

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIV-18

Stephen J. Macekura, *The Mismeasure of Progress: Economic Growth and Its Critics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0226736303

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Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Cindy Ewing | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

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Introduction by Nils Gilman, Berggruen Institute

One of the signs that we are living in the later stage of some sort of historical interregnum is that everyone these days seems to be working on building a new ‘useable past.’ From international socialists’ revival of the New International Economic Order as a way to think anew about global redistribution, to the 1619 Project’s centering Black Americans’ stories as “perfecters of democracy,” to MAGA’s mix of accelerationism and traditionalism as a way to regain political privilege, narrative entrepreneurs of various political stripes are unpacking long-marginalized episodes and ideas as tools for political action in the present.¹ Whether this makes for good history in the sense of empirical accuracy about the past varies from case to case, but there is no doubt that as an instrumental way to use ideas, these histories are quite explicitly designed to provide their readers with a sense that they are not alone in their critique of today’s orthodoxies, and as such to provide fodder for questioning the institutional status quo in radical as opposed to merely incremental ways.

As both the reviewers in this roundtable acknowledge, (as does the author himself), Stephen Macekura’s *The Mismeasure of Progress* is just such a book. It is a history of the critics of the “growth paradigm” that defined so much of the geopolitical and national histories of the twentieth century, and which is designed to give intellectual aid and comfort to those who today seek alternatives to the plainly unsustainable quest for infinite material expansion on what is unavoidably a materially finite planet. While the growth paradigm became hegemonic in the middle of the twentieth century, in the sense that it became the lodestar for virtually every so-called nation-building project, regardless of economic ideology, Macekura demonstrates that from the beginning the idea of endless growth as a panacea to all political and social ills had important critics. He organizes those historical critics into three main buckets, each of which corresponds to what progressives in the West today see as the major failings of the neoliberal project which took off in earnest in the late 1970s: first, the planetary ecological crisis caused by constantly expanding ecological extraction and extrusion; second, the exacerbation of political ills that are the downstream result of the social dislocations caused by never-ending creative destruction; and third, the relentless growth of inequality, as the fruits of economic growth have been captured by ever narrower groups at the top of the hierarchy. It turns out that from the very beginning of the growth paradigm there have been intellectuals foretelling that endless growth would produce these results. In writing this history, in short, Macekura aims to create a useable past for today’s critics of contemporary neoliberalism, and specifically for those on the progressive left who believe that the only viable solution to today’s planetary ills is to embrace the principle of ‘degrowth.’ As such, as Amanda McVety points out in her review, Macekura’s book is fundamentally about “expanding our tools of dissent” and reminding us that “different futures are possible.”

Reviewer Trevor Jackson demonstrates the value of including an early modernist as a reviewer of a book that is resolutely focused on the politics of the present and the history of the twentieth century by asking whether the growth paradigm that Macekura argues became hegemonic the mid-twentieth century was in fact something unprecedented, or whether instead it had antecedents in earlier efforts to measure and manage the wealth of nations. As long ago as the early eighteenth century there were efforts in Europe to estimate national productive capacity (and thus the potential tax base). But were these really “growth paradigms? If so, is the growth paradigm a singular one that has evolved dialectically over time, or have there been a succession of different paradigms? Jackson points out that this debate intersects in interesting ways with the burgeoning literature of the last decade on the New History of Capitalism, which likewise features as a central debate whether capitalism is best understood as a single evolving system, or in fact is best understood as a succession of distinct forms or stages. Macekura, for his part, is skeptical that these earlier episodes can usefully be called

¹ On contemporary international socialists reviving the NIEO, see: <https://act.progressive.international/nico/>; on African-Americans as the prime “perfecters” of American democracy, see: Nikole Hannah-Jones’s introduction to the 1619 Project, first published in *The New York Times*, 14 August 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>.

growth paradigms, but the question Jackson asks remains valid even if we believe that the growth paradigm first emerged in the 1940s: has it been a unitary paradigm, a dialectically evolving one, or a succession of distinct paradigms? To put a fine point on it: was the vision of economic growth proffered by Colin Clark in his 1949 essay “Theory of Economic Growth”² or Simon Kuznets in his 1955 essay “Economic Growth and Income Inequality”³ really the same as that of, say, Barack Obama in 2009 promising to “rebuild the economy on a new foundation for growth,”⁴ or, for that matter, Xi Jinping saying something similar at the 20th Party Congress in 2022?⁵

Another question both McVety and Jackson raise is the slipperiness of Macekura’s argument on the question of whether the GDP-centered growth paradigm is *specifically* problematic or whether in fact *any* quantitative measurement of material circumstances is liable to create problems once it is turned into a programming tool. On the one hand, it is generally acknowledged that one can only systematically improve what one measures systematically. On the other hand, it also has long been pointed out that when measures are converted into targets, they cease to be useful as measures (e.g. Goodhart’s Law). The fact that GDP has been increasingly decentered in favor of a broader and more diverse array of measures of ‘development’ over the past forty years (both in national statistics as well as at the United Nations and World Bank), even as neoliberalism has accelerated the trio of ills that Macekura laments, suggests that simply adding new statistical elements to the definition of development is not enough to drive fundamental political change. It remains to be seen whether an intellectual history of these efforts, by creating a useable past for contemporary degrowthers, will be more successful on this same score.

Participants:

Stephen Macekura is Associate Professor of International Studies at Indiana University. He is the author of *The Mismeasure of Progress: Economic Growth and its Critics* (Chicago University Press, 2020) and *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). He is co-editor, with Erez Manela, of *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

Nils Gilman is Senior Vice President for Programs at the Berggruen Institute, and the author of *Mandarin of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), *Deviant Globalization: Black Market Economy in the 21st Century* (Continuum Books, 2012), as well as a forthcoming book on planetary governance.

Trevor Jackson is assistant professor of economic history at George Washington University, where he teaches and researches on the history of inequality and financial crisis, mostly but not exclusively in early modern Europe. His first book, *Impunity and Capitalism: Afterlives of European Financial Crises, 1690-1830*, will be published by Cambridge University Press in the fall of 2022.

Amanda Kay McVety is professor of history at Miami University. Her first book, *Enlightened Aid: U.S. Development as Foreign Policy in Ethiopia* (Oxford University Press, 2012), examined the history of U.S. foreign aid to Ethiopia. Her second book, *The Rinderpest Campaigns: A Virus, Its Vaccines, and Global Development in the*

² Colin Clark, “Theory of Economic Growth,” *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society* (1949): 112-116.

³ Simon Kuznets, “Economic Growth and Income Inequality,” *The American Economic Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1955, pp. 1–28.

⁴ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-record/economy>

⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/xis-work-report-to-the-20th-party-congress-5-takeaways/>

Twentieth Century (Cambridge University Press, 2018), is a history of the ultimately successful international effort to eradicate rinderpest (cattle plague).

Review by Trevor Jackson, George Washington University

In his 1972 book *Dissent on Development*, the strenuously libertarian economist Peter Tomas Bauer observed that “In statistics of national income the birth of a calf represents an increase in living standards but the birth of a child represents a fall.”⁶ Since then a lot of calves have been born, and a lot of children, perhaps even more of the former than the latter, since global living standards have increased substantially. But the ironies and inadequacies of national income statistics have continued to attract dissenters, and *The Mismeasure of Progress* is a history of their disputes with the proponents of the measurement and policy goals of economic growth.

Stephen J. Macekura has written an intellectual history of what he calls “the growth paradigm”: its colonial origins, its rise to hegemony in the postwar decades, crisis in the 1970s, return in the 1980s and 1990s, and second crisis in the twenty-first century. By “growth paradigm,” he does not mean only the production of national economic statistics, or the discursive object of “the economy,” but rather the way those components were used by governments around the world to set national priorities. “In the postwar years,” he writes, “leaders worldwide adopted national economic growth—measured most often by GNP—as their foremost goal, promising that a rising tide of prosperity would lift all boats” (4). Growth represented a solution to social and political problems, potentially a solution to all of them at once, so the underlying stakes of the paradigm are less about how abstraction and quantification produce or reify different forms of knowledge, and more about how governance in the twentieth century thought it could solve problems without tradeoffs or redistribution. As Macekura puts it in the conclusion, “The growth paradigm defined the purpose of national governance during the twentieth century. In the capitalist world, policy makers pursued growth because they hoped to redress older distributional conflicts, avoid depressions, and reduce poverty without engaging in the explicitly redistributive nature of intervention that standard-of-living advocates demanded” (196).

The story of the growth paradigm is the central narrative of the book, and its periodization and protagonists will be familiar to most readers. But it also does not seem to be Macekura’s main interest, nor the main contribution of the book. Instead, the novel element is the role of the growth critics. “We need to know the history of the growth critics today,” he writes,

as a new generation echoes many of their arguments. Dozens of books and articles in the last decade have lamented the ongoing use of GNP and the continued faith that so many place in growth to solve political, social or environmental problems. The situation has become increasingly critical in light of the peril posed by global climate change and the increasing inequality within many countries (2).

Despite some argumentative framing and historiographical positioning that looks like *The Mismeasure of Progress* is gearing up to be an attack on scientism and quantification, it mostly reads like the rediscovery of a usable past that is intended for environmental activists and “degrowth” proponents today.

Since the 1998 publication of Timothy Mitchell’s essay, “Fixing the Economy,” the idea that “the economy” was only recently invented by government statisticians (usually for purposes of war, empire, and control) has generated so much scholarly enthusiasm that it now is less of an intervention and more of a field in its own right.⁷ This literature has done valuable work in historicizing economic concepts and measurements,

⁶ Peter Tomas Bauer, *Dissent on Development: Studies and Debates in Development Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 63.

⁷ Timothy Mitchell, “Fixing the Economy,” *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (1998): 82-101. Examples include, among many others, Adam Tooze, *Statistics and the German State, 1900-1945: the Making of Modern Economic Knowledge*

rendering them strange and constructed rather than natural and inevitable. It also often has a strongly social constructivist bent, insisting that the map and the territory are the same, or are co-constitutive. Macekura is working adjacent to that tradition, but the book wears its constructivism very lightly. By focusing on the political use of knowledge rather than the production of knowledge itself, and by structuring his story as a running debate between growth proponents and critics, he avoids having to render any judgments on the material reality of economic knowledge. Readers from a science and technology studies background are likely to find that choice a demerit; economic historians and other readers with a social science background are likely to find it a strength.

As with the rest of the “fixing the economy” literature, the first salient question about Macekura’s book is what is at stake in the claim of newness. To be sure, the wartime creation and postwar proliferation of GDP and GNP figures is undeniable. As Macekura observes, “In 1941 only a dozen or so countries produced national income estimates. Two and a half decades later, every single country in the world produced national income estimates and GNP figures, and all used them to some degree in national policy making” (42). But European sovereigns, bureaucrats, and theorists worried about, tried to measure, and directed policy towards all sorts of economic measures at least as far back as the late seventeenth century. William Petty’s *Political Arithmetick* (1690) and *Verbum Sapienti* (1691) were both attempts to calculate national income and wealth; John Law’s monetary theories between 1705 and 1720 were explicitly framed as ways to unlock and increase national wealth; in the wreckage of the 1720 financial crisis, writers like Nicolas Dutot, Richard Cantillon, and Jean-François Melon argued over things they called “the national wealth,” “the course of trade,” and “the circulation.”⁸ François Quesnay’s 1759 *Tableau économique* was an attempt at visualizing the flow of agricultural wealth through different forms in a single aggregate economy.⁹ Other examples abound. Macekura’s brief overview of this early history of social measurement (13-18) identifies several strands of continuity into the later period, but stops short of investigating whether these measurements constituted an entire earlier paradigm, one with its own cast of proponents and critics as well as its own set of political uses and national priorities. If so, perhaps there has been a series of successive or competing growth paradigms, which raises the possibility that we may soon see (or already be living through) a transition from one to the next. The other possibility is that there has only ever been one growth paradigm, but it is not the product of the 1930s and 1940s, but rather the 1690s-1720s. There are good reasons to think the latter might be the case: William Deringer has argued that our modern “civic episteme” of adjudicating our disputes with quantitative evidence emerged in Britain after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and Paul Slack has shown how those same decades featured a new culture of “improvement” as a set of goals across various political and economic pursuits.¹⁰

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Andrew Yarrow, *Measuring America: How Economic Growth Came to Define American Greatness in the Late Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010); Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: the OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁸ William Petty, *Political Arithmetick* (London: Robert Clavel, 1690); William Petty, *The Political Anatomy of Ireland with the Establishment for that Kingdom when the Late Duke of Ormond was Lord Lieutenant, to Which is Added Verbum Sapienti, or, An Account of the Wealth and Expences [sic] of England, and the Method of Raising Taxes in the Most Equal Manner* (London: D. Brown and W. Rogers, 1691); John Law, *Money and Trade Considered, With a Proposal for Supplying the Nation with Money* (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966 [1705]); Nicolas Dutot, *Réflexions politiques sur les finances et le commerce* (The Hague: Frères Vaillant & N. Prevost, 1738); Richard Cantillon, *Essai sur la Nature du Commerce en Général* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001 [1730]); Jean-François Melon, *Essai politique sur le commerce* (Amsterdam: Chez François Changuion, 1754 [1734]).

⁹ François Quesnay, *Tableau économique* (London: British Economic Association, 1894 [1758]).

¹⁰ William Deringer, *Calculated Values: Finance, Politics, and the Quantitative Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Paul Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

This line of questioning is not (only) the usual grouching of an early modernist, because several books adjacent to the New History of Capitalism have also been reconstructing the nineteenth century pre-history of GDP, situating it in the quantification practices developed to facilitate class struggle, land enclosure, plantation slavery, and industrial standardization.¹¹ Whether or not a quantitative culture of improvement is the same as the implacable monetizing values of capitalism, and whether those values in turn are the same as a growth paradigm is a debate worth having. To be sure, none of these ideas contradicts Macekura's story, and most of them appear in his footnotes. He devotes several pages (18-25) to social statistics and labor arguments over standards of living after the 1850s. But since his interest lies with the tensions, instabilities, and critiques of the current growth paradigm, it is germane to wonder whether there have been several successive paradigms, or just a single continually evolving one. If the former, perhaps something can be learned about the ways that paradigms become unstable and collapse; if the latter, perhaps something can be learned about how paradigms change and grow dialectically, incorporating their critics and shortcomings while continually producing new ones.

For a book about measurement, *The Mismeasure of Progress* is not deeply concerned with taking sides in the debates around the history of quantification. Its interests are more clearly signaled by its subtitle, and I think it is more productively read as a contribution to the rediscovery of heterodox economic thought. After all, his focus is on the "growth paradigm" as a vision for government priorities and a solution to political problems, so the most fissile intellectual disputes are not about measuring or mismeasuring, but about progress itself and the politics around it. In a concluding summary, he writes that

the alternatives put forth by growth critics represented a large spectrum between those who sought only to tweak existing metrics to become more inclusive of various 'variables' or 'factors' understood to be part of a discreet growth 'process' and those who sought to eliminate and move past the growth paradigm altogether, embracing and celebrating the prospect of 'zero growth' and a vast change of lifestyles (139).

These alternatives are the principal contribution of the book.

Happily, Macekura does not divide his proponents and critics along simple moral lines. He credits early growth advocates like the economic historian Phyllis Deane with a great deal of ingenuity and intellectual humility before their epistemological limits (42-4). He is careful to note that early growth critics like the Oxford Professor of Colonial Economic Affairs Sally Herbert Frankel were motivated by "cultural chauvinism, racism, and suspicion of economic planning" (55), while many growth critics in the 1970s advocated for coercive birth control policies and expressed concerns that "often resonated with deeply racist fears among North Americans and Europeans who worried that population growth in the Third World threatened traditional hierarchies defined by the long historical legacies of white supremacy" (112-13). Some writers, like Friedrich von Hayek, (or Bauer, who gets a mention) criticized the growth paradigm from the political right, on the basis that the economy is fundamentally unknowable, and that attempts to measure it would lead to central planning. Elsewhere on the political spectrum, the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq contended that conventional economic measures left out vital components of social reality, ranging from poverty to authoritarianism.¹² His ideas led to the Human Development Index as an alternative measure of social change. Moreover, growth statistics were bedeviled from the beginning by debates over inclusion and

¹¹ Eli Cook, *The Pricing of Progress: Economic Indicators and the Capitalization of American Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Walter Friedman, *Fortune Tellers: The Story of America's First Economic Forecasters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹² Mahbub ul Haq, *Reflections on Human Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

exclusion. Simon Kuznets, one of the inventors of GDP, thought armaments should not be included.¹³ Later *marxist* critics maintained that finance should not be included. Phyllis Deane struggled with the problems of pricing and including informal activity and especially the social reproduction of female labor; feminist critics like Betty Friedan and Sylvia Federici each later articulated very different versions of the claim that observable GDP depends on an immense unpaid and uncounted sphere of female work, exploitation, and expropriation.¹⁴

For all their differences and frequent shortcomings, Macekura aims to rescue the growth critics from the enormous condescension of their peers, especially the environmentally oriented critics like the economists Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen and Herman Daly. Now emeritus, Daly was a prolific writer, publishing until recently in his advocacy for a “steady state” economy instead of one based on growth.¹⁵ Georgescu-Roegen is overdue for rediscovery and rehabilitation. His ferociously complex and mathematical 1971 book *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process*, if updated and equipped with a popularizing advocate, could have wide resonance across contemporary studies of climate change, critiques of capitalism, and arguments about “degrowth.”¹⁶ More broadly, the past few years have seen a range of new work on the lost, defeated, forgotten, or suppressed heterodoxies of economic thought, from technical concepts like price controls or infant industry protection to worldviews that focus on moral order and human needs.¹⁷

Macekura’s book is a valuable addition to that literature. He renders the arguments and ideas of the growth critics into accessible language, and, by positioning them in the narrative of debate with the growth proponents, he contextualizes their work and clarifies the stakes of their critiques, both then and now. In his concluding sentences, he argues that “the history of the growth critics allows us to see that the growth paradigm is neither universal nor natural” (207) and the de-naturalization of the social world, especially the economic world, is a task at the heart of the current self-understanding of the historical profession. In this case, it raises some difficult counterfactuals. Would any government policy be different if finance and armaments were dropped out of GDP figures? Would the terrifying precipice of climate change recede if fossil fuels counted as a finite stock being depreciated, instead of as constant growth in goods and services? And further, what if economic growth was not a historic norm, but rather a one-off exception that corresponded to un-repeatable shifts like electrification and the movement of labor from agriculture to industry?¹⁸ If the point of the growth paradigm was to offer a solution to social and political problems without having to make hard choices about priorities and distribution, what might be in store for a politics of permanent decline? *The Mismeasure of Progress* wants us to ask these questions. Doing so returns to the need for

¹³ Simon Kuznets, “National Income and Its Composition: Discussion Between Simon Kuznets, Clark Warburton and M.A. Copeland,” in *Studies in Income and Wealth*, Vol. 1 (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1937).

¹⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963); Sylvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

¹⁵ Herman Daly, *From Uneconomic Growth to a Steady State Economy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2014).

¹⁶ Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen, *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹⁷ See, *inter alia*, Keith Tribe, *Strategies of Economic Order: German Economic Discourse, 1750-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Erik Reinert, *How Rich Countries Got Rich and Why Poor Countries Stay Poor* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007); Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and the Moral Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Isabella Weber, *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: the Market Reform Debate* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁸ To take only two examples, Barry Eichengreen, *The European Economy Since 1945: Coordinated Capitalism and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) argues that the slowdown in European growth since the 1970s has been partly due to the inability to replace one-time extensive growth with intensive productivity growth; Robert Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: the U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) argues that American growth corresponded to a “special century” of technological change, running roughly 1870-1970.

more research on other paradigms: whether we can recover a history of progress without growth or growth without progress, or a paradigm for progress in an age of decline.

A final great virtue of *The Mismeasurement of Progress* is its clarity. Economic measurement, national income statistics, and epistemological debates do not always lend themselves to readability, but Macekura's prose is consistently straightforward and engaging. The light touch of the constructivism helps to avoid abstraction and jargon, and despite its central story being a debate, it is not a fiery polemic. For these reasons, while experts are still likely to find new pieces of evidence and information, the book would be terrific as an introduction to the subject of economic growth, and a valuable source for students who are interested in the history of economic thought, the idea of "sustainable development," and critiques of twentieth century economic policy.

In the introduction to his bestseller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, French economist Thomas Piketty wrote that his time as an academic in the United States made him “only too aware of the fact that I knew nothing at all about the world’s economic problems.” The discipline’s “passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation,” he lamented, came “at the expense of historical research and collaboration with the other social sciences.”¹⁹ Piketty returned to France and did a deep dive into decades of tax records, first in France and then, with the aid of colleagues around the world, into many other countries. The data enabled them to ask different questions that yielded uncomfortable answers about where and why wealth had accumulated in the twentieth century.

Piketty shows up in *The Mismeasure of Progress* toward the end, one of many contemporary figures whose work is challenging the “popular narrative that sees growth as the dominate story of the twentieth century” (199). This resistance makes headlines; indeed, Piketty’s book seemed to take the world by storm in 2014. But it isn’t new, as Stephen Macekura’s excellent book reveals. The growth critics of today, who are raising alarms about expanding inequality and the ecological consequences of our dependence on fossil fuels, for example, are part of a rich intellectual tradition of dissent that goes back to the 1940s. In reminding us of that history, *The Mismeasure of Progress* not only enriches our understanding of previous generations’ academic and political struggles over economic growth, it expands our tools of dissent.

Faith in the wonder-working power of economic growth was one of the unifying ideologies of the twentieth century. It stretched across empires and over the Cold War divide. It permeated the halls of the United Nations and dominated conversations at the World Bank. Australian economist Heinz Wolfgang Arndt historicized economic growth theory’s rise in the late 1970s, but the concept only recently became central to the historiography of international relations in the twentieth century. This was part of a larger trend in the discipline to recenter economics, but it was also a specific response to the pioneering work of political theorist and historian Timothy Mitchell.²⁰ In recent years, historians Matthias Schmelzer, Adam Tooze, Daniel Speich Chassé, Quinn Slobodian, and Alden Young, among others, have deepened (and complicated) the story of growth theory’s rise to power.²¹ *The Mismeasure of Progress* adds to this work by focusing on the skeptics.

¹⁹ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 31-32.

²⁰ Heinz W. Arndt, *The Rise and Fall of Economic Growth: A Study in Contemporary Thought* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1978); Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Timothy Mitchell, “Economentality: How the Future Entered Government,” *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Summer 2014): 479-507; Timothy Mitchell, “Fixing the Economy,” *Cultural Studies* 12 (1998): 82-101; Kenneth Lipartito, “Reassembling the Economic: New Departures in Historical Materialism,” *American Historical Review* 121:1 (February 2016): 101-139.

²¹ Matthias Schmelzer, “The Growth Paradigm: History, Hegemony, and the Contested Making of Economic Growthmanship,” *Ecological Economics* 118 (October 2015): 262-271; Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The Making and Remaking of the Economic Growth Paradigm and the OECD, 1948 to 2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Adam Tooze, “Trouble with Numbers: Statistics, Politics, and History in the Construction of Weimar’s Trade Balance, 1918-1924,” *American Historical Review* 113:3 (June 2008): 678-700; Daniel Speich, “The Use of Global Abstractions: National Income Accounting in the Period of Imperial Decline,” *Journal of Global History* 6:1 (March 2011): 7-28; Daniel Speich Chassé, “The roots of the Millennium Development Goals: a framework for studying the history of global statistics,” *Historical Social Research* 41:2 (2016): 218-237; Quinn Slobodian, “How to see the world economy: statistics, maps, and Schumpeter’s camera in the first age of globalization,” *Journal of Global History* 10:2 (July 2015): 307-332; Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Alden Young, “A Currency for Sudan: The Sudanese National Economy and Postcolonial Development,” in Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela, eds., *The Development Century: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 130-149.

Acknowledging its deeper history (a source of debate amongst the historians listed above), Macekura locates the immediate origins of the “growth paradigm” in the 1940s, when “the rich standard-of-living research in the early twentieth century gave way to the widespread use of GNP as a proxy for well-being” (40). It did so by design. Policy makers chose “reconstructions” of the past that “presented nation-states as coherent and whole entities, in contrast to how standard-of-living researchers used their data to direct attention to various social groups and communities” (40). Standards-of-living data revealed division and difficulties; growth theory insisted that such things were temporary problems that would be solved by the expansion of production and consumption in the nation as a whole. It was a tantalizing promise—one most policy makers and academics were eager to believe.

Economic growth as measured by GNP quickly became accepted practice all over the world, but Macekura shows us that there were voices of dissent from the beginning. He writes about how the young Phyllis Deane, who was tasked with bringing “current English techniques of measurement” to bear in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia encountered numerous problems, most notably the unpaid work of women, which was excluded from UK calculations (47). Dudley Seers, who was sent by the Colonial Office to the Gold Coast, raised similar concerns about “many economic but immeasurable considerations, and many non-economic considerations” that clearly should matter, but weren’t getting counted (54). Seers first argued it necessary to retreat from a one-size-fits all measurement standard, but his criticisms of economic growth theory grew more expansive with time. Soon he was questioning not just the tools of measurement, but the very idea that economic growth meant development. And he was not alone. By the 1960s, a growing chorus of voices began to identify economic growth as the problem instead of the solution.

These growth critics are the central characters of *The Mismeasure of Progress* and Macekura has made an important contribution to our understanding of economic thought in the twentieth century by bringing them together. Growth critics and growth enthusiasts, he writes, “coexisted in the same time and space, in tension and conflict over the meaning and promise of the growth paradigm” (74). Indeed, more than a few enthusiasts turned into critics. Some were horrified by the growing and clear environmental consequences. Others were frustrated by the lack of promised trickle-down. Standards of living often did not rise in synch with GNP and critics argued that equating ‘development’ to GNP did more harm than good. Macekura notes that although these debates began in “the margins of expertise and political power,” in the 1970s they moved to the center (106). The crisis of the era made more people willing to consider ideas that they had previously ignored and the international community began serious discussions about both the ambitions and the metrics of growth.

Macekura’s fifth chapter relates the engaging history of how growth critics around the world created new tools of measurement to change what ‘development’ meant. This work drew on the observations that Deane and Seers had made back in the 1950s about the critical role played by labor that had been deliberately left out of GNP; on ideas about the environmental costs of growth; and on the importance of ‘social indicators.’ The effort produced tangible results, in the form of the Physical Quality of Life Index, for example—which took into account infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy rates—and in the popularity of ‘sustainable development.’ It must have seemed like the heyday of the movement: “research into alternative indicators flourished and new metrics became important in many different activist groups and international organizations” (165). But it wasn’t the beginning of the end of growth theory. The political climate was changing. The tide that swept Ronald Reagan into the White House and Jimmy Carter out of it carried with it a rejection of the idea that the progress had limits.

Growth theory—along with its conservative proponents—found new life in the heady market enthusiasm of the 1980s and 1990s. Proponents answered growth critic warnings about limits with “technological advance and infinite substitution,” and, critically, globalization (172). There was nothing, it seemed, to worry about, beyond unfettering the market so that it could work its magic. To prove it, they did change their metric of

progress: from GNP to GDP. That was decidedly not the metric change that growth critics wanted, but it did not mean that they had failed. More was going on below the surface, as Macekura shows.

Development became more holistic in 1990s and it did so largely because of the ideas that the growth critics had pioneered. Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq and others created the Human Development Index in 1990 in the belief that development required not “just the expansion of national income, but the extension of human wellbeing” (185). That focus on wellbeing influenced the 1995 UN Millennium Development Goals and then the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals. Both were built on multiple metrics of social indicators. “The sheer volume of alternatives” to GNP and GDP, Macekura insists, that are “used by international organizations, experts, and the wide range of grassroots movements” are clear evidence of the influence of growth critic ideas (195). They have not dethroned GNP and GDP, but they have successfully challenged the idea that those metrics alone can measure ‘progress.’

That victory had dramatic real-world consequences, because changing how development was measured changed how development was pursued. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG, also called the Global Goals), for example, are premised on “the recognition that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection.” Economic growth is still a priority, but it is no longer the only target. The 17 adopted goals include, for example, “Quality Education,” “Affordable and Clean Energy,” “Gender Equality,” “Climate Action,” and “Peace, Justice and Strong institutions.”²² Monitoring the SDGs continues to require innovation in data collection and analysis, just as achieving them continues to require innovation in development policies and programs. Nothing has made this clearer than the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated many kinds of inequalities both within and between nations. As we continue the quest for a better world for all, *The Mismeasure of Progress* reminds us that history can help. Different metrics are possible. Different paths are possible. Different futures are possible. Studying the critics of the past and listening to the critics of the present can help us find them.

²² UN Sustainable Development Goals at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>

 Response by Stephen Macekura, Indiana University

I thank Trevor Jackson and Amanda McVety for their thoughtful engagement with my book, and Cindy Ewing for shepherding this roundtable through the publication process.

As a field of inquiry, the history of economic growth and its measurement is both narrow and deep. It occupies a small slice of contemporary historical scholarship, yet it brings scholars from many different fields together to analyze the long history of ideas of growth and the techniques for quantifying it. The fact that scholars of early modern European history and twentieth century international and environmental history have written reviews here is a testament to the depth of this enterprise.²³ I am grateful that H-Diplo has provided a venue to engage with scholars who bring such distinct expertise to the topic.

In his review, Jackson poses fascinating questions about the periodization of the growth paradigm. He rightly notes that my book is firmly rooted in the twentieth century. But, he claims, “European sovereigns, bureaucrats, and theorists worried about, tried to measure, and directed policy towards all sorts of economic measures at least as far back as the late seventeenth century.” This longer history of quantifying economic life leads him to ponder that “perhaps there has been a series of successive or competing growth paradigms, which raises the possibility that we may soon see (or already be living through) a transition from one to the next.” How and why we choose demarcate the twentieth-century growth paradigm raises a couple of important issues for historians to consider.

First, it would indeed be useful to explain why and under what conditions a paradigm shift occurs in economic thought and practice. While Jackson notes that historians have identified the use of quantification in adjudicating public disputes and a broader culture of “improvement” dating back to the late seventeenth century, I am not convinced that those alone are sufficient for explaining why quantitative depictions of national economies and national policies that were organized around the promotion of endless economic growth only became widespread during the twentieth century. I treat the growth paradigm as an artifact of the twentieth century because geopolitical transformations (global decolonization and the Cold War), the experiences of the Great Depression and World War II, and the global spread of industrial technologies all made endless growth seem desirable and possible. But then how should we characterize other paradigms that existed prior to this one, and how should we periodize them? What would be necessary to distinguish one paradigm from the next? Matthias Schmelzer has written extensively on this topic and made, in my view, a convincing case for the distinctiveness of the twentieth-century growth paradigm compared to possible antecedents, but it would be useful for scholars to explore these issues further in the way that Jackson suggests.²⁴

A second issue regarding the nature and temporality of the growth paradigm concerns its ecological basis. As both Jackson and McVety acknowledge, environmental growth critics are a fundamental part of my book. But there remains much work to be done not just on environmental thinkers, but the ecological processes necessary for generating growth and the material foundations that make aspirations for growth imaginable. In particular, the relationship between different energy regimes and patterns of economic thought warrants deeper investigation. I draw connections in the book between the rise of oil and the growth paradigm, a

²³ For an excellent recent literature review on these topics that ranges across historical fields, see Venus Bivar, “Historicizing Economic Growth: An Overview of Recent Works” *The Historical Journal* (2022), 1-20. doi:10.1017/S0018246X22000206

²⁴ See Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Schmelzer, “The Growth Paradigm: History, Hegemony, and the Contested Making of Economic Growthmanship,” *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 118 (2015), 262-271.

theme that Timothy Mitchell has developed in multiple essays and books.²⁵ Frederick Albritton Jonsson has likewise traced the history of growth and improvement discourses shaped by environmental limits and technological promises to overcome them.²⁶ To find a compelling answer to Jackson's questions about the long origins of the growth paradigm and others that may have preceded it, more studies on energy sources and conceptions of economic possibility would help us better understand the distinctiveness of the twentieth century growth paradigm compared to earlier economic paradigms and the extent to which earlier notions of improvement stemmed from a particular ecological basis.

In addition, later in his review Jackson asks a series of counterfactuals about how different forms of measurement might have shaped broader material developments (from global climate change to financialization and militarism). It is highly doubtful that new metrics would have produced very different outcomes. To believe otherwise is to accept what I stress as an explanation for the growth critics' limitations: the tendency to treat social, environmental, and political problems as technical challenges that could be overcome through new or more refined methods of calculation. McVety makes an important point that the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent one instance of an international organization adopting the language of the growth critics. The presentation of the SDGs, though, marks only a minor and partial beginning of a transformation of international political economy along the lines of what growth critics envisioned. And as Jackson suggests, it remains unclear whether such changes are evidence of the paradigm collapsing or the paradigm coopting criticisms in a dialectical manner.

I want to end these brief comments by returning to the value of ongoing cross-field conversation. The centrality of economic growth to twentieth-century history has been well-studied. But its deeper roots and the ways in which issues like the production and distribution of energy have shaped its course and contributed to the climate emergency and much else warrant further study. Doing so requires that historians engage with one another across subfields within history and with scholars in other disciplines. My purpose in the book was to elucidate a long history of doubting the growth paradigm, given how much of the existing scholarship had focused on the origins of evolution of the paradigm itself. I was interested less in analyzing the material basis to produce new knowledge than the political implications of questioning growth and proposing alternatives. But as Jackson notes, that is but one perspective of many that one may adopt. Scholars working in science and technology studies, anthropology, political science, and even some in economics continue to prod us to understand the popular metrics that rule our world both "strange" and "constructed." Historians have much to contribute to this work, and my hope is that they will continue to do so while working across temporal and geographic boundaries, as these reviewers have done.

²⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso Books, 2011); Mitchell, "Economentality: How the Future Entered Government," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 40 (Summer 2014): 479-507.

²⁶ Fredrik Albritton Jonsson, "The Origins of Cornucopianism: A Preliminary Genealogy," *Critical History Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 2014), 151-168.