

Sustainable Consumption and the Good Life

Interdisciplinary perspectives

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14 Afterword

Beyond the paradox of the big, bad wolf

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You and I, lucky enough to be alive at the outset of the third millennium CE, live – objectively speaking – in paradise. This particular ‘you and I’ does not, alas, refer to humanity *tout court*, but to the richest fifth of the global population, somewhat more than a billion people; us who constitute the global middle and upper classes; we who inhabit the leafy suburbs of the global village, who enjoy a fast internet connection and a remote control for our television set, who ask ourselves what we should have for dinner and daydream about a nice holiday. It is those 20 per cent of us who consume 80 per cent of the world’s wealth, to which category everybody who reads these words, naturally, belongs. Never before in human history or prehistory have so many people had so much – so many things, so many opportunities for partaking in rewarding leisure activities, such good health, so much freedom of choice, such a high life expectancy. Entirely average people enjoy a material standard of living which in most respects surpasses that of the landed aristocracy in the mid-nineteenth century.

It must be conceded that on the whole we do have fewer thoroughbred horses and crystal chandeliers, fewer private chamber orchestras and less silverware than nineteenth-century aristocrats. But at the end of the day, that may not matter so much. In the mid-nineteenth century, statisticians estimated how thick the layer of horse droppings covering the streets of central London would be a century later, provided the current development continued. The scenario was alarming. The pessimists envisioned a future when the preferred footwear for crossing Piccadilly Circus would be wading boots or perhaps stilts. A few years later (in 1864), the Underground opened its first lines, and another few decades later, the horses had become a pure tourist attraction, analogous to the sperm whales of Lofoten (northern Norway) at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The sign had not changed its physical appearance, but suddenly it signified tourist titillation rather than economic utility.

In all earnestness, it must be conceded that we who belong to the global middle class manage pretty well without two hundred crystal glasses and pompous, dusty and impractical chandeliers. Chamber orchestras, naturally, have long since been replaced by affordable Asian stereo systems capable of reproducing music at virtually the same quality as the original, at any time of day or night.

Perfectly ordinary people who belong to the global middle class – and it includes the vast majority of West Europeans – live in spectacular luxury, regardless of the basis for comparison. We live in warm, bright, clean and not least spacious dwellings. (In 1946, a two-room unit with a kitchen and a bathroom was considered a functional European family flat.) On the whole, notwithstanding allergies and personal preferences, we can eat whatever we want to. The food is quality controlled and generally tastes good. (It is well known that the animals we sometimes eat do not necessarily lead fulfilling lives, but animals were not necessarily happy in earlier times either.) Thanks to improved methods of production, an inexpensive wine from Australia or South Africa tastes as good as, if not better than, wines imbibed by royalty a couple of centuries ago. In contrast to nineteenth-century aristocrats, we are also able to enjoy the exotic tastes of bananas, oranges and mangoes all year round, in addition to a range of foodstuffs they had never heard of.

Books, to mention another example, have become incredibly cheap. Many cost less than an average hour’s salary, and the selection is unlimited. We can listen to our favourite music whenever we want to, even when the musicians are asleep or dead. When we North Europeans take our four, five or six weeks of annual vacations, millions of us can spend some of them at a pleasant hotel in a remote area. A hundred years ago, Norwegians in general had no holidays; fifty years ago, they went on a camping trip to neighbouring Sweden or Denmark; and by now, Thailand has become a standard destination for a family vacation. By 2013, more than 80 per cent of the Norwegian population went on at least one holiday trip abroad, spending on average two weeks a year in a hotel.

When members of the global middle class have a spare moment, and they often do, since the number of working hours has decreased steadily in the last hundred years, they have many options. Some engage in various leisure activities, from golf to singing in choirs, but they can also be entertained or enlightened by others at whim. Concert halls, cinemas, sports arenas and theatres sell tickets within purchasing range for most, and at home, practically everybody has one or several television sets with a varied selection of enlightening, distracting or entertaining programmes. During the last few years, the internet has also become an important source of entertainment, distraction and enlightenment.

The level of education is increasing, and the proportion of jobs which are hazardous to health or physically exhausting is being reduced (or outsourced) by the year. The number of hours spent on housework among European women has decreased steadily since the Second World War, at the same time as the size of the dwellings has increased.

Moreover, we live longer than earlier generations, including the aristocracy, which had a tendency of dying halfway through life from consumption or broken hearts. This is also the case with the materially poorer countries, except those African countries which are most affected by AIDS. Average global life expectancy in 1900 was 31; a hundred years later it was 66.8 (more than a doubling!), and in many of the richest countries it hovers around 80 (Morgan 2002). Many of you who read this will live to be a hundred. We stay healthier

than earlier generations, thanks to medicines and vaccination programmes, better nutrition and changes in the world of labour. The dehumanising and dangerous jobs in agriculture, mining and industry have been humanised in our part of the world, and in the global middle class it is uncommon that people are physically exhausted at the age of 40. Today, our kind of people – the wealthiest fifth of humanity – simply do not grow old the way they used to. Some years ago, a dear colleague and friend died, and his death was especially sad because he was so young, only 62. But as late as 1928, the American demographer Louis Dublin predicted that the ceiling on life expectancy would be reached at a national average of 64.75 years. He was in fact an optimist, as expected longevity in the USA at the time was 57 years (Dublin himself lived to be 87).

We have lived in paradise for some time now. Most of the denizens of our global middle class world only know absolute scarcity and poverty through stories from mass media. If they live in countries with severe inequality, they are nevertheless intermittently exposed to glimpses of poverty on their way to work or leisure activities. One exception is immigrants from poor countries and their children. Although their social mobility has in most cases been spectacular, they have vivid memories of scarcity, which remains a fundamental reality in the country of their close relatives.

Two general aspects of life in paradise deserve mentioning. First – and this is the case with all earthly paradises – it cannot last forever. Second – and this concerns our specific paradise – we now know that objectively paradisaical conditions do not necessarily make the inhabitants of paradise satisfied. Studies from the UK and the USA suggest that the subjectively experienced well-being ('SWB') has not increased noticeably since the 1950s (Offer 2006), that is a time without holidays in the sun, mobile telephones, colour television and Saturdays off. There is also influential and much-cited research that suggests that well-being is not correlated with income, at least for those who do not live in absolute poverty (see e.g. Easterbrook 2003). Researchers are not entirely agreed amongst themselves: Some claim that more money fails to make an impact only for the richest 25 per cent, while others have argued that most people in fact do not enjoy a higher level of well-being with an increase in material welfare, provided they had enough to begin with.

'We have everything, but that's all we have', said the Norwegian folk singer Ole Paus some years ago. Although this observation was later quoted by two prime ministers in their televised New Year's speeches, it has not led to perceptible shifts in politics. Even in incredibly rich Norway it would have amounted to political suicide to propose reduced consumption and a reduced material standard of living – in spite of the fact that it is now fairly widely known, and not least experienced, that increased well-being or happiness in an affluent society depends on other things than an ever higher material standard of living.

The view that it is necessary to reduce carbon emissions, and thus energy consumption, and indeed economic growth, in order to halt climate change is not universally held, but it is widespread and influential. There are few objections from politicians or editorialists whenever the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change) presents conclusions to the effect that energy consumption and lifestyles in the affluent countries have to change. The need to be serious about the threat of irreversible global warming frequently figures in public speeches; yet, next to nothing is being done about the issue, and so far, few vote for politicians who sincerely promise to contribute to developing a post-extractive or carbon-neutral society. Nearly everybody, moreover, agrees that money, power and fame do not make you happy, and yet exactly such values govern both the workplace and the economy as such. Most members of the global middle class would say, if asked, that we are a single humanity who has to find ways of living together, yet there is considerable intolerance towards culturally different groups. The most significant contradiction, or double-bind, however, is that which exists between growth and sustainability. One cannot have it both ways in the long run; through our spectacularly successful and comfortable way of life, we are simultaneously undermining the conditions for our own existence. Perhaps it is true that in the global middle class we have everything, but ultimately that's all we have.

What is missing? Perhaps the short answer is hope. That is to say, contemporary affluent societies are lacking hope. To most people belonging to the global middle class, life after death is – at the most – a vague notion. It is far too weak to provide sufficient hope to live by. Moreover, material scarcity has been left behind, at least for now, and there is little indication that it will return in our lifetimes. The satisfaction of material needs, in other words, is not a source of hope either. With a minimum of security precautions, we Europeans can move safely wherever we might wish to in our near surroundings, without having to fear attacks from wild animals or gangs of bandits. If we become ill, we may reasonably expect to recover. Throughout the history of humanity, the struggle for survival has been a major topic and a major source of hope. This is no longer the case among the privileged classes. Hope is no longer necessary to keep us going; life now runs on an autopilot.

For this condition, I propose a diagnosis I label the syndrome of the big, bad wolf. The foundational story is as follows. The voracious and always hungry Zeke Wolf, who lives in a dense forest not too far from the dwarfs' quarry and Cinderella's stepmother's mansion, has one big, overarching project in his life, namely to capture, cook and eat three delicious, pink pigs who live less than a mile away in the same forest. For this reason, he gets up every morning and lays his dastardly plans after consuming a frugal breakfast (usually oatmeal porridge). He develops original disguises (a favourite being the elderly, gangrenous woman with a stick and a basket of apples) and builds sophisticated traps, conjures up labyrinthine routes through the forest as if he were a master chess player, and lies in hiding with great patience near paths he knows the pigs often take. He subscribes to the local press in order to follow news of public events such as fancy fairs, where the pigs might be present; he becomes an actor, an engineer and an athlete, all for the sake of capturing the pigs.

Usually, the pigs are one step ahead of the wolf, but on at least one occasion, he succeeded in catching them. The details elude me, but I remember him bundling the three plump pigs together with a length of rope and dropping them

in his big iron pot. The water began to warm up as Zeke Wolf chopped up onions and carrots, adding them to the water along with a few pinches of salt, and it seemed as if all hope was gone for the pigs. It was at this point that Practical Pig, the smartest of the three (the one with the blue dungarees and cap), turned towards the wolf and asked him: 'So, Zeke Wolf, what are you going to do tomorrow, then?'

The wolf was visibly shaken by the question. What on earth was he going to do tomorrow? For a moment, he pondered the issue at hand, gazing emptily in front of himself, and turning away, he released the pigs – an act he immediately regretted, but by then they had already jumped out of the window and run away.

In a rare glimpse of reflexivity, Zeke Wolf realised that his entire *raison d'être* rested on the project of catching, killing, boiling and finally eating the three little pigs. Without the pigs on his horizon, he would have no reason to rise from bed in the morning.

We the affluent are Zeke Wolf on the day of the hangover. Overfed and giddy, we lie on the couch asking ourselves what we should do tomorrow. Depending on his class identity, the wolf might have spent the rest of his life with a remote control and a six-pack in front of the television, or on a terrace in southern Spain near a golf course, with a glass of white wine. Briefly, there are strong indications that we need some new pigs to hunt.

The serpent in this earthly paradise may be called hopelessness. It is tautologically true that you may lose hope in the end if you are hopelessly poor, but you may also lose it if you are hopelessly rich. There is no surplus of excruciatingly difficult, but urgent and deeply necessary, collective projects around here for the time being. Dreams tend to be small, private and generally realistic. If you spend November evenings dreaming of an emerald lagoon on a tropical island, and you end up going there already next February, the dream is too puny and too realistic. (You end up disappointed anyway, as the island turns out to be a sleepy and uneventful place with bad food and mosquitoes.)

Being healthy with a long life expectancy helps, but it is not enough. It also helps to be able to read Dickens and listen to Mendelssohn (or, for that matter, Ludlum and Springsteen) whenever you wish, and to eat your fill of first-rate food daily, but that's not enough either. It certainly helps to live in a society where nobody needs to go hungry to bed, but after a while, we take this for granted as well, following the law of diminishing returns, and it scarcely occurs to us that we ought to be grateful for all this. The good life, and the good society, is, somehow, something else.

The planet has a poverty problem and an environmental problem that cannot be solved by one state alone, and in an important sense, we are in the same boat. We live in one world; we are one humanity. Where I sit, writing, in the extreme north-west of the Eurasian continent, we are nevertheless capable of boredom, and it is partly due to the fact that we lack a future-oriented, collective project. It is as though all problems have been solved. The Nordic countries and similar places, from the Netherlands to New Zealand, have overachieved. We have

developed the most well-organised, decent, materially rich and wholesome societies seen throughout world history. However, I have already mentioned that earthly paradises do not last, and ours is fast being dethroned by its inherent contradictions. In Oslo, where I sit, there is an increasingly visible gap between Norway, the world champion in global solidarity and promoting sustainability abroad, on the one hand; and Norway, the filthy, disgusting country addicted to oil – a country responsible, through its petroleum exports, for 3 per cent of the world's CO₂ emissions although it has less than 0.1 per cent of the total population.

It is no longer easy to argue against the view that something ought to be done about the way of life predominating in the global middle class. Anything else would be short-sighted, cruel and indecent. The colonisation of the future by the present has become a colossal problem.

Research on happiness and 'subjective well-being' has not led to the formulation of a set of general laws of happiness. Yet, the chapters of this book suggest, along with a few thousand years of sustained philosophical, religious and artistic reflection on the place of humanity and the quest for the good life, that a few provisional conclusions might be pertinent:

- Human beings are simultaneously driven by a desire for equality and community (the solidarity instinct) and a desire to stand out as individuals (the competitive instinct). In a good society, the two impulses keep each other reasonably well in check; too much community deprives the individual of freedom, while too much individuality leads to accelerating inequality.
- Great discrepancies in prosperity and opportunities for self-realisation make people unhappy and discontented. In enormously unequal societies, the rich fear the poor, and the poor hate the rich. The less the differences in actual (not just formal) life opportunities, the better (Wilkinson 2005).
- A great deal of the subjective well-being or life-satisfaction experienced is partly caused by inherited tendencies, yet both our cultural surroundings and the events we go through contribute to our well-being. It is possible, as some American psychologists claim, to learn how to think positively, but this exercise may not help if you find yourself at the bottom of the ladder in a hierarchical, highly competitive society.
- Human beings, moreover, desire recognition, that is to be respected – or even admired, at least on a good day – for what they are and what they do. There are many ways of achieving recognition, from driving a boat really fast in a competition with others who also drive their boats really fast; by taking care of children in a caring and humorous way; by publishing erudite papers or cooking the world's best pasta, or in one of a thousand different ways. Although some universal tendencies are embedded in our evolved nature, culture and history decide how they can best be expressed. A century and a half ago, a man in his forties could garner great respect in the American South if he owned many slaves, had a dignified paunch and a good hand with the whip, and kept his daughters' honour intact until they married. Today,

similar ideals would scarcely gain anybody widespread respect anywhere, and certainly not in Alabama. Values, in other words, change. One day, perhaps in a not too remote future, people will obtain other people's respect and social recognition through ecologically sustainable ways of behaving.

- Finally, experience and history tell us that large-scale collective projects may satisfy both the demand for equality and solidarity, and the need individuals have to prove themselves. When involved in such projects, you do something with others, and you have the chance to display yourself at your best.

All of this is fairly uncontroversial, notwithstanding the internal disagreements among happiness researchers concerning the relative significance of genetic factors, the role of inequality and a few other things. These minor disagreements notwithstanding, recent research on well-being and life-satisfaction implies that there is no necessary connection between, for example, extensive driving and flying, uninhibited energy consumption and happiness in a society. At the same time, it is no less obvious that had we, in our neck of the woods somewhere in the affluent world, quit using fossil fuels altogether, beginning tomorrow morning, the majority of the population would have experienced a steep decline in well-being, coupled with not insignificant rage directed at the powers that be. Authoritarian measures introduced without soliciting popular opinion are never popular. Short of dictatorial measures, changes must therefore come about through a broad reassessment of the nature of the good life. The arrow of time will not change its direction on its own accord.

The easiest choice is always to continue with business as usual. Already thirty years ago, green activists were jokingly telling each other that 'we are standing at the edge of the cliff, about to take a long step forwards'. Pessimists argue that we have already taken that step (like the man jumping from a skyscraper, shouting, as he passes the fiftieth floor, that it is going rather well), and that the world as we know it will soon be gone as a result of the flooding and droughts, melting glaciers and rising seas, huge migration waves, pestilence and mass deaths caused by climate change. It is tempting to draw the connection between these contemporary prophets of doom and those who were waiting for the apocalypse in the year 1000. Yet the fact that the most spectacular predictions are likely to be mistaken does not mean that prospects are great. Global climate does change, and yes, there will be repercussions everywhere.

And yet, even if the entire scientific and public debate about climate change should be exposed as a gigantic piece of propaganda (although it is hard to guess who should be responsible for such a gargantuan conjuring trick and why), there are good reasons to address the values and way of life in our kind of society. The final stages of material welfare growth, after all, did not increase the general well-being, only the level of frustration; and simultaneously, welfare growth up here made millions less happy down there, since their relative deprivation was a constant reminder of global injustice.

Neither classic socialism nor liberalist market ideologies offer satisfactory models, even if we disregard their dismal environmental record – the former

inhibits the individual's need to excel at something, while the latter is splendid as long as you experience smooth sailing, but the moment you hit a reef, there is nobody to blame but yourself.

The question is which kind of societal model is compatible with what we now know about well-being and life-satisfaction, as well as being ecologically sustainable. That question has been addressed in several of the chapters in this book, and I now propose to take it for a final spin. An annual publication, which deserves more attention than it gets, is *The Happy Planet Index*, published by the radical New Economics Foundation (2013). Intended as a supplement and a corrective to the UNDP's annual *Human Development Report*, the index takes the global conversation about happiness and the quality of life a step in an interesting direction. The people behind the report, mostly economists, calculate the relationship between SWB and life expectancy on the one hand, and ecological footprint on the other hand, that is – in brief – how much you have to pollute in order to enjoy a certain degree of life satisfaction and length. The NEF have, thus, entirely discarded GDP as a relevant criterion, which seems to be justified, as huge amounts of quantitative research now show that beyond a certain minimum level, there is no clear correlation between the average income in a country and the level of well-being. Other factors, such as the distribution of wealth (measured in gini coefficients), are far more important (Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), and inequality is now slowly being introduced as a fourth pillar by the Foundation.

The report usefully confirms things that most of us knew already; for example, that the rich live longer and pollute more than the poor. At the same time, it enables us to view the world in a slightly new way, with new connections and new potentials for change. For example, it documents that the inhabitants of the USA leave an ecological footprint which is 60 per cent higher than that of Germans, and yet the Germans live four years longer than, and are about as happy as, the Americans. Several Latin American countries are at or near the top of the table (the top five are Costa Rica, Vietnam, Colombia, Belize and El Salvador). The inhabitants of Costa Rica live long, pollute modestly and report – on the whole – that they are satisfied with life. Compared to a country like Finland, they naturally save a lot of energy on simpler housing and no central heating. Perhaps the kind of life quality that, in a place like Norway, requires a 300-square-metre house, a mountain cabin, HDTV and two annual vacations in warm places can be achieved in El Salvador with a 70-square-metre house with some afternoon shade on the terrace, well-behaved children and a plaza nearby with music, dance, food and drink on Saturdays. In earlier editions of the report, small island-states like Vanuatu and Dominica were near the top; in the latest versions, these countries are, for methodological reasons, not included.

Some countries vary little regarding ecological footprint, but considerably when it comes to satisfaction and longevity. Jamaicans live 27 years longer than Equatorial Guineans (figures from the 2008 report; the latter country was not included in 2012), but they pollute about as much (or little), and Jamaicans are – understandably – palpably more satisfied with life than Equatorial Guineans,

who live in an exceptionally brutal and insensitive dictatorship with huge inequalities.

There are other interesting variations and correlations as well. Hondurans report a far higher quality of life than Latvians; the two nationalities have roughly the same life expectancy, and the ecological footprint of the Latvians is more than twice that of the Hondurans. This difference reflects the importance of cultural values and cultural style, network types and trust, but also intangible but real factors such as the experience of improving versus deteriorating trends in societal development. As mentioned, small, manageable island societies with relatively dense networks and short social distances, incidentally, did well in the earlier versions of the report, when they were included.

The most interesting finding is perhaps that the countries which do best in the Happy Planet Index are neither those at the top nor those at the bottom of the UNDP Human Development Index, but those in the middle. The inhabitants of the poorest countries suffer from all kinds of deprivations, while the richest countries pollute far more than others without this being compensated through increased well-being or longevity. The spiralling growth which has led to a doubling in world energy consumption since 1975 has done little to improve the quality of life among those who were already reasonably well off then.

The first OECD country on the Index is New Zealand, in 28th place, followed by Norway (the impact of petroleum exports is not included in the footprint measurement); both countries are ranked below Indonesia and the Philippines and just above India and the Dominican Republic. The first Muslim country is Bangladesh, in 11th place, while the Gulf States are near the bottom of the table due to their huge carbon footprint, with Qatar and Bahrain in 149th and 146th place, respectively (the total number of countries in the index is 151). The USA is, owing to its very high carbon footprint, ranked as number 105 and China as number 60. In spite of Western propaganda to the effect that the Chinese are now the worst polluters in the world, the average Chinese leaves a modest carbon footprint (less than a third of the Americans), lives beyond 70 years and report (possibly with some subtle indirect nudging from the Party) that he is quite content.

The report confirms the provisional conclusions made earlier and strengthens arguments developed in the other chapters of this book, namely that it is not necessary to destroy the planet's ecology or to pester one's neighbour in order to be content with life.

The opposite may indeed often be the case. Most people, one may presume, would prefer to be liked rather than feared, and now that we increasingly find ourselves in a catch-22, a double-bind (Bateson 1972) between growth and sustainability where it is being confirmed every day that you cannot have it both ways, it is far from unlikely that many members of the global middle class will change their priorities. Driving gas-guzzling cars will appear tasteless and stupid if you live in the city: the oversized SUV becomes a sign indicating that the owner is out of kilter, analogous to showing off your prestige by parading a dozen well-trained slaves in New Orleans in 1870. Flying becomes an increasingly rare

necessity as long as it lasts, and will then slowly be phased out (provided solar-powered planes do not take over the market).

Science fiction? Daydreaming? Perhaps, but not necessarily. The dramatic transformation in the public attitude towards tobacco smoking shows that cultural mores and habits may change rapidly. Beginning in California in the 1980s, negative attitudes towards smoking spread like wildfire during the next decade and into the twentieth century. By 2010, smoking in public spaces had become anathema in large parts of the world, from India to South Africa, from Ireland to Colombia. When the smoking ban in restaurants and bars was introduced in Norway in 2004, pundits predicted that half of these establishments would be out of business before Christmas. Yet, it took only a few months before the absence of tobacco smoke, even in brown cafes patronised by workmen and heavy drinkers, had been naturalised and internalised. Smokers were literally left out in the cold, and today, some think wistfully, albeit with a tinge of disgust about the dim and distant past more than twenty years ago when everything smelled vaguely of tobacco smoke. This may be the ultimate fate of ecological irresponsibility as well. Now that it has been conclusively proved that it is not necessary for human beings to undermine the conditions for their continued existence in order to be happy, there are no good arguments for continuing on that particular path.

The small, mountainous country of Bhutan – east of Nepal, north of India and south of Tibet – is often mentioned in the happiness literature as a counter-example to Western 'affluenza'. In 1976, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck declared that it would be wise not to open the country to Western influence. His son, King Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, largely follows up his father's policy, but has decided on a few reforms, such as introducing television and political elections. There is still no mass tourism in Bhutan, and it is a McDonald's-free country with little commercialisation. This is in itself far from a guarantee for a high quality of life; neither the Cambodia of Pol Pot nor Stalin's Soviet Union were particularly McDonaldised. However, Bhutanese authorities have decided on 'gross national happiness' instead of the Western standard 'gross national product' as a yardstick for measuring how well the country is doing. Unlike Pol Pot, they do not massacre people who can read, and unlike Stalin, they are not obsessed with beating the Americans in childish competitions within sport, chess or space travel. Recently, the Centre for Bhutan Studies in Thimphu has begun to operationalise criteria for national happiness. They include obvious dimensions such as health, education and good governance, but also less common criteria such as cultural vitality, ecological diversity, time use and psychological well-being. Interestingly, Bhutan is not included in the Happy Planet Index due to a lack of comparable data. The Bhutanese authorities try to learn from the mistakes of the West without having to commit them. The Bhutanese have a life expectancy about ten to 15 years shorter than that of the global middle class, so the health care system arguably leaves a bit to be desired; yet, the average lifespan in Bhutan is the same as what Louis Dublin, back in 1928, estimated to be the highest possible average for a society. In South America, the popular movements

associated with the concept of *buen vivir* (living well) – based on local, often indigenous, notions of sustainability and the good life – follow a similar logic (Escobar 2013), with growing success locally in countries such as Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia.

Much could have been different here as well. A growing proportion of the global middle class not only believe that it is necessary to reduce consumption, but positively yearn for a life bringing them into closer contact with themselves and the ecology of which they are part. Of course, consumption does have its rewards (even if short-lived). To some, buying shoes gives a form of pleasure that may be compared to the pleasure others experience when listening to jazz. Modernity can be an extraordinarily rewarding epoch in which to live; the point is that it is possible to continue leading a modern life without destroying the planet, and without reducing one's quality of life. Soon, perhaps, people who love shoes will again begin to have them repaired instead of throwing them away, and perhaps they will start buying shoes that have not been sent halfway around the planet in a shipping container. There are some intuitively understandable, liberating aspects of a slower, less consumption-intensive life. Rather than working oneself to death on the stock exchange, we can be herders in the morning and fishermen in the afternoon, and in the evening we may hold our beloved's hand as much as we wish, provided we prefer that to criticising.

A revolution is not required in order to reach this kind of a situation, which many desire. The question remains, however, as to why nothing has happened so far, after decades of increasing affluence, which has not led to a concomitant increase in life-satisfaction, but instead threatens to undermine its own conditions. A short answer, to do with path dependency, is that business as usual is always the easiest option. Both the powerful and the less powerful have invested so much in the presently hegemonic model for growth and prosperity that changing the course will require a new mentality. Since the fossil fuel revolution around the year 1800, development and increased happiness have been associated with increased energy use. What is now called for may seem tantamount to reversing the arrow of time, which seems intuitively wrong.

For this reason, it is necessary to show that an ecologically sustainable future does not amount to turning the clock back. Two main arguments have been proposed against the hegemonic world order in this regard: It did not just create wealth, but also poverty; and it destroys the environment and the life opportunities for our descendants. To this I have added a third argument: The growth model which did lead to an increased quality of life (and not just a higher standard of living) for millions in the past two centuries no longer helps make people happier. The positive effect of affluence on the quality of life decreases and eventually vanishes when basic needs are satisfied. Granted that this is the case, a new language, new models for thought and a new epistemology are needed in order to talk about development and progress, where ecological footprints and life quality, not economic growth and increased production, form the baseline. What is needed more than anything is a net growth in the domain of political imagination.

In a society with considerably lower disposable monetary income than what is typical of the rich world today, it would suddenly seem rational to begin to look after one's belongings again. Services would become cheaper; goods would become more expensive. There would again emerge a demand, in the richest countries, for tailors and furniture upholsterers. When your scanner broke down, you would have it repaired instead of buying a new one. There would be fewer meetings and less reliance on Microsoft Outlook. More poetry and live music. Fewer costly, alienating and ecologically destructive construction projects. More small-scale enterprises, fewer megacorporations. More free time and less rubbish. You might even take a boat from Portsmouth to Buenos Aires instead of a plane; the trip would do you good, and it would take 13 days rather than 13 hours.

Late in the evening, over a drink, most people, including politicians, agree with this reasoning. What is required today – following the latest reports from the IPCC about climate change, the newest research on what makes people happy and the last news stories about the proportion of Americans who take pills every day just to keep going – are politicians and community leaders who have the courage to declare, without caveats, that the spiral of growth must be reversed as from next year, that the richest should start, and that there are good reasons to rejoice in our ability to do this.

In order to shake off the syndrome of the big, bad wolf, a large, collective project is necessary. Such a project would enable us to transcend ourselves, to do something both difficult and necessary, to reap other people's recognition for it, to take part in an encompassing and encouraging community and to perform some morally defensible acts in the world. Such a project would reconnect politics and everyday life among the global middle classes with planetary needs. At the moment it may seem remote, but we have reached a historical crossroads where it is becoming visible. Details must by necessity be worked out locally, but some common elements are environmental responsibility, justice, slow time, personal challenges and a reasonable balance between rights and duties.

The time since the global turn towards neoliberalism, around 1980, has been a long period of transition. Material scarcity had been overcome in the global middle classes, and there were no plans for the future beyond the consolidation of affluence. Self-realisation became an objective in itself, an empty signifier with no ulterior goal. The treadmills were filling up, literally and figuratively speaking. Irony became the preferred mode of engagement. With the hindsight of the early twenty-first century, it is clear that ways out of this impasse are within reach. What is on the horizon is a difficult, necessary, collective project with the promise of simultaneously saving the planet and enabling the global middle classes to shake off the syndrome of the big, bad wolf.

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