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Happiness, wellbeing and ecosocialism – a radical humanist perspective

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ABSTRACT

The GDP growth paradigm has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, with the rising threats of global social inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation. New thinking around ecosocialism, degrowth, happiness and the wellbeing economy insist on keeping alive the utopian imagination. It seeks to break through the constraints of traditional state-or-market development debates, by searching for ways to subordinate both the state and market to society, in harmony with non-human nature. Pioneering work on alternative development indicators has been done in recent times, the most notable being the Gross National Happiness Index, currently in practice within the small Buddhist mountain state of Bhutan. The happiness/wellbeing perspectives do not have an explicit critique of capitalism, and avoid any mention of ‘socialism’ or ‘ecosocialism’. Is there a Chinese Wall between the Buddha and Marx – or can these perspectives be harmonized, as part of building a broader counter-hegemonic movement?

KEYWORDS

Ecosocialism; happiness; wellbeing; Marx; Buddha

Introduction

Following the failure of various developmental models in the post-colonial world – whether market- or state-oriented – to meaningfully address global problems of environmental degradation, social inequality, poverty, dispossession, slumification and unemployment, ‘development’ has become a contested concept. If the relative success of the East Asian economies kept alive the notion of the ‘developmental state’ as a solution to problems of development, the ecological degradation engendered by expanded GDP economic growth – the pivot around which all socio-economic development models revolved – deepened the search for alternative models of development. While the arguments for ‘post-development’ (see Ziai, 2015) and ‘degrowth’ (see D’Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2015) have become more nuanced in recent years, post-colonial countries (or at least their political and economic elites) assert the need to achieve levels of material well-being enjoyed by ‘over-developed’ countries. But does increased material growth necessarily produce happiness or wellbeing? Indeed, is GDP growth an adequate measure of real growth, if the material goods are measured against the social and ecological bads that have been externalized out of the GDP accounting mechanism?

The growth paradigm, based on the GDP/GNP metric, has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, following the 2007–2008 financial crisis, and increased awareness about global inequality and climate change. More mainstream efforts that work within the narrow constraints of possibilism, which confines thinking to the perceived ‘balance of power’ in society, are set against bolder
thinking around ecosocialism, degrowth, happiness and the wellbeing economy, that insist on keeping alive the utopian imagination. The challenge is to break through the constraints of traditional state-or-market development debates, by searching for ways to subordinate both the state and market to society (i.e. the ‘people’), in harmony with non-human nature. In other words, a balanced, holistic developmental pathway.

While the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI) has tried, since the 1980s, to move beyond narrow concerns with GDP growth, it is still constrained by the GDP metric (given the power of global capital within the UN process). Pioneering work on alternative development indicators has been done since then, the most notable being the Gross National Happiness (GNH) Index, currently in practice within the small predominantly Buddhist mountain state of Bhutan. This concept was adopted by the UN in 2011, without any other governments, however, seriously implementing it. Instead, insubstantial ‘happiness’ surveys, which focus narrowly on how people feel, have led some writers to prefer substituting ‘happiness’ with the term ‘wellbeing’ (see Fioramonti, 2017).

Whichever term is used, the ‘happiness/wellbeing’ perspectives do not have an explicit critique of capitalism, and avoid any mention of ‘socialism’ or ‘ecosocialism’, also a growing body of work amongst the ecological and Marxist Left. Is there a Chinese Wall between these perspectives or can they be harmonized, as part of building a broader counter-hegemonic movement?

This article considers the problem of GDP growth, and the civilizational crisis that it has engendered. Is it a problem of human beings’ impact on the earth (the Anthropocene), or a problem of capitalism (the Capitalocene)? Or is that yet another way of erecting hard boundaries between schools of thought that ought not to exist, in keeping with the boundaries between Marxism (as a product of ‘scientific’, enlightenment thinking), and that of indigenous and ancient bodies of knowledge, such as that of the Buddha (as products of ‘pre-scientific’ thinking)5? It then looks more closely at happiness and wellbeing studies, with a particular emphasis on the unique GNH index currently being implemented in Bhutan. Finally, the article contrasts this with the ecosocialist perspective, and considers whether the happiness principle, based on the spiritual value of compassion, can be harmonized within a broader counter-hegemonic, ecosocialist movement.

The problem of GDP growth

On 18 March 1968, at a University of Kansas election rally, presidential candidate Robert Kennedy made an explicit critique of the GDP/GNP growth paradigm:

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 redwood and the loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and counts nuclear warheads and armoured cars for the police to fight the riots in our cities. It counts Whitman’s rifle and Speck’s knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. 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, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans. If this is true here at home, so it is true elsewhere in world. (The Guardian, 24 May 2012)

Kennedy, of course, never became president, as he was later assassinated, and we will never know whether he would have translated this critique into substantive policy measures. Indeed, the
The realpolitik of US class relations would most probably have militated against the lofty ideals of meaningful and substantive human development and social wellbeing. Since that statement little has been done to shift mainstream thinking around the world away from the talismanic hold of GDP growth as a marker of socio-economic progress, despite efforts in the 1980s to develop the HDI, which goes beyond GDP (by including health and education) but remains captive of it. In any case, the HDI annual survey receives some public attention and then is usually forgotten about, while GDP growth is, for most countries’ politicians, economists and investors, an absolute fixation. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), and later the World Trade Organisation (WTO), have been critical in entrenching this fixation, given their global hegemonic power since the second world war (Fioramonti, 2017; Peet, 2009).

The recognition of GDP as a misleading metric received a major boost in 2008 amidst the global financial crisis, when then French president Nicolas Sarkozy commissioned Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen to produce an alternative measurement of economic performance and social progress (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). The financial crisis followed heightening global awareness about human-induced climate change, as a direct result of accelerated fossil fuel industrialization since the rise of capitalism. The challenge was to more accurately measure socio-economic development, by including both the economic goods and social-environmental bads in the accounting process. As Kennedy argued, the bads are often counted in as a positive contribution to GDP growth, because it generates monetary wealth – but the real costs to society and the environment are externalized, to be paid by communities, public funds and future generations.

In other words, false accounting gives a false impression of social progress, and indeed, as Stiglitz et al. (2009) argue, it also gives a false impression of economic growth. Smith (2012), from a Marxist perspective, goes further, and argues that the ‘GDP illusion’ misleadingly attributes value added to developed countries like the USA, which obscures the value capture in under-developed countries, through the relations of super-exploitation between northern firms and southern producers (as embedded within global commodities such as the iPhone, T-shirts and cups of coffee). Fioramonti (2017) shows that, instead of increasing over the past decades, if the full costs are taken into account, world economic growth since the 1970s has been stagnant. What has been monetized in fact disguises the physical wealth taken from the earth, through mining, deforestation, water, air, sea and land pollution. In addition, the social costs of gross inequality, which usually accompanies GDP growth, manifests itself in social instability, crime, violence, poverty, and other forms of social immiseration.

The climate crisis is but one aspect of a broad range of ecological disasters that threaten the fate of the earth as we know it (i.e. as a habitable planet for a wide range of life forms), and is for one school of thought a problem of humankind’s impact through the ages. For these thinkers, we have entered the age of the Anthropocene (Angus, 2016a).

For Moore and Patel (2018, p. 18), however, the Anthropocene is a vacuous concept:

The root, anthropos (Greek for ‘human’), suggests that it’s just humans being humans, in the way that kids will be kids or snakes will be snakes, that has caused climate change and the planet’s sixth mass extinction.

Instead, they place the causes of our civilizational crisis more firmly within the logic of fossil capitalism, or the viral force of unleashed Capital propelled by compound growth (Harvey, 2014), and prefer to talk of the age of Capitalocene.: 

Today’s human activity isn’t exterminating mammoths through centuries of over-hunting. Some humans are currently killing everything, from megafauna to microbiota, at speeds one hundred times higher than the background rate. We argue that what changed is capitalism, that modern history has,
since the 1400s, unfolded in what is better termed the Capitalocene. Using this name means taking capitalism seriously, understanding it not just as an economic system but as a way of organizing the relations between humans and the rest of nature. (Moore & Patel, 2018, p. 18)

Those who place emphasis on the Anthropocene, namely that human beings are the cause of our civilizational crisis, locate the origins of it in the industrial revolution, and recognize a great acceleration in systemic threats since the 1950s, in parallel with global capitalist growth. The scientific community that advances this position, however, do not talk of capitalism as such (but, according to Angus (2016b), do concede that only a small fraction of humanity are responsible for the impending crisis).6

These differences may be seen as academic nit-picking about terminology, or as having substantive implications for a Left strategy and tactics that evoke twentieth century debates around ‘reform or revolution’ (Luxembourg, 1908), or Gorz’s (1962) reformulated ‘reformist reforms versus revolutionary reforms’, or Gramsci’s (1982) ‘war of position and war of manoeuvre’. For ecological Marxists like Angus (2016a, 2016b), anti-capitalists ought not to exclude themselves from others who are as concerned about a fast transforming world. Creating a new discourse (for example around ‘Capitalocene’) can separate anti-capitalists from the emerging discourse around the Anthropocene, thus leaving that field open to domination by neoliberalism.

Indeed, such concerns can be extended to the divide between, on the one hand, religious and humanist perspectives, such as that of Buddhists, who might lean towards an Anthropocene perspective (humans are the problem), and Marxists on the other hand, who might be inclined towards the Capitalocene perspective (capitalism, or unleashed capital, is the problem). Taken further, a humanist/Buddhist view is more compatible with the emerging happiness or wellbeing perspectives, which tend to avoid an explicit or comprehensive critique of capitalism, or any talk of socialism – given their association of it with the authoritarian statism of the Soviet Union and China (see Ambedkar, 2017; Fioramonti, 2017). In similar vein, ecological Marxist or ecosocialist perspectives, which are explicitly anti-capitalist, often ignore the happiness or wellbeing literature (see Lowy, 2018).

Is there a Chinese Wall between these perspectives? Or do they, upon closer inspection, identify similar problems and, at least in the short to medium term, propose similar solutions to address the civilizational crisis? What follows is a consideration of the compatibilities between ancient lineages, such as that of the Buddha, and Marx’s thinking, as a prelude to an examination of happiness/wellbeing and ecosocialism as longer-term utopian visions.

The Buddha meets Marx

As far as social-economic theory is concerned, I am still a Marxist. (Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, as quoted by Times of India, 13 January 2015)

If alternatives to the hegemonic paradigm are to be considered, it is necessary to re-examine certain core beliefs of twentieth century Left thinking. This partly stems from the failures of twentieth century Marxist-Leninism (or ‘actually existing socialism’) to fulfil their liberatory potential, and having become associated with authoritarian statism (see Pillay, 2013). Marxist movements and regimes often stripped out the dialectical nuances of Marx’s thinking, and built an impenetrable wall between Marx’s ‘structuralism’ and what was perceived to be his immature early humanism (see McLellan, 2007). However, as thinkers such as Fromm (1961) argue, Marx’s humanism was an integral part of his thinking, and potentially compatible with core elements of humanist paradigms (secular and religious), which stem from the insights of the philosophies of the Axial Age (around 800–200 BCE). The Axial Age thinkers were reacting to rising class domination and
inequality during their times, and departed from other more tribal, patriarchal and socially violent religious dogma and practice. They emphasized universal love, respect for all human beings and nature, social equality and social justice for all, along with a strong emphasis on personal liberation from suffering as a vital precondition for the liberation of others. Jaspers (1953, p. 2), who coined the term, lists the key thinkers of the time, in different parts of the world:

Confucius and Lao-Tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo Ti, Chuang Tse, Lieh Tzu and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to materialism, scepticism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance from Elijah by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of Homer, of the philosophers – Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato, – of the tragedians, of Thucydides and Archimedes. Everything implied by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India and the West.

The precepts ‘Do to others as you would have them do to you’ and ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, popularized by Christianity, had their origins in eastern thought centuries earlier, such as that of the Buddha (see Armstrong, 2006). In essence these are socialist precepts that arose out of the lament of prophets and philosophers who saw violent upheavals in their societies, brought about by the rise of class-divided societies, which destroyed the solidaristic ‘primitive communist’ societies referred to by Marx (Chattpadhyaya, 1970). According to scholars, the Buddha learnt about social equality, non-violence and democracy from classless tribal societies in India which still existed during his time, as he wandered out of the privileged existence he lived in his own class-divided kingdom (see Ilaiah, 2000; Sardesai, 1982). These humanist and liberatory philosophies were integral components of religious movements such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – but competed with oppressive tribalistic, patriarchal and class/caste-driven doctrines and practices within these movements through the ages.

While Marx warned against religion as the ‘opium of the people’, his also saw that religion was the ‘groaning of the labouring creature’ or the ‘soul of a heartless world’ and the ‘spirit of spiritless conditions’ (quoted in Duchrow & Hinkelammert, 2012, p. 244). Marx felt that the rise of a humanist atheism under ‘communism’ (or what ecological Marxist Foster (2009) calls ‘sustainable human development’) would result in all human beings developing to their full potential in harmony with the laws of nature. In such a context, the belief in a higher power external to humans would eventually die out. In other words, the ‘spirit’ of religious spirituality would be replaced by the ‘spirit’ of atheist socialism, where alienation from the self, fellow human beings, nature, production and consumption would be overcome (Fromm, 1961). As Foster (2009) puts it, the ‘metabolic rift’ capitalism has entrenched between humans and non-human nature, and by extension between humans and their individual and collective selves (who are part of nature), would be restored.

Radical Christian theologians Ulrich Duchrow and Franz Hinkelammert argue that Marx desired the overthrow of ‘all conditions in which the human is degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being’ (2012, p. 245). As such, Marx could be said to be advocating the restoration of the soul or the spirit in a caring world, based on social and environmental justice. His humanist–atheistic yet ‘spiritual’ (or in Buddhist terms ‘compassionate’) socialist vision pivoted around the flourishing of all humankind, and resonated strongly with that of the Buddha (approx. 500 BCE),7 who drew on the rationalist–agnostic Samkhya school of ‘Hindu’8 philosophy (approx. 800 BCE) (Armstrong, 2006; Walters, n.d.).

In India B.R. Ambedkar, a contemporary of Gandhi who fought against caste oppression in India in all its forms, made direct reference to the Buddha as the first major campaigner against
Brahminism and caste oppression, and compared the Buddha’s thinking to that of Marx (Ambedkar, 2017). While some Dalit activists see the need to discard Marx in favour of the Buddha and Ambedkar (given their association of Marx with Marxism-Leninism, the predominant version within India) others see these thinkers as complementing each other (see Teltumbde, 2012). This is an ongoing debate within India, and reflects similar tensions in other contexts, between purists who seek to preserve essentialist or fundamentalist versions of respective schools of thought (such as that of Marxism against Buddhism or ‘Ambedkarism’ in India, or Marxism against Christianity or Islam in other contexts). The challenge is to understand most religions as being in origin movements of liberation against oppression (‘sighs of the oppressed’), even if they became oppressive themselves (just as Marxism became oppressive in the Soviet Union, China and elsewhere).

It is no wonder that within all major religions, there has been strong currents of revolutionary thinking, set against the established Church, Mosque or Temple. These include for example the Liberation Theology of Latin America (emerging out of the Catholic church, and finding echoes with the current Pope), and the thinking of Iranian revolutionary Ali Shariati within the Muslim world (Bensaada, n.d.). Marx’s compatibility with the Buddha, however, perhaps goes furthest, in that the Buddha did not believe in a supreme being (he was agnostic, if not atheist). Just as official Marxism bordered on deifying Marx (along with Engels and Lenin), so has much of Buddhism in practice (incorporating, over centuries, other religious ideas in India, Tibet, Bhutan and elsewhere, in order to become accepted and to maintain its popularity). Given this, can core principles of Buddhist practice, such as that found in Bhutan and its concept of ‘happiness’, resonate with socialism (or ecosocialism), even if it is not explicitly stated? The following section takes a closer look at Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness, as a specific variant of the economics of happiness (or the wellbeing economy).

**Bhutan’s gross national happiness index**

We have now clearly distinguished the ‘happiness’ … in GNH from the fleeting, pleasurable ‘feel good’ moods so often associated with that term. We know that true abiding happiness cannot exist while others suffer, and comes only from serving others, living in harmony with nature, and realizing our innate wisdom and the true and brilliant nature of our own minds. (The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, 2008)

When the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigne Singye Wangchuck, announced in 1979 that GNH is more meaningful than GNP, he set in motion an explicit orientation of public policy and development plans towards the pursuit of happiness (Ura, Alkire, Tshoki, & Wangdi, 2012). He was not introducing something completely new, as the Legal Code of Bhutan in 1729 stated explicitly that ‘if the government cannot create happiness for its people, then there is no purpose for government to exist’ (quoted in Centre for Bhutan Studies, 2015, p. 29). This draws from deeply entrenched Buddhist principles, but also harks back to the Greek Philosopher Aristotle, who lived approx one century after the Buddha.¹¹ The ‘pursuit of happiness’ was a foundation of the human rights ethos of the US Declaration of Independence in 1776. None of these abstract ideas, however, were translated into a specific set of legislative or policy tools until Bhutan developed its GNH methodology, which remains unique amidst a growing interest in happiness and wellbeing studies over the past decade (Correa, 2017; Van Dijk, Spencer, & Ramirez, 2014).

Unfortunately, the happiness or wellbeing surveys do not rise substantially above the ‘fleeting’ notions of ‘happiness’. The one’s that receive momentary media attention are conducted around the world by opinion survey agencies such as Gallup, which provides the data for the World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012). These self-reported happiness studies seek to interrogate what has become known as the Easterlin paradox (Wong, 2016), which suggests that,
counter-intuitively, increased economic growth does not necessarily bring increased happiness. The generally accepted view is that, while increased material wealth often does improve wellbeing, beyond a certain point it ceases to have that effect.

Matterially wealthy individuals, in a sea of inequality and poverty, may not feel a sense of wellbeing if their neighbours are severely deprived, or if they are in constant fear of theft and violence arising out of social instability. Conversely, a person might become materially better off, but if they measure themselves against others who have much more (and whose material wealth is rising at the same or greater pace than themselves), that feeling of relative deprivation may induce a persistent sense of unease, envy and dissatisfaction (particularly in over-developed countries like the USA, which places a high value on individual competition and incessant consumerism). In developing countries economic growth might push people off their land (where they might enjoy clean air and water, and organic produce) and generate employment in dirty or labour-intensive industries (such as mining or sweat-shops), working long hours in alienating environments. Such people might be materially better off, but much worse off in terms of their physical and mental wellbeing. Wealthy individuals living isolated existences in urban sprawls often suffer from depression and loneliness, compared to income-poorer communities which enjoy the happiness-inducing effects of social solidarity. The drug industry offers anti-depressants, while the retail industry offers retail therapy. Neither give more than fleeting moments of relief.

While these studies have their importance (see Kudrna, 2016), the methodologies they employ, through large national surveys based on self-reported feelings, can only yield suggestive results, and are difficult to fully compare across national-cultural barriers, and across time (given the fleeting feelings of happiness from one moment to the next). They consequently do not have the same traction amongst policy-makers, compared to metrics such as GDP growth, which have a firm quantitative foundation (even if, as mentioned earlier, they are grossly misleading as measures of both real economic growth, as well as social wellbeing). While Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) surveys are often lumped together with the large studies in commentaries about ‘happiness’ (see Van Dijk et al., 2014), they offer a vastly different methodology to that of the large national surveys designed for international comparisons.

Bhutan is a small country of approx. 826,000 people in 2019 (worldpopulationreview.com), and was until 2008 a monarchy, ruled by a relatively benign succession of monarchs, with close ties to their southern neighbour India, which offers protection against domination by China, their northern neighbour. Bhutanese Buddhism came from their beyond the Himalayas, Tibet, during the seventh century, along with migrations southwards of Tibetans over time (Puntsho, 2013). The country is thus acutely aware of China’s suffocation of Tibet, and associates its statist-authoritarianism with socialism and Marxism (despite the fact that the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, who lives in exile in India, declared himself a Marxist13).

While it has for centuries been a predominantly Buddhist country, Bhutan was embroiled in controversy during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Hindus of Nepali origin engaged in armed rebellion against the state, resulting in 100,000 refugees, many of whom settled in the USA as Bhutan achieved democracy in 2008. Nonetheless, Bhutan still comprises 35% of people of Nepalese origin, while 50% are Bhoti (Buddhist Bhutanese of Tibetan origin) and a further 15% tribal (CIA, 2019). Today, approximately 75% of Bhutanese are classified as Bhuddist, while the rest are Hindu (22.6%), Bon and other indigenous faiths (1.9%), Christian (0.5%), Islam (0.1%) and Other or none (2%) (Pew Research Center, 2016). The Constitution stresses freedom of religion (i.e. Buddhism is not an official state religion) – however, foreign religious personnel ‘are not allowed to proselytise’ (Lonely Planet, 2012, pp. 156–157).
While writers such as Correa (2017, p. 4) cite the views of Nepali advocacy groups that the Nepalis (who entered Bhutan over the past century, legally and illegally) were ‘expelled’ because they ‘would not integrate with Bhutan’s Buddhist culture’, historian Puntho (2013, pp. 578–579) strives to offer a more balanced perspective, seeing it as an ‘ethnic collision’ rather than the extreme charge of ‘ethnic cleansing’ (made by Nepali dissidents), on the one hand, or the portrayal of dissidents as an ‘anti-national terroristic movement’ (made by the government), on the other. The context was both the fear of cultural swamping, as happened in the neighbouring Sikkim state in India, and fear of becoming embroiled in the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla war being waged against the Nepalese monarchy at that time. Nevertheless, amongst the Left in India, Bhutan has a bad name because of this episode, and the GNH project, for them, can never be considered potentially compatible with a socialist project14 (to be addressed later).

After opening up the process around the drafting of the Constitution in 2001, and inviting outside help with developing indicators for measuring happiness, the Fourth King abdicated in favour of his son in 2005, who in turn became a constitutional monarch with limited powers after the first democratic elections in 2008. From that point onwards Bhutan opened itself up to the winds of democracy, with a free press, including unrestricted internet access. This was a double-edged sword for some Bhutanese – opening up to the outer world, including advertising and investment from mainly Indian companies, created new wants along with jobs and increased incomes for some.15 These changes are reflected in the survey results (see later).

It also at that point conducted its first GNH survey, using a comprehensive methodology and set of indicators to measure happiness. The purpose of the GNH Index are explicitly stated (Ura et al., 2012):

- firstly, to set up an alternative framework of holistic development, beyond mere material satisfaction;
- secondly, it must provide robust indicators to the different sectors, in order to guide development (e.g. electricity provision, or hospitals);
- thirdly, it must allocate resources in accordance with targets and the tools for GNH screening (i.e. target those deemed ‘least happy’, according to locality district, age, gender etc.);
- fourthly, it must measure people’s happiness and wellbeing, using understandable methodologies;
- fifthly, it must measure progress over time, preferably every two years; and
- finally, it must compare progress across the country.

The 2010 GNH Index had a sample size of 8510 people above the age of 15, in all 20 districts of Bhutan, while in 2015 that number increased to 8871 (CBS, 2015).

As Figure 1 shows, there are 33 GNH indicators located within nine domains of education, health, ecological diversity and resilience, good governance, time-use, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, psychological wellbeing and living standards. As such, only one domain, psychological wellbeing, relates to the subjective feelings of wellbeing surveyed by Gallup and other polls referred to earlier.

The GNH survey is unlike any other in that enumerators are extensively trained for 13 days, and then spent quality time with each person interviewed, explaining the process in the local language, and according to the CBS (2015) ‘engaging in meaningful conversation with a diversity of respondents’. The results of the 2015 survey were not remarkably different to that of the 2010 one (recording a nominal 1.8% overall increase in happiness). The breakdown was:

- 8.4% were found to be ‘deeply happy’ (defined as sufficiency above 77% of the weighted indicators);
- 35% were ‘extensively happy’ (66–76% sufficiency);
• 47.9% ‘narrowly happy’ (50–65% sufficiency); and
• 10.4% ‘unhappy’ (0–49% sufficiency).

Of the 33 indicators, people enjoyed highest sufficiency in values, speaking native language, safety, family, healthy days, mental health, disability, ecological issues, urbanization issues, life satisfaction and responsibility towards the environment (all above 77%). In addition, people enjoyed relatively high sufficiency in sleep (74%) and rural wildlife damage (66%).

Middling satisfaction (above 50% but below 66%) include from lower to high, positive emotions, fundamental rights, literacy, negative emotions, housing, household income, services and artisanal skills.

Lowest satisfaction was in knowledge (8%), government performance (34%), spirituality (39%), donations of time and money (43%), work (44%) and cultural participation (46%).

Figure 1. The nine domains and 33 indicators of the GNH index. Source: Ura et al. (2012, p. 13).
According to the prime minister (CBS, 2015), the results revealed that 91.2% reported experiencing happiness at various levels of intensity, with 43.4% being deeply or extensively happy. He found that people were healthier, educated people were happier, living standards improved, urban residents were happier than rural ones, farmers were less happy than other professions, men were happier than women, government services needed to be improved, more needed to be done to strengthen Bhutanese culture and traditions, and people felt less responsibility for conserving the environment. As the report noted, while material wellbeing increased, in terms of income, housing and assets, and around 20% saw an increase in services such as electricity, clean water, waste disposal and health care – psychological wellbeing decreased significantly, as did many people’s ‘sense of “belonging” and the etiquette of courtesy’ (CBS, 2015, p. 5). This finding concurred with impressions gained from visits to Bhutan in 2012 and 2013, with an increase in alcohol consumption amongst urban youth (often unemployed, having migrated from rural areas).

In other words, Bhutan is caught between wanting to preserve the positive benefits of adhering to its Buddhist cultural values and the pursuit of happiness, and at the same time increase the material development of the country and its people, through opening up the economy and society, and allow the ‘free market’ of goods and ideas to compete with each other. It is a classic development paradox, experienced also by countries like Bolivia which, despite granting the earth constitutional rights, and embracing an ecosocialist vision through the Native American ethos of buen vivir (living well in harmony others and with non-human nature) has succumbed to the allures of extractivism, as it seeks to deliver material development to its citizens (see Acosta & Abarca, 2018; Boron, 2012; Solon, 2018).

According to the CBS (2015), Bhutan wants to use its GNH index to regularly assess societal wellbeing, in order to develop policy tools to address the issues, as well as alert the private sector and civil society about the social issues that need attention. Specific policy interventions arising out of the 2015 survey include boosting work prospects in rural areas, to stem the flow of migration into the cities, and allow youth to find meaning in rural settings, in harmony with nature. Another priority identified is that of farmers’ needs across all the domains of the GNH. There is also a resolve to improve what is called ‘values education’, such that children and youth, attracted by the allures of consumerism (particularly via Korean pop culture, which is itself a mimic of US pop culture) would be grounded in ‘knowledge of Bhutanese culture, spirituality, traditions, natural environment, politics and values’ (CBS, 2015, p. 8).

However, as Lorenzo Fioramonti noted a few years back,16 Bhutan may be contradicting its GNH principles by foregrounding economic growth on its official website, in a bid to attract investment. Clearly, as with Bolivia, there is contestation within the country between new class forces that have emerged, seeking, in tandem with the conventional development ethos of the Indian government and its corporations seeking entry into Bhutan, to pay lip service to GNH (seeing it as a tourist marketing exercise). The election of Sherin Tobgay as prime minister in 2013, ousting the pro-GNH prime minister Jigne Thinley (with, allegedly, the help of the Indian government) seemed to point in this direction.17

The fact that the GNH faces countervailing winds that threaten to undermine it, does not render the concept invalid, or any less inspirational to those seeking holistic development pathways. It merely alerts advocates to the tension-ridden nature of development, with conflicting class interests always present. GNH itself can become a powerful force from below, as it empowers citizens with knowledge about their social circumstances, and the social-solidaristic policies that will be required to preserve and enhance the happiness principles, based on the spiritual values of compassion for others, and for oneself (as noted previously, these are in essence socialist principles).
Can ecosocialism be happy?

‘Ecosocialism’ emerged out of the debates of the 1980s between the Marxist left (red) and the ecological left (green) perspectives, and is thus often depicted as a red-green synthesis, which is counterposed to the deep ecology perspectives of anarchism (Pepper, 1993). For Lowy (2018, p. 1) ecosocialism stands against both reformist ‘market ecology’ and the ‘productivist socialism’ that dominated the Marxist Left during the past century. Instead, he argues for a new model of ‘robustly democratic planning’, such that society ‘takes control of the means of production and its own destiny’. In other words, in contrast to neoliberal market dominance on the one hand, and bureaucratic state dominance on the other, ecosocialism advocates the subordination of both state and market to society (i.e. the ‘people’). However, to achieve this longer-term goal, Lowy is aware of the need to fight for ‘concrete and urgent reforms in the near term’, without succumbing to the illusions of a ‘clean capitalism’ (2018, p. 10). He goes on to state explicitly:

the movement for deep change must try to reduce the risks to people and planet, while buying time to build support for a more fundamental shift. In particular, the battle to force the powers that be to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions remains a key front, along with local efforts to shift toward agroecological methods, cooperative solar energy, and community management of resources. (Lowy, 2018, p. 10)

All of this can fit into the logic of transformative reforms (or non-reformist reforms), whereby partial victories combat both environmental degradation and social inequality, and despair about the future. However, they must fit into a longer-term strategy of raising consciousness around eco-socialist possibilities, through activism from below, as part of a myriad number and variety of movement of movements that can merge into an ‘overarching systemic global movement’ (Lowy, 2018, p. 10). Lowy recognizes that ecosocialism is ‘but one current’ within a larger stream, flowing alongside eco-feminism, anti-racist movements, indigenous movements grounded in communitarian solidarity, as well as ‘peasant, trade union and degrowth movements’ (Lowy, 2018, p. 11).

The closest Lowy comes to the economics of happiness or wellbeing perspective, is his recognition of indigenous movements, and perhaps the degrowth movement. However, it is telling that he avoids any mention of happiness or wellbeing – just as the happiness and wellbeing perspectives avoid any mention of socialism, at least in the positive sense. Fioramonti (2017) does provide a critique of corporate capitalism, as a key driver of the GDP growth paradigm, as does the documentary The Economics of Happiness (www.economicofhappiness), which blames ‘globalization’ not capitalism for the damage to the earth and people. The solution is not, contra Lowy, democratic planning at the national (or indeed global) level, but more localisation of production and exchange, through small business development (including cooperatives). Indeed, Fioramonti does mention ‘socialism’, but only in the negative sense, as something confined to the leadership of the working class, through the intermediation of political parties (2017, p. 103), which is suggestive of authoritarian rule. He says explicitly:

In purely self-interested terms, it should be the rich who demand greater equality. Not only because they get direct benefits, but also because more equality is a good antidote to extreme political recipes, like socialism or communism. In many ways, greater equality helps preserve capitalism against its own destructive tendencies. (2017, p. 138)

This paragraph ought to be enough to make any ‘self-respecting Marxist’ foam at the mouth, and throw the book into the dustbin. Fioramonti, however, was once an admirer of Chavez and the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela, until he was persuaded otherwise. The imploding of what some have called ‘petrosocialism’, due in part to the decline in the oil price, US sanctions, internal
bureaucratic blundering, corruption and the politics of antagonism, has done much to taint the idea of ‘twenty-first century socialism’ as the Stalinist regimes did to twentieth century ‘actually existing socialism’. Fioramonti (2017) goes on to praise the New Deal of US president Roosevelt in the 1930s (which involved massive state intervention to address unemployment and increase social welfare), and his views about ‘saving capitalism’ hark back to those of John Maynard Keynes, the British economist still wheeled out by many on the Marxist Left as a stepping stone towards more fundamental transformations.

The New Deal is currently being revised by democratic socialists in the USA as a Green New Deal (GND), which the leftwing Jacobin magazine hailed as being akin to ecosocialism (Batisson & Cohen, 2019). Of course, there are those on the ‘harder left’ who reject it as a mere capitalist ploy (see Webb, 2019). The radical reforms envisaged in the GND are designed to combat destructive ecological threats in the short term, by injecting a sense of urgency in public discourse in the USA (but with resonance across the globe). A resolution introduced by Ocasio-Cortez to Congress on 7 February 2019 aims to ‘achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions through a fair and just transition for all communities and workers’, and to ‘create millions of good, high-wage jobs and ensure prosperity and economic security for all people of the United States’. Its aim is that the US should meet ‘100% of the power demand through clean, renewable, and zero-emission energy sources’, which, along with other goals, should be ‘accomplished through a 10-year national mobilization’ that would need to be ‘on a scale not seen since World War II and the New Deal’. This has inspired the Science for the People movement to launch a Peoples Green New Deal, to mobilize engineers and scientists to work with grassroots activists in order to bolster its radical potential, in the face of mainstream threats to co-opt the GND reduce it to a corporate friendly charade (Zill, 2019).

The GND has also inspired movements and parties in other parts of the world, such as the UK Labour Party, which has committed itself to a Green Industrial Revolution that explicitly links climate justice issues with social justice (and class struggle). Its leader Jeremy Corbyn recently promoted a red-green alliance and addressed the fears of workers regarding a transition to green jobs, by declaring:

> Just as the US GI Bill gave education, housing and income support to every unemployed veteran returning from the Second World War, the next Labour Government will guarantee that all energy workers are offered retraining, a new job on equivalent terms and conditions covered by collective agreements, and fully supported in their housing and income needs through transition. (quoted in McDonnell, 2019)

These commitments fit in well with the pragmatic-idealistic (or in Olin-Wright’s (2010) terms ‘real utopian’) framing of the wellbeing and happiness perspectives, and indeed the short-term strategic perspectives laid out by Lowy. Yet Fioramonti (2017) avoids any embrace of ‘democratic socialism’, and Lowy (2018) avoids any mention of the GND (although it was raised by some contributions to the Great Transition debate centred on Lowy’s article).

If the Left is to be a central part of building a counter-hegemonic alternative, it needs to get out of its more comfortable spaces, and engage seriously with the happiness and wellbeing perspectives, and see a logical connection between ecological Marxism and engaged Buddhism – even if the latter do not always identify as socialist, as in Bhutan. The point is to enter into effective dialogue, in order to decontaminate the terms socialist and Marxist from the authoritarian-statist infections. This will allow the Left to embrace the concept of happiness and wellbeing, in as much as ecosocialists seem to more readily make connections with the buen vivir of Bolivia, or the African equivalent ubuntu, which Terreblanche (2018) rescues from its mundane usage, to fuse it into an ecosocialist framing (see also Bond, 2018).

Bhutan’s GNH index provides a rich methodology which can do much to shift thinking away from GDP growth, by providing a more accurate measure of societal wellbeing. This can have
profound policy implications, and can also mobilize energy within countries to empower communities to imagine solutions to their problems that go far behind the needs of short-term investors and unimaginative bureaucrats. There is indeed no Chinese wall between this, and what ecosocialists are striving for.

Conclusion

This article departs from the false dichotomies of ‘western’/modernist vs ‘non-western’/post-modern bodies of knowledge. Attempts by some ‘decolonialists’ and environmentalists to discard the trenchant insights of Marxism into the inner logic of Capital, because it is allegedly a product of ‘western’ Enlightenment thinking, is just as misguided as those ‘twentieth century’ Marxists who, following conventional western modernity, dismiss ancient and indigenous bodies of knowledge as being wholly pre-scientific and therefore value-less (if not harmful). Instead, the assumption is that all knowledge is produced globally, and symbiotically, and belong to the global community of humankind (even if some regions of the world were more scientifically advanced than others at different periods in history).

The conversation between Marxism and ecology has produced a red-green synthesis in the form of ecosocialism. It more readily embraces the indigenous knowledge of Native American people, given the alliance between Native American communities and urban-based working class movements, that ushered in the Morales presidency in 2006. The meeting point is made easier because Morales describes himself as a socialist (even if his government has in recent years departed from many of its commitments around environmental protection). Bhutan, on the other hand, avoids any mention of ecosocialism, yet it has declared that its forests will remain undeveloped, for ecological reasons, and is working with left ecologists like Vandana Shiva to become fully self-sufficient in organic farming.

The happiness and wellbeing perspectives offer utopian visions of future possibilities beyond the GDP growth paradigm, without lapsing into utopianism. In this they can find a common meeting place with the GND perspectives offered by the democratic socialists in the USA, as well as the ecosocialist vision (as sketched by amongst others Lowy (2018)). The Left, if it is to break out of its self-imposed isolation, needs to re-learn the art of counter-hegemonic politics, to avoid leaving spaces open for occupation by reinvented neoliberalism. The view of Angus below applies as much to scientists as to proponents of the happiness and wellbeing perspectives:

Realization that we have entered an unprecedented and dangerous epoch has triggered international discussions in which almost all participants agree that business as usual is a road to planetary disaster. Ideas once held by only a few radical environmentalists are increasingly accepted by scientists worldwide and are creating the possibility of a powerful science-based challenge to the present social order. In this situation it would be a tragedy if straw-person arguments and fears of ideological contamination were to prevent the Left from engaging with scientists and joining the global discussion. We need to seize this remarkable opportunity to unite the latest scientific findings with an ecological Marxist analysis in a socio-ecological account of the origins, nature, and direction of the crisis – the essential basis of a concrete program for change. (Angus, 2016b)

Notes

1. While Left scholars and groups like Oxfam have exposed rising inequality since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the work of Piketty (2014), which provides substantial data showing that we have reached nineteenth century levels of inequality, has shifted mainstream discourse substantially.
2. The scientific consensus around human-induced global warming and climate change is captured in the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). These have fed into the regular high level summits called the Conference of the Parties (COP), seeking binding global agreements to reduce carbon emissions. Thus far the power of global corporations, particularly the fossil fuel lobbies, have ensured highly compromised agreements, such as the 2015 Paris Agreement (which the USA under Donald Trump has pulled out of) (See Guerro, 2018).

3. Society and the ‘people’ can be taken to mean all the people living within a nation-state, for the purposes of this discussion. From a globalist perspective, of course, the people can be all people living on earth, subjected as they are to the power of global capitalism and global institutions.

4. New Zealand has recently indicated that future spending will be guided by ‘wellbeing’ considerations (New York Times, 22 May 2019). While this is significant, there however is no indication that they will go as far as Bhutan’s GNH Index to measure wellbeing.

5. As Ilaiah (2000) argues, the Buddha was a scientific thinker (and political philosopher), in the sense that he was a rationalist who insisted on testing his theories empirically (in contrast to the idealism of his contemporaries). There is some dispute regarding when the Buddha lived (early historians put it at 563–483 BCE, while more recently a later date is given). While the Greek thinker Socrates (470–399 BCE) may have been a contemporary, his student Plato (around 428–347 BCE) and his student Aristotle (384–322 BCE), whose thinking formed the basis of western rational-scientific thought, more clearly lived later.

6. Moore (2017a, 2017b) concedes that the industrial revolution was a turning point, but not the turning point, as there was no fundamental rupture between early capitalism (starting around 1450) and ‘industrial’ capitalism’s ‘logic of environment making’ (2017b, p. 30) (see also Satgar, 2018).

7. See note 5.

8. ‘Hinduism’ as such did not exist at that time, as a unified body of thought. It was a term coined by ancient Persians to refer to the geographical area beyond the Indus River (in present day Pakistan). According to Doniger (2009) it was only after the British occupied India that the term ‘Hindu’ as a religious category gained currency, to differentiate from other religions, most notably Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

9. The first king, Ugyen Wangchuck, unified the country after a period of civil war between 1882 and 1885, and was made king in 1907. Much of Bhutan’s early history is unclear due to a fire which destroyed most of the records in 1827. What is known is that the country existed as a patchwork of competing fiefdoms, occupying valleys separated by mountains. Karma Phuntsho’s comprehensive The History of Bhutan (2013), is the first attempt to reconstruct the country’s history by a trained historian.

10. Since taking over as king as a 16 year old in 1972, he talked continuously about happiness and wellbeing, in keeping with his Buddhist principles – but it was only in 1979 that he spoke explicitly about Gross National Happiness in contrast to Gross National Product (CBS, 2015).

11. See note 5. There is evidence of contact between Buddhists and Greek thinkers around that period, suggesting a fair degree of cross-pollination of ideas (see Armstrong, 2006).

12. See his initial study in Easterlin (1974).

13. The irony is that the current Dalai Lama considers himself to be more ‘Marxist’ than the Chinese and other Asian communists, who he feels have capitulated to capitalism (see Smithers, 2014).

14. Various discussions (during the period 2011–2015), with Communist Party of India (CPI) member, the late Sharit Bhowmik, who was born in neighbouring Sikkim province, and based at the Tata Institute in Mumbai.

15. Bhutan restricts the number of tourists visiting the country at any given time, in order to avoid the social and ecological impact of unbridled tourism (as experienced in neighbouring Nepal). During a visit to Bhutan in 2012 my young guide lamented the advent of democracy, as he feared that it would bring about instability, and a decline in Buddhist values of compassion, which were protected by the monarchy.

16. Personal conversation during 2015. This attraction to economic growth, including mining, was revealed to the author in a meeting with the head of planning in December 2013. To be fair, however, Bhutan has never declared that economic growth is unimportant. It has always positioned it as being subordinate to the pursuit of happiness, as opposed to being eliminated. The question, of course, would be what kind of growth is pursued, and whether its externalised costs outweigh the benefits. Bhutan has a commitment to subject every development project to a GNH screening, and those that do not pass this test, will not go
through. For example, membership of the WTO, which is attractive to certain business interests, was subjected to a GNH screening, and it was found that it would decrease happiness, and thus rejected.

17. These views were expressed by various people during my visit to Bhutan in 2013, including a former advisor to the first prime minister.

18. Lowy, along with Joel Kovel, was the first to craft an Ecosocialist Manifesto in 2001, and his 2018 piece, including the wide range of responses it provoked in the Great Transition debate (none of which referenced happiness or wellbeing thinking), can be regarded as representative of mainstream ecosocialist thinking today.


20. There is some speculation as to the origins of Mint Press News, which published the Webb article. Some believe it has Russian funding, and articles like this are designed to drive a wedge between more pragmatic democratic socialists, who understand the Gramscian logic of war of position, and Gorz’s transformative reforms, and those who counterpose ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’ as absolutes.


22. A Vietnamese official working in the GNH Centre, who I met on a visit to Bhutan in 2012, spoke of his run-ins with the Vietnamese communist party, who are hostile towards Buddhists. In the course of our conversation, however, he admitted that the happiness principle has a strong socialist meaning, and was surprised to hear that the Dalai Lama described himself as a Marxist.

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