

Book Review: The Infinite Desire for Growth by Daniel Cohen

In The Infinite Desire for Growth, Daniel Cohen offers a historical and philosophical account of the adoption of growth as a principle and goal in economic theory from the Enlightenment to the present day. While the essays at times overlook the specific historical and political contexts in which the concept of growth emerged and developed, the collection is thought-provoking and will contribute to contemporary debates around growth, finds [Ryan Glauser](#).

***The Infinite Desire for Growth.* Daniel Cohen (trans. by Jane Marie Todd). Princeton University Press. 2018.**

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A decade after the 2008 Financial Crisis and ensuing Great Recession, economic growth as a principle and goal in economic theories is being questioned from numerous angles. Instead of accepting rapid, consistent GDP growth as the norm, heterodox economists, including Daniel Cohen, have formulated different goals. While many of these economists propose new theories in a framework highly influenced by economics and the social sciences, Cohen's new book, *The Infinite Desire for Growth*, adopts a more historical and philosophical approach. The links between economic growth and institutions, culture, society and international factors have been investigated by [economic historians](#). Cohen, however, grounds himself in [the Easterlin Paradox](#) – the disparity between happiness and economic expectations experienced by people – and deterministic economic geography popularised by [Jared Diamond](#).

In *The Infinite Desire for Growth*, Cohen attempts to synthesize a *longue durée* analysis of the idea of growth by situating it as an inherent human desire and by tracking this phenomenon from the Enlightenment to the present-day emergence of populism after the Financial Crisis. Using core works from authors like Diamond, [Ronald Inglehart](#) and [Robert Gordon](#), economic growth becomes bound by capital, inequality and other economic factors, but also by national cultures, institutions and the natural distribution of resources around the world. Instead of positioning pure GDP growth as the sole finality of economic theories, Cohen argues that 'we must try to imagine a world in which happiness and satisfaction with one's life are less dependent on the expectation of constantly earning more' (6).

Structurally, the book is formulated around three main concepts: growth as an inherent human desire; growth as a goal in economic theories since World War II; and the formulation of a future model of growth. Cohen therefore splits the book into three parts. Firstly, the origins of economic growth are grounded in the emergence of civilisation in the Fertile Crescent – the area surrounding the Euphrates, Tigris and Nile Rivers – as well as through the Scientific Revolution and rapid demographic changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondly, the paradox of the promised 'second scientific revolution' from the development of computers and the stagnant growth of the last three decades in the West is placed alongside the rapid economic and demographic growth of the 'Third World' since 1945. Thirdly, a broad and rather undefined model of future growth based on standard of living and happiness is envisioned, which aims to solve the Easterlin Paradox. Although the above sections are separated from one another and are rarely linked together, the book is meant to provoke thought on a possible outcome for economic theories, rather than propose a new and completely fleshed-out model.

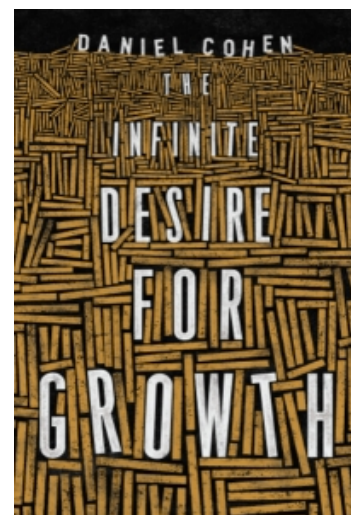




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Stemming from [his own opinion piece](#) published shortly after the Bureau of Economic Analysis released its initial estimates for 2014 GDP growth in the United States, Cohen's third section is the most thought-provoking. Instead of doubting the theoretical foundations of economic growth, the anxieties and effects of an unfulfilled promise of steady and proportional increases in the standard of living in relation to GDP growth are briefly examined. These concerns, such as global warming, lack of trust in government institutions and diminishing worker satisfaction, indirectly reinforce one another because national GDPs have continued to slowly grow while the standard of living has steadily declined in the West since the 1970s.

Using the Easterlin Paradox, these anxieties are tied to economic theory through happiness and people's decision-making based on their relation to their neighbours. Drawing on [Prospect Theory](#), Cohen argues that people account for their happiness and their relative position in their community when making economic decisions. In short: 'if they attempt to get rich to save themselves from want, the position they acquire quickly becomes a new point of reference, and they must begin all over again' (133). Typically, mainstream economists would answer by suggesting GDP and wage growth would eventually offset the new wants. On the contrary, Cohen argues that the stagnant growth since the 1970s has destroyed the social contract established between the workers and capitalists during the Enlightenment; thus, the only answer is to reconstruct the 'real social contract' and create an economic system that grows and defends standards of living, worker satisfaction and happiness, rather than GDP and wealth.

While the third section coincides with current debates, this part still has many problems that stem from a weak beginning. *The Infinite Desire*'s most significant issue is a lack of specificity when traversing centuries of time and space without properly contextualising not only the intellectual formation and dissemination of ideas, but also the political, economic and international changes of the world since the seventeenth century. Without this context, economic growth can easily be seen as an ancient phenomenon rather than [a newer invention supported by the creation of statistics as a scientific field in the twentieth century](#).

Besides these contextual issues, the book lacks definitions and descriptions of terms, such as 'Third World', the West, culture and modern vs postmodern societies. The most important concept that is not properly defined is economic growth. This causes the book to use economic growth, GDP growth and growth of wealth interchangeably without accounting for their differing meanings within economic theory. This lack of definition allows the book to redefine the terms themselves chapter by chapter and at the author's whim rather than in relation to changing historical and economic contexts. Beyond the third section, the remainder of the book is plagued by similar ups-and-downs. Due to the three radically different themes, the book, unsurprisingly, feels disjointed and does not always flow from part to part. Instead, the book reads as a series of short essays designed to provoke critical thinking about the necessity and inevitability of economic growth.

The Infinite Desire for Growth is framed as a book that addresses the urgent issues of economics and the present-day world due to an emerging digital economy, driven by the 'second scientific revolution'. Unfortunately, Cohen's work falls far short of this promise. His over-ambitious goals cause him to overlook the temporal, spatial and historical contexts in which the idea of growth emerged. Despite this shortfall, Cohen offers a series of essays that are thought-provoking and will start debates on growth as a historical and economic concept in any academic classroom.

- This review originally appeared at the [LSE Review of Books](#).

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About the reviewer

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Ryan Glauser graduated from the MA Global History programme at Freie Universität Berlin. His MA thesis focused on the West Germany's *Wirtschaftswunder* and its Cold War context. He analysed how the emerging Cold War from 1945 to 1953 fundamentally changed the economic structure and thinking of West Germany and its government.