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BROADENING THE SCOPE OF ECONOMIC HISTORY: HOW HAPPINESS HAS CHANGED OVER THE LONG PERIOD AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH ECONOMICS

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ABSTRACT

The essay reviews the changing relationship between economic conditions and the ideas of happiness over the long period, from hunter-gatherers to the present age. It argues that cultural aspects, in their interplay with social conditions and institutions, are crucial for understanding the rise of the modern world, and it proposes an interpretative schema within which to explain the origins of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution. On this basis, the article calls for closer integration between economics and economic history, on the one hand, and psychology, ethics and politics on the other: it is vital to gain better understanding not only of the past but also of our times, given the widening gap between technological progress and ethics.

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JEL codes: A12, A13, B15, N00.

1. Introduction. What Kind of Happiness?

To begin with, it is useful to clarify what is meant by 'happiness'.[1] Schematically, we may consider happiness to be the combination of three elements: a) freedom, understood both as emancipation from material constraints (i.e. control over the natural environment and understanding of the physical, biological and psychological laws that govern nature and our species) and as the capacity to reduce the obstacles that people, intention-

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[1] This paper is basically an English version, rearranged, updated and (hopefully) improved, of the first chapter of Felice 2017.

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ally or otherwise, pose for other people's freedom (so-called "negative liberty", to use Berlin's expression);[2] b) social relations; c) finally, a very important aspect to which we may refer with the expression "meaning in life". Furthermore, if we view happiness in the most exacting terms, it is perhaps the product and not the aggregate of these factors: its various dimensions are interdependent, and if any one of them is missing, then the edifice will collapse.

This approach to happiness pertains to a philosophical tradition extending from Aristotle to the Enlightenment, and thereafter to Hannah Arendt, in the twentieth century. It culminated in the writings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on human development and capabilities.[3] In short, this view of happiness is closely linked to the development and flourishing of human rights. And this is a conception very different – and not just wider – than the hedonistic-egocentric notion of happiness, which in substance limits itself to a combination of income and subjective status as reported by surveys ("how happy do you feel?").

Nowadays, even some international reports, at least to some extent, measure happiness by means of surveys.[4] As far as possible, this article instead refers to a battery of objective indicators centred on what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach defines as "human development": income, education level, life expectancy, and also civil, social and political rights. Strictly speaking, these indicators mainly evaluate the first element of my definition of happiness, i.e. emancipation from material constraints and negative liberty, which is moreover the component most consonant with economic studies. The other two components, social relations and meaning in life, are in essence unmeasurable, but on closer inspection prove to be closely linked to the first.

As said, this conception resumes reflection by some Enlightenment thinkers. Not by chance, this reflection is complemented by the discourse on human rights. This takes place precisely on the basis of the right to happiness (or better, to the pursuit of happiness)[5] that originated in the Century of Lights. In short, happiness understood as a right, or rather as the "first right", ought to be anchored as far as possible in objective parameters, which are its preconditions. This is certainly not the only conception that has developed over the course of history, or has been pursued today (as we

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[2] Berlin 2002 [1958].

[3] Arendt 1958; Sen 1985, 1999; Nussbaum 2000, 2006. See also Van Parijs 1995, who speaks in terms of "real freedom".

[4] Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, De Neve, Huang and Wang 2017.

[5] "The pursuit of happiness", as the US Declaration of Independence put it in 1776.

shall shortly see). In what follows, first (§ 2) I outline the long-period social-economic "revolutions" in human history, and their relationship with culture and, thus, with the changing ideas of happiness. I then propose a preliminary interpretative schema concerning the onset of modern economic growth (§ 3) and thereafter I focus on the contribution of the Enlightenment to the rise of the modern world and to the formation of the current, competing views on happiness (§ 4). In Section § 5, I urge closer integration between economic history, on the one hand, and cultural and institutional history on the other, in order to achieve better understanding of the past; in turn, this integration should be linked to a broader redefinition of economics that is open to contributions from psychology, ethics and politics. In the conclusions, I briefly reiterate that this redefinition is crucial also for the issues of our age, given the widening gap between technological progress and ethics, with dramatic consequences in the last century.

2. The Three Major Revolutions in Human History and the Ideas of Happiness

In the human race's long march from the appearance of the first hominids until the present day, there have been three major revolutions, each of epochal significance. They have been simultaneously both economic and cultural, and in the first case perhaps even biological; they have changed our way of producing, of thinking, of living (of being). Even though they are called "revolutions", they developed over centuries or even millennia. Each corresponded to one or more different "visions" of happiness.

The first was the Cognitive Revolution which generated the *homo sapiens* hunter-gatherers. They were biologically equal to us. Their mythologised existence in certain respects inspired the image of the "Garden of Eden": we now know that in terms of material conditions they were usually better off than their sedentary descendants, at least until the nineteenth century, and also that they had more egalitarian societies and better human relations, with less income inequality and less sex discrimination than the subsequent agricultural societies. The second was the Agricultural Revolution, which began the long era of the "vale of tears" when inequality by birth (in terms of gender, race, social class) was enforced by law, and most people lived barely above the subsistence threshold. While we know nothing about the views on happiness of the hunter-gatherers (although we may suspect that they varied greatly), things changed, of course, after the Agricultural Revolution and the invention of writing. It was during this revolution that two antithetical notions of happiness were conceived: a terrestrial but individual one to be achieved by ascetic means (*ataraxia*);

and an other-worldly one that could nonetheless be collective, or better, social (the "City of God"). The third revolution was the Industrial one set in motion by Enlightenment thought, on which basis new ideals of happiness were asserted. Among these (but not the only one) was the "City of Man", the earthly transposition of the City of God, in which individual happiness melted into collective happiness, here on Earth: this vision then degenerated into the utopian terror that indelibly marked the experience of the twentieth century.[6]

Fortunately, our narrative does not finish here. More views of happiness grew and coexisted in the industrialist and post-industrial era. Firstly, starting with the Industrial Revolution and Enlightenment ideas, the hedonism of "artificial paradises" also began to take form. This conception has today become hegemonic, having its economic counterpart in welfare-consumerist society. On closer inspection, this is the advanced stage of a process that began in eighteenth-century England (its economic-technological bases were already established by industrial capitalism, with the substitution of human labour by machines). At the same time, a further conception of happiness began to take form, due to the technological progress and conceptual change that had also matured in the Enlightenment era. Unlike the other notions of happiness, this one sought to conjugate material wellbeing, high-quality social relations and the free pursuit of a meaning (or multiple meanings) in life. It was a conception accompanied by a fresh transformation that is still underway and whose outcomes are unpredictable. Like the hedonistic conception, it concerns human conduct and the world of ideas: we could call it an "ethical revolution", albeit at the risk of seeming a little too optimistic. In our era, hedonism and the ethical revolution stand side-by-side, come face-to-face and come to blows (or sometimes mix together).[7] In so doing they make up the landscape of the contemporary world.

These great stages of our past, and of the present, are the narrative thread whereby we can investigate the relationship between economic development and happiness. However, our approach affords a better response to an equally revealing question (not least, as concerns the abovementioned relationship): what was the determinant of economic growth,

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[6] Felice 2017: chapters II and III critically discuss the cognitive and the agricultural revolutions, respectively; chapter IV is devoted to the Industrial Revolution and its causes, while the two competing views of the modern world sketched below are treated in chapters V and VI.

[7] Moreover, hedonism is, in itself, a form of ethics: it identifies the moral good with pleasure. When we speak of an "ethical revolution" we are instead referring to a change in the consideration of the human person and a change in social relations, which leads to the assertion of "extended human rights". This is thus another form of ethics, different from the pursuit of pleasure (though, as argued, not impossible to reconcile with it).

the rise and fall of civilisations, and the different eras? And, more particularly, the driver of modern economic growth?

3. An Interpretative Schema for the Rise of the Modern World

Seeking a one-sided response to these questions, or an explanatory model that applies to every time and place, would probably be fruitless. Indeed, it seems not by chance that, at the level of theoretical elaboration, economists appear to be very far from proposing any convincing explanation of the process of economic growth over the long term. The most ambitious and innovative attempt in this regard, Oded Galor and David Weil's unified growth theory,[8] starts from population growth. It notes that a larger population makes it more attractive to invest in human capital and activates technological progress. At a certain point, the benefits from technological progress overtake the negative impact of a growing population on resources per capita. Thus a cumulative process can begin: not only population, but also income per capita starts to rise; this latter favours further population growth, first of all by improving longevity; in turn, longer lives make it even more convenient to invest in human capital and thus promote even more technological progress. However, this "mechanical" explanation fails to demonstrate how and when the "point of rupture" occurred: why in a particular society did it do so at a certain point (England, and Western Europe, in the eighteenth century)? Many societies had experienced population growth in the past: all but one had declined in the end. Why did it happen? After millennia of stagnation, after centuries-long cycles of growth and starvation, for what reason in a certain place did there begin a cumulative process which simultaneously concerned income, education and life expectancy? (Incidentally, these are also the three main components of human development according to Amartya Sen's capabilities approach).

Douglass C. North explicitly acknowledges this interpretative void. This Nobel Prize laureate (1920-2015) is one of the scholars who have ventured deepest into the enterprise of "understanding the process of economic change" (to quote the title of one of his books).[9] North goes so far as to investigate the mechanisms of the cognitive process, which is to say the functioning of the human mind. He thus integrates his analysis on the role of institutions with the study of culture and even of psychology.

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[8] Galor and Weil 2000; Galor 2012.

[9] North 2005: vii-viii, and 1 for what follows.

He clearly admits that, unlike in the case of Darwinian biology, the key to evolution in human societies lies in agents' intentionality. Yet he too seems to under-value some essential issues: that this intentionality is influenced not only by our limited and subjective consciousness of the external environment but also by the (historicised) vision that we might have of what is good or bad for the human being; the question of how desirable it is to improve our lives, and in what way; and the question of what our end goals should be – and these latter are not at all the same in every civilisation and culture. This means that North under-values the importance of the idea of happiness (the various different ideas of happiness), as a lodestar that orients actors' intentionality.

It is by adding this dimension that it perhaps becomes possible to adumbrate a more "complete" explanation of the process of economic change. It is not a theory, still less a model. But in factual terms, it is hopefully a better description of what has happened, at least as concerns one focal point of long-run economic history: the transition from agricultural civilisation to the industrial world.

Indeed, choosing happiness as our favoured perspective enables us to clarify a centrally important aspect that has hitherto been little considered. And thus to locate the missing piece of the jigsaw. In the enormous variety of economies and cultures among the five continents, in agricultural civilisations there exists what is largely one and the same existential disposition: a common mental attitude that serves as the substrate for analogous institutions. These latter are everywhere institutions of inequality: agricultural civilisation bases itself on the inequality "of rights" among social classes, and between men and women. The common existential disposition that sustains this inequality is an attitude of resignation: renouncing "public" happiness for this world; accepting unhappiness as a dimension of social life, in the hope of an other-worldly happiness or, at the very most, of an individual serenity immune from everyday trials and tribulations.

As said, we find juridical inequality everywhere in agricultural societies, including those that emerged and developed completely independently of one another. This is a characteristic that radically differentiates them from hunter-gatherer communities. Arguably, it derived from the need to carry out particularly onerous toil for survival, work that could (literally) kill a person. Someone had to be entrusted with carrying out this toil; and had somehow to be obliged to do so. Reduced to its bare bones, this is the reason why we everywhere see the gradual emergence of the institutions of inequality and an associated ideology. The latter postulates that the upper classes of society, spared the burden of physical toil, do not have to dedicate themselves to useful knowledge, but to speculative knowledge alone. It thereby imposes a mentality founded on resignation, as well as censure

of personal enrichment. These are both consequences of the fact that the intellect is not employed to improve the human condition through technological progress – that is, to increase the size of the "cake to be shared out" (if that were the case, then the cake would get bigger and the craving for self-enrichment would also be socially justifiable, at least in principle). As well as inequality and resignation – that is, the rejection of happiness as the horizon of political action – thus also constructed are the two other pillars that we can posit as the foundations of traditional agricultural civilisations in all areas of the planet, notwithstanding differences of religion, custom and law: the denial of practical knowledge and the censure of personal enrichment.

On closer inspection, therefore, this paradigm is rooted in an economic or "technological" factor: the mode of production. It is on this basis that a social and institutional structure is constructed (inequality) as well as a correlated notion of knowledge (one decoupled from practical utility). These are cemented together by an ideological and cultural notion that itself concerns the idea of happiness (resignation, the rejection of individual enrichment). Incidentally, to a large extent, in the preindustrial world the most unequal societies were precisely those which grew less: that was no chance thing.

The liberal-democratic ideology that permeates the industrial world is built upon a radically different paradigm: its four pillars are equality before the law, the right to happiness, useful knowledge, and the valorisation of individual enrichment. But like the paradigm of agricultural civilisation, this one, too, is founded on an economic and technological factor: the substitution of physical effort with work by machines. A new social and institutional structure is created on this basis. This structure is imbued with the postulates of (juridical) equality, and it is held together by an ideological and cultural cement that also concerns the idea of happiness: each human being's right to pursue happiness here, on this Earth.

How did the transition from one "paradigm" to the other take place? First of all, it should be clarified that this transition can only be declared complete once all four pillars of the old order, which supported each other, have been demolished and replaced with the new ones. Until this happens there is always the risk of a return to the past; such was the case of Greco-Roman civilisation, for instance, which managed to undermine only some of them (mostly thanks to Stoicism, it made progress towards the ideas of public happiness, as a goal of the polity, and equality by law; but it insisted on the denial of practical knowledge, as well as on the censure of personal enrichment).

On reviewing history, we can see that – not by chance – the initial overturning of the old order (an order consolidated over millennia) proves to

be a slow and gradual process. It takes place incrementally. This process began in medieval Europe. It was fuelled by social and demographic changes (the fall in population numbers after the plague of the fourteenth century), changes in resource-availability and in how the world was seen (thanks to geographic exploration), as well as cultural changes (culminating in Humanism and the Reformation). This unique combination of factors was in many ways fortuitous, and it succeeded in fundamentally undermining the social, institutional and cultural cement of European agricultural civilisation. At least in part of the continent, it favoured the rise of an innovative social class that challenged the old order; and unlike in the case of other episodes in the past, this time this class was not defeated. It was a class that carried forward new values, including personal enrichment, and which demonstrated its capacities by conquering territories and markets outside Europe. All this laid the bases for the great "revolution of ideas" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which definitively changed the dominant paradigm. It was this dynamism that began with the Scientific Revolution and culminated in the century of the Enlightenment. With this former revolution the idea of useful knowledge finally began to impose itself. But with the Enlightenment there took place two other decisive transformations: the notion of juridical equality made headway, and a new concept of happiness asserted itself.

With the change in the concept of happiness, the revolution of ideas reached the point of greatest rupture: it altered agents' intentionality and oriented their choices in a different way. It was thus able to ensure a change of direction, and this time a definitive one (definitive until today, at least), also in the technological and productive sphere, in the economy. It destroyed the old order forever: widening useful knowledge's field of action, ensuring that juridical equality did not remain a dead letter (as it had been for the Stoics in the Greco-Roman period, who failed to abolish slavery), but instead rose to the rank of a concrete reality. Not least for this reason, what happened in Europe during the modern era and culminated in the Enlightenment should be discussed in somewhat more detail.

4. The Enlightenment: A Revolution in Ideas

Before the modern era there were two prevalent conceptions of happiness. One, proper to monotheistic religions, argued that happiness was possible only in another life, after death: in this life people find themselves in a "vale of tears", and their earthly existence is an instrument for achieving the objective of eternal happiness – the only happiness that counts, the "real" one. Babylon fell, and so too did Rome: to use Augustine of Hippo

(St. Augustine)'s famous image, we ought to concern ourselves not with the ephemeral City of Man, but with the City of God.

The second conception is a typically Eastern one (Buddhism), although it had a strong influence also in the Mediterranean world before Christianity (we need only consider the Cynics and the Epicurean school). It instead held that it is possible to cultivate happiness – or perhaps better, serenity – on this earth, provided that we repress both the influences of the external world and our own desires. Worldly happiness must come only by ascetic means, and it is fundamentally individual; and even those who did not entirely yield to asceticism (Epicurus) still recommended remaining as distant as possible from the preoccupations of political life. In the Hellenistic era we find only one philosophical school that accepted public happiness, and even this was ascetic. This school was Stoicism. But it appears to have been unable to change the reality within which it operated, or to put into practice the principles that it enunciated (such as the abolition of slavery), because it rejected technological progress – and this was also because it was ascetic.

In pre-industrial Europe, something different occurred. It was a process that was cultural, in its essence, but also had strong ties to social and institutional dynamics. This process eventually threw both of these conceptions of happiness into crisis. It was above all the Enlightenment that sharply broke with the previous conceptions. And it made this break in a clear-cut fashion, even in the very titles of certain works: from Lodovico Antonio Muratori's *On Public Happiness* (1749) to Pietro Verri's *Meditations on Happiness* (1763) and Chevalier de Chastellux's *Essay on public happiness: investigating the state of human nature, under each of its particular appearances, through the several periods of history, to the present times* (1772). This last, moreover, was the first book that attempted to retrace a history of happiness.[10] In brief, Enlightenment thinkers posed the problem of public happiness, and in many cases did so explicitly; or even only implicitly – and here the emphasis falls on the great attention devoted to institutions that ought to improve the population's well-being and reduce abuses of power. To limit ourselves to the best-known cases, we find this in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and, even before that, in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690), and subsequently in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) and, at least at the level of a statement of principles, in the US Declaration of Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson (1776). This

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[10] The book's renown in part stems from the praise it received by Voltaire, who also sought to exalt this work in opposition to Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, which he considered little suited to the man in the street (Chastellux's book would indeed be republished in 1822 with Voltaire's notes).

last text can still today be considered a manifesto of the liberal-democratic order, with the famous words beginning its second paragraph:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

At the conceptual level, the Enlightenment was thus the movement of thought that sanctioned a new perspective in historical development: namely, to realise happiness here, on this Earth and, principally, by changing the institutions and the formal and informal rules that set the terms of human action. Common among a good part of the philosophers of the eighteenth century was the assumption that it was possible to improve the conditions of all, or at least the majority, by making the appropriate interventions: growth was not a "zero-sum game" (I win what you lose) but a "positive-sum game" (we both win, because the cake to be shared grows bigger). This was a fundamentally important intuition: and when it combined with another great novelty in modern Europe, "useful knowledge" (that is, technological progress), it began to give form to the world in which we live.

Before we move forward, however, some more details about the interpretation we are advancing may be useful. We could describe our schema as follows. In the agricultural-trading civilisation of medieval Europe, a cultural change began which resulted in a better appreciation of useful knowledge; this, in turn, favoured social and institutional change that, *when sustained over time and space*, eventually produced a further and deeper cultural change, culminating in the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. The true exceptionalism of Western Europe was that this social and institutional change could be sustained over time and space, over centuries indeed and in different and competing countries, due to the consequences of the Black Death and, later, thanks to the geographical explorations and the Reformation. For this reason, it could thus produce the above mentioned deeper cultural change. When this latter came to affect the idea of happiness, it also modified the purpose that orients human actions: this, in turn, could impose a decisive turn not only in the social and institutional sphere, but also (and without any possibility of a backward step) in the economic and technological sphere. The paradigm of the old world was definitively overthrown, in all its fundamental aspects.

To be stressed is that this schema should not be understood in a rigid sense. Indeed, in general terms the (more simplified) version of historical materialism – according to which ideology and culture are the product of

a society's material conditions – does not prove to be true; but nor does the opposite thesis of idealist inspiration (and this is also rather vulgarised) according to which it is instead ideas that forge a society's material evolution, and in the last analysis historical development itself. On closer inspection, both positions are guilty of historicism – that is, the idea that there exist inexorable laws that govern man's fate, as historicism's critic Karl Popper put it.[11] They do not much correspond to the reality of human history. This latter instead shows that there exist two-way relationships between the material sphere and the sphere of values, out of which it is difficult to make any aprioristic model. This premised, it should hopefully be clearer that our schema does not rule out the possibility of significant breakthroughs on the cultural level, and thus a certain independence of the world of ideas relative to the productive sphere, society and institutions. One example is provided by Stoic philosophy, and another by the Arab science and technology of the "golden age" between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. These breakthroughs, however, are doomed to peter out unless they are also accompanied by a profound transformation of the social and institutional dimensions. We might say that the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment had the fortune to develop in a context particularly favourable to major change, on the social and institutional as well as cultural levels. For other important movements in other historical eras this condition was lacking. For this same reason, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment also had the fortune of being able to take their challenge to its proper conclusion, which is to say, to the point of asserting a new idea of happiness: this was now possible, in real life, as the fruit of individual and collective human decisions that promoted technological progress. Fatalism and resignation were thus abandoned: rather, the human being would be the maker of his/her own destiny.

5. Where Are We? A Call for a Broader Scope of Economic History (and Economics)

What we have discussed thus far is only a hypothesis, or a plan, for further research: a preliminary outline, about an issue which deserves to be investigated in much greater depth. The issue is the relation, in history, between technological progress (and thus economic progress) and the ethi-

[11] Popper 1957. Indeed, the idea that it is impossible to determine absolute models and laws in history can be found as early as the works of the Renaissance historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540).

cal (and thus the political) dimension, viewed through the lens of the ideas of happiness. I have devoted a book to this topic, but that too – needless to say – is far from resolutive, let alone exhaustive.[12] What I can say, from my field of expertise, is that economic historians, and economists more in general, should devote much more efforts to the study of this relationship, for the past and for present times, since it is, arguably, by far the most important issue our society must deal with: the government and thus the direction of technological progress, and of economic development.

As regards the past, attempts to reconstruct and discuss the relationship between technology and economics, on the one hand, and ethics and thus the views of happiness, on the other, have usually been undertaken by philosophers or historians of thought (other than by writers of literary works). Never, by an economic historian, with the sole (modest) and recent exception that I have mentioned. This is, arguably, a serious lack: not least because economics ought to concern itself precisely with the question of how to achieve a greater individual and collective well-being, in its broadest sense; in particular, economic history should (also) help us to reconstruct the stages of this path and to evaluate its results. But all this is possible only if we establish a relation between the two terms of the above-mentioned relationship: that is, technological progress and the ethical dimension. However, since the second half of the nineteenth century even the most attentive economists, and even economic historians, have preferred to limit themselves to measuring and recounting the one side of the relationship, namely technological and economic progress. They have overlooked the questions raised by psychology, ethics, and politics, or taken them as already answered (and even this was a lot; often economics has devoted itself to refined theoretical models borrowed from static mechanics, which are as pertinent to real life, Deirdre McCloskey notes, as a game of chess).[13]

In so doing, economists and economic historians have ended up by singing the praises of humanity's "magnificent and progressive destinies" (the phrase, somewhat sarcastic, is from the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi), with ill-disguised, if not ingenuous, optimism. And fundamentally they have lost their bearings even with regard to material well-being itself, insofar as they have remained anchored to principles of rationality and optimisation that are not always reflected in real human experience, as is now clear to other social sciences.[14] For the economists of growth, of whatever

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12 Felice 2017.

13 McCloskey 2002: 44-45.

14 For example, the striking incapacity to foresee the onset of the economic crises of 1929

orientation and background, technological progress – which translates into productivity, and through this, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – is considered almost the only objective to work toward.[15] Politics and the media seem to share this assumption: namely, the need to focus on GDP, as the yardstick to measure a ruling class's, a country's, a society's success.[16] Economic history, too, has become the narration of human beings' rise in terms of their material wealth (the goods and services produced and sold on the market), from the Stone Age to the Space Era. Linear, teleological in some respects, it certainly does have variations, owing to institutions and politics, or to geography, but these do not affect the underlying confidence in it.[17]

It is fair to say that in recent decades some less orthodox economists, sometimes following in the wake of Enlightenment classics, have once again concerned themselves with human well-being, in the broadest sense, and happiness. In so doing, they have also rediscovered the usefulness of links with other sciences, from anthropology to psychology.[18] But these analyses by "happiness economists" often lack historical depth, and for this same reason tend to be limited to a decalogue of good intentions, even commonplaces at times. They hardly touch on the major questions that we see, on closer inspection, have forever posed themselves for the human community, albeit with even greater power since the Industrial Revolution: population growth; the increased opportunities and risks that stem from technological development; and the foundations of ethics (and human relations) for a society that is becoming global. Furthermore, insofar as they place emphasis on the subjective indicators of well-being, or amplify the egocentric dimension, the economics of happiness even lend themselves to being used in distorted fashion, contrary to their own stated goals.

More interesting is what is happening on the terrain of economic history. Here, there has been a certain reorientation, indeed very recent, with attempts to produce long-term analyses covering not only income but also education levels, longevity and other aspects of material well-being like

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or 2007, not to mention the almost total lack of reference to the origins and nature of wars and their impact on human well-being.

[15] E.g. Aghion and Durlauf 2005.

[16] Felice 2016.

[17] Exemplary in this regard is Maddison 2001. With reference to Europe, see also Broadberry and O'Rourke 2010a and 2010b: both devote only a handful of pages to social indicators and the evolution of living standards. Neal and Cameron 2016 is a wide-ranging and less quantitative work, but it is equally highly optimistic.

[18] For a far-reaching synthesis see Bruni and Porta 2007. Also useful is (in Italian) Bartolini 2010. These are among the contributions with fewer problems at the interpretative level.

nutrition and even political freedoms.[19] The research agenda that I advocate should take up a position within this same path. In certain respects, it should connect it into an even wider dimension, taking cues from the history of ideas and from moral and political philosophy.

If this makes sense, it is also because the other social sciences (from psychology to anthropology, from sociology to the history of culture), which have concerned themselves with these problems from different approaches, have themselves overlooked a central point: material well-being.[20] That is, they have overlooked the role that technological innovation and more generally the economic sphere are able to play in changing our culture and increasing our happiness. These latter can liberate us from "necessity" and expand the space of possibility for all human beings to fulfill their lives according to their aspirations. In fact, empirical studies seem to agree that when people are very poor, an increase in material conditions can have a great impact on their happiness. But then again, above a certain threshold (moreover, one that has been considerably surpassed in the advanced world) material well-being alone no longer suffices. This is the well-known "Easterlin paradox": as income grows, happiness at first increases as well, but at a certain point it ceases to do so, or it even diminishes (the pattern takes the form of an inverted U-curve).[21] This paradox, too, is fundamentally part of a wider cleavage between technology and ethics. Moreover, it may also undermine the prosperity that has been achieved with such great difficulty; it already did so in the past, aided by the image of happiness which certain societies – and especially totalitarian ones – cloaked themselves with.

We therefore need to take a multi-disciplinary approach. Put otherwise, economic history should be set in relation to other social disciplines, and particularly those that have concerned themselves with happiness in the past, with reference to its conceptual (more than material) and individual dimensions. This concerns moral philosophy and the history of ideas, but in certain respects also anthropology and psychology. The account that results would be, naturally, an inter-disciplinary one. It should recall, must have the ambition of being, a "total history" which matches Marc Bloch's definition of that term: a history of human experience as such, in its both

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[19] See in particular Baten 2016 and, with reference to the last two centuries, van Zanden *et al.* 2014; or the attempt, above all in the work of Leandro Prados de la Escosura, to extend Sen's capabilities approach across the long term: Prados de la Escosura 2010, 2015.

[20] Not by chance, the histories of happiness available to the reader concentrate on the philosophical level or, at most, the cultural and anthropological one: see McMahon 2006; White 2006; Bok 2011.

[21] Easterlin 1974, 1995.

psychological and material aspects, in its both economic and existential problematics, without particular constraints of time or space. As far as possible, of course. But also important is the need – indeed, the necessity – not to restrict ourselves to a single dimension, or to a single context.

Finally to be emphasised is that precisely because the material and valorial aspects of happiness are so tightly interconnected, reciprocally influencing one another, the choice of happiness as a field of study proves useful in two different ways. As can be inferred from the discussion above, here we have not only a goal to work toward, a yardstick with which to evaluate a millennia-long human experience, but also an indispensable tool of comprehension, and thus a means to reflect on the causes of historical development. Why did civilisation's path take a certain direction at a given time? Why, for example, did the Industrial Revolution begin in eighteenth-century England and not in ancient Rome, in medieval Florence, in the golden age of the Islamic world or in the Celestial Empire? More ambitious historians and economists have been tormented by such questions for a long time, and naturally so. As said, some of them have recently come to identify, precisely in the reversal of the conception of happiness – when it is considered possible in this life, and no longer through ascetic means but as a consequence of "useful knowledge" – that is, in a philosophical-cultural transformation and vision of the world (one largely coinciding with the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment), the first driver of modern growth.[22] The debate is open, of course. But we may say for certain that what should be further investigated is not only the impact of culture on economic conditions, but also the other side of the relationship: the influence that economic conditions have on ethics and culture. And, more importantly, there lacks an analysis of how these two influences interact with each other: in the past, as well as in present times.

6. Lights and Shadows

To conclude, and hopefully to strengthen our argument, we should add to the positive notes about Enlightenment and its consequences, some darker ones. Thus far, we have sung the praises of Enlightenment. But of course, things are not so simple – they never are, in history and more broadly in human affairs. From the modern world that the Enlightenment contributed to creating (more specifically, from its basic inspiration of transforming society in light of reason), there in fact emerged different and

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[22] See Mokyr 2017 and McCloskey 2016.

mutually antithetical political-ideological systems, not only the present liberal-democratic order. Not without earlier and subsequent influences, and not without a certain distortion of Enlightenment thinking, some roots of the totalitarian order of a communist type, and in certain aspects even of the Nazi one, can be found here. All these ideologies proposed reorganising society on the basis of certain arguments that they held to be scientific, for the purposes of improving the human condition – here on this Earth, even if not necessarily immediately or (in Nazism's case) to the benefit of all "races" (but only of the more "evolved" ones). And they of course also had very different outcomes.

To be stressed is that these political-ideological systems do not derive from the Enlightenment alone, but also intersect with previous and subsequent ideologies and cultural movements. For example, various strands within Christianity have had an evident influence on the liberal-democratic system (the singularity of the soul and thus the inviolability of the human person and his/her rights) and the communist one (egalitarianism and universalism). It is instead more difficult to detect any Christian inspiration within Nazism. As for subsequent influences, National Socialism indeed had roots within the Enlightenment – ones that passed via positivism and scientific racism (and even some Enlightenment thinkers were racists, from Voltaire to Thomas Jefferson) – but, as is well-known, it owed most to Romanticism, to nationalism and the theory of the Superman, all visions of the world with which Enlightenment thinking had little in common. As regards the distortions that we also mentioned, this is particularly a reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influence on totalitarian systems: it is debatable whether Rousseau was a properly Enlightenment thinker (the author had a position unto himself, to the extent that some consider him more of a proto-Romantic) and that the totalitarian-type interpretation of his writings was in fact the only possible one. But it also fair to acknowledge that, these enormous differences notwithstanding, all these three ideological movements are closely linked to the process of modern economic growth, to the idea of useful knowledge and to the ideal of earthly happiness.

It is also important to stress that these differences in the political and ethical dimensions are not only of paramount importance, as obvious: they are arguably more important today, after the onset of modern (and post-modern) economic growth, than in the past. As well-known, over the course of human history, a divide has opened up between the power that *homo sapiens* has at his disposal, and his ethical dimension: a gap between technological development and the ethical dimension of human beings, which ought to use technology to improve their living conditions. This gap has gradually widened. On the one side of this divide are the possibilities

of our intelligence, our capacity not only to imagine worlds that do not exist but now also, and increasingly, to forge them – the artificial weapons that the brain has made available to this most evolved of primates, so that it may master and transform its environment. On the other side is the real disposition toward using technological progress to improve human beings' lives, and perhaps also the lives of other sentient beings.[23]

The gap has widened with increasing rapidity over the past two centuries, since the Industrial Revolution. Technological progress has given human beings the capacity to destroy themselves, and the planet. The absence of significant change on the ethical (and therefore political) level has meant that humanity has indeed run this risk, and it is still running it today. At the same time, our increased technological potential has been employed not only in order to improve the condition of humanity and other living beings, but often to worsen it. And not just to a minor extent. Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union are paradigmatic cases in this regard, each of them being a very technologically-advanced society in comparison to the past (but often also to coeval civilizations). And we can also find examples of this in the liberal world: suffice it to consider the Great War, or the colonial exploitation.

However, we can look out at the issue from an opposite perspective. The last two centuries have seen extraordinary progress in humanity's material conditions and in its technical and scientific knowledge. This marks unprecedented progress. There are enough resources available for each person (on average) to be able to satisfy their needs. But there is also an amount of knowledge that is immeasurably greater than it was in all past eras. Added to that is the exponential rate of increase in population numbers, as average life expectancy has risen. Humans have thus become richer, more cultured, and freer. They have become more numerous, with longer lifespans. But are they also happier? If we measure happiness in terms of human rights and capabilities, overall they are. A problem, however, arises from the fact that this advancement in human rights has not been uniform in all regions. Another problem, related to the previous one but even more important, arises from the fact that such advancement has been, arguably, slower than that in technological progress.

From whatever perspective we assume, how to reconcile the two sides of the divide should become a major issue in economics.

[23] Among the early (and best) works on this, Arendt 1958.

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