2nd EMES-Polanyi International Seminar
Societies in transition: Social and solidarity economy, the commons, public action and livelihood

CNAM, Paris (France) · 19 - 20 May 2016

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The politics of the post-GDP agenda: Progress beyond growth?

Paper for *Societies in Transition EMES-Polanyi International Seminar*
19th-20th May 2016

Abstract

In this paper, we examine the politics of recent attempts to move beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary measure of economic progress. After outlining the key tenets of this "post-GDP agenda", we reflect on the relationship between it and other iterations of thought which seek to challenge the centrality of economic growth to dominant conceptions of political economy. We argue that many of these other iterations see the challenge to growth as going hand in hand with a broader critique of the measurement of society and environment in market terms. This raises the question of how far initiatives undertaken under the post-GDP banner adopt or draw upon this broader critique. We go some way toward answering this question by examining two different approaches taken to post-GDP statistical reform: those which seek to change conceptions of economic value through the modification of national economic accounts, and those which seek to supplement GDP with other measurements such as subjectively reported wellbeing, access to education, leisure time etc.
We demonstrate that, while these all pose distinctive challenges for the market view of society, the methodologies through which they have been articulated in fact often fall back on and re-inscribe a conception of economic value as dependent on price forming markets, and reify a set of institutional arrangements associated with market society.

1. The Post-GDP agenda

There is a growing consensus amongst politicians, academics and international organizations that economic growth is, by itself at least, not the solution to some of the most significant economic problems of our age, including job insecurity, growing inequality, climate change and environmental degradation in general. In result, there has been a push to find new ways of conceptualizing economic priorities beyond the traditional emphasis on increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Fleurbaey 2009; Hay and Payne 2014; Costanza 2009). To this end, a clearly defined "post-GDP" agenda has taken shape, including endorsements by heads of states and public intellectuals and a variety of new policy initiatives. In 2008, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen were asked by then French President Nicholas Sarkozy to set up a commission tasked with identifying the limits of GDP (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009). Similar initiatives have been established by US and UK governments and by the European Union under the banner of the "Beyond GDP" programme.[1] A variety of alternative indices of development have also been developed including the Happy Planet Index, the Human Development Indicator, the Quality of Life Index and the Genuine Progress Indicator which has been signed into law in several states in the USA.

This agenda has revolved around the search for new forms of measurement. Some of the initiatives have sought to alter the basis for macro-level economic statistics and national accounting frameworks, which form the bedrock of governmental understanding of the economy itself. Such initiatives include efforts to develop a set of 'satellite accounts" to measure non-market activity such as volunteering and care work, efforts to better capture inequality and moves to shift the focus of accounting away from production and towards household level consumption (see ONS 2008; Miranda 2011). Some focus more directly on the sustainability of current forms of economic growth by seeking to develop comparable values for stocks of "natural", "human" and 'social" capital in order to assess whether current growth comes at the expense of depleting non-material stocks of wealth (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009: 97-136; OECD 2001). This includes, for example, the work of the joint UNECE/OECD/Eurostat task force on measuring sustainable development, which has since 2008 developed indicators of various non-monetary stocks.[2]

Another set of approaches seeks to set the economic aspects of development within a broader framework of indicators which capture different aspects of "progress", seeking to move beyond the sole emphasis on the growth of economic output as measured by market exchange by incorporating more explicitly social, psychological or environmental dimensions of life. In this vein, the UK's "national well-being" dashboard seeks to monitor progress in 10 domains with a mix of subjective and objective measurements selected (based on public consultation) to represent these (ONS 2011a). Other examples include the UN's Sustainable Development Goals indicator framework, which includes a large array of indicators intended to capture the multidimensional nature of poverty and development, and the OECD's Better Life project which measures progress across 11 dimensions.[3]

In a sense, post-GDP reforms are challenging traditional conceptions of what the economy is by seeking to produce alternative forms of measurement. Common to all of these initiatives is the idea that GDP is either an overly narrow, restrictive, or an actively distorting, measure of whether the lives of citizens are actually getting better, and that more accurate, timely and broader data might enable us to grasp human progress in all of its complexity. The aspiration is that this will lead to better understanding of the trade-offs involved in policy decisions. As the Stiglitz Commission put it:

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[1] www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr; http://www.stateoftheusa.org/about/; http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/index.html; http://ec.europa.eu/environment/beyond_gdp/index_en.html.

[2] www.oecd.org/greengrowth/41414440.pdf

[3] http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/; http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/

> What we measure affects what we do. If we have wrong metrics, we will strive for the wrong things…We see the world through lenses not only shaped by our ideologies and ideas but also shaped by our statistics we use to measure what is going on…flawed or biased statistics can lead us to make incorrect inferences (Stiglitz, Sen and Fittousi 2009: xvii-xix)

2. The various politics of post-Growth thought

Given how far the post-GDP agenda has developed in mainstream policy circles recently, it is worth remembering that it is borne of a longer tradition of critical thought on growth which harbours a spectrum of ideological positions. One way to chart this spectrum is to think about the different attitudes taken to the market. *Prima fascie*, there is an intimate connection between the ideology of growth and the ideology of the market. The most commonly made argument for the imposition of market mechanisms in a given situation – privatization of state assets, deregulation of industry, flexibilisation of labour etc. – is that markets deliver productivity in greater amounts than any other mode of economic integration.

The earliest iterations of what we would now recognize as growth-centric conceptions of the economy took place in debates surrounding the marketization of land. As Ellen Meiksins Wood has discussed, the concept of "improvement" captured this relationship as it was developed in debates surrounding agrarian productivity in the seventeenth century. As she notes, the idea of economic improvement came to mean not merely an increase in productivity, but specifically an increase in productivity which would produce monetary profit (Wood 2002: 106), pre-supposing a commodified understanding of land in market terms. Karl Polanyi neatly captured some of this politics in *The Great Transformation*, citing an English parliamentary document from the period:

> An official document of 1607 … set out the problem of change in one powerful phrase: 'the poor man shall be satisfied in his end: Habitation; and the gentleman not hindered in his desire: Improvement'" This formula appears to take for granted the essence of purely economic progress, which is to achieve improvement at the price of social dislocation (2001: 36).

This "social dislocation" included the literal, physical dislocation of early wage labourers during the enclosures, but also later the abysmal working conditions of the industrial working classes and a variety of environmental harms resulting from industrial growth, both within industrialised economies and across the world through colonial expansion. For Polanyi, conceiving of society in market terms – an "economistic fallacy" (Polanyi 1968) – meant that all the social costs of economic improvement were rendered invisible. In sum, the market view championed the cause of economic growth whilst being inattentive to the costs of that growth, borne by society more broadly, that were not reflected in price terms.

By these accounts, to move beyond growth-centric accounts of the economy is necessarily to move beyond market-centric conceptions of the economy. Wood challenges the ideology of improvement by revealing what was lost in the transition from communal to private property relations, and, implicitly, what could be gained by moving away from them again. For Polanyi, the view of society and economy in market terms had only provided a metaphysical, quasi-theologistic way of explaining the phenomenon of economic improvement since the industrial revolution (2001: 110, 120, 141) which he argued ought to be replaced by a view of the economy which accepts the "reality of society" (2001: 267), which in turn would make harms rendered by economic development more visible.

More recently, Jeremy Rifkin has argued that the opportunities for economic growth as measured by market exchange are becoming exhausted in many different areas, with rates of profit declining due to technological innovation (2014). Drawing an arc from English

Enclosures in the eighteenth century, through the industrial revolution in the nineteenth, Fordism in the twentieth, and emerging forms of collaborative economic activity and "zero marginal cost" production today, he argues that 'the capitalist system has peaked and begun its slow decline" (2014: 1). For Rifkin, we are in the midst of a shift away from economic growth traditionally understood. That is to say, a shift away from forms of human progress that can be measured in terms of monetary cost within market institutions towards an emergent "collaborative commons". For him, this shift is inevitable and to be celebrated.

The *Decroissance*/de-growth school of thought is similarly radical in terms of understanding the challenge to growth as a challenge to the substance of capitalist relations, but is more guarded about the possibility of its fruition on the grounds that so much of our experience of modern social and economic life has become dependent on ever-expanding output as measured by market exchange. As Serge Latouche argues, "We know that simply contracting the economy plunges our societies into disarray, increases the rate of unemployment and hastens the demise of the health, social, educational, cultural and environmental projects that provide us with an indispensable minimal quality of life" (2009: 9). He continues: 'the need to accumulate means that growth is an "iron corset". Jobs, retirement pensions and increased public spending (education, law and order, justice, culture, transport, health, etc.) all presuppose a constant rise in Gross Domestic Product" (2009: 16). Latouche concludes that it is not necessary to move beyond markets – or profits, wages and money – in and of themselves, but to move beyond "market society" in which accumulation is the central economic goal (2009: 90-1). Rifkin also sees the move beyond the economic growth paradigm as necessarily a move towards non-market forms of economic integration (2014: *passim*).

Clearly, then, critiques of growth can lead one into quite politically radical territory, often involving explicit challenges to a conception of society in market terms. But, on the other hand, ways have been found in which to think about the negative effects of economic growth in more market friendly manners. For example, under the banner of "welfare economics", the idea was formed that the solution to the problem of economic activity producing harmful effects upon society – "externalities" - was to price them and thus bring them within the remit of the market. In the 1960s, Ronald Coase (1960) developed this argument by suggesting that, if externalities can be priced, the market must inevitably be a better allocator of those harms. The conclusion flowing from this argument, developed more fully by Kenneth Arrow (1969), was that the price mechanism should be extended as far as possible so as to include all possible externalities. Then firms and individuals could decide, based on rational self-interest, how much different harms were worth to them, and trade appropriately. In this way, the idea of economic improvement/growth producing harms in society was resolved within pro-market, pro-growth thought. Resolving externalities through the extension of property rights presented the possibility of addressing the "problem of social cost" (Coase 1960) whilst maximizing utility *and* avoiding the disincentives of taxation, or any other growth-inhibiting form of prohibition. This way of thinking was very influential in subsequent environmental economic thought. J.H. Dales converted the insights of Coase and Arrow into a direct argument for the benefits of pollution trading mechanisms (Dales 1968), ideas which were later developed into concrete proposals for addressing airborne pollutants (Hahn and Hester 1989; Kneese and Schultze 1978; Tietenberg 1989). As the spectre of climate change climbed the political agenda over the 1990s, carbon trading mechanisms modelled on Coasean assumptions became the most popular policy option (Giddens 2009: 201) and remain so today.

Another example of the attempt to bring previously non-marketised aspects of life into the frame of traditional economic analysis is the rise of the field of "happiness

economics". This dates back to the work of Richard Easterlin in the 1970s, who observed a difference between steadily rising levels of income and affluence in post-war America and apparently static levels of subjective life satisfaction (Easterlin 1974). These insights spawned the sub-field of economic psychology which tries to understand the relationship between people's experienced happiness and market goods, often with the view to uncovering the ways in which markets produce sub-optimal outcomes, such as the systemic undervaluing of leisure time (e.g. Frey and Stutzer 2002; Frey and Stutzer 2008; Layard 2011).

This approach represents a challenge to some central market assumptions. Happiness economists attempt to directly observe the utility produced by economic goods through their effect on measured levels of wellbeing. This is a direct challenge to the idea that the choices made in markets, as manifested in monetary values determined by supply and demand, accurately represent a complete expression of the utility experienced by market participants. However, in application, many basic tenets of market thinking are reproduced in happiness economics. The justification for many happiness economics studies has often been the potential beneficial effects on market competitiveness. For instance, in recent studies conducted by economists in the UK government's department for Business, Innovation and Skills, happiness or "wellbeing" is conceived of as an input into the production process – a form of personal cognitive resources or "mental capital", valuable because of the extent to which it bears on productivity by enhancing a worker's mental resilience and ability to adapt to new tasks (DBIS 2014). Instead of happiness being a desired product of an increase of market output and prices, an increase of market prices is a goal in its own right, to be facilitated by happier and thus more efficient workers.

To summarise, there is a spectrum of critical positions on economic growth, some of which present themselves as challenging the institutional and normative configurations of the economy in market terms, others of which further entrench a marketised view by conceptualising harms to society in the language of cost, benefit, property, trade, mental/human capital etc. A key question, therefore, is where the post-GDP agenda sits on this spectrum. To what extent do legislative initiatives undertaken under the post-GDP agenda interfere, transcend, or challenge the understanding of economy in market terms? Is the focus on measurement actualized in a way which commodifies, or not? In the next section, we explore these questions empirically by linking them to some of the initiatives and measurement techniques within the emerging post-GDP agenda.

3. Locating the Market in Post-GDP Statistical Reform

There are various ways to categorise the different methodological approaches taken within the post-GDP agenda, but for the purposes of this paper we will consider two broad approaches: those which seek directly to challenge or extend notions of the economic itself by modifying the way GDP is calculated or by expanding the system of national economic accounts to include new sources of value, and those which seek to set economic objectives within a broader system of supplementary metrics and indicators which would together provide a more holistic vision of progress. These might be termed the "reforming GDP" approach and the "supplementing GDP" approach.

3.1 Reforming GDP

An example of the first approach is recent attempts to reform the System of National Accounts (SNA) so as to include non-market activity such as household production. The SNA is an internationally agreed and regulated set of standards for the production of national economic accounts which has, since its inception, been very much focused on measuring the volume of marketable economic activity. It explicitly defines "economic" activity as that

which falls within a clearly defined "production boundary". This boundary refers to the criteria used to distinguish between economically productive activities, which governments are expected to monetize and include within their accounting system as accurately as possible, and activities which fall outside of this boundary and are classed as non-economic.

This theoretical divide has substantive effects: activities falling outside this boundary lie outside the national accounts, and are therefore frequently dealt with by separate departments within statistical agencies. This therefore represents a mechanism through which the social is separated from the economic in national accounting methodologies. The scale of this issue is also significant: estimates by Goldschmidt-Clermont and Pagnossin-Aligisakis have put the value of non-SNA labour at around 50% of total economic activity, leading the authors to conclude that "labour statistics…do not account for about one-half of human labour" (Goldschmidt-Clermont and Pagnossin-Aligisakis 1999: 527).

Key to the maintenance of this conceptual divide is the notion of appropriation, and thus exchange: economic activities are things which can be transferred from one productive unit to another. This thinking can be observed in the wording used in the SNA 2008, the most recently revised global standards for the production of economic statistics:

> All goods and services produced as outputs must be such that they can be sold on markets or at least be capable of being provided by one unit to another, with or without charge. The SNA includes within the production boundary all production actually destined for the market, whether for sale or barter (SNA 2008: 6).

Similarly, in 1996 the OECD laid out four conditions that must be met for something to be considered an "asset" for accounting purposes (OECD 1996). The last two of these conditions are that "the cost at the time of acquisition must be objectively measurable" and that "in day-to-day transactions, capital and labour markets place value on the output potential of the asset" (*ibid.*). On this basis, the 2008 SNA ruled that human capital, for example, cannot be classed as an asset for the purposes of national accounting precisely because it is "embodied in the individuals as persons" and it therefore non-appropriable: it "cannot be transferred to others and cannot be show in the balance sheets of the enterprises in which the individuals work" (Quoted in ONS 2012: 4).

Such methodologies have been taken to task by feminist political economists. Most notably, Marilyn Waring (1988) argued that this definition of economic activity excludes aspects of human life that are clearly valuable, such as the daily preparation of food in the household. Thus, it presents a highly gendered view of production which systematically excludes the work of 'social reproduction" without which the market economy itself could not function – work which in contemporary societies is still mostly performed by women. As she put it: "every time I see a mother with an infant, I know I am seeing a woman at work…I know that money payment is not necessary for work to be done" (Waring 1988: 25).

Reflection on the role of social reproduction in the economy has provoked increased efforts to extend national accounts to include such non-market activities in recent years. Indeed, this was the 5th key recommendation of the Stiglitz Commission, which argued that "many services that households produce for themselves are not recognized in official income and production measures, yet they constitute an important part of economic activity… Comprehensive and periodic accounts of household activity as satellites to the core national accounts should complement the picture" (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi: 14). An example of this being put into practice is the system of "household satellite accounts" developed by the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) since 2011. These seek to measure the value to the UK economy of various types of non-market activity, including volunteering, unpaid care work for children and adults, and even laundry.

The implicit idea is that if the contribution of these types of work are made visible they could be valued on equal terms to paid employment. For instance, comparing the living

standards of two households - one of which earns £50,000 from a single parent while the other cares for the children, and one in which £50,000 is earned from both incomes and which pays for childcare services - the Stiglitz commission argues that "Conventional measures treat these two households as if they have identical living standards, but obviously they don't. Focusing on market production provides a biased picture of living standards – some of the measured increase in market production may simply reflect a *shift* of the locus of production" (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi: 49). Similarly, the ONS suggests that "the information will also be of use to policymakers who need to take significant amounts of unpaid work into account" (ONS 2013a: 2).

Key to making these types of calculation is the use of time-use data from large government social surveys (ONS 2013a: 11-15; Goldschmidt-Clermont and Pagnossin-Aligisakis 1999). The basic principle is to obtain figures for the amount of time people spend doing various productive activates outside formal market exchange, such as caring for children or volunteering with a charity, and to then compare this with an average reference price for similarly skilled work in the labour market (for instance, a paid nanny or childminder), to get a figure for the amount which would have to have been spent to employ another person to do this work for you, and thus the monetary value of the services rendered.

In theory, of course, this methodological innovation represents a potentially radical move beyond market-based ways of valuing economic activity, because unpaid work can now be included in overall measures of economic production alongside paid work and given equal status. However, it also raises a number of practical and conceptual problems: it is often unclear that skill levels or the intensity of work done in market and non-market contexts are comparable; it is unclear how skill levels or productivity could be made comparable with labour conducted within markets, without direct testing or observation; it is not always obvious which type of formal labour the unpaid work should be compared to, and which region the reference wage should be taken from. Taking the childcare case, for example, nannies charge very different rates in London versus the rest of the UK, but the informal childcare estimate is calculated for the UK as a whole (ONS 2013a: 14). As such, time-use data still has to be monetized with reference to wages set within labour markets in order to make the value of this work comparable within this framework.

The place of the market in this type of approach is ambiguous: although it draws attention to non-monetised forms of labour occurring outside of a market exchange setting, these non-market dimensions continue to be referenced to the conditions prevailing in competitive, commodified markets. In this respect, the grounds on which these new valuation techniques have been shielded from the core SNA are revealing. Partly, this has been justified on the basis that these measures are new and experimental. But it is also justified on the basis that they would disrupt the equilibrium analysis of neoclassical economic modelling. The SNA 2008 states this position quite explicitly:

> All of these activities are productive in an economic sense. However, inclusion in the SNA is not simply a matter of estimating monetary values for the outputs of these activities. If values are assigned to the outputs, values have also to be assigned to the incomes generated by their production and to the consumption of the output. It is clear that the economic significance of these flows is very different from that of monetary flows. For example, the incomes generated are automatically tied to the consumption of the goods and services produced; they have little relevance for the analysis of inflation or deflation or other disequilibria within the economy. The inclusion of large non-monetary flows of this kind in the accounts together with monetary flows can obscure what is happening on markets and reduce the analytic usefulness of the data. (SNA 2008: x)

This justification has similarly been used by the ONS to explain why these measures cannot be integrated into the UK National Accounts, as they "would swamp the monetary flows, obscure what is happening in the markets, and reduce the usefulness of national accounts data for analysis" (ONS 2013a: 2).

While these concerns are at one level analytical, they also have political implications. Standing little chance of being brought into the formal system of economic accounts, the values attributed to this non-market labour stand equally slim chance of penetrating mainstream debate of issues such as welfare. The protection of a market-centred method of economic analysis and the assumptions it relies upon becomes a mechanism for excluding non-market valuation of work from the "economy" proper, and thus for excluding claims those engage in such labour have in the public sphere. Rather that understanding the failure to accommodate this type of data as a problem for orthodox economic analysis, the failure to conform to the assumptions of this analysis is used to justify the exclusion of the data itself from core economic accounts.

In sum, whilst these efforts do clearly attempt to respond to earlier critiques of the overly market-centric form of traditional national accounts, there is a clear limit to how far they are permitted to go. That limit is set by the threat of destabilization of market-based understandings of economy in general. In what follows, we look at a different set of approaches on the post-GDP agenda which look at the issue in reverse by attempting to evaluate the expansion of market values on the basis of the contribution they make to social objectives.

3.2 Supplementing GDP

The second set of examples do not directly extend the notion of economic value, but instead seek to set the growth of economic resources within a broader context of political evaluation across various dimensions of social progress. This is often part of attempts to develop measures to represent concepts such as "genuine progress" or "inclusive growth", underpinned by the idea that growth should not be pursued at all costs, but should be set within the wider context of human developmental aims, with trade-offs between different objectives made visible and explicit in political debate.

A first set of these approaches conceives of utility as essentially incomparable across different domains of life; these domains are understood as qualitatively different and it is argued that they should not be aggregated or indexed in any way. This is typically justified on the grounds that "wellbeing is multidimensional", or that "there is no single indicator that can capture something as complex as our society" (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi: xxv). These approaches are often underpinned by efforts by analytical philosophers to produce lists of different, hetrogenous, goods and needs required for human flourishing (e.g. Alkire 2002; Nussbaum 2001). At face value, this seems to represent a break from market-based conceptions of utility and value. Often, goods relating to economic production and growth are present on these lists, for instance as the need for "material security" or "control of physical environment", but they are not bound up with competitive markets and are viewed as only one component of what is needed for the full development of human potential. A concrete example of this is the OECDs Better Life Initiative. Arguing that 'there is more to life than the cold numbers of GDP and economic statistics", this initiative ranks countries across 11 dimensions of progress, only two of which – "income" and "jobs" directly relate to economic growth.[4]

A first problem, however, with these measures is that they retain an understanding of the economy as a discrete sphere of existence, which must be offset against social

[4] http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/.

factors, rather than as itself a substantive sphere of political and social relations. While it is frequently stressed that there are "interdependencies" and "interactions" between the dimensions, they are conceived of as essentially discrete, analytically distinct objects, represented methodologically by distinct indicators. For instance, the OECD's Better Life Index includes a measure of "civic engagement" and participation in the democratic process. But the indicator selected to represent this are limited to turnout in elections. A similar choice is made with the ONS's wellbeing dashboard, where "governance" is similarly measured through voter turnout and subjective levels of "trust in national government". As such, the public sphere is delineated as something centred on the formal institutions of parliamentary democracy only.

Secondly, the way in which the different domains of value are conceptualized and methodologically captured often in practice reproduces a specifically economistic understanding of value. This is often implicit in the way "progress" in these non-economic domains is conceptualized and measured. For instance, the "education" dimension of progress is justified within a human capital discourse based around equipping individuals for participation in the fast-paced modern market economy. The OECD suggests that "Having a good education greatly improves the likelihood of finding a job and earning enough money… Highly-educated individuals are less affected by unemployment trends, typically because educational attainment makes an individual more attractive in the workforce… Furthermore, the skills needed in the labour market are becoming more knowledge-based".[5]

Thirdly, these types of multi-dimensional measures often naturalise a market-centric understanding of social institutions in in the way the "social" factors of development are themselves defined and measured. A good example of this is the EU's target indicator for poverty and social exclusion, which forms part of its central growth strategy, Europe 2020 (Eurostat 2015). Here, the poverty rate is calculated partly through a measure of low work intensity. Under this measure, individuals *can only* be removed from the condition of being at risk of poverty and social exclusion by spending more of their existence within formal waged labour. The low work intensity measure is calculated by assuming an individual has a set "total work potential". This reproduces an implicit set of assumptions about the temporality and scope of economic activity, assumes a discreet separation between "work" and the rest of an individual's existence, and then attributes a fixed "potential" to this, which is linked to perceived norms about average working week within commodified labour relations in industrial society (Gorz 1980: 1-13).

A second approach to extending GDP retains the concept of a single measure of utility, but replaces monetary values generated in economic markets with subjectively experienced wellbeing, life satisfaction or happiness (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009: 15-16; Hicks, Tinkler and Allin 2013). Then, regression analysis is conducted to show the main drivers and correlates of this happiness, which in turn should inform the dimensions of life which should be measured and prioritized in socio-economic indicator sets and policy evaluation. For instance, if it turned out that happier people in general have more free time, then free time should be measured and its expansion prioritized by government departments. This basic principle informs the growing inclusion of quality of life measures on government surveys, and analysis conducted on the "drivers of wellbeing".

Again these methodologies appear to represent a fundamental challenge to traditional economic analysis. However, the framing of these measures suggests an ahistorical understanding of the relationship between human wants and the institutions through which they are satisfied – one which is compatible with market-based ways of viewing social

[5] http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/education/.

harms, and which gives less emphasis to the way in which the content of people's wants and need are themselves influenced by market factors. For instance, such approaches regularly "discover" that a major driver of wellbeing in Western populations is whether people have a job and the level of their income, which is as a result taken as evidence that the quantitative expansion of waged labour should be a priority (ONS 2011b). These findings are often reported as an ahistorical truth about human populations in general (DWP and DoH 2014: 18). But as, for instance, Thorstein Veblen theorized, and as Polanyi's also highlighted, it is not clear that these can be taken as representative of desires which exist independently of the distinct socialization pressures associated with market society itself (Veblen 2009 [1899]; Polanyi 1968: 61). Furthermore, given that these market-centric categories are specified in pre-defined surveys, market framing is naturalised as the relevant conceptual orientation through which individual's success and happiness is understood.

4. Conclusion: the political limits of post-GDP agenda

In this paper we have sought to think about the politics of the post-GDP agenda by relating it to the broader pantheon of critiques of economic growth and challenges to growth-centric understandings of the economy. We argued that, in many cases, critical thought on growth has sought to emphasise the close relationship between ideologies of market exchange and those of growth-centrism, and as such have typically suggested that a move beyond growth-centrism must also be a move beyond market-centrism in our understanding of the economy. We have now seen that the post-GDP agenda is indeed wrestling with this issue. In various ways, post-GDP initiatives are having to confront difficult questions about the nature of the economy, and how non-market forms of economic production can be understood in policy. Clearly, progress can be said to have been made in that such issues are on the table at all. However, we have seen some of the barriers against which this radical implication of post-growth thought has come up against. The vision of post-GDP politics imagined often reproduce traditional notions of production and of the economy as centered on price forming markets, even as they extend and reformulate the understanding of such notions.

It may be that the emphasis placed on measurement within the post-GDP agenda itself acts to blunt the political potential of the post-growth ideas which gave rise to it in the first place. By focusing solely on issues of measurement, post-GDP initiatives take a "problem-solving" (Cox 1981) approach to the issues surrounding the harmful effects of economic growth upon environment and society. GDP, it is suggested, is no longer an accurate way to measure what we want out of the economy, and so the solution is finding better measurements which will produce better policy, 'solving" (or at least mitigating) the problem. Continuing on the Coxian theme, the exclusive focus on measurement taken by post-GDP initiatives takes for granted existing institutions and power relations as the "given framework for action" (Cox 1981: 128). By taking a measurement-centric approach, the possibility that the harmful effects of growth might be produced by particular configurations of power or particular institutional forms – and consequently that reducing or eliminating those effects might require challenging power and institutions – is rendered moot.

Building on this, the focus on measurement adopted by the post-GDP agenda also works within a particular account of the relationship between ideas and action which potentially delimits the terms of debate. This account might be termed, 'thinly constructivist". Ideas do clearly matter: a focus on the production of better forms of measurement clearly depends on the idea that the way we look at the world matters for what kinds of things get done within it. But ultimately, the post-GDP agenda is Cartesian and representational. The world does exist "out there" and it is the job of social science and policy to understand that world more accurately so as to act upon it in "better" ways.

By adopting this representational frame, the broader politics of measurement *itself* are outside of the debate. The production of statistics is a particular form of knowledge about the world, and one which has a specific political history. The etymology of the word 'statistic" connotes the relationship between knowledge and sovereign power and this etymology is demonstrable in the way statistics were introduced and developed as a means of controlling, or at least influencing, social organisation (Foucault 2007). Efforts to measure and categorise the social and natural world are always undertaken within the nexus of particular relations of power (Scott 1998: 21), driven by political authority but also by the need for a quantitative basis for market exchange to take place upon (1998: 12). By working within a representational frame, the relationship between measurement and power is not visible.

A more critically engaged system of post-growth accounting could contest not only the primacy given to accumulation relative to other goals, but also how the institutionalization of the economy as a sphere of price-making markets is reproduced and normalized through the measurements used to make economic decisions. There is no optimal way of measuring the economy, but rather only historically produced, politically conditioned evolution of ways of measuring, which are intricately related to economic practices, institutions and power relations. As we have shown, post-GDP initiatives have clearly provoked points of tension and resistance against certain forms of commodification and market-centrism, but points which are being actively managed and negotiated within particular political and ideological contexts. If, as looks likely, post-GDP thought continues to become more significant in economic policy-making circles, a fuller picture of contexts will become increasingly important.

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