

# QUALITY OF LIFE: ENVIRONMENTAL AND CONSERVATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

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*Where is the Life we have lost in living?*

T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from the Rock," 1934

There is a dispute nowadays between environmental thinkers and the defenders of the "sustainability of progress" about the issue of quality of life. In a more objective and broader sense, the same question is given the heading of "The State of Humanity."

It is a vital question. It is not only a scientific one, but it also affects our personal experience. Unless in a span of days or weeks we are totally plunged into some absorbing activity, we tend to evaluate the taste of our life by intuition which makes a holistic balance of all our positive and negative experiences. Many of them are caused by the social system in which we live. As a result, we sometimes feel that our life is beautiful, worth living, and sometimes we feel that it is tasteless, or even abhorrent.

A series of questions may be posed: How should the concept of quality of life be defined? Can we agree with its more or less objective indicators? If yes, are they pointing upwards or downwards in our time? What should we do in order to save and promote the taste of life both in the social and individual dimension?

Quality of life, in the context of this paper, can be defined as a degree of satisfaction a contemporary civilisation can afford to people having justified needs and wants. It is not happiness or unhappiness resulting from natural circumstances, such as having talent, physical beauty or being handicapped. Furthermore, quality of life is measurable by objective and subjective indicators, although only up to a point.<sup>1</sup>

Objective indicators are physical and socio-cultural. The examples of the first category are: world-wide life expectancy, level of nutrition, habitation, sanitation, employment, education, communication, environmental pollution. The data about trends in these matters have been collected over decades by specialised agencies and are, thus, relatively precise and sure.

The socio-cultural indicators of quality of life include various kinds of freedoms, such as freedom of religious or political beliefs, of association, freedom to work or buy items of choice, freedom from racial or sexual discrimination. The data about socio-cultural indicators are more difficult to gather since governmental bodies have an interest in presenting them as being as good as possible. Non-governmental organisations are more reliable in this field.

The subjective evaluation of quality of life is an inner appreciation of whether one's life, given current civilisational circumstances, has been fine, tasteless or abhorrent, and whether it is getting better or worse overall. It has psychological and spiritual components. Subjective measures of the quality of life are available in two ways. First, by asking people to express their evaluation of their family life, of their sense of control over their life, the level of trust in the ruling elite, the feeling of prevalence of co-operation rather than conflict in social life, or vice versa. Subjective indicators of quality of life may also be indirect, namely by observing the trends in such phenomena as social conflicts, crime, suicide, psychological depression, neurosis, taking drugs, and subscribing to various sects and cults predicting the end of the world.

Putting aside hate, war and acute racial or political conflict, the key point of the subjective indicators seems to be the feeling about distributive justice. In a rich nation, where about 10% of oligarchs own 70% to 80% of all net assets - and this is the case of the prosperous countries today<sup>2,3</sup> - respondents of the lower social strata will not report a growing confidence in progress, although their material conditions may be relatively good and still improving.

## Divergence of opinions

Environmental authors maintain that the quality of life in the last three or four decades has been generally worsening in countries influenced by western civilisation, including the richest ones.<sup>4</sup> This opinion concerns both objective and subjective indicators, but more the second category. The main arguments of ecologists are the deterioration of the environment and the growing gap between both poor and rich countries and between the social strata within countries. In addition, a growing crime rate, drug addiction, distrust of political leaders, commercialisation of mass culture and similar symptoms have been emphasised. The reports about the state of the world compiled by pro-environmental bodies like the Worldwatch Institute and the Club of Rome are eventually pessimistic.

It is worth noting that, in 1992, about 1,500 eminent world scientists - including more than half of the living winners of the Nobel Peace Prize

- have endorsed a document entitled Warning for Humanity. After pointing to the main ecological dangers of our time, the document concludes that mankind is now at a decisive point: A new ethic is required- a new attitude towards discharging our responsibility for caring for ourselves and for the Earth. We must recognise the Earth's limited capacity to provide for us. We must recognise its fragility. We must no longer allow it to be ravaged. This ethic must motivate a great movement, convince reluctant leaders and reluctant governments and reluctant peoples themselves to effect the needed changes.<sup>4</sup>

The opponents to the ecological line of thinking who call themselves the defenders of the sustainability of progress maintain that quality of life has been steadily improving since the beginning of modernity and industrialisation.

According to Professor Julian Simon of the University of Maryland: On average, people throughout the world are living longer and eating better than ever before. Fewer are dying of famine than in earlier centuries. The real prices of food and other raw materials are lower than in earlier periods, which is a trend of increased natural resource availability rather than scarcity. Air and water pollution in advanced countries has been lessening rather than worsening.<sup>5</sup>

In the opinion of the conservative think-tank, the Earth's resources will never be depleted because modern techno-economy creates substitutes for every one of them. Oil, for example, is being replaced by gas, and telephone lines previously made from copper are now made from glass. The rate of disappearing species is very low today and no greater than in the past. The statistics made by ecologists are based on the wrong assumption that species perish along with the diminishing area of forests and other ecosystems. However, they survive on smaller spaces as well.

The advocates of the sustainability of progress charge that ecologists' predictions are of a wrong methodology, since, admittedly, they ignore the satisfaction of human needs. As Professor John McCarthy of Stanford University says, if the Meadows had made their extrapolation for the consumption of meat one hundred years ago, it would result that today each one of us should eat one cow daily.<sup>6</sup>

Earth doomsayers are wrong, concludes Professor Julian Simon. None of their dire predictions have come true, as yet. The state of humanity is today better than ever in the past. All that is needed is to continue the existing line of progress, only with more emphasis on scientific/technical research and economic and social freedom. The need for a more healthy environment has not been denied but, material progress and human interests come first.

### **Evaluation of the controversy**

It is not necessary to choose one or the other position of the above sketched controversy; perhaps they are in part complementary. On the one hand it seems doubtless that many modern achievements of science, technology or social institutions - such as democracy and human rights - are real values of our western civilisation. They have contributed significantly to the improvement of quality of life. Indeed, in many countries, people today live longer, eat better, have better access to health care, education, information and other social benefits, than their grandfathers and grandmothers had. In western countries, housewives now spend about 30 hours per week less than at the beginning of this century preparing food, cleaning or repairing clothes.<sup>7</sup> These and similar values are today earnestly sought after world-wide and should be defended against radical critics who sometimes come from an environmental background.

On the other hand, one should not overlook the shadows of modern progress. One author expresses this in the following way: Roads become choked with cars whose occupants, and others in turn, choke on smog-filled air; people find fish laced with toxic substances and meat larded with chemicals; they boat on or stroll along rivers which have been turned into open sewers; they worry that their housing may have been built over hidden poisonous waste dumps; and on their vacation they find it harder and harder to locate pristine forests to camp in before all the trees are either lumbered or die of acid rain.<sup>1</sup>

There are other, even more disquieting symptoms of the crisis of western civilisation: the enormous and still deepening gap between rich and poor, the idolatry of money, the degradation of mass culture due to its commercialisation and the growing number of people who are more or less unnecessary to the capitalist financial system - the jobless, both old and young, the artists and others who do not produce commercial goods.

To sum up, many objective indicators of present-day quality of life, both physical and socio-cultural, if compared with those of one hundred years or more ago, have improved. The state of the environment has deteriorated, however, and social stratification has deepened. Moreover, cultural creativity has been overwhelmed by practical materialism. Last but not least, the political situation of the world after the end of the cold war has not been more peaceful than before. It is endangered by nationalist wars, immigration, lack of global order, and by civilisational tensions. It may be said, a priori, that the feeling which people normally have about their quality of life cannot be good and improving in such circumstances.

### **What should be done?**

Theoretically, the idea of an alternative civilisation, which comes mainly from the camp of environmental thinkers, may well be recommended by today's reality. We need a new civilisational paradigm, indeed, which would be based more on solidarity and co-operation than on ruthless

competition; more on spiritual than consumerist values; more on the ethics of responsibility for long ranging consequences of technological innovations than on short term profit; more on biocentrism than anthropocentrism; more on a sane equilibrium of womanly and manly attitudes in socio-political life than on today's patriarchy; more on a democratic world order than on the interests of nation-states.

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