

DEGROWTH AND THE PARADOXES OF HAPPINESS

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the movement of reduction and involution of happiness that started in the Age of Enlightenment and continues today: from the emergence of the idea of happiness to the reduction to its economic definition (GDP per capita), then from the criticism of wealth indicators to the rediscovery of the goal of *buen vivir*, of “frugal affluence”, of joyful sobriety, in the context of “prosperity without growth”.

Keywords: Happiness, GDP per Capita, *Buen Vivir*, Frugal Affluence, Degrowth.

Une intolérance démente nous ceinture. Son cheval de Troie est le mot *bonheur*. Et je crois cela mortel.

RENÉ CHAR ¹

The paradoxes of happiness become clear if one thinks about the contrast between the ambiguity of the expression “Happy degrowth”, which has been (wrongly) attributed to me but was rather suggested by Maurizio Pallante, and the famous words of Saint-Just (1767-1794): “Happiness is a new idea in Europe”. It is obvious that Pallante did not come up with his manifesto of happy degrowth because happiness is a new idea related to the agenda of modernity (which resulted in growth societies – i.e. the greatest happiness of the greatest number), but because happiness represents a universal and transhistorical aspiration.

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¹ [A mad intolerance surrounds us. The word Happiness is its Trojan horse. I believe it is mortal] CHAR 1965: 115.

If we have to take Saint-Just's declaration seriously, it is because aspirations emerged just before the French Revolution that were different from the previous celestial *bliss* and public *felicity*. The point was to start looking for material, individual prosperity – a preview of sorts of the GDP per capita of today's economists whose ethical value is pretty much zero. We must therefore look into this semantic disgrace: words may allow us to communicate and to comprehend each other, but they can also be a trap, a source of misunderstanding. It might be difficult to pretend that the pursuit of happiness only appears in the 17th or 18th century, but it is clear that the Greeks' *eudaimonia*, meaning more or less the good life and the happy city, has little to do with the happiness of Locke and Bentham. At the very least, we should speak of an Ancient happiness and a modern happiness, just like Benjamin Constant of the freedom of the Ancients and modern liberty.

One could hypothesize that every human community and every one of the members of each community aim to achieve a "good" life. Let us suppose (which is most probably wrong) that this expression, the "good life", is neutral, that it merely designates *pluriversal* and transhistorical aspirations; different cultures, different languages, different eras have come up with different concepts, such as *gluck*, *bonheur*, *felicità*, happiness, etc., but also *bamtaare* (pular), *sumak kawsay* (quechua), and so on. All these expressions are what the Indo-Catalan philosopher and theologian Raimon Panikkar has called homeomorphic equivalents of the "good life".² "Happiness", in all its European variants, but most notably in the French word "bonheur", certainly constituted the early-modern form of the "good life". That question is indeed quite interesting, but in this article, we will not look into the way in which the good life first appeared in the Medieval *beatitudo*. Rather, we will investigate the double movement of reduction and involution of happiness that started in the Age of Enlightenment and continues today: from the emergence of the idea of happiness to the reduction to its economic definition (GDP per capita), then from the criticism of wealth indicators to the rediscovery of the goal of *buen vivir*, of "frugal affluence", of joyful sobriety in a context of "prosperity without growth", as Tim Jackson put it.³ In the end, if we take René Char at his word, we should perhaps

² Raimon Panikkar explains that homeomorphic equivalents are "not just literal translations, nor do they play the role the words play in its native language, but seek to serve a similar (analogous) function to the supposed one assigned to philosophy. It's not, therefore, a conceptual equivalent, but a functional one, that is, a third-degree analogy. It is not looking for the same function, but for a function that is equivalent to the original notion in the corresponding cosmovision". PANIKKAR 1998: 104.

³ JACKSON 2009.

add “happiness” to the list of “toxic words” that Ivan Illich came up with, next to Development, Environment, Equality, Aid, Market, Need, etc.⁴

FROM THE EMERGENCE OF “HAPPINESS” TO ITS ECONOMIC REDUCTION

In his report about a new social policy, dated 13 Ventôse (March 13th) 1794 – i.e. four months before Thermidor and his death by guillotine at the age of 27, alongside Robespierre –, Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just writes: “Europe must learn that you do not want a single miserable person nor a single oppressor on French lands. Furthermore, may this example spread to the entire earth and propagate the love of virtue and happiness! Happiness is a new idea in Europe”.⁵ If happiness is a new idea in Europe, it is because of the abrupt change created by what was called at the time the “Republic of Letters”, which subsequently transformed the lives of the peoples and was disseminated throughout Europe; “Zeitgeist”, Hegel called it. This cosmopolitan movement, the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*, *Les Lumières*, *l'Illuminismo*) was a radical change from the Christian *oecumene*, the ideal good life that clerics called *beatitudo*. *Beatitudo* was so spiritual as to almost be celestial, immaterial; it was also collective – the “Communion of Saints” that Luther famously repudiated. Monks and hermits, who would write on their door “*O beata solitudo, o sola beatitudo*”, could only, in this vale of tears, anticipate and look forward to it...

Semantically, the words for “happiness” in Indo-European languages tend to vary based on cultural and historical context. They cannot be used interchangeably. The French word, “*bonheur*”, only appears in the 13th century and is generally considered an equivalent of the Italian “*felicità*”; however, French also has the literal translation “*félicité*”. When, in Naples, thinkers of the *Illuminismo* debated about “*felicità*”, they considered it to be a public state: it didn't mean the *individual* pursuit of prosperity but the Prince's virtue of “*buon governo*”. It was, in a way, a collective, earthly bliss. One cannot yet achieve salvation all alone. As we go from Antonio Genovese's Neapolitan school to Adam Smith's Scottish school, we go from public felicity to the felicity *of the public*. The rise of happiness as a “new idea” accompanied the rise of Capitalist ideology as the basis of an individualistic society and an ethically neutral state to avoid deadly conflicts. Each member of society (and not religion or the state) had to provide their own definition of the good life to prevent religion wars. As a result, the common

⁴ SACHS 1992.

⁵ SAINT-JUST 1996: 61.

good vanished, because there was no more good, but also because nothing was common anymore. *Buon governo* simply became “good governance”. In the Modern Era, happiness is always associated with money. As economists like to say, money is “minted freedom”, it is a tool to achieve anything possible in an integrally mercantile world. Therefore, happiness means earning as much as possible. For Americans, this is obvious. Even if one is willing to admit that money can’t buy happiness, there is no one who will deny that the lack of money results in unhappiness. In a megacapitalistic world, in global capitalism, this idea is dominant; everything local having been destroyed, it is literally made true. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Morals being excluded, modern happiness looks nothing like the good life of yore. Wealth and happiness are the same thing. The rise of happiness as a “new idea” is connected to the colonization of the mind by economics. The good life has become nothing more than the GDP index, and economics literature makes this abundantly clear – and the ethical about-face that made it possible occurred some time between the 16th and the 17th centuries.

The Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number with the Highest GDP Per Capita

It is perhaps not superfluous to mention the context of Saint-Just’s famous aphorism. To quote the great philosopher Jacques Ellul: “When Saint-Just famously proclaimed that happiness is a new idea in Europe, [...] what was actually new, and there is no doubt that this is what Saint-Just intended, was the means: industrialization, wealth spent on consumer goods when it could have been shared. Those are the means that seemed to him, just as the Revolution called for Equality and Liberty, capable of making happiness a *concrete* and *possible* idea. It was not merely an idea anymore, but an achievable goal”.⁶ Saint-Just was a disciple of Rousseau, and therefore, for him, happiness could not be dissociated from virtue. Yet, it remains that the material and individual dimensions of the GDP per capita of the economists are already there. As Ellul pointed out, it is all about the consumption of manufactured products. The Thermidoreans may have mocked the moralism of “this scatter-brained youth of 26, who still smells of classroom dust”, who told them “smugly ‘it is not the happiness of Persepolis, but of Sparta, that we are promising’”.⁷

Somewhat cynically, and anticipating post-Thermidor hedonism, Voltaire shed a light on this change of context: “Towards 1750, the nation,

⁶ ELLUL 2013: 183.

⁷ Report of the commission in charge of examining the papers of Robespierre and his accomplices, made by E.B. Courtois, deputy of the department of Aube, on 16 Nivôse an III.

having had its fill of moral reflections and theological disputes about grace and convulsions, finally started to talk about corn”.⁸ In the Prince’s mind, doctor Quesnay and the Physiocratic doctrine replaced Bossuet and his theology. Happiness as material prosperity is thus a direct consequence of the *wealth of nations*. Indeed, in that sense, it is a new idea that appears in Europe at that time – but mostly in England and in France. The *ideology of happiness* is closely linked to the ideology of Progress that is being developed at the same time (e.g. Turgot, Condorcet); each gives the other strength and support. Besides, happiness contains its own sense of *progression*. Unlike the “blissful life” of the Ancients, happiness is not static. It is not the good life; it is the *best life*. Locke sets the “pursuit of happiness” as a goal, and after him, Bentham and many others seek “the greatest happiness”. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America in 1776 – a supposedly virgin land where the ideals of Enlightenment can be realized – takes inspiration from them and states that life is about: “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”.⁹ Alain de Benoist points out that “For Liberalistic authors, the ‘pursuit of happiness’ can be defined as the possibility of always maximizing one’s own best interests” – and “interest is, first and foremost, a material advantage that must be calculable and quantifiable to be fully appreciated – that is, it must be possible to assess it using the universal equivalent, money”.¹⁰ The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1793 is even more explicit: “The aim of society is the common welfare [*le bonheur commun*]”. The promise of bliss in the hereafter or the spectacle of the king’s prosperity (or even of the nation) do not satisfy the members of a bourgeois society (the *Gesellschaft*, as opposed to Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft*). The ambition of modernity, which will eventually lead to the growth society, is *the greatest happiness of the greatest number*. Several thinkers of the Enlightenment formulated it more or less simultaneously, from Cesare Beccaria to Jeremy Bentham to Francis Hutcheson. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith claims prosperity can be achieved through laws that will “enrich the people and the sovereign” – that is, through following the precepts set down in his book.¹¹ For Smith, this goal, while utilitarian, is in no way immoral. Even if the agents do not want to do good

⁸ VOLTAIRE, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, quoted by J.-C. Michéa (LASCH and CASTORIADIS 2012: 69).

⁹ “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.

¹⁰ BENOIST 2019: 62.

¹¹ He writes: “No society can prosper and be happy if the greatest part of its members is poor and miserable”.

but seek only to further their own interests, the result will inevitably be welfare for all, thanks in particular to the trickle-down effect – a metaphor which recently found new life under a new guise, the *lead climber* [*premier de cordée*]. Good governance simply means, then, to help this invisible hand along. A good life and justice (as defined by John Rawls) will be achieved as inequalities are reduced.

The need for growth societies to reach this goal of modernity was rightly highlighted by Jacques Ellul. He remarks that “the ideology of happiness requires a growth of welfare consumption by creating new needs. [...] But as consumption grows, the ideology of happiness must become stronger to counter the absurdity of the emptiness of the cycle. Without welfare, happiness seems illusory, pointless, it is powerless. Welfare is the only way to happiness”.¹² As Olivier Menéndez pointed out: “It’s not a problem of saving the soul anymore, as was taught by Christianity, or a problem of moral behaviour as believed by eudaemonists; it is simply a question of acquiring enough commodities to make life concretely pleasant and comfortable”.¹³ The right to be happy is therefore an individual right. The pursuit of happiness supposes working, producing, selling, eating one’s full, avoiding poverty, buying property, becoming rich, saving, giving inheritance, etc. And mostly, it supposes making as much money as possible...

Going from happiness to GDP per capita supposes a triple reduction – more explicitly so with the English word *happiness* or the French word *bonheur*, less so with the ambiguous Italian *felicità*: 1) earthly happiness is reduced to material well-being, and material is to be understood in its purely physical sense: goods. Things, objects, gadgets, but also, by extension, concrete, paid-for services. 2) Material well-being is reduced to statistical possession, i.e. the quantity of goods and services produced and consumed. The good feeling that results from comfort is nothing more than the objective evaluation of what is owned. 3) The sum of goods and services is calculated in a way that does not take into account the ill effects their production had on the environment, natural or man-made. In particular, the *hidden costs* of this lifestyle, called negative externalities by economists, are not taken into account.

This first point was clarified quite precisely in the debate between Thomas Robert Malthus and Jean-Baptiste Say. Malthus began by stating:

¹² ELLUL 1998: 93. To drive his point across, he adds: “Happiness is the ideological value of welfare. It is its legitimized and glorified form. But without welfare, happiness, for anyone who is realistic, is nothing but lies and mockery”. *Ibid.*, 94.

¹³ MENÉNDEZ 2019: 13.

“If the exertion which produces a song, whether paid for or not, be productive labour, why should the exertion, which produces the more valuable result of instructive and agreeable conversation, be excluded? Why should we exclude the efforts necessary to discipline our passions, and to become obedient to all the laws of God and man, the most valuable of all labours? Why, indeed, should we exclude any exertion, the object of which is to obtain happiness or avoid pain, either present or future?”¹⁴ This is true, but as he himself remarks, this would immediately lead to the self-destruction of economics as a specific field. “And yet under this description may be comprehended the exertions of every human being during every moment of his existence”.¹⁵ In the end, he agrees with the simplistic opinion of Say: “If we then wish, with M. Say, to make political economy a positive science, founded on experience, and capable of making known its results, we must be particularly careful in defining its principal term, to embrace only those objects, the increase or decrease of which is capable of being estimated; and the line which it seems most natural and useful to draw, is that which separates material from immaterial objects”.¹⁶ With this definition, we have somewhat moved away from the happiness described by the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the colonization of the mind by economics makes it easy to disregard, at least for a time, this difference. In accord with Jean-Baptiste Say, who defines happiness in terms of consumption, Ian Tinbergen suggested renaming the GDP (Gross National Product) as GNH (Gross National Happiness).¹⁷ This arrogant claim of the Dutch economist is quite simply a return to basics: happiness is materialized in the form of welfare, which is a euphemism for possession and, therefore, it would be vain to attempt to find any other indicator of wealth and happiness. GDP is happiness, quantified.

But then, after two centuries of growth and a colossal increase in production, we should all be immensely happy. Obviously, it is not the case. Indeed, as Jean Gadrey reminds us, quite rightly, government accountants, when they are questioned about this, reply that “GDP and growth do not measure welfare, that is not what they are for”.¹⁸ Nevertheless, if the public is deceived, it is because everything leads to that. From politicians to the media, in the Olympic games of growth, the list of winners of GDP per capita is always presented as the world’s race to welfare, if not to hap-

¹⁴ MALTHUS 1821: 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁶ MALTHUS 1836: 33.

¹⁷ TINBERGEN 1972.

¹⁸ GADREY 2004. See also GADREY and JANY-CATRICE 2005.

piness. The confusion is to be expected, given that the GDP per capita is always clearly linked, in the realm of imagination as well as in facts, to the standard of living and the wage levels. We have been “formatted” to see in it a measure of our well-being, insofar as it is strictly proportional to our commodity consumption. Jean Fourastié defines standard of living in this significant manner: “[It] is measured by the quantity of goods and services that can be bought with the average national income”.¹⁹

By having as a stated objective of modern societies the *greatest happiness*, the philosophers of the Enlightenment also include in it the *absence of limitations* of economics. The point is not only to live well, but to live better, always better. Quantification becomes critical to determine the achievement of this unachievable goal.²⁰ As far as economic doxa is concerned, money can, in fact, buy happiness.

The Western Ethical Turning Point

In the supermodern era, transgressions are systematic, and that has its origins in the momentous ethical change that took place during the Enlightenment and had been prepared by the Reform. Western society is the only society in history to have unleashed what all other societies have tried, not always successfully, to suppress: essentially, what Spinoza called the sad passions (ambition, greed, envy, resentment, selfishness) – Freud called them the aggressive passions, and said they were responsible for the discontent of civilization. In today’s late modernity, transgression is almost seen as a sort of ethical paradox, perhaps even an antinomy. As Max Weber clearly showed, the Reform had a strong individualistic component and thus, unwittingly, it facilitated the appearance of the spirit of capitalism. However, a great agent of this change is Bernard de Mandeville and his famous *Fable of the Bees*. The conclusion of the tale, that claims that the hive prospered because of the individual private vices of the bees, caused a scandal, but progressively became the amoral, even immoral creed of Western societies, an image of Adam Smith’s invisible hand. Modernity did believe, and still believes (or pretends to believe) that private vices and interests, channelled into the economy, become public virtues and contribute, even if those concerned do not realize it, to common welfare. Therefore, one can – one should indulge them. This is taught in many business schools (and not only there!): *Greed is good*.

¹⁹ FOURASTIÉ 1958: 800.

²⁰ By adding “of the greatest number”, the prophets of modernity are setting a paradoxical double objective, as has been pointed out many times: one cannot increase simultaneously both the happiness and the number. One must choose.

Thanks to the trickle-down effect, we are already on our way to the greatest happiness for the greatest number; the consumer society, Keynesianism and Fordism will see to it. Saint-Just may have thought, as a fervent admirer of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that virtuous behaviour was just as necessary to achieve the happiness of the people as collective and individual material comfort, but that changed as the economic doctrine gradually surpassed the social doctrine. Adam Smith considered that virtue was suspect because it interfered with interests; for Hayek, virtue was simply harmful. George Perec's book *Les Choses*, published in 1965 (and thus contemporary with Jean Baudrillard's sociological study *Le Système des objets*), can serve as evidence. The word "*bonheur*" is used often by the protagonists, but it has for them no moral connotation; happiness comes from the accumulation of consumer goods. Baudrillard, in his book, even talks about "the terrorist conspiracy of happiness".²¹

Western economic imperialism globalized this conspiracy. However, growth and development in the Northern hemisphere may have given the illusion, especially in the thirty years after the war (1945-1975) known in France as "*Les trente glorieuses*", that a certain form of justice could be attained by the statistical rise of the average standard of living, and thus to realize, in a way, the *good life*. But things went differently in the Southern hemisphere. There, Raimon Panikkar's joke sadly proved to be true: "When Americans – and, by extension, all Westerners – say *justice*, we should in fact hear *just us*".

Today, in the North as well, this quantified happiness is failing and one of the imaginary pillars of the globalized Western society is crumbling. Some are looking into other concepts of the *good life*, but without questioning the foundations of growth societies. Barring the invention of a society of *frugal affluence*, it is unlikely that they will find anything.

Criticizing the Wealth Indicators and Rediscovering "Buen Vivir"

Growth society, whose program coincides with that of modernity, did not keep its promises. Access to quality goods is limited, mass consumption does not bring about the expected happiness and, as a bonus, an ecological crash is almost a certainty. Should we not acknowledge, then, the failure of modern happiness as "*good life*"? Should we not listen to the suggestions of those economists who are critical, should we not hear the resurgent voices of the indigenous peoples, should we not come back to the ancient wisdom that says that one must impose limits on one's needs, find afflu-

²¹ PEREC 1965. BAUDRILLARD 1968.

ence in frugality, in order to build a sustainable future? Those are the objective of degrowth.

Dreams into Nightmares. The Failure of Quantified Happiness in the Northern Hemisphere

To plan for and to build a society of frugal affluence, to reach a new form of *good life*, we must first deconstruct the quantified happiness ideology of modernity. In other words, we must decolonize the mind of the GDP per capita, we must understand how it came about.

It's easy to invalidate the claim that happiness and GDP per capita are the same thing and to show that the Gross National or Domestic Product (GDP or GNP) only measure commercial "wealth", since GDP does not include off-market transactions (housework, volunteer work, undeclared work), since expenses related to the repairs of damages caused by growth (uncertainty, pollution, stress, health problems) are counted as positive, since negative externalities and damage to the environment are not deducted. In other words, "anything that can be sold and to which a monetary value can be attributed will increase the GDP and growth, whether or not they add to the individual and collective well-being".²² Furthermore, "many activities and resources that contribute to well-being are not counted, just because they are not commercialized or have no direct financial production costs".²³ It has been said that GDP measures output but not outcomes.

Perhaps we should go back to Robert Kennedy's beautiful speech (probably written by his expert John Kenneth Galbraith), delivered just a few days before his assassination: "Gross National Product counts air pollution and cigarette advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for the people who break them. It counts the destruction of the redwoods and the loss of our natural wonders in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armoured cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities [...]. Yet the Gross National Product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages [...]. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning [...], it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile".²⁴

²² GADREY and JANY-CATRICE 2005: 18.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Quoted by RASMUSSEN 2004.

Thus, the society of economic growth does not give the greatest happiness to the greatest number. That's because, in the words of Arnaud Berthoud, "Everything that makes the joy of being together, the delight of the social theatre in which all show themselves to others in all places in the world, all that is not a part of the economic sphere and belongs instead in the sphere of morals, of psychology or of politics. The only joy that is expected of consumption is separated from the happiness of others, from collective happiness".²⁵

Herman Daly showed that, with the *Genuine Progress Indicator*, at a certain point, the cost of growth (restoration and compensation expenses) generally exceed its advantages.²⁶ This tends to prove Ivan Illich's intuition right, when he said: "The growth rate of frustration largely exceeds that of production". We are facing this sophistic provocation used by journalists in every country when the economy is growing: "The economy is doing fine; the citizens are not".²⁷ This is particularly true of the current phase of globalization, since the famous trickle-down effect of development has actually been *trickling up* (increasing inequality).

If we attempt, by going one step further, to go from well-being to happiness, the gap, inasmuch as we are able to measure it, is mercilessly large. In his remarkable book, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, Robert E. Lane lists all the possible theoretical biases used by accountants to try and measure the evolution of individual happiness (*subjective well-being*) in capitalist societies. He concludes that as the material standard of living has progressed in the United States, *real* happiness has undoubtedly declined for the majority of Americans. This drop can essentially be attributed to the actual degradation of fundamental human relations, or *companionship*.²⁸ Many surveys about subjective well-being versus statistical commodities consumption have confirmed the validity of this observation. The General Assembly of the United Nations, mindful of the ever-growing gap between the GDP per capita indices and the subjective well-being of the population, held on April 2nd, 2012, its first High Level Meeting on "Happiness and Well-being" and officially created the Gross Global Happiness index and an

²⁵ BERTHOUD 2005: 38.

²⁶ The formula is as follows: Income weighted private consumption + Value of non-market services generating welfare – Private defensive cost of natural deterioration – Cost of deterioration of nature and natural resources + Increase in capital stock and balance of international trade.

²⁷ In the same vein, this title from *Le Monde*: "Le Japon va mieux, les Japonais moins bien" ["Japan is doing better, the Japanese are doing worse"] *Le Monde Économie*, November 18th, 2003.

²⁸ LANE 2000. See also MICHEA 2003: 162.

annual World Happiness Report. It also named March 20th International Day of Happiness.

A British NGO, the *New Economics Foundation*, publishes a *Happy Planet Index* by cross-referencing the results of surveys on subjective well-being, life expectancy and ecological footprint, and in doing so, completely overturns the classical order of GDP per capita and the Human Development Index. In 2006, Vanuatu, Columbia and Costa Rica came in first, while Italy was 66th, Germany 81st, Spain 78th, Japon 96th, France 129th and the United States 150th. In 2009, Costa Rica was first, followed by the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Guatemala; the United States were 114th.²⁹ This apparent paradox can be explained by the fact that so-called “developed” societies depend on a massive production of decline, that is, a loss of value and a general degradation of disposable commodities that become garbage and disposable men, rejected or fired after use, be they CEOs, managers, unemployed, homeless, etc. To link growth to a rise in well-being and still more so to happiness is, in the words of Jean Baudrillard, “an extraordinary collective bluff [...] a white magic spell”.³⁰

The Return of the Repressed: The Civil Economy of Happiness

To remedy this failure, we are constantly looking for new indices that would restore the aspiration for a good life contained within the original idea of happiness. The King of Bhutan, who studied in English universities, realized that the development of a people was not a purely economic question but had also to take into account such important factors as good governance, population health, quality of education, of the environment and of the local culture. In a way, he listened to Robert Kennedy and had the goal of raising the GNH (Gross National Happiness) written into the constitution – thus recalling, somewhat humorously, Ian Tinbergen’s suggestion, but reversing it. By the same token, all sorts of alternative indices projects, often quite hyped by politicians or the media, flourish, looking to “reconsider wealth”.³¹ Economists working in academia (Richard Easterlin or Daniel Kahneman in the United States, for example), aware of broken promises and always seeking new ways to make a name for themselves and for new dissertation topics to suggest, have created the field of *happiness economics*.

²⁹ www.happyplanetindex.org. See also RETICO 2009. The results are not always a complete surprise, as Russia, Estonia, the Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe and most subsaharan African countries came in last.

³⁰ BAUDRILLARD 1970: 42.

³¹ VIVERET 2003.

This is how came about the project of “civil economics” or “economics of happiness”, mainly developed by a group of Italian economists (Stefano Zamagni, Luigino Bruni, Benedetto Gui, Leonardo Becchetti, among others), based on an Aristotelian tradition present in Italy well into the 18th century and critical of individualism. Stefano Bartolini, with his *Manifesto for Happiness*, comes close to the *end of economics* envisioned by the degrowth movement.³² Civil economics inevitably reminds one of the “publica felicità” of Antonio Genovesi and the Neapolitan schools of the Enlightenment, which had been forgotten following the triumph of Scottish economics. Earthly *felicity* created by a good government (*buon governo*) working towards the common good was, after all, the main topic of reflection for the Neapolitan economists. While including free market and competition and the commercial pursuit of self-interests, these thinkers did not renounce the teachings of Thomism; they were perfectly aware of the “felicity paradox” that the American economist Richard Easterlin rediscovered. “È legge dell’universo, wrote Genovesi, che non si può far la nostra felicità senza far quelle degli altri” (“It is the law of the universe that one cannot be happy without making others happy as well”). After two centuries of wanton destruction of our planet, thanks to the “good governance” of the invisible hand and self-interest elevated to the rank of a divinity, economists have finally rediscovered these elementary truths that poets and philosophers have always known.³³ André Gide wrote in *The Fruits of the Earth*: “I am happy when I make others happy. I need other people’s happiness to be happy myself”. Furthermore, cognitive science has stressed the importance of “relational goods” in the enjoyment of life experiences, hence confirming the interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary value of the economics of happiness.³⁴

Smith concedes the point: “As far as the real happiness of humans is concerned, the poor are in no way inferior to those who seem so far above them” – but the field of economics that he founded is not be able to define happiness nor to confirm its realization. For economists, it was even thought unseemly to broach the subject, especially in France. Ellul writes that “well-being has become progressively so important that, conversely,

³² BARTOLINI 2010.

³³ Daniel Kahneman even received the 2004 Nobel Prize simply for putting these truths into scientific terms: he showed that a rise in income always required an equal increase in consumer spending in order to maintain the same level of satisfaction, a phenomenon which he called the *treadmill effect*.

³⁴ “Il benessere della persona è fatto coincidere con il soddisfacimento di bisogni di tipo materiale, un’identificazione contestata dalle neuroscienze, propense piuttosto a esaltare i beni relazionali e l’armonia interiore, elementi che hanno a che fare con la bellezza, la gratuità, la generosità, la creatività, il saper dare senso alla vita e non con il possesso o il consumo” GUSMEROLI 2018: 59.

we are tempted to minimize the importance of happiness – a notion that is vague, uncertain, complex, comprised of relics of a regrettable subjectivity and romantic sensibilities. Contemporary sociologists and economists prefer using well-being (standard of living, lifestyle, etc.) because it can be calculated, analysed, even put into numbers”.³⁵ That is probably one of the reasons why Tinbergen’s suggestion was not well accepted – and not, as has been said, because it tends to assimilate “possession” to “well-being”. In the 1970’s – that is, probably too soon –, Philippe d’Iribarne and the CEREBE (“Centre d’études et de recherches en économie du bien-être”, Centre for study and research in welfare economics) attempted to include happiness in economic evaluations, but the endeavour did not amount to much and was abandoned a few years later. Advertising then deceptively hijacked the notion. “Happiness is part of our DNA”, claimed the Coca-Cola company; it even created a “Happiness Institute” in 2010 to help finance public research centres, such as the CNRS, to develop this new field. There is today a sort of “happywashing” very similar to greenwashing. The frustration of the users, needless to say, only seems to grow.

Unsurprisingly, the serious theoreticians of happiness economics end up redeeming a certain kind of sobriety that agrees with the ideas of the simple living movement.³⁶ This civil economy of *joie de vivre* agrees fully with the objectives of a degrowth society, even though it carries a double ambiguity. On the one hand, it sees what it hopes to abolish – economics as calculating rationality, this moribund body – and it looks the other way. On the other, it does away with the border between what is inside and outside of economics, and thus leaves an opening for a form of economics, an even more overbearing form, a pan-economics, to rush into.³⁷ To try to calculate what cannot be calculated will obviously lead nowhere. As the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis liked to say: “I’d rather get a new friend than a new

³⁵ ELLUL 1998: 93.

³⁶ “Indeed, I am quite convinced that there is no happiness, writes Bruni, without a certain form of self-determined poverty (i.e. a choice to free oneself from commodities, power...). That sort of poverty is one of the few injuries to which is truly attached a blessing”, *ibid.*: 179). Ultimately, though, to have an impact, it cannot be a personal choice, it must be a collective project.

³⁷ “As far as we are concerned, write Jean Gadrey and Florence Jany-Catrice, we do not find very exciting the idea that it is necessary, in order to be heard when suggesting an unorthodox, economically speaking, view of wealth and progress, to give an economic appreciation of all non-economic variables. Perhaps we should interpret this contradiction as the proof that the victory of economics is complete, that it has become the supreme value, the only credible justification for working towards justice, community or the environment. To justify, for example, the value of volunteering (that is, the social contribution of gifts) in terms of its monetary value, in terms, whether we like it or not, of its market value, only shows our incapacity to uphold any other kind of values”. GADREY and JANY-CATRICE 2005: 49.

car”. Sure, but how much is a new friend worth?³⁸ That’s why economists of the happiness school (and all those who believe in another kind of economics) can never be taken seriously by *real* economists while not managing to represent a truly alternative paradigm. Once we go beyond the limits of calculating rationality, we are not talking about economics anymore, but about Mauss’ “total social fact” – and its study can be called anthropology, sociology, or maybe just philosophy.

A New Hope from the Southern Hemisphere

As it is in the Southern hemisphere that the deceptive and deliberate confusion between the *good life* and welfare, life based on economics paradigms, was most conspicuous, it is fitting that a new hope arise from there. “The French talk about *development*, says Thierno Ba, the director of a Senegalese NGO. But is that what the people want? No. What they want is best expressed by the Pulaar word “*bamtaare*” – which means an interdependent community, a harmonious society in which every individual, rich or poor, can find fulfilment”.³⁹ It is quite interesting to realize that this notion is very similar to the principles behind the emphatic demands of the Native populations of the Americas, as an alternative to economic development. According to F. Huanacuni Mamani, “In Bolivia, the Aymara expression “*suma quamaña*” is used; in Ecuador, the Kichwa “*sumak kawsay*” – both mean “to live well”, “to live fully”, “to live in harmony and in balance with all the cycles of Mother Earth, of the cosmos, of life and all forms of existence”.⁴⁰ The anthropologist Françoise Morin points out that “the Aymara expression implies that some conviviality is necessary in order to live in harmony with all, that sharing with others is better than competing with them. Both concepts are different from the Western notion of “living better”, which emphasizes individualism, indifference to others, the pursuit of profit and hence, a necessary exploitation of men and nature”.⁴¹ Just like for the *bamtaare* of the Peul people, it makes no sense to suppose that non-Western cultures have the same aspiration to the “pursuit of happiness”. We must leave economics to find a *social form* of the “good life”. The good

³⁸ “Let’s say it even more clearly: the price to pay for freedom is the destruction of economics as a central value and, in fact, as the only value. Is that so expensive? As far as I’m concerned, not at all; I’d much rather have a new friend than a new car. This is a subjective preference; I don’t deny it. But ‘objectively’? I’ll let political scientists ‘invent’ (fake) consumerism as the supreme value” CASTORIADIS 2010.

³⁹ CIMADE 1996: 43.

⁴⁰ Quoted by MORIN 2013: 230.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: 230.

life is linked to a good society, and a good society is not necessarily the one that gives out means of existence, it is the one that gives a reason to live, that gives *meaning*.

To retrace the steps that economics made us take, we went from *happiness*, earthly form of bliss, to GDP per capita, by reducing subjective well-being to possession of commodities, measured by the amount of goods consumed per person, with no regards to others or to nature. However, this *metanoia* (regression/regret) must not stop there, as it would allow the myth of infinite progress to continue. To rediscover a sense of measure, should we not first end this obsession with numbers and get rid of economics for the sake of a sense of community? Unconventional economists may say that what matters cannot be counted, but the Natives of Bolivia and Ecuador were more consistent and enshrined the goal of *buen vivir* in their new constitutions: the “good life” can be rediscovered in communal frugality.

More than ever, it is a shared aspiration to discover, or rediscover the *joie de vivre* that, for most people in our societies, is supposed to be what the ambiguous word “*happiness*” means. The growth society failed us, thus forcing us to redefine the “good life” as “frugal affluence in social solidarity”, in accordance with the radical change demanded by the degrowth project. The idea of degrowth came about almost randomly, because a segment of the political milieu and critics of development felt it was necessary to put an end to the doublespeak of sustainable development. All those who believed in the edification of a society that was truly an alternative to our current ecologically unsustainable, ethically doubtful and socially unbearable society quickly rallied to its banner. The word “degrowth” has become a *performative fiction*, used to mean the need to break with the cycle of productivity; it is not originally a concept, much less a symmetrical opposite of growth. It is a political watchword, a provocation, that principally aims to help restore a sense of limits. In particular, degrowth does not look for recessions or negative growth; the word should not be taken literally. Degrowth for degrowth’s sake would be just as absurd as growth for growth’s sake. Of course, degrowthers want to raise quality of life, of the air and water, and to restore a great many things that growth for growth’s sake has destroyed. Perhaps the word “*ungrowth*”, as in “*ungodly*”, would be more appropriate. And this is exactly what this is about: giving up a faith, a religion, the religion of progress and development. We want to become growth and economics atheists. Therefore, degrowth intends to create a rift both linguistic and factual, to decolonize the mind and help build a new world. The construction of an alternative society requires the end of the infernal cycle of unlimited growth of needs and products – and of the endless frustration it breeds; it also requires to restrain selfishness,

i.e. individualism resulting from massive uniformity. The first objective can be achieved by self-limitation leading to frugal affluence; the second, by the rehabilitation of the spirit of giving and the promotion of conviviality.

This is a radical project. The point is not to end a “bad” economy and put a “good” one in its stead, to have “good” growth or “good” development by declaring them ecological or social or “fair trade”, by throwing in some state regulations or some notions of giving and solidarity. The point is to *get out* of economics. Generally, this statement is not well understood because most people are not aware that economics is a religion. Of course, like all human societies, a degrowth society would have to organise the production of its life, which means using natural resources rationally; the consumption of material goods and services would be somewhat akin to those Stone Age affluent societies that, according to Marshall Sahlins, never had an economy.⁴² It will not resort to the straightjacket of scarcity, of needs, of economics calculations, of the *homo oeconomicus*. These imaginary foundations of the institution of economics must be called into question. In truth, our so-called affluent society is really a society of shortages and scarcity of essential things – pure air, naturally drinkable water, green spaces, housing and, of course, time and conviviality. Going back to frugality, by contrast, would make it possible to rebuild a truly affluent society on the basis of what Ivan Illich called “modern subsistence”, meaning “the way of life in a post-industrial economy in which people have managed to reduce their reliance on markets by protecting politically an infrastructure in which techniques and tools are mainly used to create goods that are not and cannot be quantified by the professional maker of needs”.⁴³

Conviviality is yet another element that can be used to find a way out of the aporia of reaching beyond modernity. Just as it promotes the recycling of material waste, degrowth must take an interest in the rehabilitation of *wasted people*. The ideal solution for waste is not to produce any; similarly, the best solution for wasted people is to have a society that doesn’t create them. A *decent* or convivial society should not exclude anyone. Ivan Illich borrowed the word “conviviality” from the great 18th century French gastronome Brillat-Savarin (*The Physiology of Taste*); it is meant to weave back together the sense of community that has been unravelled by “economic horrors” (Rimbaud). It reintroduces in social interactions the spirit of giving, and thus rediscovers Aristotle’s *philia* (“fellowship”) and Christianity’s

⁴² “In traditional societies, [...] structurally, the economy does not exist” SALHINS 1976: 118. “There is nothing that looks like an economy in external reality until we construct such an object” DUMONT 1977: 33.

⁴³ ILLICH 1977: 87-88.

agape.⁴⁴ In a way, this is also what Marcel Mauss said, in a 1924 article: “It may seem old-fashioned and cliché to say this”, he wrote, but we should go back “to the old Greek and Latin concepts of *caritas*, so poorly translated today as *charity*, to *philia*, to *koinomia*, to this necessary ‘fellowship’ that is the delicate essence of the city”.⁴⁵

In conclusion, degrowth is an opportunity, an invitation to find another possible world. It is also an invitation to live in it, here and now, and not just in some hypothetical future which we will probably never know, no matter how attractive it seems. This other world is already part of ours. It is also in us. In a sense, this is precisely the question that Judith Butler asked: “Can one lead a good life in a bad life?”⁴⁶ Degrowth does not guarantee earthly bliss, but it is a solution to the problem of massive degradations caused by the growth society, it is a possible exit, a way to rediscover self-esteem by fitting harmoniously in the human and natural environments. In the words of the famous French ecofeminist Françoise d’Eaubonne about socialism: “It is not a guarantee of happiness, but it guarantees the end of forced misery”.⁴⁷

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⁴⁴ See BRUNI 2010.

⁴⁵ Quoted by CHANIAL 2009: 35.

⁴⁶ BUTLER 2012.

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