

On Wellbeing Economics

Have you ever wondered what our next economy might be like if it aimed for wellbeing rather than wealth as the means, even the guiding end, of economic life?

Wellbeing is about living: beingness, aliveness. It is about being well, thus, living well, as the means to life's fulfillments. And "well," or "wellness," has more to do with inner health and soul-nutrition and thus with inner "wholeness" than with superfluities of material wealth.

Material wealth is about inertness, thinginess, the material naturifacts and artifacts of living. It is not that much about inner life when well beyond sufficiency and often then contributes to a sort of inward death because we live not much in our super-sufficient things, which too often distract us from our larger selves and amities.

We live mostly in our feelings and imaginings and in our thoughts about those feelings and imaginings -- which bring us our most quietly long-lasting joy when softened and watered by our largest streams of sympathies and empathies. And those are the daily earthly wellsprings of our moral sensitivities and of our most truly kind-hearted compassions.

When wealth becomes an end unmoored from feelings and soul-nourishings, it seems, we become emptier in our innernesses and thus need more things to fill our discomfoting vacuum in a self-amplifying growth of the economics of possession.

We are not at all inert, and are only so on earth, in some senses, in the stillness of our passing.

Thoughts to wonder on as one ponders the necessity for a novel economics of wellbeing in an upcoming materially plundered world of ecosystem support breakdowns, which, of course, is really the very ancient economics of wisdom: something once well-known to Old, Old, Africans . . .

What do you think?

Joseph Edozien.

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The below is simply an informal open conversation among interested members of our community on a subject of common interest relevant to a new conceptual framework for economics.

On Wellbeing Economics
Reactions From The Community;
With Responses to The Reactions.

If these reflections interest you, please dip in as you wish and how you wish, and wherever lights a flame of resonant thought with you.

The earlier reflections in this string are perhaps a bit dense since compacted to be brief but they get lighter down the thread a bit if you persist.

Musings on the necessity for a novel economics of wellbeing seem to have caused a bit of a stir.

The thoughts on Wellbeing Economics seemed to have resonated with many but were deeply challenging for others.

The reactions seemed to range from "nice, but impractical" to "nonsense, and impractical anyway."

A common thread of reaction in any case is "impractical."

And why impractical? Mostly, it seems, in one way or another it appears, because of the totalising nature of the current system: its apparently all-encompassing nature.

In any case, ***it does seem necessary, and timely, to contemplate an alternative foundation for the framework of economics***, whether it be "Wellbeing" or some other living value.

The combination of exponential human population growth; increasingly exponential degrowth in easily and cheaply available ecosystem resources to support that exponential growth in human population; and the corresponding, advertising fed, increase in the material wealth expectations and aspirations of that exponentially rising world human population is physically unsustainable and is a lethally toxic brew. Thus, there will eventually with certainty be one or a combination of the following processes: a situation in which it costs more in energetic terms to extract material resources from ecosystems than the use-value of the energy extracted leading in one way or another to one or the other or some combination of the three probabilities immediately following: a naturally induced cataclysmic dieoff of human population numbers, an "artificially" induced dieoff of human population numbers, or a fundamental shift in the economic values of contemporaneous humanity.

Accelerating all of these processes toward an epic world problematique is the inevitable catastrophic exponential debt implosion of the current global financial order.

A novel economics of wellbeing, which is really an ancient economics of wisdom, addresses the last of the probabilities above: namely, a fundamental shift in the economic values of contemporaneous humanity.

An economics founded on wellbeing is very different from an economics founded on wealth. The science of such is novel in contemporary terms, though not so much so in historical terms of human living and sustainable livelihood.

There are those who will say that economics is intrinsically about material life and therefore about material wealth and so the only relevant sociopolitical issues are distribution and redistribution. That is true too; . . . in another way. But let us for now not engage in a long discussion as to whether or not the fundamentals of our experiential engagement with our world are primarily physical (material) or are primarily psychological (including emotional and spiritual). I avoid this engagement, for now, knowing perfectly well that it does matter crucially on which basis our human experience is ultimately founded.

Joseph Edozien

Herewith, some reactions; and responses to those reactions.

(selected reactions encapsulate themes found in all; last names are omitted for the privacy of the correspondent)

As this informal community conversation continues and evolves, if it indeed continues and evolves, it may well morph into the founding editions of SANE Community

Views: a friendly thinking space where you may share your emerging themes and designs as we codevelop them together. www.sane.org.za

Hi Joseph

I like the idea but each time I explore the possibility of living in a new way on the earth I come back to the issue of land ownership.

The problem to me is that in the end you no longer have the right, just to be anywhere on the planet. The waters, earth and air are owned by individuals, governments and corporations. So to be on the planet you need to rent or own property. To do this you are almost forced onto the treadmill of income or wealth generation or accumulation which does not easily work hand in hand with wellbeing.

My wife and I tried so hard to find another way to be in the world but have now settled on being financially independent, owning land and working on sustainability from the inside.

My thoughts....for today.

Rob

Rob,

What you say gets right to the kernel of one of the core issues, which is how the modern financial-economic system, as we know it, frustrates the free and holistic development of human personality and humane values in very practical and concrete daily ways for not only many of the rich with access to copious financial facilities but even more so for most of the urban poor without access to monetary income and the corresponding means to live without money.

The counter-argument, of course, is that the present system has enabled fabulous technological progress and material wealth generation, etc., which allows the human personality to express itself in creative and spectacular ways. It has taken us from the "brutality" of "savagery" to the splendours of the glittering neon lights of the modern city, etc.

This is a powerful counter-argument because it is hard to argue practically with a nice smooth ride in a nice gleaming car, especially if the air-conditioner is on in the sweltering heat and there is soothing music on on the surround sound quadraphonic system. Not bad, really, until you encounter the smiling man in the sweltering heat good-naturedly trying to sell you a cheap trinket when you come to a full stop at a traffic light and you wonder whether or not there is a connection between his penury, and lack of socio-personal development options, and your splendour: and on "his continent" no less!

It takes complex sociocultural "justifications" to bury that uneasy feeling wrapped inside that uncomfortably suppressed question about the necessary relation between wealth and poverty in the current financial-economic setup if one's conscience still has a pulse and hasn't itself been deeply buried and thus murdered under all the complex "justifications."

Moreover, it is questionable whether or not the free expression of human innovation is based on this current financial-economic system. It may be reasonable to argue that it is concentrated and perhaps accelerated by it, but it would be unreasonable to argue that it is caused by it, or even intrinsically best organised by it.

For example, on the question of acceleration of innovation, this may simply be an inevitable outcome of the historical accumulation of innovations and their organic diffusions. The question of the concentration of innovations is more complicated because there does seem to be a link to the concentrative nature of the current form of monopoly financial power.

Every key means of sustenance and livelihood is as you say "owned," so it has to be

bought or rented with system money (if not inherited). Thus, under the compulsion of necessity, most people just have to desperately get that system money by straight means when they can and even by crooked means when they can't. And the system, of course (who would?), won't pay those who question its foundations and justifications to question its foundations or justifications. This makes it hard for those, such as yourself, who would like to experiment with other living system modes. So, in one form or another, willingly or unwillingly, wittingly or unwittingly, we mostly all have to become accomplices in the universalisation of the monopoly debt-based financial system founded ultimately on "securitised" lending and borrowing processes, and also often thus even in our own experiential dispossession because we have to spend most of our time and energy doing things and living in ways which undermine our genuine preferences. And, as they say: in the "survival of the fittest," better to step on than be stepped on so it's not me that's crushed under foot. In this way, we are mostly all haplessly caught up in this "play the game or starve" dynamic. And that's the fence around humanity today.

This monopoly debt-based financial system, which is the system of the self-exponentiating "monetization" of debt-fictions, even debt on debt in towers of "securitisations," is so ubiquitous and so all-encompassing today that we can't escape it even if we want to; and the personal toll and cost of doing so when one can is just too overwhelming to be practical and sustainable for most of us, especially if there is a family to feed, etc., or if one just wants some acceptable social dignity and respect, etc., without being called a loonie, eccentric, or an outcast as is the label often given those who dare to try a different way not sanctioned by current system needs. This is both a very real and a very deep sociopolitical issue in the current financial-economic framework. It is why this system has no other long-range option than its own self-caused collapse. It allows no other sustainable alternatives to itself which could become "lifeboats" in times of need. In the long-run, that is self-annihilating because monocultures lose resilience. The real cost, of course, is who and what it takes along with it in its long-run course of self-implosion.

There seems, at first blush, to be no practically viable escape economic system lifeboat in which to row away if one so wishes, whether or not the dominant financial-economic system is ultimately a danger to itself and us as I believe it is. But that is why we are here working on the alternatives we are thinking about and building. We think we need other ways around in case we all, or most of us at least, ever need them.

Stupefyingly massive as it is, the current dominant mainstream financial-economic system is much more fragile and unstable than it may currently appear, and the daunting inertia in the mono-directional momentum of its very large mass is itself one of the great dangers of this system. It is flexible and creative in only one direction: exponential growth in all core variables. This is not natural. It is ultimately self-implosive.

We will all eventually have to grapple directly with what you say, Rob, because it is an inescapable issue.

Joseph Edozien

Hello Joseph,

I agree with what you say about material wealth breeding inertness. It would be interesting to see a return to some kind of barter system where direct trading of skills and services is valued over the exchange of money. I know its idealistic and impractical--but I also know I'm not the only person thinking along these lines. Its interesting how the need to own territory and posses space as a symbol of status/belonging makes people equate material wealth with wellbeing.

In the words of eddie vedder;
*'society, your crazy greed....
you think you have to want more than you need...
but if you have more than you need you need more space'*

I wonder if nomadic cultures weren't wealthier in the non-material sense---the focus was more on community, living in sync with natural cycles and accumulating only that which can be carried with you when its time to move to the next place.

I think we often mistake wants with needs
I also think that living generously is important and that emphasis on accumulation of material wealth can impede the flow of giving and receiving that is necessary to the dynamism of living systems.

Those are my pre-coffee thoughts of the morning.

Thank you
be well
Tamlyn

Tamlyn,

It is definitely a key to happiness to live generously. We need to do that, but have lost sight of that "giftingness" as a core human need. It is not just nice to be nice; it is necessary to be nice to be happy. And, yes, giving and receiving should be a flow, a free flow, something organic and unmeasured because one should be able to take here and give there, etc. So it all organically balances itself out without measurement. But that's basically not easily facilitated by this system. This is one reason we are working on alternatives which systemically facilitate this circuit of "giftingness."

In my view, and this is not a common view, nomadic and pre-civilisational cultures were "wealthier," just as you suggest. But this now a highly "political" and implicitly very

charged issue partly because part of the power dynamic of this system is to convince people they are better off in it and that it is "progress" from what was destroyed, etc., in the pyramidal erection of the industrialisation and urbanisation we call "modernity" which has now both captured and captivated our world.

This is a deep and painful, and thus submerged, issue. And I'll explore it in another time and in another space. It's a very complicated and intricate subject. But this matter is not just a "philosophical" or "romantic" yearning with no practical relevance to today's world and current issues as would be the present dismissals of "modernists," "development experts," and those aspiring to or speaking in homage of the status quo.

This issue of rampaging, unquestioned, and unchallenged "modernity" is a very real and very pressing current issue in our rural areas and is the primary danger to the health and thriving and wellbeing of African peasantry who are the real human backbone and stability foundation of our continent. Village life in systemically supported rural living is not intrinsically a bad or unworthy or unhealthy or even "impoverished" life especially when values other than material opulence are used as evaluation standards. In fact, such living can very much be a self-provident lifestyle if the resources of rural areas are not seen simply as extraction fields for unsustainable cities. If this issue is not thought through on this continent and others, and simply dismissed as anti-modernist bucolic utopianism, we will simply be headed for far more of what we increasingly have now: growing and intensifying informal settlement invasions and "colonisations" of megalopolises built on squalor.

It will be a catastrophic error of "development" to proletarianise the peasantry when there are no jobs to proletarianise them for.

Even if there were those jobs, and there aren't and there won't be, would it not be a sad spectacle to see all Africans become either factory workers, vastly most of us, or factory managers, very few of us, or factory owners, even very very much fewer of us? That seems neither a happy nor a beautiful picture of African "development" facilitative of genuine wellbeing.

We must thoughtfully question and deeply challenge this allocentric model of African "development" orthodoxy that is being forcefully stuffed down our psyches as the only relevant and desirable "game in town" and which is profoundly seductive, because so personally "profitable," to too many of our uncritical elites: seductive too because too many of us think we envy and think we want the eurocentric glitter and the asiocentric bling which most of us will never be able to afford because the cost keeps rising while the promise keeps tempting.

It is time and tide for an Afrocentric model of African new economics for a different and fresh approach to a new continental internetworking and re-engineering redevelopment of Africa.

This is our continent not theirs, and our resources belong to us for our own

socioeconomic redevelopment and not to them for theirs.

While this sentiment may seem "separatist" at first encounter, it is not said in a separatist spirit. I think we can all reasonably agree, even those with compelling needs to deny, that Africa has been ceaselessly and mercilessly plundered for centuries with its human and material wealth stripped and shipped to other shores, with the witting and unwitting collaboration of far too many Africans, and that this extravagant plunder must stop now because Africa now needs its wealth for itself to redevelop itself in its own self-defined image and in its own Afro-affirming way. I say this, too, knowing fully well that "Africa" is itself an ill-defined label meaning many different and very complicated things which need further elaboration and discussion.

Additionally, what is said here is not to imply that "African culture," whatever that loose label actually refers to in any meaningful way, or "peasant life," whatever that really is, are perfect or idyllic, they are neither, but both have been very effective social security and economy-ecosystem balancing systems for millenia until disturbed by the manic force of "modernity." We thus have much still to learn from them about how we as humans are really designed and meant to live by Nature.

Seeing "modernity" in proper perspective as just one limited, and quite often sub-optimal, human development option among other also worthy options is very much a matter of practicality and not only a matter of philosophy or romance.

Of course, I fail to understand why "philosophical" or "romantic" when applied as epithets should be considered dirty words in matters concerning systems of good living. Smile . . .

On the other hand, thus, one wonders why the word "progress" does not come under like scrutiny. It may not be a dirty word, but it certainly is not clean.

The word "progress" is problematic. It is values-relative. One man's "progress" is often another person's agony . . . This is most often most evident in the relations between colonisers and colonised between continents, between settlers and "natives" in well-resourced "new" lands, and in the relations between economic classes within societies. We see it today, everyday. It's the so-called "poverty" issue, which is an issue more of system than of justice, actually . . . "Progress" is a much more relative and much more difficult idea than is frequently supposed. It all depends on where you sit . . .

Joseph Edozien.

PS: if those are your early morning pre-coffee thoughts, Tamlyn, then perhaps you shouldn't drink any coffee and keep thinking "pre-coffee" all day. How about that?
Smile . . .

Thanks Joseph

Talking about living well, this notion came out strongly in the recent People's Declaration on Mother Earth after a big get together in Bolivia to reject the disastrous Copenhagen conclusion. I've summarized the document as follows from a much longer one which you are welcome to if needed.

Best

Patrick

Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth - Summary

*We, peoples, nations **and other species** are all part of Mother Earth with a common destiny and shared, interdependent rights to exist, be respected, regenerate and be free of contamination with abundant fresh air and clean water. While there is enough for all to live well the capitalist system is putting life at risk through destructive activities the results of which are evident in phenomena like climate change.*

*We must take urgent and collective action to transform life-disrupting systems and have the United Nations adopt the rights of Mother Earth as a common standard of achievement for all peoples with the expectation of full implementation and enforcement. We commit to learn and communicate about how to live well while defending and restoring Mother Earth. We reject the use of nuclear and chemical weapons and will work towards peace and **economic systems** in harmony with Mother Earth.*

Patrick

Patrick,

Thank you for that.

Your summary is very, very good.

The Declaration fits perfectly with a framework I wrote some time ago which I may share with the community at some point.

However, I must point out that the idea that Mother Earth has rights is an anthropocentric notion. We derive our rights, in my opinion, from Mother Earth and not the other way around. Nevertheless, I understand the principle informing that idea in the Declaration, which is to fit our obligations to Mother Earth within our current dominant anthropocentric framework of jurisprudence which derives largely from Roman sources and which places temporal human affairs at the center of our concerns in the formal legal architecture of current society. This is a limited point of view not shared by all cultures;

but, by implicitly acknowledging its current pre-eminence, the Declaration points in new directions from familiar and broadly accepted grounds.

I will add also that the other element which seems missing in the Declaration, or at least in your fine summation of it, is the background idea of Culture.

I tend to the view that economic systems are cultural artifacts even if ultimately based on natural imperatives. Therefore, it matters what cultural presuppositions upon which an economic system is based.

There are those who will say that economic systems are transcultural categories. In this view, they are not really constructs but something given. In this view, most modern economists, it seems, would say that economics is in some sense like physics: the study of immutable laws as given. Others with a transcultural view of economics would venture that it is a social construction, but a social construction which transcends culture because it is driven by social imperatives which cut across all cultures. For example, they would say that the need to process the material conditions of living under conditions of scarcity necessitates social stratification into an economic class structure defined by relations to the means of production. In this view, "Culture" is almost a fictitious category which obscures and mystifies the true social relations of production. Thus, economics is transcultural because the material conditions of life are transcultural.

There is neither the time nor the space here, nor is this the place, to enter into this thicket; so let me leave it by simply asserting that "Culture" is itself a socio-psychic response to material conditions which is creative and thus potentially differentiated and can therefore yield different embedded economic systems.

That said, I leave the subject, for now, before I get peevishly run out of town by both the formalists and the materialists of economic science. They might hit me hard with their vuvuzelas, after blowing them hard right into my ears, for my cheeky seemingly substantialist, even evocatively vaguely spiritualist, and apparently heretically non-materialist insouciance. Mercifully, my presumably sufferable naughtiness may be forgiveable? Smile . . .

Joseph Edozien.

I really liked what you wrote here Joseph. It strikes a big chord with me. However, I think this is something quite difficult to work on in isolation. There is so much pushing us in the other direction, that without discussion and support I think it is difficult to really embrace an economics based on wellbeing. It's something I'd be keen to discuss in a small group. So...keep writing. Simple living can also, I think, lend itself somewhat to a spirit of mean-ness.

Susan

Susan,

It will be difficult to implement an economics based on Wellbeing in the current psychic, political, and economic architecture of the world. I agree. There are currently inadequate and insufficient macrosystemic supports. And small pockets, as you suggest, likely cannot last and probably cannot thrive in isolation.

And, as you so insightfully and correctly suggest, overwhelming forces are pushing us in the other direction.

Those sociopolitical forces, in the guise of economic systems, are forces whose persuasive and coercive powers cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, even if we cannot enjoy wellbeing-based economic systems, if we start pilots experimentally in our lifetime, perhaps we can leave seeds for our descendants if they ever need them as they likely will.

It will not work for all of us to have an ethics of one generation alone: mine. We probably should start thinking, some of us at least, of a few down the line . . .

An economics of wellbeing will be a work for generations . . .

Nevertheless.

Wellbeing Economics can begin to help uplift the poor here and now once it is seen that a rich system of flourishing can be based on an abundant system of simple living: abundant not in a material sense but in an associational sense of the give and take of mutual assistance unmediated by the artificially scarce usury system money yet lubricated by more informal means arising from necessity and which are systemically facilitated rather than systemically obstructed.

The missing large-scale catalyst is mostly political will in the context of the blunting and frustration of social imagination.

What is particularly fascinating in what you say, though, is that simple living can itself lead to a spirit of mean-ness. There is much to ponder in that statement . . .

Joseph Edozien.

Some of us at least, even if not all of us, should be thinking seriously and systematically about what ingredients would be present in systems of society and living which emanate happiness for most, even if not all, and which are systemically facilitative of wellbeing and inner flourishing.

I will be happy to share my work and thinking in this area at some point in another time and space if they would help since I believe that such systems are viable and sustainable and will soon become necessary in any case.

Certainly, I for one would welcome your thoughts too because they would be important thoughts to share I'm sure.

Whatever new systems emerge out of the waning of the current one, including systems based on fostering and making way for more happiness in the inner flourishing of wellbeing, will manifest themselves in different ways from culture to culture, and from subgroup to subgroup within each culture.

The future relocation to multiculturalism I foresee is because, though it may not appear so at the moment, it is unlikely that the currently universalising monoculture we see today which is based on the global standardisation of mass consumerism will remain unfragmented after a waning of its underlying financial support system. We will likely restart from that "globalisation" base in a localising process analogously to how the romance languages localised out of Latin in the long period after the breakdown of the empire undergirding the universalisation of Latin: Rome. And while this line of future peering may seem an irrelevantly long view relative to immediately present concerns, it is one view, my view, of a possible long period ahead whose roots will emerge in our lifetimes if present processes are reliable indicators of future probabilities.

The generic components of happiness and wellbeing are likely similar, but the specific expressions will vary in the differing conditions. One person's delight is another person's drudgery, and vice versa, etc. And this is why the systems of a long-term viable future cannot and should not be monocultures. The systems for the long-run future will be, in my view, about live and let live. And in that diversity we will all find mirrors of ourselves which will help us see our uglinesses as we reach inward for our beauties.

I really do think the coming collapse of the dominant system we experience today will help us outgrow conquering system needs to force all into its image; or, more correctly, force us into monocultural self-images which breed subservience to its values and dominance imperatives and drives.

We may even start to learn that we need "othernesses" to survive, to be resilient, and even to be ourselves; . . . and that we should celebrate, rather than attempt to murder, the existence of the "other" in its or his or her special flavour and particularity.

Anyway, I have enjoyed this conversation with you. I hope you have too with me. And thanks very much to Rob, Tamlyn, Patrick, and Susan who so well and so succinctly encapsulated so many of your thoughts, themes, and concerns.

Cheers All!

And please be well.

. . . as always as is practicable for you in the present system. Smile . . .

Have a nice day, evening, night, and tomorrows too, and etc. . . .

Joseph Edozien.

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