

Chapter 2

TODAY'S DOMINANT METANARRATIVE

Ethnographers refer to discourses or metanarratives as cosmologies, by which they mean descriptive accounts of how and why things are the way they are within a given culture. As such, they're an inevitable feature of any civilization. They're called 'social epistemes' in political science,¹ collective representations of collectively perceived reality; and because 'reality' also includes the material world, these representations typically co-exist with or in some fashion reflect their natural environment. Civilizations throughout history have been shaped by myth, language and religion, but equally by the physical foundations of their technologies (stone, copper, bronze, iron, steel, silicon), and by their economic relationship with the land (nomadic, subsistence, urban industrial). Robert Cox joins these factors in his definition of civilization as a "fit or correspondence between material conditions of existence and intersubjective meanings."² This correspondence was clearly visible at the medieval/modern juncture, for example, when a variety of material factors (not least of which was the invention of machinery powered by coal) contributed significantly to the transformation of European society and to the evolution of a new dominant episteme highlighting new ideas about progress.

Today, the material and ideational aspects of our modern experience are concordant, but destructively so. Instead of encouraging qualitative improvement of the human condition within the bounds of the available physical environment, our transcendent capacity for mindful oversight has aligned itself with and amplified our natural but naïve propensity to pursue material prosperity above all else, a process which inevitably enlarges the human impact on Earth. The modern emphasis on material well-being, shared around the world and legitimized by the incumbent metanarrative called Progress and Prosperity, has dangerously destabilized the relationship between people and planet. Changing that metanarrative – or, more accurately, subsuming it within a better one – is the objective at hand.

¹ John G. Ruggie, 'Territoriality at millennium's end,' in John Gerrard Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International Institutionalization*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp.184-6.

² Robert W. Cox, *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization*, London: Routledge, 2002, p.161.

What is the origin of discursive conversations? Many would argue – and Karl Marx would certainly agree – that big ideas and dominant stories about social structure and behaviour, especially those that have taken root globally, are the self-serving creations of powerful actors who control the international political agenda through money, material resources and media ownership. This accords with the observation alluded to in chapter 1 that social practices and categories of meaning are not value-free; that the process of discursive representation always privileges one type of knowledge over another. For example, the modernist (financial/industrial) era offers up a shared view of the world at the core of which is a secular, rational-scientific individual confronted by a single, empirically accessible reality. That view, now both common and exclusive, is contrasted to pre-scientific, pre-Enlightenment traditionalism, grounded in myth and superstition, while promoting instead the search for instrumental control of the real world and for material progress within it. Promulgated by those with the means and the interest to do so, a popular story such as ‘modernism’ can harden into the bedrock of common sense, the unquestioned merit of which prefigures society’s moral orientation.

The linkage between formative ideas and powerful social actors is undoubtedly real, but the ideational domain is accessible by others too, and by other more subtle influences as well. One doesn’t need a superior social position or the hammer and tongs of forcible coercion to construct a new discourse. Tools such as literature, art, emotion, critique and philosophy are different from those used to physically dominate and direct the developmental trajectory of human society, and are available to anyone. A compelling discourse can originate anywhere and, because it’s animated by symbolic (non-material) representations, carries the potential to flip our shared mindscape from one mode to another virtually overnight. New stories about life, living and fertile social-ecological relations can have unique generative powers not beholden to venal influences, and as such they have the capacity to drive transformational change. For the moment, however, this potential remains unfulfilled.

The Story of Progress and Prosperity: A Short History

Neoliberal capitalism has been the *lingua franca* of policy-makers around the world since the 1980s. This contemporary laissez-faire economic ideology is a modern manifestation of today’s dominant metanarrative, but it’s not the metanarrative itself. The real storyline targeted by this book for a radical makeover has deeper historical roots, namely, the broader, more encompassing

story called Progress and Prosperity. It's an alluring and generous story which promises more comfort, more security, more freedom and opportunity for everyone. Rife with half-truths, that story is on track to a bad ending. It has vaulted us to the very pinnacle of species success, but it has also seriously impoverished our living planet. Here's a truncated summary of its (first European, then global) provenance:

The story began at the feudal/modern juncture, some three hundred years ago, with the Age of Enlightenment and the ascendance of instrumental Reason.³ “The Enlightenment was a magnificent revolution,” said Antonio Gramsci. “It gave all Europe a bourgeois spiritual International in the form of a unified consciousness . . . In Italy, France and Germany, the same topics, the same institutions and same principles were being discussed.”⁴ Among other transformative events, it was this ‘magnificent revolution’ that separated the feudal and modern eras, and that gave birth to the seminal idea of progress.

Historian Ronald Wright defines progress as “the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind (sic) . . . that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is toward improvement.”⁵ Of course this doesn't mean that human development before the Enlightenment was devoid of achievement. Pyramids and aqueducts, castles, trebuchets and Gothic cathedrals were all significant accomplishments of architecture and engineering, and many other lesser inventions such as the compass, gunpowder and the printing press were also important contributions to the improvement of commerce, culture and social development. But, as Ernest Tuveson puts it:

None [of these various products] was thought of as ‘progress’ – simply as ingenious contrivances of persons, mostly anonymous, to meet immediate needs . . . Lacking was the *idea* of progress; namely, the idea that purposive, concentrated effort . . . guided by increasing knowledge of nature, could achieve defined goals of improving man's (sic) estate in objectively measurable ways – and that such effort is of great moral, and indeed

³ Some analysts trace the history of progress all the way to the ancient Greeks. On this, see Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, New York: Basic Books, 1980.

⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings, 1910-1920*, translated and edited by Q. Hoare, New York: International Publishers, 1977, p.12.

⁵ Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004, p.3.

spiritual value. This idea, along with [democracy] has been the most enduringly influential force in the modern world.⁶

The transformation that pushed the idea of material progress to the forefront of public thinking was driven by a confluence of uniquely powerful historical factors. The Italian Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries, for example, foreshadowed the possibility of continuous progress by stimulating enormous advancements in painting and sculpture, literature and poetry, architecture and music – in short, in wide swaths of cultural expression and knowledge. This was soon followed by the European Enlightenment which emphasized and encouraged the pursuit of rational and scientific enquiry, a necessary intellectual prerequisite for an era of rapid material improvement. The disintegration of feudalism, the rise of capitalism, and the Protestant ethic of personal responsibility, hard work and thrift, all spurred the process of capital formation and accumulation, even as new wealth poured into Europe from colonial empires. And, not least, the emergence of the international state system in the wake of the Thirty Years' War, with its emphasis on sovereignty, national wealth and power, provided a conducive political context in which the foregoing were all given free rein. Collectively, these changes paved the way for a newly emerging competitive market system which enthusiastically pushed progress forward.

In particular, the Industrial Revolution boosted material productivity with machines and new sources of energy. Fossil fuels, especially coal, began to drive the machines of production in this new forward-looking society. The Revolution took off and consumer goods proliferated. Before, little changed from generation to generation. Now, cumulative changes became visible in ever shorter periods of time and improvements in living standards were enjoyed within the lifetime of an individual. The idea of material progress, finally brought within the perceptual horizons of ordinary people, could now be regarded as realizable and desirable. By the latter part of the eighteenth century, Adam Smith had expressed the widening consensus and the exciting new hope that “the progress of England towards opulence and improvement [would be] universal, continual, and uninterrupted.”⁷

⁶ Ernest Tuveson, ‘Progress,’ in William Outhwaite and Tom Bottomore, (eds.), *The Blackwell Dictionary of Twentieth-century Social Thought*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1993, p.515. Original italics.

⁷ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, vol.1, London: University Paperbacks, [1776], 1961, p. 91. Quoted in H. W. Arndt, *Economic Development: The History of an Idea*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.11.

A radical shift in social perceptions (epistemes) ensued. Images of cyclical, recurring change gave way to the shared expectation of linear, straight-ahead movement to the future. This shift gave full voice to the Enlightenment ideal of self-determination, the personal freedom to pursue a better life. Within two centuries a collectively shared expectation of continuous progress had spread almost everywhere in the world, made manifest in the common pursuit of material prosperity in an ever-growing and more productive international economy. By the 1980s that expectation was formalized in the neoliberal dream of freedom from government intervention in the economy, and freedom to imagine a cornucopian future in which all needs will be met, all wants satisfied. With restraints removed and horizons unbounded, progress is inevitable and prosperity is assured. Such is the promise of today's metanarrative.

It's easy to understand why prosperity for all has been selected as a desirable goal, from both a practical and a normative point of view. Practically speaking, we want everyone to be as well off as possible in order to reduce social tensions and to lubricate the steady flow of consumer goods through the world economy. It's a simple, appealing and generous objective with obvious, tangible benefits. And from a normative point of view prosperity for all is fair as well as practical. It implies that the needs of the poor and disadvantaged will have been met and that a solid foundation of social equity will maintain and nurture healthy, productive relationships between all members of the world family far into the future.

It seems equally clear that progress has been chosen as the best way to eventually achieve prosperity for all. A precise definition of progress might be hard to pin down, but certainly it has been closely associated with economic growth. A growing world economy can deliver the corporate surpluses necessary to foster research, innovation, job creation and a continuous supply of consumer goods. And growth can also deliver tax revenues to support the development of the myriad public services a prosperous society needs and expects. In short, progress through growth can steadily improve living standards for everyone, and for next generations too.

Today, growth is openly and routinely highlighted as the paramount prerequisite for and driver of progress and prosperity; in fact, it's touted as the prime metric for almost all economic activity, whether at the level of the personal paycheque, the productive output of a corporation or country, and even global GDP. Growth is measurable, universally coveted and deeply embedded in

everyday discourse. For these reasons I take a closer look at economic growth as a key ingredient in today's dominant metanarrative.

Economic Growth

Growth is a process of two streams which, in keeping with the spirit of this book, may be characterized as material and non-material. The first stream is strictly quantitative. It refers to the production of more cars, more houses, more fridges, more food and more factories. The second is qualitative – more comfort, more security, more freedom, more opportunity – a process of betterment which is often called 'development.'

Conceptually, the difference between quantitative (material) enlargement and qualitative (non-material) improvement is straightforward but in practice it's not always easy to distinguish between the two, that is, between bigger and better. For example, more physical artifacts such as schools, hospitals, airplanes and consumer goods all contribute to better living standards, and to the legitimacy and desirability of economic growth. There is in this respect an intimate and important connection between the real things we manufacture on one hand, and our personal well-being on the other. Nonetheless, an unresolved tension lurks at the bottom of the relationship between the material and non-material, a tension which requires that the two be considered separately, each on its own merits. Specifically, *bigger* is a physical process limited by available space and resources, but *better*, a process of qualitative improvement, knows no such limitation. The growing totality of human artifacts on Earth will inevitably bump up against biophysical boundaries, but no such constraint limits knowledge creation, artistic and cultural expression, scientific advancement, or any other open-ended exploration of human potentialities. These two streams of growth, so closely identified one with the other, must eventually be distinguished one from the other, and their relationship closely scrutinized.

The distinction is important because the subjective (non-material) and objective (material) modes of growth do not advance at the same pace. The latter moves forward easily. If resources are available, they can readily be transformed into (or purchased as) useful products. This process satisfies humanity's immediate need for things, not to mention our impetuous tendency to acquisitiveness, even gluttony. On the other hand, our self-reflexive ability to evaluate the quantity and form of consumption, and more generally to assess the utility of that consumption and its usefulness with respect to optimizing personal and social welfare, is much slower to develop,

being more difficult, less tangible, and less gratifying in the short term. This is problematic because the oversight and evaluation capacity which rationalizes the process of responsible consumption originates from the subjective stream but, lagging behind, that oversight is weak and immature. In fact, today the subjective stream has been swept up in the rush to material prosperity; it's been co-opted to justify excessive behaviour. This suggests that the paired processes of growth and development need to be realigned and recomposed as a mutually beneficial duality which supports a balanced approach to social welfare, and which works to the protection of long-run planetary sustainability.

Another important and often misunderstood feature of growth is that it is not just the product of a capitalist economic order. Capitalism may be the most efficient and prolific producer of material things, and therefore a popular mode of allocation and production, but at bottom it's a means to an end (namely, growth) and in that respect is not unlike other such modalities. Most other forms of socio-economic order (China's socialist market economy, for example) are equally concerned with maximizing growth. Attacking capitalism as the chief cause of the global environmental crisis misses the deeper problem, that is, the physical impact of growth as such and, of equal importance, the worldwide political commitment to it, capitalist or otherwise, as a non-negotiable policy priority. The untouchability of the growth imperative demonstrates its deep embeddedness in the metanarrative of Progress and Prosperity, and the inviolate hegemony of that powerful modern episteme.

It's worth reflecting on this for a moment because the 'progress and prosperity' mantra is sometimes branded a Western phenomenon, and analysts who portray it as global in scope are regarded as failing to take into account the life stories and diversely hopeful expectations of any number of other local, regional and national non-materialistic cultural narratives around the world. But this point of view, which sees the world through the 'diversity' lens described earlier, does not capture the larger picture which envelops all such non-Western social projects. This is so because governments, by and large, are excluded from the inventory of cultural actors, and yet it is government – the final arbiter of competing visions and the public face of any polity – that expresses the dominant bearing of any people (whether voluntarily or not) and which portrays that bearing to the rest of the world. When this crucial actor is included in the full comprehension and calculus of today's dominant metanarrative, the ubiquity of the commitment to growth becomes apparent; in fact, is seen to be remarkably consistent, not to mention unique in history.

Without important exception, the growth paradigm encompasses all types of national government – capitalist, socialist, authoritarian or otherwise – in the world’s North and South sectors and remains constant despite variations in domestic policies which reflect divergent opinions about how best to realize it. Major institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization strive to optimize economic growth on behalf of member states. The G7 and G20, the OECD and informal organizations such as the Trilateral Commission and the World Economic Forum, endorse and encourage growth. All regional trading blocs in the Americas, Europe and Asia were constructed to enhance the potential for growth. Multinational corporations pursue growth wherever and whenever possible as a charter responsibility to shareholders, and civil societies around the world are eager to fulfill their crucial role as consumers in a growing global economy. Together, all these institutional and social forces reveal, enhance and drive forward the agenda of Progress and Prosperity.

In light of the curious fact that the pervasive commitment to economic growth permits and encourages the open-ended accumulation of material goods on an obviously finite planet, it’s fair to ask how the idea of growth – which is to say, the belief that growth knows no bounds – came to be separated from the real constraints of the physical world. The evolution of that process is actually quite complex, but the truncated summary below will serve to provide some useful historical context.⁸

Abstraction of the Growth Paradigm from the Material World

The disenchantment of nature – the rejection of myth, magic and holism in favour of analytical reason and control – was the seminal event in the process of abstraction of ideas from the material world. The demotion of nature to a useful but often adverse thing, the philosophical separation of subject from object celebrated at the dawning of the Enlightenment, and the new pre-eminence of individual over society accented by the Protestant Reformation, all represented revolutionary epistemic change in Europe which granted priority to an anthropocentric worldview. These changes forcibly diminished the role of the natural environment even as they elevated the self-importance of people. But another more mundane change – the monetization of economic life – helped to usher in a market-based society which soon encouraged the commodification of all

⁸ This summary is drawn from Stephen J. Purdey, *Economic Growth, the Environment and International Relations: The Growth Paradigm*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2010, Chapter 3.

things tradeable, a process which contributed significantly to the evolution of dominant beliefs of the time, and to the disengagement of those beliefs from their material grounding.

The rapid development of a merchant class in towns across Europe spurred the process of monetization of economic transactions, spreading outward from urban developments, gradually encompassing more and more of rural society. Using money to facilitate trade and bargaining allowed the separation of use value (value derived from the actual use of real goods and services) from exchange value (measured by money) and, significantly, it opened the door to the theoretical possibility of unlimited accumulation of wealth. Food rots, water runs dry, buildings decay and people grow old, but money can be summed indefinitely and in perpetuity because it's symbolic, immaterial and abstract.

The process of monetization soon extended far beyond the facilitation of trade of consumer goods and services to include the deep structural foundations of society and economy. Specifically, land, labour and capital were redefined as instrumental factors of production which could be treated as tradeable commodities, and with this important shift money and markets finally came to dominate the gestalt of social relations. Karl Polanyi clearly saw that, with this change, the economy, now a force unto itself, had come to depend upon a contrivance – an abstraction – because land, labour and capital, their commodification notwithstanding, “are obviously *not* commodities; the postulate that anything that is bought and sold must have been produced for sale is emphatically untrue in regard to them.”⁹ Land, he argued, isn't just property; it's the native soil on which an agrarian society is built. Likewise, labour isn't just the paid work of employees; it's the daily story and life condition of everyday people. And capital, which includes productive plant such as warehouses and factories, may be understood even more broadly as that set of durable artifacts which collectively forms the heritage bequeathed to future generations. This definition includes both the built and the natural environments. Like productive plant, however, the natural heritage is also vulnerable to unpredictable investment flows, and may not survive the vicissitudes of business. Polanyi objected vigorously to all this. “Undoubtedly,” he writes, “labor, land and money *are* essential to a market economy, but no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude

⁹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, [1944], 1957, p.72. Original italics.

fictions . . . unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill.”¹⁰

Near the beginning of the nineteenth century the discipline of economics itself underwent a radical transformation from the classical to a neoclassical phase which added impetus to the process of abstraction of economic activity from social community and socio-natural interdependencies. That process began with the monetization of market relations and the commodification of factors of production, but it took firm hold with the pivotal decision to make the discipline of economics deductively rigorous and timelessly mathematical – an explicit attempt to emulate astonishing successes recently achieved in the field of physics. The classical understanding of economics as contingent and socio-historical was displaced by a penchant for abstruse equations which forced economic management away from policymakers to an elite stratum of specialists whose technical analyses were now beyond the comprehension of non-experts. The forces of nature simply disappeared from these calculations, allowing the accumulation of capital to proceed irrespective of what was physically happening to soils, mines, forests and waterways. Now floating free from material restraint, neoclassical economics did not impose any numerical upper limit on national economic growth, or by extension on gross world product, and present-day annual growth projections offered by the World Bank and the OECD, among other organizations concerned with macroeconomic management and long-term trends, rely completely upon this theoretical licence.

Questioning Growth

The sense of normalcy which lends to any dominant paradigm its stability, authority and seeming inevitability can be shaken by the accumulation of anomalies generated by it. Several are now in play, not least of which is the massive problem of ecological overshoot.¹¹ The global economy has blundered across several ‘planetary boundaries’¹² and, consequently, we are now draining Earth’s natural capital (including biological diversity) to pay for the upkeep of present resource consumption. The inability to pay our ecological bills is a direct result of the fact, mentioned earlier in this chapter, that our self-reflexive ability to evaluate the quantity and form of consumption lags far behind our impetuous tendency to acquisitiveness.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.73. Original italics.

¹¹ Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*, New Society Press, 1996.

¹² See Stockholm Resilience Center at <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries.html>

Another problematic anomaly of the growth paradigm is its performance metric. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a direct offspring of the process of abstraction outlined in the previous section. This macroeconomic indicator, first deployed in 1934 after the Great Depression, embodies two seriously misleading properties, neither of which became apparent until the advent of the global environmental crisis. The first is that it conflates costs and benefits into a single category of economic activity. The cost of building a coastal seawall against rising waters, for instance, or cleaning up an oil spill, is included as a positive contribution to the (national or global) economy. This is exceptionally dangerous because it doesn't allow decision-makers to know when costs might exceed benefits, in which case further activity may be uneconomic. In contrast, microeconomic calculations at the level of the firm are based on a clear division of costs and benefits. Specifically, when increasing marginal costs equal decreasing marginal benefits business people know that further production of the firm's output would generate a financial loss. But no such rule applies to GDP. It's unique among economic indicators in its capacity to grow forever, growth which can occur simply because 'gross economic activity' includes any kind of transaction which can be measured in the abstract and limitless currency called money. The negative environmental implications, the embedded implication that growth can continue forever, and the conclusion that GDP is in fact a poor measure of social welfare, have all been vigorously analyzed and criticized for many years, yet GDP growth remains by far the most prominent and publicly recognized gauge of economic well-being. This speaks clearly to the sanctity of the worldwide socio-political commitment to growth, and no less to the illegitimate foundation of the metanarrative which it underwrites.

GDP growth also conceals a mathematical demon within it. In the public eye a rate of three percent annual growth seems reasonable, just fast enough to accommodate a rising living standard for a growing population. It's a rate that, if sustained over a period of time, would please most political leaders. And yet, seemingly unknown and certainly unremarked, this slow and steady growth rate of three percent per year is in fact an exponential function – and if we've learned anything from Thomas Malthus, we've learned that exponential functions are explosive. The overlooked mathematical reality here is that fixed annual increases are actually being applied to an ever-larger economic base, and this simple fact leads to a remarkable result. Leaving the mathematical details aside, one finds that an ever-larger base, steadily pushed, will double in size at regular intervals, as in the sequence 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, and so on. In the case of a constant three

percent per year increase, each doubling occurs approximately every 25 years (the doubling interval for ten percent annual growth is seven years). Even allowing for various dampening effects (such as periodic recessions and setbacks like viral pandemics), this trajectory points to an increase in the size of the global economy from USD85 trillion today to perhaps USD150 trillion by 2050, and then USD300 trillion by 2075. In light of the fact that we're already in a chronic condition of ecological overshoot our intention to generate such a stupendous increase in economic activity is imprudent, to say the least. And yet, political and corporate leaders prefer instead to believe in the boundless capacity of human ingenuity to overcome any obstacle. To secure this point, they often point to the hapless Malthus as the archetypical pessimist.

In the eighteenth century Thomas Malthus compared the rate of population increase in England (an exponential function) to the rate of agricultural production (a much slower linear function of the form 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ...) concluding that population growth would soon outstrip food supply and countless thousands would perish of starvation. This didn't happen for a variety of reasons, chief among them huge increases in agricultural productivity. Malthus was subsequently savaged for his fear of an obscure mathematical menace and his embarrassing underestimation of humanity's ability to successfully meet any kind of challenge. The modern-day epithet 'neo-Malthusian' is still reserved for those whose pessimistic outlook is derided as unsubstantiated alarmism.

Blindly optimistic but at least marginally responsive to popular demands for a safe and stable environment, how exactly are today's managers planning to minimize the impact of a growing world economy on vital resources and ecosystems? The remedy proffered by proponents of more growth is 'decoupling' – steadily reducing the resource intensity and pollution per unit of economic output. Reduced resource intensity and declines in pollution (especially CO₂) per unit of output are obviously good things, but in reality such gains are of little use if ever-increasing production overwhelms efficiencies per unit of output. Decoupling growth from its physical impact in absolute terms is very hard to accomplish. To be truly effective it would have to occur rapidly enough to pay down our burgeoning ecological deficit, to render present activity environmentally benign, and to accommodate the surge in future activity commanded by the exponential function. The expectation that economic activity can be decoupled from the environment enough to accomplish these critical objectives beggars belief, and yet that expectation lies at the heart of today's mainstream argument in favour of continuous economic growth.

The Persistence of Growth

Serious anomalies associated with the process of economic growth as the driver of progress and prosperity have not by any means been persuasive enough to de-legitimize it as the prime policy directive of political and corporate leaders everywhere. This is anomalous in itself and requires some explanation. Three factors explain the persistence of the commitment to growth – political expedience, moral convenience, and a distorted conception of the Enlightenment ideal of freedom.

The story of Progress and Prosperity serves up an image of the future that is equitable, cornucopian and ecologically benign. North–South issues will be resolved by integrating developing and transitional economies into the growing global market, allowing impoverished states a progressively larger slice of a progressively larger pie. Future generations will benefit from the process of decoupling the global economy from its environmental impact, and their heritage will be secured with the production of capital goods which replace any resources exhausted in the present. And non-human species and their habitat will be protected by the moral beneficence engendered by prosperity.

As well as delivering this idealized image of the future it has also been said that growth – the operational foundation of the metanarrative – serves present political interests because it's the best of all social lubricants, which is to say, it relieves the pressure of tensions associated with inequality and competing claims on limited resources. It was John Kenneth Galbraith who observed that economic growth was the one solution to which everyone could agree because it penalized no one. All contending parties, public or private, employer or employee, rich or poor, could agree on economic growth as a policy objective simply because it benefits them all – by promising more of everything for everybody – without the imposition of a redistributive burden on any sector. For this reason above all others, Galbraith concludes that

No other social goal is more strongly avowed than economic growth. No other test of social success has such nearly unanimous acceptance as the annual increase in the Gross National Product. And this is true of all countries developed or undeveloped; communist, socialist or capitalist.¹³

¹³ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1968, p.183.

Contemporary rulers who preside over prosperous economies are likely to enjoy power, social stability and electoral success, and those who are ruled are likely to enjoy enhanced prospects for personal security and steadily increasing opportunities for improved standards of living. If prosperity lags, the growth paradigm promises a better tomorrow, a promise on the strength of which current problems, shortages or challenges may be more easily borne. In this way the paradigm is perceived not only as desirable and useful but also, in light of its progressive teleology, as the right way to improve the human condition. Governments' common pursuit of growth strengthens their hold on power even as it serves the will of the people, which in turn affirms the legitimacy and rectitude of their policy-making.

What makes growth the right thing to do – what makes growth normatively legitimate – is not only its progressive teleology but, more specifically, its close association with political and economic freedom. Progress, as we have seen, is made manifest in the material benefits generated by economic growth but it has also, from its inception at the Enlightenment, included a notion of freedom – freedom from domination, oppression and exploitation, and freedom to pursue desirable goals and a better life. Thus progress has always comprised both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension; the two are mutually involved and, arguably, progress is best achieved when these dimensions are balanced or harmonious. An increase in knowledge, for example, will be most salutary if it engenders or facilitates improvements to the physical security and material welfare of people, or to the ecological viability of Earth.

A process of abstraction, however, traced earlier, has de-linked the qualitative (ideational) aspect of progress from the quantitative (material) aspect of growth such that the mutual relationship between them has been radically disengaged. The belief in progress and in the expectation of continuous improvement of the human condition is no longer accountable to material limitations. And the notion of freedom, embedded in the idea of progress but now also relieved of accountability, has been reimagined to mean freedom to pursue a limitless and cornucopian image of the future. This inappropriate linkage of growth with freedom has permitted a dissolution of the political obligation to redress inequities. In *The Affluent Society* Galbraith observed how “increased production [had become] an alternative to redistribution”; that it was “the great solvent of the tensions associated with inequality”; and that “it is the increase in output . . . not the redistribution of income, which has brought the great material increase, the well-being of the

average man.”¹⁴ Growth has displaced the moral injunction to redistribute resources between rich and poor, to husband them for the benefit of future generations, and to share them between humans and other life forms on Earth. By facilitating this moral defection without incurring the revolutionary wrath of civil society, the paradigm binds rulers and ruled together in common cause. Thus political expedience, moral convenience and an aberrant view of freedom all help to explain the continuing persistence of the growth paradigm.

The hard reality, however, is that unrestrained freedom is a distortion of Enlightenment ideals. Such freedom is illusory if it ignores the limitations of Earth’s finitude. It’s reckless if it encourages a cornucopian vision of the future in which human betterment is defined in terms of continuous consumption. And it’s licentious if it releases decision-makers from the need to make ethically informed choices which may constrain growth-driven behaviour in favour of the larger, longer-term common good. False freedom and the moral laxity it engenders are the poison pills of the modern story of Progress and Prosperity.

The twin themes of today’s dominant metanarrative are not malign. It’s common knowledge that progress opens new doors and prosperity improves social well-being. But hopeful themes must be tempered by reality. Unchecked, they foster a set of impossible expectations and encourage irresponsible behaviour to achieve them. The new metanarrative, embryonic and still largely unknown, will surely retain the intrinsically positive features of progress and prosperity but, by acknowledging limitations recommended by temperance and nature’s realities, will situate them within an accommodating social-ecological planetary context.

¹⁴ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958, pp.86-87.