

**Christopher F. Jones**, *The Invention of Infinite Growth: How Economists Came to Believe a Dangerous Delusion*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2025, pp. 376.

Christopher F. Jones's *The Invention of Infinite Growth* begins with a simple but unsettling proposition: the modern conviction that economic growth is the master key to prosperity, political legitimacy, and even environmental repair is not a timeless truth of social life but a historical construction. That claim gives the book both its intellectual edge and its originality. Jones does not merely argue that growth has become excessive, or that economists have underestimated ecological limits. He asks a prior and more interesting question: how did growth come to appear so natural, so necessary, and so unquestionably desirable that entire societies learned to treat it as the final measure of success?

This historical reframing is the book's greatest achievement. Jones shows that classical political economy did not yet inhabit a world in which 'growth' functioned as a self-evident policy imperative. Thinkers concerned with wealth and improvement still wrote in a language shaped by land, subsistence, scarcity, demography, and the stubborn materiality of the natural world. The book's early chapters are especially good at recovering that lost horizon. Malthus appears here not simply as the prophet of doom familiar from textbook caricature, but as the representative of a tradition that had not yet severed economic reasoning from ecological constraint. Jones's point is not that earlier thinkers were wiser in every respect, but that they worked within a conceptual universe in which the economy could not easily be imagined as floating free of the biophysical conditions that sustained it.

The second movement of the book, devoted to what Jones calls the 'discovery' of growth, is particularly strong. Growth had to be made visible before it could become compulsory. It had to be named, measured, modelled, and inserted into the language of government. Here, Jones is excellent on the emergence of national income accounting and on the political elevation of GDP. One of his central insights is that metrics do not merely record reality; they reorganise it. GDP began as a technical instrument, but it gradually acquired the status of a public philosophy. It taught states how to compare themselves, politicians how to justify policy, and citizens what to expect from government. Once growth could be expressed as a single number, it could also become an object of anxiety, competition, and faith.

The book's intellectual centre, however, lies in the brilliant chapter on 'The

kingdom of Solovia', where Jones turns to Robert Solow and the postwar formalisation of growth theory. This is arguably the most incisive part of the volume. Jones shows that the new growth models did more than refine economics analytically: they reordered economic attention. In Solow's stylised world, output can be decomposed into labour, capital, and technological change, while the natural world recedes into the background as something external, substitutable, or analytically secondary. Jones is careful here, and rightly so. His argument is not that economists crudely denied nature, but that they rendered dependence on nature progressively less visible at the level of theory. This is a subtler and more persuasive claim. The achievement of formalisation was also, in part, a narrowing of vision.

From that point onward, the book traces the consolidation of what might be called the modern growth imaginary. The chapter on 'Growth Without Nature' extends the argument beyond theory into public policy, postwar affluence, and Cold War statecraft. Growth becomes not simply an economic objective but a political obligation: the condition of social peace, military strength, employment, fiscal capacity, and national prestige. Jones is especially convincing when he shows how postwar economics and postwar politics reinforced one another. Growth promised to ease distributive conflict without confronting hierarchy too directly; it offered the prospect of more for everyone, and thus reduced the pressure to ask more difficult questions about who gained, who lost, and what forms of damage were being displaced onto the nonhuman world.

The later chapters, on contestation, climate, and green growth, are no less ambitious. Jones reconstructs with clarity the persistence of dissent – from the environmental critiques of the 1970s to the debates over *The Limits to Growth* and the more recent confidence of climate economics. What emerges is not a simple opposition between enlightened critics and blinkered economists, but a struggle between rival understandings of abundance, welfare, and the future. Jones identifies with particular force the assumptions that allowed optimism about growth to survive repeated ecological warnings: faith in technological innovation, faith in substitution and price signals, and faith that aggregate expansion will soften both environmental and distributive tensions. These chapters are valuable because they show that the durability of growth thinking has depended not on ignorance alone, but on a powerful repertoire of arguments that many economists have found both analytically elegant and politically convenient.

Yet the book is strongest in diagnosis rather than prescription. Jones is extraordinarily effective at showing how growth acquired its authority, and at exposing

the historical contingency of ideas that now pass for common sense. He is somewhat less fully persuasive when he turns to what should replace that common sense. This is not because his concerns are misplaced; on the contrary, his insistence that economies are embedded in fragile ecologies is one of the book's most important contributions. But the final movement occasionally advances more quickly from critique to alternative than the richness of the preceding historical chapters would seem to warrant. Some readers may also feel that the book's overwhelmingly American focus, though justified by the global influence of American economics, leaves underexplored the very different moral and political stakes of growth in poorer societies.

These reservations, however, do little to diminish the force of Jones's intervention. Despite its polemical subtitle, *The Invention of Infinite Growth* is not a shrill denunciation of economics. It is a serious and often impressive work of intellectual history, written with narrative control and real argumentative purpose. Its distinctive contribution lies in making growth visible not as a neutral fact, but as a historically specific way of organising knowledge, policy, and expectation. For economic historians, that is no small achievement. Jones reminds us that the most powerful ideas are often those that cease to appear as ideas at all. By restoring contingency to growth, he reopens questions that modern political economy had too quickly closed. Whether or not one accepts all of his conclusions, this is a book that sharpens the terms of the debate and makes it harder to speak of growth as though its meaning were self-evident.

**Giuseppe Pignataro**  
*Università di Bologna*