



‘The Good Life’ by Edward Fischer, Part 1/2

written by Michael Costello
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Edward Fischer’s volume is an addition to the growing anthropological interest in people’s understanding of “well-being”, looked at through the prism of “how people engage the market to pursue their own visions of wellbeing” (p. 1). This is seen very much as an intricate process of individuals negotiating their aspiration to ‘do the right thing’ to reach a (semi-) happy medium. His raw material for the investigation is a comparison between the subjectivities of the residents of a stable middle class estate in Hamburg in western Germany and the very different communities of coffee-growing peasants eking out an existence in the precarious conditions of highland Guatemala.

The author’s research is focused on “key, non-material qualities that define the good life: aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, and commitments to larger purposes” (p. 2).

The volume is in two parts. The first draws on his anthropological fieldwork to study the Hamburg community’s sense of values and the choices made or



preferred, as expressed in selecting the prices paid for goods, such as eggs or a car, so as to answer the question: “What price are German shoppers willing to pay to be virtuous?” (p. 23). He discusses how actions do not always coincide with what is considered most desirable, but argues that stated and revealed preferences are not mutually exclusive, with the former giving “greater emphasis to long-term goals and moral projects” (p. 44). This part is anthropologically the richer of the two for giving voice to the residents themselves.



Photo by Berliner Kaffeeösterei

Part two focuses on Guatemala and for this the author derives many of his sources from sociological surveys among the coffee growers. He goes into some detail of the history of the industry and, especially, the very different experiences to those of the middle class German town-dwellers. Here he illustrates a life dominated by the uncertainties that derive from the vagaries of the demands of fashion for their products in the First World market. The local moral codes put value on hard work and condemn ill-gotten gains and those who do not help family and neighbours to get ahead – the presence of ideas about a moral economy (p. 62). Aspirations for well-being very much hinge on the realities of attempting to make a living but include the moral dimension, as it does with the Hamburgers.

In both Hamburg and the hills of Guatemala, Fischer demonstrates, societal community norms guide individual choices.



In prosperous Hamburg he shows well-being as the accommodation of a sense of social responsibility to others, practised sometimes at the cost of one's own possible immediate gain; concern for the environment and for what is considered to be the 'common good'. In the hills of Guatemala seeking well-being lies in similar considerations, although the room for the peasants to make choices is narrowed by the brutally-experienced imperatives of securing a minimum level of material sustenance by exploiting any openings that might offer themselves to overcome severe economic constraints – “If Job was a country, it would have to be Guatemala,” writes Fischer (p. 181).

He shows that within their separate worlds the members of both communities strive to gain a sense of well-being, however different its elements or the levers that are available.

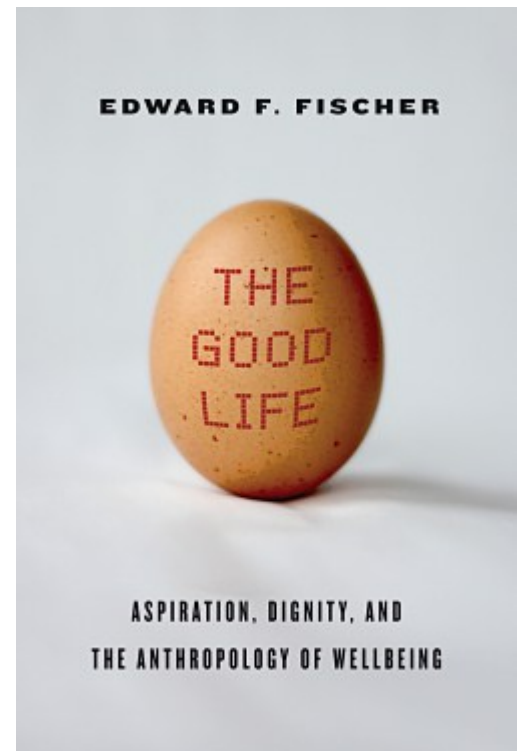
The sharing lies more in the seeking, through different trajectories constrained by economics, rather than the achievement of a shared experiential goal; so we see well-being as a process, a striving, a state of mind at a given time and not as a fixed immutable condition.

Fischer investigates, in his words: through “an anthropology that dares offer conceptual alternatives [...] based not on rigid models but on inductive ethnographic understandings of what people [...] say they want from their lives” (p. 65), adding “what people want [...] takes place at interfaces between global political economic structures, collective processes, and cultural representations, all of which coalesce around ideas about the good life” (p. 68).

Fischer does not skate around the problematic of comparing what actors actually do and what they consider should be done, the ‘stated preferences’ and, shown by peoples’ actions, the ‘revealed preferences’ that economists tend to prioritise (p. 44) thus delineating the function of aspiration in the two societies he considers.



This work engages in discussion with a broad range of social scientists that includes other anthropologists and sets aside behaviourist economists, as he insists that what people actually do does not necessarily reflect the values and aspirations they possess.



In an intriguing discussion of people's "revealed" preferences (i.e. what they do) and their "stated" preferences, he convincingly concludes that it is the latter that "helps us understand their values and ideals, hopes and dreams for the future, the sort of person they want to be, and the sort of world they want to live in.

This tells us a lot not only about the way things are, but also about the way things could be, "the aspirations that inform life projects" (p. 50). Here one might detect an elision by Fischer of the words "aspiration" and "hope" and students of hope and nostalgia will find recurrent insights into those conceptions.

He makes no reduction of people's aspirations to determination by psychology, only to mental exercises of how a person perceives matters, and draws widely on aspects of developmental theory, especially those of [Amartya Sen](#), for stressing what he sees as the importance of "agency and material resources [as] essential elements in the freedom to construct the life that one values" (p. 158).



The extensive bibliography makes for something of a handbook on its topic. Its wide comparative embrace will hopefully stimulate research into the topics in the book's subtitle, possibly to include approaches that will extend beyond people's pursuit of the good life only in societies where commercial markets dominate economics. These might encompass perceived 'semi-isolates' in Amazonia, those with strong non-capitalist regulatory states such as Cuba, or others, among societies in the Caucasus, such as Abkhazia, where customary norms dominate over the state in a "developed" country. He writes that in Guatemala "the state is largely absent" (p. 185), while the values of the Hamburg community are promoted by state legislation in Germany. While he demonstrates this for Germany, for Guatemala it is teasingly left without being expanded, thus inviting others to do so - and this might also encourage an extension of ethnographic research into societies where custom is not contained by state institutions - into the scene-shifting dialectics of custom and state law relationships.

The author's discussion of all his terms offers a solid list of topics and conceptions that, hopefully, will lead to further fields being investigated by research and anthropological considerations of them.

Edward F. Fischer. [The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing](#). Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2014. 280 pages. Pb: \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-8047-9253-0