The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing by Edward F. Fischer.


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What do decisions about buying eggs in Hannover, Germany, have in common with the decisions about planting and marketing high-end coffee being grown by indigenous Maya in Guatemala? Edward Fischer in his interesting book offers some ideas about wellbeing and happiness occasioned by his study of German shoppers in Hannover and Maya farmers in Guatemala. This juxtaposing of different people and their cultural systems finds a commonality not in what they do so much as in the approach Fischer takes in characterizing “the good life” among both groups.

Maya coffee growers in the mountains of Guatemala sell high-end coffee beans flown to Miami for distribution in the United States and elsewhere. German shoppers in Hannover are concerned about where the supermarket eggs they buy come from—caged or cage-free, free-range, and organically fed hens.

So Fischer asks how economic choices in these two groups relate to their perceived wellbeing and their social obligations as expressed through fair trade and economic
Fischer’s analytical categories are similar to The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) list, overlapping, for example, where Fischer’s categories of aspiration, agency, and opportunity structures represent a finer gradation of the OPHI category, agency. Fischer’s focus generally is subjective, “combining cultural critique with non-prescriptive, ethnographically informed positive alternatives that engage public policy debates” (p. 19). Thus, the author implicitly subscribes to the standard position of cultural relativism and the use of culture as a count noun (which takes a definite article—as opposed to a wider, interdisciplinary, and ecological base for cultural phenomena as a network or system). Unless anthropology can quantify variables in a testable theory that correlates with clear benefits or deficits, as in measures of physical health, psychological health, resilience, or adaptive potential, studies of wellbeing in anthropology remain subjective and should be, as Fischer says, nonprescriptive.

There are numerous citations throughout the book, Amartya Sen being a prominent influence in what Fischer sees to be a positive anthropology, paralleling work in positive psychology in which people are asked how happy they are in interviews with the widely used ladder scale on which respondents indicate their current felt happiness or wellbeing and where they hope they might be on that scale in the future. That and another type of data Fischer has collected, the Ultimatum Game, are part of the data considered. In the latter case, Guatemalan farmers playing the Ultimatum Game showed them paying a substantial premium to punish players who they felt played unfairly. Income inequality was tolerated as long as “those who do well are seen as treating others with fairness and generosity” (p. 209). Clearly, however, outside the game environment and in the real world, ethnic relations remain an oppressive source of inequality in social interactions between Latinos and Indians. But private ownership of land and improving educational opportunities for indigenous people can certainly diminish some of those inequalities.

Fischer has carved out an important piece of the wellbeing puzzle. A summary of his values and subjective conditions is depicted in a diagram that includes opportunity structures that enable (or could frustrate) the fulfillment of a respondent’s aspirations (p. 211). A future project of interest would be to apply those categories to various other sectors and tiers of society.

At a time when financial leadership (e.g., the central bank) in Germany lacks the kind of stewardship, fairness, and value orientations exhibited by shoppers in Germany or farmers in Guatemala, worldwide problems in countries like Greece, Spain, and Ireland will continue to decline economically under the yoke of austerity imposed by those private banking interests. Thus, austerity is another variable that might usefully be added into the mix of negative conditions to consider in a positive anthropology in different tiers of society and politics and under different conditions of public safety.

Fischer does not gloss over the period of La Violencia in Guatemala. He describes former president and general Efrain Rios Montt’s recent more benign change and brings us up to date from those terrible days under his military leadership of violence and torture to the present. Although convicted for the Ixil genocide, Rios Montt escaped his 80-year prison sentence through a higher court’s ruling.

Currently there have been major changes in Guatemala but not for the better. There has been a disturbing growth of criminality, organized crime, former military officers in their own gang (“hidden powers”), and the emergence of a gang known as MS-13 that is involved in extortion, drugs, smuggling, and money laundering—a sharp contrast to staid Germany.

Fischer touches upon these negativities but keeps his focus on coffee production and egg selling, fair trade, and the good life. The book’s ample footnotes are a useful survey of recent writings on subjective wellbeing. It will be interesting to see how positive anthropology develops as a new branch of the discipline. That is where anthropology can get exciting.

Imagined Globalization by Néstor García Canclini.


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At a time when many anthropologists are aiming to move beyond the long-entrenched Euro-American orientation of our discipline, the translation of a work by Néstor García Canclini into English is a notable event. Originally published in Spanish in 1999 and addressing time-sensitive theorizations of globalization, culture industries, and world-historical developments, it might be claimed that this book comes on the scene a bit late. After all, when the work first appeared, the Internet had only recently begun transforming communications and commerce, 9/11 had not yet changed the way we view the world, and the BRIC countries’ (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) emergence in the global economy was barely a trace on the horizon.

Nonetheless, the value of García Canclini’s Imagined Globalization is better seen in the context of broader, extended debates among anthropologists and fellow travelers who have grappled with the reverberations of global processes, whether in academic culture, the arts and publishing, or the lives of the subjects of our research. This Argentine’s distinction as an anthropologically oriented scholar long resident in Mexico and publishing leading works on culture,