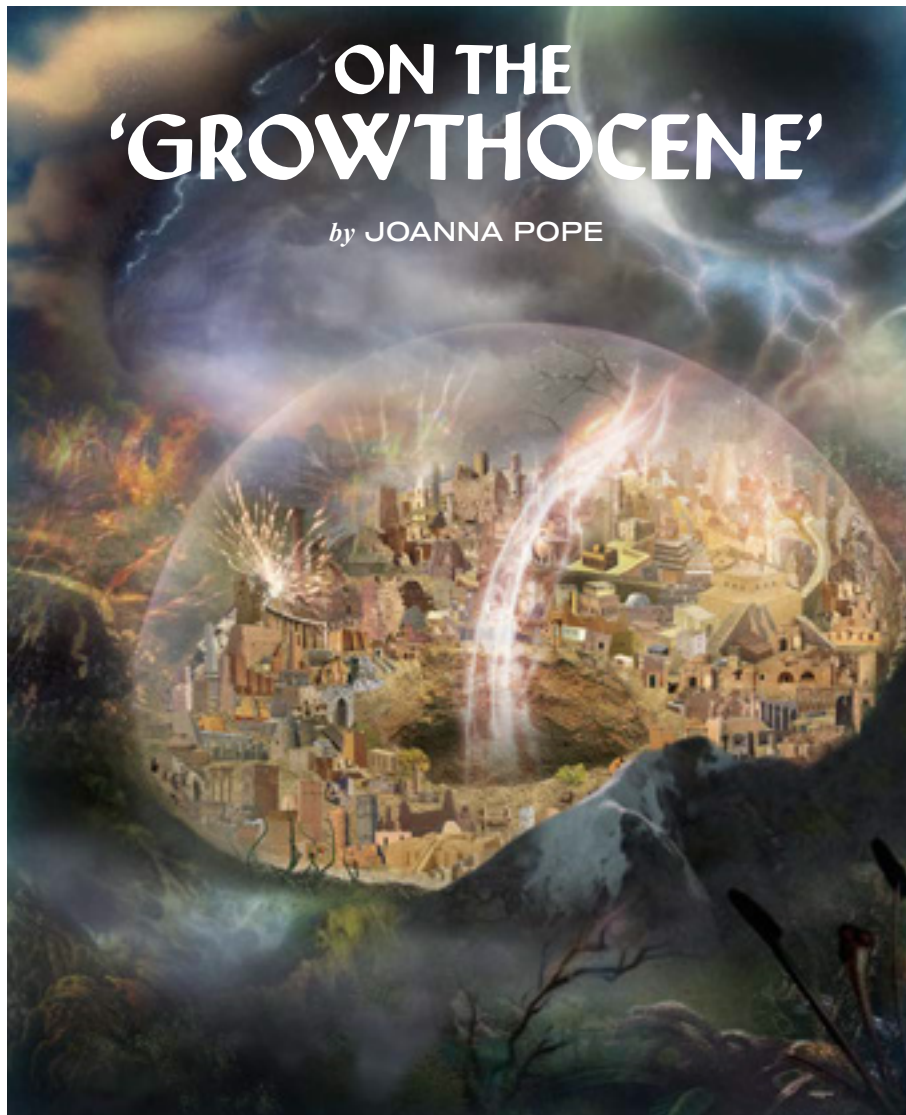


ON THE 'GROWTHOCENE'

by JOANNA POPE



Utopian / Dystopian Image of a Post-Growth World
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It is quite remarkable, our current culture of victoriousness. For all intents and purposes, we did “win our war” against “the” crisis. Our world is now replete with mostly carefully planned, mostly just, mostly degrowing economies, now winding down to their steady state. Some even frame our victory as one over “growth itself”. As one prominent geologist whom I won’t name put it recently, these new times “herald the end, if not of the Anthropocene, the Growthocene”.

In such loose formulations like this, the Growthocene expands. It takes on the breadth of human history in its entirety, and the depth of human nature’s “dark side”—a tendency to compete, to conquer, to hoard and spread. Let us take a step back—the Anthropocene, after all, demanded that we think in longer time spans. Quite apart from the indigenous and autonomous communities that existed in opposition to, and were oppressed by, the growth paradigm and its agents until quite recently, many past human civilizations did not have a growth ideology.

Here I defer to the work of Gareth Dale, whose history of the growth paradigm revealed its absence in civilizations like Bronze Age Mesopotamia, India’s Mauryan Empire and Tang dynasty in China. In Mesopotamian society, ostensibly “all ingredients were present necessary for the emergence of something that would at least bear a resemblance to the growth paradigm”.¹ But in spite of the birth of agriculture, a Gilgameshian work ethic², the use of commodity money and sophisticated book-keeping, accounting³ and even economic forecasting⁴, a Mesopotamian growth ideology is nowhere to be found. The Mauryan Empire (322 BCE–185 BCE) brought with it the Arthashastra, a treatise on statecraft and material gain that set out strategies for acquisitive projects to “ensure the royal treasury was full to the brim”.⁵ But its author Kautilya did not present wealth accumulation in terms of infinite, linear progress. Rather than “defending endless wealth or economic ‘development,’”⁶ the Arthashastra’s logic was cyclical, embracing civilizational rise, fall and decline.

With its so-called “Inexhaustible Storehouses” the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) seemed, at first glance, to manifest “the quintessential capitalist imperative of continual growth”, or something very much like it.⁷ The Inexhaustible Storehouses were Buddhist monastery treasuries of monetary offerings from devotees, over time amassing large fortunes used for almsgiving, harvest loans and funding the monastery’s own enterprises.⁸ But what exactly was inexhaustible about the inexhaustible storehouses?

Rather than “signifying the endless accumulation of interests,” what was inexhaustible was the process of gift-giving itself. The “quintessential capitalist imperative of continual growth” is one of increasing productivity, and corresponding increases in consumption. Tang dynasty’s monasteries present us with an example of a gift economy, where one gift begets another. The aim was not to expand accumulation, but redistribution; to grow expenditure, not profits.⁹

The point of such historical excursions is not to unearth forgotten civilizational models that we might use as blueprints for our current post-growth era. Each of these past societies had their own forms of injustice. Mesopotamian states, often thought by scholars to have been “intrinsically better equipped to weather environmental or economic crises” by design, were also “built on high levels of institutionalized inequality” where resilience at the societal level was secured at the expense of the most vulnerable.¹⁰ What Dale’s work does remind us, however, is simply that ending the “Growthocene” was not the installation of an unprecedented new world order. Rather, it was desperately-needed corrective on an historical aberration.

The history of the beginning of the Growthocene is none other than the history of seventeenth century Northwestern Europe, when capitalist social relations and the colonial doctrine of progress became entrenched. Crucial episodes took place in the mid-1950s, when the (now thankfully defunct) OECD gave nations eminently exploitable narratives of economic expansion. As another historian of the

growth paradigm writes, in the face of post-war problems of “rear-mament, European reconstruction, political instability, colonial decline, and the Cold War... growth promised to turn difficult political conflicts over distribution into technical, non-political management questions of how to collectively increase GDP.”¹¹ These histories are available to all those who seek them out, and if we are to believe our policymakers, will soon be taught in schools. But simply drumming these facts of the dawn of the Growthocene into our own heads won’t suffice. What is also needed is greater attention paid to the history of the end, or many possible ends of the Growthocene, which is unfolding around us now. It is a truism to say that we cannot afford complacency, but I will say it anyway:

The growth paradigm is not behind us. This new world we believe ourselves to be living in exists only as an incredibly delicate balancing act, between decentralization and recentralization and their multisca-

lar negotiations and renegotiations. This new world exists only so long as transnational solidarity exists, allowing processes of cooperation and autonomous self-determination to keep unfolding. Finally, until all reparations have been made to groups, human and nonhuman, past generations and future generations, who suffered and will still suffer the effects of the destructive, self-destructive capitalism that relied on growth and its ideology for its survival, the Growthocene will still exist, and we will still be living, trapped, in its shell.

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3 Ezzamel, Mahmoud, and Keith Hoskin. “Rethorizing accounting, writing and money with evidence from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt.” *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 13.3 (2002): 333-367.

4 Woods, Christopher. “Contingency Tables and Economic Forecasting in the Earliest Texts from Mesopotamia.” *Texts and Contexts: The Circulation and Transmission of Cuneiform Texts in Social Space* 9 (2015): 121.

5 Dale, 29.

6 Boesche, Roger. *The first great political realist: Kautilya and his Arthashastra*. Lexington Books, 2002. P.66

7 Graeber, David. *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. Melville House, 2011. P. 265

8 Dale, 30.

9 Dale, 31.

10 Paulette, Tate. “Domination and resilience in bronze age mesopotamia.” *Surviving Sudden Environmental Change* (2012):- 163-191. P.183

11 Schmelzer, Matthias. “The growth paradigm: History, hegemony, and the contested making of economic growthmanship.” *Ecological Economics* 118 (2015): 262-271. P. 266

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