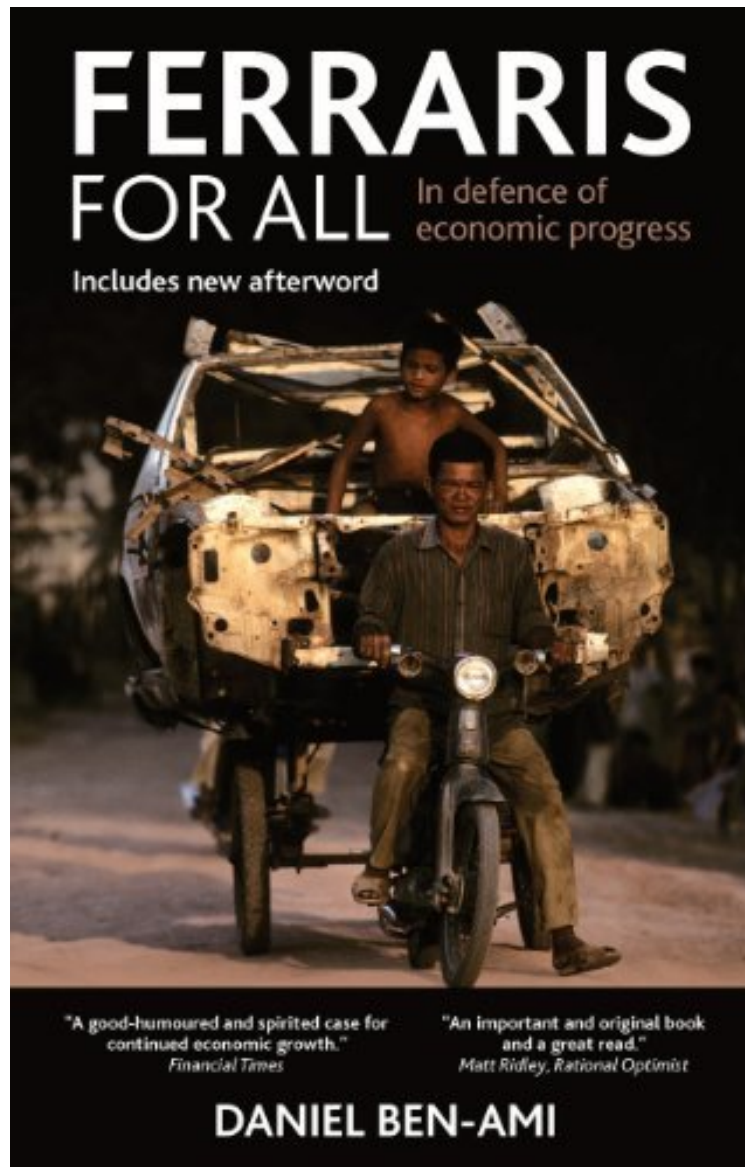


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Ferraris for All: In defence of economic progress

Daniel Ben-Ami

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Daniel Ben-Ami : Ferraris for All: In defence of economic progress before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ferraris for All: In defence of economic progress:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Smoothly written, but with holes you could drive a Ferrari through (2.5 stars)By A. J. SutterDuring the 1970s, it was hard to enter the campus gates of any major university in Cambridge (Mass) or New York City without first having to pass through a pair of extremely intense, earnest people who wanted to hand you a newspaper. At places like Harvard, Columbia or NYU they were Trotskyites, and at MIT they were devotees of Ayn Rand's cult of objectivism and romantic realism. I confess that during the past 40+ years

I've never wondered about whatever became of those folks. Reading this book, I found out anyway.

1. LEFT-WING OR RIGHT-WING?:

The author (DBA) was barely a couple of years too young, and on the wrong continent, to have ever blocked my way with his tabloid. Today he writes for a UK online magazine called "Spiked", which was founded by a "libertarian Marxist" and which one of its leading contributors acknowledges to be influenced by Trotsky. (Meanwhile, the website runs headlines that could have been written by Ayn Rand herself, like "Gravitational waves: behold the greatness of man.") In his Preface, DBA presents his credentials as a man of the Left. Sure enough, there are plenty of hallmarks of a traditional 20th Century Leftist perspective in the book. For one thing, there are plenty of favorable references to Marx. In a 1971 critique of economic growth entitled "Is abundance est-elle possible ? [Is abundance possible?]", Hungarian sociologist Peter Kende pointed out that both capitalists and socialists are devoted to growth, but the former emphasize consumption while the latter emphasize production. I'll find the topic of production coming up continually in this book, both explicitly (e.g., @85, 97), and when DBA asserts that older economists' use of the term "capital accumulation" — which refers to assets used for productive purposes — was their way of talking about economic growth (@11). Nonetheless, at times the book seems to have curled around so far to the left that it joins hands with the Right. How else to explain that it both absolves Mao Tse-Tung from blame for the murderous Great Leap Forward (in a context suggesting that the deadly famines arose from natural causes as yet untamed by the forces of economic growth, @158) *and* defends Wall Street bankers (@222)? How else to understand the contradiction that although DBA uses the word "conservative" as a mark of shame, he claims the true "radical" path is to stick to the line of a book written almost 170 years ago? (@240-244: The Communist Manifesto, of course.) And though Marxists and Objectivists might be loath to admit it, the book's passionate defense of individual freedoms and an outlook "based on notions such as progress, the power of reason and the demand for plenty," its "rejection of the idea that human potential is constrained by natural limits" and its call for "a revival of the project of asserting human control over nature" (@255) are equally Marxian and Randian. (Although Rand rejected the Soviet Union, her opportunity to attend university was thanks to the Russian Revolution: so it's not surprising that she carried some rhetorical and even intellectual echoes of it.)

2. RHETORICAL TECHNIQUE:

The engine of DBA's argument, though, seems to be a tactic he borrowed from Saul Alinsky (not that I think ill of Alinsky). In *Rules for Radicals* (1971), Alinsky's 13th Rule of Power Tactics urges "Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it." DBA does exactly that by labeling the main targets of his argument as "growth sceptics." These must be people who are anti-growth, or who doubt economic growth is a good thing, right? Not at all. "Growth sceptics" as explicitly defined by DBA (@11-12) are "pro-growth." Their sin is that they believe that there might be natural, social or moral limits to growth, and that maybe growth could have harmful effects on the environment or limited resources. (Nonsense, says DBA: in Chap. 7 he describes how growth "on balance" "improves" the environment, especially by reducing the adverse impact of nature on people, and how innovation overcomes all limits.) Even worse, "sceptics" suggest that that we should "downgrade" the importance of growth by taking an interest in the "well-being" of people, and/or care about what we leave for future generations ("sustainability") instead of focusing on the "prosperity" of people today through more production. In all these things, they depart from "staunch advocates of economic growth" like DBA (@17), who don't harbor any doubts about growth or the future. And while "sceptics" may borrow arguments from the third faction, the "deep greens" — comprising both "deep ecology" environmentalists and the even more explicitly anti-growth degrowth advocates — that faction is merely a "minority hard core viewpoint," which is unlikely ever to become popular with the public (@25). What's dangerous about "growth sceptics" is that they are in the majority, says DBA. In fact, their rise has been a "long, drawn-out process" that began with "the defeat [sic] of the Russian Revolution in 1917" (@75). (So is the February Revolution still a bitter memory for 21st Century Trotskyites, despite their better luck a few months later? I wonder if Red Sox fans have already forgotten about 2004 and are still ruing their earlier World Series losses.) Is it really "scepticism" if people suspect that they have to be careful about how they pursue growth? Is your heart surgeon "sceptic" if she's very careful and focused about how she operates on you during a so-called routine operation? Obviously DBA is using a well-known rhetorical trick of choosing a term with strong connotations in order to bias the reader's mind each time the word is repeated, while pretending the word or phrase has a more neutral meaning. (Actually, "growth" is exactly such a word, too — we might think differently if politicians talked about the economy "swelling," for example.) To be fair, DBA does tell the reader that this is a polemical work (@viii); this sort of characterization is bread and butter for polemicists. Moreover, polemics aren't always intended to appeal to a rational audience. If we try to weigh DBA's arguments rationally, though, how solid are they? Suppose we change the terminology: Since to be a "staunch advocater" by DBA's lights you can't entertain even the slightest doubt about whether there are any sort of limits to growth or about whether growth has any adverse environmental impact, let's call him and his comrades "growth fanatics." Let's call those who are pro-growth but who are concerned about growth's possible adverse side effects

“rational supporters of growth” and instead of “deep greens” we can simply call the same group “opponents of growth” (which is better anyway, since not all who oppose growth do so primarily on environmental grounds). If you read the book with these mental substitutions for DBA’s preferred epithets, then the substantive weaknesses in DBA’s growth-fanatic arguments become more apparent.

3. SOME SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES: First of all, DBA never defines “prosperity” — which makes it much harder to accept that rational supporters of growth really oppose it. And if “well-being” is irrelevant to prosperity, then is having more stuff — or, more precisely, producing more stuff — all there is to “prosperity for all”? (If so, then the next question would be: if I have 20 iPhones instead of 1, is that a sort of prosperity worth having?) Next, even if we accept without argument Chap. 6’s recitation of growth’s wonderful gifts during the past couple of centuries, why should we necessarily expect that the benefits of growth *could not* be more moderate in the future? It seems to me that a rational supporter of growth would at least entertain the possibility of declining marginal utility of growth and maybe of qualitatively adverse impacts, even if a fanatic would not. By the way, many of those advances attributed to growth, including radar and a number of other inventions DBA lists at the end of Chap. 6, would never have become so widespread (or in some cases, even exist) without government spending — and in particular, military spending. Those factors are never mentioned as preconditions for prosperity, however. DBA also makes claims that are highly exaggerated, to say the least. E.g., growth scepticism brings about “disdain for industry. Industrial activity is seen primarily [sic] as a source of pollution and waste rather than as the engine of wealth production. Well-being is seen as a much more desirable goal than prosperity. . . . Growth scepticism expresses a fear of the future and ultimately, a loathing of humanity.” (@86.) It gets odder: apropos of the US obesity epidemic and its connection to the American Dream, he notes: “What the growth sceptics find particularly offensive is obesity among the poorer sections of the US population. This is not, as they suggest, because they are concerned about the health of the poor. For the sceptics such obesity is perhaps the ultimate symbol of what they regard as a society dominated by overconsumption . . . [Contemporary critics] find the notion of the US as a land of plenty distasteful. In effect, they argue that the benefits of high levels of consumption should be restricted to a small elite.” (@157; BTW, is he suggesting here that obesity is a benefit?) “Eliter” and “elitist” are labels DBA constantly tries to hang on the rational supporters of growth/sceptics, who paradoxically are also the “majority”. How about the truly small elite, the “fat cats”? Hands off! “The campaign against ‘fat cats’ . . . is deeply conservative in the current environment. . . . Fat cats are typically set up as a populist moral fable against excessive greed. The clear implication of such campaigns is that they should behave in a more ‘responsiblers’ manner by accepting less. From this it is a short step to argue that everyone must be prepared to behave responsibly and moderate their demands. . . . [T]hose earning excessive sums are seen as straining an already over-stretched economy. Once this premise is accepted it is hard for ordinary people to demand that they should have higher incomes.” (@222.) And later: “[C]ampaigns against ‘obsceners’; pay carry an implicit message to the general public: everyone should be equally ready to make sacrifices. Rich and poor alike should be willing to make do with less. It is a plea to curb general living standards rather than to raise them.” (@250.) This is doubtful. DBA seems to be shifting the meme of “over-stretched” from public spending to the private economy, where I’ve never heard anyone claim it belongs, least of all rational supporters of growth. The usual call is to lower the rich while raising the poor and middle classes — not to cut everyone. But there’s a logical problem with DBA’s stance, too. Elsewhere he tells us that “the ultimate aim should be to raise the living standards of the poor to the level of the rich” (@115). So if we don’t do *something* to put a cap on the level of income of the rich, how can the poor ever catch up? The rich will keep getting richer all the while.

4. GENERAL: The book is clearly written, with little humor but a lot of passion, so that a reader who doesn’t step back and think critically about the arguments could easily get swept up by it. And even an objector to growth like me can agree that a few of DBA’s critical harpoons hit appropriate targets, such as environmentalist anti-growth arguments based on the laws of thermodynamics, and the “happiness” movement in social science (specifically regarding subjective well-being). The book includes many text boxes and chapter endnotes to flesh out some points in more detail. There’s also a proper reference list, albeit a bit heavily-laden with DBA’s Sp!ked-mates. For my money, the concise pro-growth arguments of the billionaire-backed *Economic Growth: Unleashing the Potential of Human Flourishing (Values and Capitalism)* by Edd Noell al. (2013) seem far more modern and diabolically ingenious than those in this book: its Christian conservative authors skillfully twist the modern and compassionate goal of global well-being into a defense of the 1%. Nonetheless, this book is a valuable reminder that the pro-growth vs. degrowth debate isn’t a matter of right vs. left: there are partisans of each position on both sides of the aisle. I couldn’t help feeling, though, there is something quaint and even wistful about a book emphasizing physical production when its author writes for an online magazine. The struggle may have moved indoors from the sidewalks, but intellectually this book is too attached to the concepts of “growth” and “prosperity” — and 140 — years ago.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Two Stars By Christian B. dogs***

The growth of the economy and the spread of prosperity are increasingly seen as problematic rather than positive - a

trend Daniel Ben-Ami has termed 'growth scepticism'. Prosperity is accused of encouraging greed, damaging the environment, causing unhappiness and widening social inequalities. Ferraris for all: A defence of economic progress is a rejoinder to the growth sceptics. Using examples from a range of countries, including the US, the author argues that society as a whole benefits from greater affluence. Action is needed - but to increase abundance and spread it worldwide, not to limit prosperity, as the sceptics would have it. The lively and provocative hardback edition was published to widespread coverage in 2010, and triggered debate and dissent in equal measure. This much-anticipated paperback edition includes a vigorous response from the author to the spirited discussion provoked by its controversial arguments.

"Ben-Ami's thinking and writing is spotlessly clear but unbendingly hard...he makes a formidable, controversial case." GetAbstract "A good-humoured and spirited case for continued economic growth." Financial Times "Mighty controversial, yet sublimely convincing. If you seek a fresh take on an argument that has been with us for a while, then it is well worth your own while to pick this book up." Gaurav Sharma, review on .co.uk "Growth is one of the great issues of our time. Its benefits are manifest and anybody arguing against it will have to take on Ben-Ami's core opinions." Bryan Appleyard, Sunday Times "...an attractively readable, succinct and closely-argued optimistic exposition." Society of Business Economists "The global financial crisis has produced a fresh outpouring of growth scepticism: the idea that we would all be better off in a world without economic growth. Daniel Ben-Ami has provided a timely and thought-provoking reminder of why we need growth and the benefits that it brings." David Smith, Economics Editor, The Sunday Times "Daniel Ben-Ami is an important voice for reason and fact in our current economic debates. His book is a probing contribution to understanding the decisive way that economic growth helps everyone everywhere on the social ladder. Ben-Ami's style is incisive and entertaining, his argument crucial to understanding our present economic plight." Denis Dutton, Editor, Arts Letters Daily About the Author Daniel Ben-Ami has worked as a journalist specializing in economics and finance for twenty-five years, during which he has contributed to many national newspapers and specialist publications, including the "Financial Times," "Guardian," "Independent," "Prospect," "Sunday Telegraph," and "Sunday Times." He is the author of "Cowardly Capitalism: The Myth of The Global Financial Casino."