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Book Reviews

ANIELSKI, M. (2007)

The economics of happiness: Building genuine wealth

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Measures like gross domestic product (GDP) and its cousin, gross national product (GNP), have become a kind of scoreboard for our collective well-being, both economic and psychological. Economists, academics, politicians, and much of the general public habitually assume that increases in GDP are desirable, and anything less is bad news. Despite this, over the last 20 years increasing numbers of people have found boosts in GDP inadequate as a barometer of a nation's or a culture's progress. For example, wars, auto accidents, catastrophic medical problems, and hurricanes all increase spending and therefore increase GDP, but expenditures like these are obviously undesirable. Further, it has become increasingly recognized that, given the way our society is currently structured, increased GDP typically results in depletion of nonrenewable natural resources, environmental degradation, and global warming. Rosnick and Weisbrot (2006) found, for example, that if U.S. work hours were reduced to European standards, this reduction in economic activity would be sufficient to meet the CO_2 emission-reduction requirements of the now-scuttled Kyoto protocol. In our collective preoccupation with GDP growth, we work more than ever, use nonrenewable fossil-fuel energy more than ever, and fail more than ever to do something as simple as take a vacation, which would benefit both ourselves and the environment.

In *The Economics of Happiness: Building Genuine Wealth,* Anielski invites us to take a step back, reconsider our values in relation to our current practices, and become the kind of society we truly aspire to be. Anielski spent much of his career developing alternatives to GDP, indices that focus on what he calls *genuine wealth* and *genuine progress.* Anielski describes his work, for example, with the province of Alberta, in Canada, where he developed the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) as an alternative to traditional GDP-like measures. The GPI includes familiar financial measures such as GDP itself, stock market levels, real wages, and consumer expenditures. But the GPI also encompasses self-rated happiness, life expectancy, leisure time, strength of personal relationships, personal indebtedness, foreign indebtedness, poverty rates, youth suicide, violence in society, income and wealth inequality, and environmental health, among others. Anielski measured the GPI for Alberta and found that while average GDP per year had risen over 4.4% from 1961 to 1999, average GPI had fallen 0.5% per year over the same time period. Whereas GDP increases seemed to portray a successful, increasingly more prosperous society, GPI, with its broader scope of underlying indicators, several of them psychological in nature, showed a society in slow-motion decline. Anielski collected GPI data for the United States over the same period and found a similar pattern of increasing GDP and decreasing GPI.

Anielski is not promoting a specific index like the GPI but is encouraging individuals, communities, businesses, and nations to define their core values, translate these values into measurable indicators, and use the resulting indices as means of tracking real progress, the extent to which core values are being reflected in community or national practices. Unless this occurs, our tendency will be to continue to fall back on traditional GDP measures, which focus merely on buying and selling. This focus in turn comes to define us narrowly as workers and consumers rather than as good friends and neighbors, happy and zestful individuals, lovers, environmentalists, prudent savers, thinkers, and good citizens. Communities and nations can aspire to be whatever they choose, but unless they define their core values and assess progress toward them, their aspirations will seldom be realized.

Anielski references diverse psychological influences in his work, but his main thrust is an implicit exercise in behavior analysis in two principal respects. First, defining core values and linking these to measurable performance indicators is a means of specifying target behaviors and target outcomes. The use of an omnibus index like the GPI is a method of assessing and monitoring the extent to which targets are being achieved. Anielski's suggestions for defining core values and measuring pertinent indicators are similar to behavioral self-control methods (e.g., Watson & Tharp, 2002), except that the success of society as a whole is at stake.

Second, many of the measures within the GPI assess the social validity of both small- and large-scale public policy interventions. *Social validity* refers to the social acceptance and importance of outcomes and indicators. Several of the specific indicators Anielski discusses, like self-ratings of happiness, directly reflect important, subjectively evaluated outcomes that Wolf (1978) originally endorsed. Further, within Anielski's model, *all* the indicators are preselected as socially acceptable and important prior to their use. Behavior analysts typically have assessed the social validity of relatively small-scale behavior change interventions, but Anielski is again thinking on a larger scale and applying the concept of social validity to the society as a whole. Is our culture socially valid? Is its social validity improving or worsening? Compelling ourselves to define core values, to identify pertinent indicators to measure those values, and to examine changes in the indicators over time permit us to determine where the social validity of our culture is headed. Just as applied behavior analysis found its heart though the use of social validity measures (Wolf, 1978), Anielski's GPI measures permit economics at long last to do likewise. Just as behavior analysts have realized that some target behaviors can be trivial in comparison to genuinely important behavior changes, some economists like Anielski have come to realize that GDP is only one component of comparatively more important measures of genuine wealth and genuine progress.

Sustainability, fossil fuel depletion, and global warming have become key challenges of our time, which has led to calls to rethink the consumer society in which the good life is equated with bigger GDP numbers, more material possessions, more cars and planes, more travel, and more advertising to create desires for superfluous products (e.g., McKibben, 2007; Princen, Maniates, &

Conca, 2002). The transition to a postconsumer society is often portrayed as bleak, barren, and joyless, yet these depictions themselves reflect a culture so immersed in materialism that it is incapable of imagining the good life independently of the consumption of products. Anielski's methodology offers a tool for effecting a successful transition to a postconsumer society by elevating nonmaterial aspects of the good life, like friendship, family life, peaceful neighborhoods, intellectual pleasures, and everything else the GPI measures, to a level now occupied exclusively by GDP.

Anielski's book will appeal to much of the reading public, but it will perhaps have its greatest impact on those in public policy decision-making positions. Both economists and psychologists will benefit from Anielski's framework and methodology for setting socially valid goals and measuring progress toward them. Behavior analysts and other goal-oriented and data-guided psychologists will appreciate and admire the way in which Anielski scales up familiar goal-setting and social-validation methods in a way that holds great promise for changing society for the better.

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