

TOWARDS AN ECONOMY OF WELL-BEING: A RESEARCH IN THE REGION OF VENICE

Abstract

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The research, published in June 2007 by the ONG Atena (Padua), contains the findings of a research carried out in the Veneto Region of Italy by Professor Dr. Romano Toppan with the scientific cooperation of Dr. Ruut Veenhoven, Professor at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, of Mr. Nic Marks, head of Well-being research of the New Economics Foundation in London and Dr. Carla Collicelli, Vice Director of the Central Bureau for Research and Statistics of Italy (CENSIS). Prof. Toppan holds a chair in Vocational Organisation and Development of Human Resources at the University of Verona.

The research was promoted and financed by the Veneto Regional Government which aimed at obtaining an indicative survey on the relationship between economical affluence and quality of life, between personal income increase and individual well-being. Reason for the survey is the impressive evolution the Veneto Region went through when compared to its social and economical situation until some decennia ago, when the region was characterized by high emigration rates, a prevailing agricultural economy and widespread pauperism. Currently, Veneto is ranked among the first ten European regions in terms of income and social and economical welfare.

The survey aims at providing a preliminary answer to the following question: While the population of Veneto has certainly become richer, with their per capita income having increased threefold within the last thirty years, did they also become happier?

The above question originates from the discovery and corroboration by several international surveys of the so-called well-being paradoxes. The most important one has been studied and verified during over fifty years of research at global level which have pointed out how an increasing index of affluence or income is far from being reflected - as one would habitually be inclined to believe - by a proportionally equal level of well-being and satisfaction within one's individual and social life. A further paradox shows how the degree of "happiness" verified within social groups of individuals that enjoy the highest levels of affluence (such as the ranking of 100 of the world's richest people as estimated by Forbes magazine) equals that of other social groups characterised by the highest level of sobriety, if not poverty, such as the Amish population of Pennsylvania or the Masaai).

In its first part, the text provides an exhaustive history of the findings advanced by psychologists, economists and other researchers on the subject and adds a presentation of existing alternative economies inspired by the concept of sustainability, and the forms of social or solidarity economy. According to the author, such forms of economy are a pre-condition for the economy of well-being to become accepted and widely adopted. The economy of well-being, in fact, quantifies the degree of affluence within a country or a region by following not only the traditional parameters and indicators such as Gross Domestic Product, but also by adopting a panel of indicators which include such concepts as sustainable development indexes and the

extent to which the national cultural values, the domestic social capital, the environment, the concept of good governance, etc are safeguarded.

The above are proposed by the author as the new scientific base and parameters that can allow researchers to evaluate how such concepts as advancement, affluence and quality of life increasingly apply to individuals, their consumption habits and especially their expectations concerning the future. In other words, the proposal is in favour of an economy based on intangible values, which – if adopted – would allow individuals at large to enjoy a better, alternative life while at the same time safeguarding non-renewable resources from exhaustion.

The author states with no hesitation that the economy of well-being as a paradigm must be made a key theme of the political agenda, upon which the development strategies for the future twenty years are to be modeled, since growth beyond one's actual needs is impossible. Unfortunately, growth in itself is the obsession of the industrialized Western world, with its accumulation of wealth, power and energy that cannot but result into excess and waste. If these tendencies are not redirected towards a solidarity model, they are bound to pave the way for decadence and isolation. One of the symptoms investigated by this text is, for instance, the case of the United States, where the total expense in waste bin bags alone equals that for all goods in 90 countries across the globe.

What about Veneto; are people happy? The third part of this work contains the findings of a survey carried out on a sample of residents; The average degree of "happiness" is higher than the national one (7.2 as opposed to 6.9) as recorded by the World Database of Happiness in Rotterdam, but it is lower when compared to other countries, such as Denmark (8.2), Iceland, Ireland, Malta and even Colombia (all with a national average around 8.0).

The interviews leave little doubt: The degree of happiness is significantly related not so much to one's income, but rather to the adoption of consumption and behavior patterns inspired by such concepts as environmental awareness, sobriety, a moderate level of physical activity and one's degree of trust in other people. Very interestingly, the happiest groups in the population of the Veneto Region are the youth between 19 and 34 years of age, and the elderly over 70 years of age. The least happy are to be found among the fifty to sixty years old.

The most prevailing requirement is not so much that of a greater economic development, but rather a desire for 'intangibles' such as human relations (within one's family and society), security, and a clean and healthy environment. In this concern Veneto as a region still proves to be mainly oriented towards maintaining a set of values where sobriety, solidarity and affluence without ostentation are the key concepts. However, there are signs of an incipient crisis, an erosion of some "social capital" that the region had been accumulating for decennia, and perhaps centuries.

The survey advocates the timely adoption of corrective measures; in this way, Veneto can exploit the available strategies and incentives in order to formulate its own 'social' policy. This policy should be inspired by the choice of a certain set of values, and encourage the development of community-orientated awareness, humanitarian engagement, collectivism and alternative consumption patterns. Such an approach would allow for our better qualities to keep growing and to lead the problematic transition of our "liquid" and globalised society towards Veneto's own model, the latter to be inspired by and as original as the one which Veneto represented during its development in the Sixties and Seventies. Moreover, Veneto Region is

attracted by a strong memory and historical factor: the long and exemplar political experience of the so called "Serenissima Repubblica" (the word "serene" was used to mean the original "well-being" governance style of the state, which was the unique Republic in Europe in those days). As Fernand Braudel wrote: "Venice was the only state where the power palace (Palazzo Ducale) was "empty" downstairs and full upstairs": the contrary of the other contemporary palaces and castles, because the political leaders (Senate) of Venice had no reasons to fear their own citizens. Well-being and happiness in society needs as a basic premise the absence of the so called "fear market".