

Bhutan as a model

JOSÉ VIDAL-BENEYTO

Two readers of my recent column on how the "financialization" of economic life is hard to reconcile with social progress, have objected to it on the grounds that real economic life carries on, and that its growth, though at rates that vary yearly, is constant.

The real roots of these readers' dissent lie in the fact that what they and prevalent economic opinion call growth, does not look like growth to me. Nor does it look like growth to an ever-growing number of social analysts, whose outlook is grounded in critical economics and in ecological considerations.

Moreover, this growth, and the wealth they say it generates, entail a reduction in labor volume and increasing employment instability — which is inversely convergent with the financial domination of economic life, and which tends to render the social-solidarity dimension of our societies even more fragile than it is already.

In two columns I wrote last year, I highlighted the function of camouflage or concealment inherent in the system of national accounting and its conceptual underpinning. The set of economic indicators that make up the liberal-conservative model, and render it operational, really conceal the ecological and social costs that its functioning must necessarily produce.

The result is that the more wealth that appears in the national accounts, the more poverty and the more natural and social deterioration we generate.

This situation was bound to arouse protest and rebuttal among certain minorities who are sensitive to the idea of progress, so that, since the 1990s, we have seen a proliferation of proposals centered on quality of life and well-being, as against the mere creation of wealth.

The struggle against illiteracy, the movement to higher levels of education, questions such as life expectancy, public health

practices, the need for greater respect for the environment, the struggle against poverty, the satisfaction of basic needs, urban security, access to jobs, equality and solidarity — such terms are the outstanding watchwords of these movements.

In 1990 the United Nations Program for Development (UNPD) published a report on sustainable development, creating a Human Development Index, and other similar indicators related to inequalities in income and wealth, job instability and job accidents, clandestine employment, family indebtedness,

Times, illustrates the possibility of converting this option into a reality, telling us of the experience of the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan.

In 1972, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, who was recently crowned king of Bhutan, decided that what is most important for a community and its members is not the pursuit of money but the well-being of the community as a whole, and its social cohesion and internal solidarity.

In line with this view of things, the national data on Gross Domestic Product in the tiny Asian monarchy are complemented by data on Shared National Happiness.

Protection of the environment, public health, cultural activities, the conservation and promotion of the national patrimony, time devoted to the family, responsible citizenship and government are significant components of this indicator.

At the recent Conference on Well-being and Qualitative Economics held at St Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, the interior minister of Bhutan said that we cannot go on confusing the idea of producing, consuming and possessing with that of being happy. And the Canadian political scientist John R. Saul concluded that, for the signers of the American Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of collective happiness, thus understood, was a goal as fundamental as the conquest of liberty and the defense of life itself.

In a country such as Spain, what political party, what public leader, what social forces might conceivably lend their support to such a conception of our real interests? Even if this support amounted only to regular, insistent publication, in the mainstream media, of the results of the alternative evaluation systems that have been mentioned in this column.

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GDP in Bhutan is complemented by data on Shared National Happiness

domestic violence, the criminalization of poverty, discrimination against women and immigrants, and so on.

Meanwhile, the excellent environmental indicators now at our disposal, starting with the "ecological footprint," offer us a realistic idea of the natural costs involved in our prevailing economic processes.

Andrew C. Revkin, in a recent article in *The New York*

Letters

to the Editor

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