

Resource Reviews

THE ECONOMICS OF HAPPINESS

Review by Henrike Rau

The documentary *The Economics of Happiness* by Helena Norberg-Hodge, Steven Gorelick and John Page was released in 2011 by the International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC) and has since attracted considerable attention. It combines footage from diverse places affected by globalisation, such as the Ladakh region in northern India whose culture has been extensively studied by Helena Norberg-Hodge, with commentaries by other prominent advocates of an alternative approach to economics that is both culturally sensitive and local in scale. Thought-provoking analyses offered by social scientists and activists such as Juliet Schor, Vandana Shiva, Bill McKibben, Andrew Simms and Rob Hopkins, amongst many others, combine to offer a nuanced picture of the challenges and chances of a 'new economy' based on localisation.

The Economics of Happiness covers key impacts of globalisation on societies, local economies, cultures and ecosystems around the world, focusing in particular on the effects of recent changes in the production and consumption of food. It provides ample evidence of the social and environmental costs of industrialised agriculture and the carbon-intensive global circulation of food, especially for farmers in developing countries. Pressing economic issues such as forced competition and de-regulation, growing indebtedness and the continued subsidisation of unsustainable agricultural practices are highlighted throughout the documentary. Challenging the persistent use of economic growth as the yardstick for measuring human development, the documentary promotes a shift in emphasis towards community and cultural integrity, wellbeing and happiness.

Education is seen as a key driver of change by many commentators. Current efforts to preserve local knowledge and lay expertise receive attention throughout the documentary, most notably in relation to localised systems of food production that work with rather than against nature. For example, Vandana Shiva stresses the need to involve older people in education to ensure the survival of local knowledge and practices. In addition, the documentary

introduces viewers to the idea of ‘reality tours’ – that is, excursions that give members of non-Western cultures the opportunity to experience key institutions and patterns of everyday life in the west and that aim to promote cultural reflexivity and critical awareness of cultural differences. There is some interesting footage of two Ladakhi women on a ‘reality tour’ with Helena Norberg-Hodge that includes visits to a nursing home, a supermarket and a municipal waste dump.

One of the most appealing features of *The Economics of Happiness* is its emphasis on cultural diversity and resilience to the negative effects of globalisation. This is an often neglected area that deserves much more attention in academic and popular literature and in the media than has hitherto been the case. The question of what makes some cultures more resilient to the pressures of modernisation and the ‘growth logic’ of global capitalism than others is a very pertinent one. Footage from Ladakh reveals that existing cultural conventions and traditions may equip communities with strategies and practices that help them maintain their cultural identity, at least to some degree. On the other hand, the documentary shows many places that have suffered from the negative impacts of economic and cultural globalisation, including rural communities in India and Peru that have come under pressure to either modernise their system of agriculture or abandon farming altogether.

The Economics of Happiness is a very welcome addition to the existing pool of recent documentaries that deal with the social, economic and ecological consequences of globalisation and possible sustainable alternatives. It is a very suitable teaching tool for courses on sustainability and development in schools, organisations and higher education institutions. The material is presented in a clear, concise and engaging manner. Importantly, the overall tone of the documentary remains optimistic and there is a firm focus on practical bottom-up solutions. This makes it particularly suitable as a tool for action-focused initiatives such as the Transition Towns movement or local food initiatives. Community screenings of *The Economics of Happiness* have already taken place throughout Ireland following its release in early 2011.

The website that accompanies the documentary – www.theeconomicsofhappiness.org – provides detailed information about the production of the film and its key message. There is potential for further enhancement of the website through the inclusion of materials for teachers and trainers, such as freely downloadable worksheets for in-class exercises and discussion cards that could be used in conjunction with the film.

The Economics of Happiness will appeal to teachers, practitioners, campaign groups and non-governmental organisations that work on sustainability and development issues. It makes a very significant contribution to current sustainability debates because of its strong focus on the cultural consequences of globalisation and its emphasis on localisation as a potential alternative pathway to development and human well-being.

Anielski, Mark (2007) *The Economics of Happiness: Building Genuine Wealth*, Philadelphia: New Society.

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