesting. They're creating a panel, instead of the gerrymandered state that assures Republican control in the state, which are totally counterproductive. That's going to change. I don't know if it'll be enough time. But people have more of a voice. That's one good thing…[but] I don't feel a lot of hope.”	N/A (Keynesianism)
Sven	N/A	N/A
Kiran	“Seeing movements of ordinary people crush bastards, occasionally.” [Followed by list of labor, Indigenous, and other activist movement victories]	Marxism
Dean	“Eco radicals are rising, we are rising…and the DSA is growing as well…But the one thing that keeps me hopeful is that at some point, something's gonna go really wrong. But we're going to be there. And we're probably going to know what to do.”	Marxism
Maya	“I'm really, really optimistic about nationally caucus forming for, you know, a Democratic Socialist or a populist left caucus. Because there's been amazing candidates nationwide.”	N/A (Keynesianism)
Sue	“I'm optimistic about everything. Because I've seen how bad it can be. And I saw us come through to where I thought we were better, I'm not sure now when I see the underlying but I've seen us come through it. I think it will change but boy, it's going to take a long time to rebuild what we've lost. But I'm optimistic that we can do it. We just have to stay active and let people know.”	N/A
Liam	“you're gonna make me reveal my deep dark secret, which is, I think we're probably screwed. I stay optimistic because what's worse than being screwed, and losing at the end of the day is losing and knowing you didn't do anything to try and stop it, I'm okay losing if I know I gave it my all, and we still lose. So I think we're probably fucked in a lot of ways,	N/A

	I'm hopeful that, you know, there's at least a percentage chance, let's give it 10% that we don't completely screw ourselves over…I think [my daughter is] gonna be like an awesome witch doctor, like in the community, helping to keep people alive and survive in the wild…So we're planning for the the bad version in small ways."	
Jo	"I'm seeing where these different groups are learning how to like, work together, to really start making an impact. And I'm seeing, you know, the DSA groups starting to do that. And to me, that's really energizing and hopeful…I really hope that there's enough time that as [the Boomer generation's] power wanes, that we can scrabble to, you know, pick something up…I feel hopeful that there's going to be some kind of stewardship during this murky period for us. Such that we don't end up, you know, in a nuclear war and dealing with, you know, some post apocalyptic thing."	N/A
Kevin	"Since the federal government doesn't really want to address climate change, and in many ways, the federal government's starting to make it worse. It's amazing how local cities, local communities, everyday people, including myself, have kind of stepped up to the plate…So I'm optimistic about the future because of that, what Michael Bloomberg is doing right now, and Jerry Brown in California, organizing all these local entities, communities, cities, states, corporations, into action…The other reason for optimism is the economy is going to demand sustainable energy…the economics will dictate that we must move in this direction. Because not only are we going to save money, but we're also going to create jobs, which are going away, by the way, unless we do this."	Neoliberalism (Old Testament Dominion, New Testament Afterlife)
Farouk	"I'm definitely not rosy eyed about "the arc of history being long and bending toward justice,"...I don't think that happens unless people really organize to make that happen, And then get lucky in a lot of ways, but I just don't think we have a choice…it's never too late…it can always get worse and there's always stuff that can be done to keep it from getting so much worse…there's an innate human capacity to respond to crises in ways that are unexpected and creative…like "disaster socialism," after natural disasters the community has to regroup and do mutual aid and rebuild in ways that are very collaborative and unexpected…I feel like a lot of people I've met through DSA or like just on the broader left just like are already just deeply disillusioned in a way that is productive…paradoxically that broad disillusionment gives me hope…we're not basing our proposals for changing society on false hopes."	Marxism
Evie	"I've become very hopeful because I'm seeing people fight this plant in West Virginia that's going to be spewing a bunch of chemicals out of a 21 story smokestack right next to a school…all of these small towns all over the United States are like waking up. And that makes me feel really amazing because…there is a consensus on what we want as human beings…there are things that we can agree on	N/A

	wherever spectrum on the political spectrum that you come from. And that is one of the reasons why I got into environmental work is because I think that we can all agree that we want clean water and…clean air and…s safe and happy environment for our families.”	
Jean	“I'm not an optimistic person, but I never have been. But I want to survive and I'm in solidarity, I don't think there's a choice. As long as we have options, we should think about the best decision we can make under that circumstance looking towards like a better future for all of us because there's nothing else to do.”	N/A (Keynesianism)
Aaron	“I'm hopeful. But it can only be solved if there's a lot of work on the left…[citing DSA growth]...I think things are going in a hopeful direction at the moment. It's just not clear whether that's going to be enough.”	N/A (Keynesianism)
Victor	“I guess work on a nice day, going outside, pulling up, pulling up plants, weeding, weeding out the the trash plants and getting, cleaning up the ground?...I think when you can get into the work, and know that you're contributing something positive, I think that that is able to keep moving forward…what small battles can we win that are skirmishes as part of a larger campaign?...still getting us a bit closer?…and not give up because we are we because the end goal seems so far away…And I swear I despair about it a lot. But I think keeping up the work really helps.”	N/A (Neoliberalism and Keynesianism)
Karen	“it's actually since [Representative Alexandria] Ocasio[-Cortez]'s election I've been in basically a good mood, which, which has been like, really weird, right?...I do think that Trump's election and presidency has really cut into the myth, that kind of "somebody's handling it."...there's something really good about taking away the total illusion that like the adults are handling this…Realizing that the Democrats aren't handling this, the climate movement isn't handling this. No one is handling this, you have to…you can join a network of people who have stared into the abyss and realized, "okay, like, what can I do?" And it's a wonderful, there's fellowship there, an incredible sense of purpose and meaning in life that I think is lacking from most the people who aren't in that small movement…I think that the upside to our politics being so messed up right now, is that it feels kind of like anything could happen, including a whole range of bad outcomes…I do see a path forward where the country decides to live rather than die…But, I mean, we're not even trying now. So all that all the doom, doomishness, "Oh, it's, it can't be done. It's too late," whatever. I mean, like, we should try.”	N/A
Robin	“I think the future socialism goes into building enterprises of social cooperation. Like "oh my best friend's an herbalist, I make the I make the compost", like it's a circular relationship that I can put more people in…I think a big part of the next step for climate change and socialism is, is to sort of accept…not knowing all the answers about	Marxism

	the politics…I think there is this move, to cooperate with each other to build systems that will heal the planet. But we're not there yet. Like the fact that I can say that is great, and it moves on to progress…Can I do that in five years? No!”	
Peter	“I guess the hope that culture is powerful and shifts can happen and suddenly something could really take off…you look at Black Lives Matter and how much energy they got. But that's both a hope and, you know, a lack of hope…there's so much bad news around ecosystems collapsing and the damage we're already doing, that people are really working at not paying attention to. I just don't know at what point people, you know, snap out of it. I just don't know.”	N/A
Tom	“What does the future look like?...our first grandchild is going to grow up in a world that is…if you're anywhere near the coast, are you going to be living continually with or in an area that the ocean is encroaching, and the storms are insane, and really, people can't live there…it's a sad thing to think about. Do you, then try to make that turn, turn that sadness into, “okay, we need to take action right now and we need to start, you know, working towards it?”...day to day, there's a lot going on, what small things can I do, particularly because I'm involved with things at work, to try to make a difference? That's where I focus energy. When I, when I'm in that mode, I'm like, “Okay, I know that this will be good, you know, for the environment, so let's do that.”...I don't necessarily get cynical about the process that can happen. I just feel like I'm that small cog.”	N/A (Neoliberalism)
Stella	“[Regarding the 400,000-person People’s Climate March] that's when, that's when it's like, "oh, maybe there is hope. And maybe people are paying attention. Maybe people are listening." And then you see it kind of tamped down again…the fundamental question, how do you create change? And it's hard to know what the answer is to that. And I've seen it happen in my lifetime, I've seen change, and I've seen change in a positive direction and I've seen people walking away from it.”	N/A
Eric	“I think that we either will make it work on this planet or we'll cease to exist as a species. Or we're going to go through an almost complete depopulation, and then have to start over. And it'll be terrible…And I'm okay with the idea of us and the life on the planet having a mortality, I just think that we should have a good run of a few more billion years.”	N/A

Table 15—Sources of Optimism

Across ToC's and progress affiliations, interviewees' senses of optimism and futurity varied considerably, with some expressing strong optimism and others hedging or even stating a lack of optimism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, DSA members found a sense of hopefulness from class struggle—some more or less implicitly ascribing to a Marxist sense of progress—while other activists found a sense of hopefulness from young people and mass mobilization. Those from non-activist ToC's tended to find more optimism in technocratic possibilities, from local government action, to economic incentive shifts (toward renewables, primarily), and institutional change. Participants drew primarily on elements of 19th century (Marxism) and 20th century (Keynesianism or neoliberalism) narratives of progress when they drew on any at all. As discussed above, many reflected a sense that they had either seen progress firsthand in their lifetime while then seeing those changes rolled back, or that they have seen a decreasing quality of life compared with older generations' experience. Nevertheless, some of those same members expressed optimism in some area or showed a resolve to continue participating in spite of—or because of—that deterioration in well-being indicators, equality, and environmental integrity. Instead of deriving a sense of meaning or purpose from achieving or anticipating progress, some found meaning and purpose from a sense of camaraderie or collective struggle that was rewarding regardless of the extent to which they achieved victories.

Patterns Emerging from Interviews	Openness to Degrowth	Reliance on Progress Metanarrative	Status Quo Deviation Into Future
Stated growthist/progressivist views based on expansion of economies through renewables and mid-20th-century style welfare-industrial policy	low	high	low
Local democratic governmentality and renewable energy seen as inevitable replacement for fossil fuels, creating a new "green future"	high	high	moderate
Environmental and inequality crises, Anthropocene understanding of history, and comfort with lower tech futures disrupt progressivist views of the future	high	low	high

Table 16—Patterns in Rhetoric

Three primary patterns among interviewees' responses illustrate the connections between degrowth and progress, with varying degrees of openness to degrowth and reliance on progress, and varying degrees of openness to deviation from status quo trajectories. The first is an emphasis on mid-20th-century style Keynesian interventions using welfare and industrial policy to address problems. These rhetorics are less likely to be open to degrowth/ism and more likely to depend on progress narratives. They are unlikely to radically deviate from status quo trajectories into the future. The second emphasizes the importance of localism, place attachment, and renewable energy generation through grassroots leadership and organizing. These rhetorics are more likely to be open to degrowth/ism, but still comfortable with major progressive metanarratives, even assuming market-driven energy transitions. They show potential to radically deviate from status quo trajectories in rhetoric, but simultaneously remain invested

in existing structures like market solutions. The third pattern emphasizes the intensity of crises and need for interventions that are centering environmental and inequality issues more thoroughly. These rhetorics are open to degrowth/ism and less reliant on progress narratives. They show the highest receptivity to deviating radically from status quo trajectories, and even take for granted that environmental changes will make this inevitable, for better and worse.

Discussion

This thesis is interested in the relationship between the physical processes of growth, metaideology of growthism, and metanarrative of progress. This chapter examined that relationship through the in-depth interviews of practitioners of progressive change. This analysis finds a complicated relationship between growth and progress among interviewees. In most cases, interviewees have little expectation of "progress," an improving condition in the issues they care about and values they seek to promote, with the major exception being in the growth of renewables technology. Instead of being empowering, awareness of Anthropocenic pressures like ecological collapses and climate change foreclose the possibility of progress into an imagined deep, or even immediate, future. The study suggests that faith in progress is not, at least for those involved in the sorts of activism studied, necessary to compel action. Indeed, even the reverse, a belief in degradation from the status quo or rolling back of past progress, is a motivator for many interviewees. Attitudes toward growth and degrowth, meanwhile, varied. Some interviewees explicitly rejected degrowth rhetoric while promoting some basic degrowth values, while others had a more favorable view of degrowth rhetorics. Others, meanwhile—particularly those involved in CRG—engaged directly in the sort of local energy production central to degrowth agendas while also maintaining growthist attitudes, like promoting profit-making. There were exceptions, with some still promoting growthism and maintaining a faith in the possibility of a growth economy—or at least not a widely divergent economy—through the growth of renewables.

Given that many of these activists were citing motivations and participating in actions consistent with common degrowth agendas, goals, and imaginaries, this suggests that degrowth literatures and advocacy need not lean on its own version of a traditional progress narrative to compel participation. While the scale of the study limits its generalizability, it adds to a growing discussion about the role of positivity, hope, and progress in messaging on issues related to climate, environment, and justice. Given that progress has been an effective tool in the arsenal of growthists promoting growth-based policies, degrowth advocates must continue to interrogate the relationship between degrowth, growth, and progress. Further empirical studies can contribute to better understanding how progress metanarratives impact the attitudes and motivations of those who may be most likely to usher in degrowth agendas.

Kallis and March describe a "repertoire of degrowth strategies" including civil disobedience, and the formation of eco-communes, back-to-the-land movements, and cooperative projects.[386] Without explicit degrowth affiliations, interviewees participated in these strategies to various degrees: CRG members brought resources into communal ownership and control, often redistributing profits among vulnerable members of their communities; DSA members engaged in grassroots activism and faced police brutality at protests, or started back-to-the-land communities of people keen to leave New York City; climate and environmental activists pressured government representatives to declare a state of emergency. Activists varied in their attitudes to political participation, with some

[386] Kallis and March, "Imaginaries of Hope," 365.

opting to engage in electoral and party politics—often aiming to improve representation by radical left coalitions—and others focusing on local, grassroots changes directly impacting their communities. Particularly among CRGs, members would profess a lack of political engagement or affiliation, even while participating in what might be framed as a radical collective ownership of material resources in order to redistribute material benefits to vulnerable groups in their community.

This thesis has also sought to challenge a tendency within degrowth scholarship, particularly the historiography of degrowth currently developing, that tends to emphasize capitalism as the primary source of growthism and driver of continued growth. Capitalism is frequently asserted as the origin of growth, or at least the sort that is being contested by degrowth today, and that it must therefore be the central target of critique and political contestation by those advocating for degrowth. This study suggests, however, that this may be a limiting tactic and unfounded in social scientific research. Interviewees brought up a variety of targets of contestation and cited a broad range of motivations, the practical obstacles that they saw their actions as challenging, as well as a variety of targets of critique, analytical and conceptual entities—like systems and ideologies—that they saw as central agents to be overthrown, replaced, or undermined. Targets of contestation took the form of particular statutes or policies, like with renewable energy advocates who lamented legal obstacles to microgrids, for instance, or specific politicians (Donald Trump was mentioned often, even in Scotland), political parties, or corporations. The government, at every level, from municipal to state/provincial to federal, was also occasionally cited as a primary target of

contestation. Targets of critique most consistently included capitalism, particularly among participants of DSA, but also included neoliberalism, patriarchy, racism, growth(ism), and fossil fuel industrialism.[387] One of the overwhelming conclusions one draws from these interviews relevant to this study is consistently shared values with disunity in the diagnosis of a primary root cause of the problems they all seek to confront. Across generation, movement, institutions, and theories of change, stated values remain fairly consistent and rarely in conflict—which is likely in part an effect of a sampling bias—while diagnoses and conceptual framing remain at odds. That is to say, they lack a shared target of critique or target of contestation. One way of putting it is there is a black hole where a common target ought to be. A black hole is invisible, only distinguishable by the signatures left by the energy and matter being affected by the black hole. In the same way, we see myriad movements, institutions, projects, ideologies, and tendencies circling a concept that remains unnamed, or rather misnamed, but that could find a home in degrowth.

[387] "Target of critique" being a target for analytical and conceptual challenges; "target of contestation" meaning more practice-oriented challenges.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Growth is at the heart of the ecological and inequality crises dominating the Anthropocene. Progress has been one of the most important, if not the most important, metanarrative and political rhetoric for the co-reproduction of growth throughout recorded history. Degrowth offers a framework for contesting the root of these twin crises, but there is a risk, as this study contends, that its public discourse and scholarship have an underdeveloped historiography, historical narrative—particularly around the origins of growth/ism—and intellectual history. As raised in the Historical Analysis discussion section, there are both advantages and limitations to broadening the definition of growth/ism and backdating its emergence in a new historical framework. There is a risk, for instance, of the study suffering from reductionism, undue universalizing, and a naturalizing of growth/ism such that it results in a dispiriting sense of inescapability. There is, too, a risk in deconstructing progress, casting it in a primarily negative light that may undermine peoples' faith in the possibility of improvement—of society, of technology, of knowledge, of morality—which may entail negative psychological and emotional reactions to such research, and to the world in general. As mentioned, I believe there are mitigating factors to these risks. I sincerely believe that the benefits to further research and to our understanding of the roots of the Anthropocene's great challenges outweigh the possible disadvantages that come from this kind of historical analysis and understanding of growth and progress. The reductionism

inherent to the kind of analysis in the historical section, in my opinion, is a worthwhile tradeoff with the insights that can be gained by analyzing patterns over a large historical scope. Further, I think it is important to openly study, scrutinize, and write in such a way that myths, hopes, and narratives can be deconstructed and either abandoned or reassembled based on a more rigorous understanding of the world's phenomena, even at the risk of engendering negative feelings, hopelessness, or despair. The seriousness of the problems we are confronting demands commensurate seriousness with how we aim to understand the world and shape it.

Continued debate around Anthropocene dating, meanwhile, can be productively aided by more thoroughly developing a sense of growth/ism's place in human history as a major force in initiating a departure from Holocene stability. Further, scholarship and public discourse have an under-examined, largely uninterrogated, relationship to progress metanarratives that may hinder an understanding of growth politics and social movement efficacy in the realm of degrowth activism. This thesis has sought to address these issues by investigating two primary questions: **1) How do growth economies relate to progressive narratives through (primarily Western) history? And 2) How do (de)growthist values relate to attitudes toward progressive narratives and teleology in the present?**

In pursuing Question 1, the study found novel and useful outcomes with regard to building a growth/degrowth (macro)historiography, and discerned patterns in the development of both material forms of growth, as understood in this

thesis, and the cultural forms of progress narratives that evolved to co-reproduce them. These findings were arrived at through constructing a critical genealogy and discursive analysis of ideas of progress from a variety of sources, including primary and secondary texts, archival texts, and political speeches. This genealogy produced a periodization framework including four major historical periods in which particular forms of growth and progress attained hegemonic positions. One significant pattern that emerged from this study was the religiosity of progress narratives shifting through time, finding a complicated relationship between teleology, religiosity, and secular narratives of progress, but with a general trend toward secularization. This trend was not linear nor always permanent, and religiosity seemed frequently to correspond to the form growth took in a given geography. For instance, regional expansionism—even when it took place in the Industrialization period—tended to rely on a more religious, mythic form of progress narrative to reproduce and justify itself, whereas maritime expansionism was more likely to turn to secular progress narratives, and the state-corporate network growth more dominant in the latter 20th and 21st centuries was primarily secular. Another interesting pattern to emerge from this study suggests that narratives of progress tend to compound and accumulate through time, rather than necessarily displacing other narratives. Religious and secular narratives co-evolve in sometimes efficient ways, while at other times and places competing for supremacy. Ultimately, this study suggests that there is a significant relationship between growth processes and progress narratives through time, and that they co-reproduce one another in complex ways.

In addressing Question 2, the study found that practitioners of progressive change frame their motivations and goals in ways that are complicatedly amenable to degrowth values, and possess often variegated, confused, or ambivalent relationships to progress narratives. This section of the thesis utilized a discursive analysis to compare responses from interviewees across geographies, generations, ethnic backgrounds, theories of change, and progressive affiliations. From this analysis, some patterns emerged along three axes: interviewees' openness to degrowth(ism), interviewees' reliance on progressive metanarratives, and interviewees' openness to deviation from status quo trend lines into the future. These comparisons found that, among interviewees that stated growthist/progressivist views based on expansion of economies through renewables and mid-20th-century style welfare-industrial policy—which cut across all the groups (ordered according to theories of change and progress affiliation)—openness to degrowth was often lower, reliance on progress narratives higher, and openness to status quo deviation lower. Meanwhile, those that emphasized local democratic governmentality and renewable energy as an inevitable replacement for fossil fuels in an ongoing energy transition, creating a new "green future," which also cut across all groups, tended to be more open to degrowthism, but also rely more heavily on progress narratives, while retaining a mixed or moderate openness to status quo deviation. Finally, interviewees that were most concerned with environmental and inequality crises, used an Anthropocene understanding of history, and showed comfort with lower tech futures were more open to degrowthism, less reliant on progress narratives, and more open to major

status quo deviation into the future. Perhaps interestingly for those dedicating their time to working on social, political, or environmental change movements, sense and level of optimism, futurity, and faith in progress were mixed, with many respondents showing a lack of faith in these things, and an assurance that conditions were more likely to deteriorate than improve, or found optimism and faith in progress in less traditional sources, like small-scale, communitarian organizing.

Contributions to Literatures

The Literature Review section of this thesis identified two primary literatures that the study aims to contribute to: degrowth literature and Anthropocene literature. There are primarily two ways in which the study can contribute to degrowth literature: 1) to broaden the historical scope in which degrowth has turned its critical eye, and 2) to investigate how progressive practitioners may understand their work in relation to degrowth and progressive ideas and values.

The Historical Analysis section of the thesis presents a macrohistorical view of growth as a sociotechnical phenomenon that has evolved through time. Degrowth literature has tended to rely too heavily on traditional histories of capitalism or 20th-century economic growth for understanding the origin and evolution of growth/ism and growth-based economic modes. This thesis argues that the origin and evolution of growth/ism should be dated much further back in time than to the origins of capitalism to the Early Dynastic Period of Mesopotamia.

Setting out a broader scope for the history of growth/ism, degrowth as a scholarly endeavor and social-political movement will be better situated to both understand and achieve its aims.

The Historical Analysis section of the study also sets up a macrohistorical narrative that yields patterns potentially productive for Anthropocene research. By situating the emergence of growthism at a particular geography and period, debates around Anthropocene dating can be better informed about the sources of phenomena driving Anthropocenic changes today. This macrohistory and the patterns gleaned from it offer a useful intervention in debates around the naming, origin, and agency of Anthropocene changes. In addition to contributing to Anthropocene literature in these ways, I also hope this study can offer a bridge between de/growth historiography and Anthropocene historiography, bringing degrowth understandings of growth/ism into greater conversation with Anthropocene literatures and understandings of large historical sweep of human influence on the planet.

Because progress metanarratives have been critical in the co-reproduction of growthist economic modes, understanding how they interact with the values and motivations of the people who make up the movements that contest growth/ist metaideologies and structures is critical to better equipping both scholars and activists in pursuing the construction of ecological societies and economics. The Contemporary Analysis section offers insights into how social movement practitioners conceptualize their values and motivations, which can yield productive insights into degrowth scholars hoping to better understand the place

and role degrowth frameworks can play in social change and creating cohering targets of contestation around which practitioners can coalesce.

Scope for Further Research

A July 2019 essay appearing in the magazine *The Atlantic* titled "We Need a New Science of Progress: Humanity needs to get better at knowing how to get better," argues for "inaugurating the discipline of 'Progress Studies.'"[388] By a "discipline of Progress Studies," the essay *is not* calling for transdisciplinary research that interrogates progress as an idea, questioning where, whether, and how it has occurred through time. To the contrary, the essay takes the idea of progress and its genuine existence for granted, and in the process commits several errors of fact and pitfalls of reasoning that have been interrogated in this thesis, including 1) a teleological understanding of history in which societies improve inevitably, linearly, 2) an understanding of history that is constrained to a relatively recent past, primarily for setting goal-posts to achieve narrative cohesion, 3) presumptions about the universality of access to life-improving changes, and, relatedly, 4) presumptions about the efficacy of technological interventions yielding broad-based well-being, 5) omissions of the often negative social and political consequences of such changes and developments, 6) omissions of the environmental impacts of sociotechnical change through time, 7) a

[388] Patrick Collinson and Tyler Cowen, "We Need a New Science of Progress," *The Atlantic*, 30 July 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/07/we-need-new-science-progress/594946/.

misunderstanding of how and why political, social, and technological change occurs, 8) a simplistic understanding of the relationship between political power and technology, 9) omissions of facts and projections on trends that undermine its narrative of progress, and 10) an unexamined and undisclosed ideological framework that seeks to disappear behind prose style pretending at neutrality. This is not a comprehensive list.

Perhaps the most truthful sentence in the article reads, “Progress itself is understudied.” Indeed, even in universities, the idea of progress often operates as an invisible psychological infrastructure, a faith similar to—and in some cases identical to—the religious faith that undergirds one’s worldview, motivations, and situating of self in relation to one’s history, society, other researchers, and the rest of the world. *Progress* as an orienting metanarrative, the water in which we all swim, is remarkably taken for granted as an idea, and remarkably under-interrogated for something so central to so many social scientific—and as this thesis has sought to show, natural scientific—phenomena. There are a handful of manuscripts in the English-speaking world that direct scrutiny at the idea and none, as far as I have seen, that construct a critical genealogy of the idea.[389] My attempt here should not be alone; there is broad scope for historians and social scientists of other disciplines to engage with the idea and its consequences more deeply. Further, study of the idea of progress not simply as an intellectual artifact, but as a powerful cultural mover creates a fertile framework in which to conduct

[389] The most recent and comprehensive history is Robert Nisbet’s *History of the Idea of Progress* (1994), which has been cited in this thesis, and it is far from critical. Nisbet himself explicitly proclaims his normative commitment to the idea.

further research in ideological formation, political coalitions, political rhetorics, social movements, and social-political change scholarship. There is a ubiquitous assumption, largely unstated, that the achievement of progress—however that may be understood, whether in well-being indicators, equality and justice, or even technology—requires belief, even faith, in progress. There is growing research, both from this study and studies cited in this thesis, that that is not necessarily true, and that working to confront major crises of the Anthropocene, for instance, may be better served without narratives of progress or broad sense of optimism. The role of teleology and progress as a psychological framework and cultural force—along with other forces impeding resolution to these crises—is among the more important objects social scientific scholarship today can pursue.

Like progress, growth—the material process of ecologically-exclusionary expansionist, extractivist compounding economies—and growthism, the metaideology that helps to reproduce the material process, remain understudied. Some recent research in the degrowth and ecological economics literatures have begun to target growth/ism as an object of study, but much more is needed. Growth/ism as global political economy, the hegemonic mode of sociotechnical metabolism, and the central driver of Anthropocene change, deserves at least as much scholarly attention as capital/ism received in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Growth/ism as a framework for understanding the major driver of events throughout recorded history—rather than a driver of events since around the 16th century—opens a tremendous field for scholarship that reinterprets the past through the lens of these Anthropocene crises and the forces at their base.

In a thesis often burdened by a necessarily pessimistic outlook, riddled with hope-destroying facts and skepticism of any hint of optimism, some recent developments in the field of degrowth are promising. Scholarship as a means of confronting Anthropocene challenges of inequality and ecological collapse is, fortunately, rapidly gaining new support and attention. From major grants, new journals and departments, policy victories, testimonies before parliamentary bodies, and profiles in major media, growth-critical scholarship is intervening in important ways throughout the world, while adding rigorous new theory and data to humanity's store of scientific and humanistic knowledge. Whether it will suffice remains to be seen.

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