

Hartmut Rosa and Christoph Henning (eds.)

The Good Life Beyond Growth: New Perspectives

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The environmental crisis now poses an imperative for radical social change, with economic growth increasingly appearing as a key issue to confront. But what needs to change in order for growth to be challenged? Why challenge it to begin with? Answers to the second question often invoke existential issues of survival. *The Good Life Beyond Growth* instead speaks of questions ‘existential’ in another sense: Do ideologies of growth hollow out the conditions that enable a *meaningful* life? This, in turn, circles back to the first question above: Are ideologies of limitless growth underwritten precisely by deficient conceptions of the good life?

Originating at a conference held in Jena in 2015, this volume gathers contributions from 22 scholars belonging to various disciplines. In their introduction, editors Hartmut Rosa and Christoph Henning set out the intellectual task they envision the book as contributing to: growth is a structural imperative of modern society as such. This structure, in turn, owes much to the dominance of a political paradigm, which is decisively neutral towards any definition of the *ends* characteristic of a ‘good’ life. While this neutrality serves to avoid paternalism, it also runs the risk of occasioning a deterioration of politics into the administrative maximisation of the (economic) means for realising *any* end. From such a characterisation of modern society, the task for intellectual critique follows naturally: explicitly, to scrutinise the connection of growth with the good, and to learn from imaginaries where this connection is absent. More implicitly, this task also involves a confrontation with ways in which such a society makes *any* notions of the good life politically impotent.

It is not always clear how far the other scholars in this volume subscribe to the foregoing line of reasoning. Nonetheless, it is perfectly possible to read their chapters as a heterogeneous set of contributions to such a task. Some chapters deal with ontological fundamentals. During the course

of his commentary on Rosa's chapter, Charles Taylor pinpoints a basic question for any politics of the good life: is it possible to conceive of a domain *between* natural fact and subjective value, whose existence would enable claims about human meaning to be true or false? Rosa's own engagement with such issues, developed in terms of the concept 'resonance', may well prove the most significant contribution of this volume. In more political chapters, some authors remind us of the severity of our situation. Others draw on concepts such as *Buen Vivir*, calling the moderns to learn about the good life from those indigenous and marginalised people whom they used to believe that they could only teach. Sociological contributions discuss more formal models, and anthropological chapters investigate the roles played by visions of the good life both within capitalism and outside it. Kothari's final chapter discusses (partial) realisations of 'radical ecological democracy', which concludes the volume on a note of hope – something that any affirmative politics requires.

An unusually prominent topic throughout the book is that of work. Here, it is significant how work is approached in a vocabulary parallel to the one which has shifted 'existential' preoccupations with growth from a concern with life to concern with the *good* life. This book demonstrates what a politics of work looks like when concerned not only with hours and wages, but with the *ends* which make work intrinsically meaningful or not. Rosa forefronts work as a possible site of 'resonance' (Chapter 3), and Thompson demonstrates how radically the language of work-critique changes when it refers to a conception of the common good (Chapter 9). The extent to which such language already resonates with the experience of those who work is something we learn from Mayer-Ahuja (Chapter 10) and Hollstein (Chapter 13). For the anglophone reader, it is then refreshing how Van Parijs and Vanderborght (Chapter 12) argue for a basic income in a manner free from 'accelerationist' references to automation, demonstrating instead a concern with social conditions that enable *meaningful* work.

It is commendable to have gathered such diverse contributions to the task of prying growth from the good. The quality of the chapters, however, is as varying as are the topics, and several suffer from

copy-editing issues. Furthermore, often chapters stand next to each other with little trace of mutual dialogue or proper engagement with the transformative possibilities offered by engaging the issue of the good. Yet as a whole, the book makes a very meaningful contribution to the debate on economic (de)growth. First, in how it forefronts the topic of the good life at all. Second, in its distinct manner of doing so.

In the first regard, the volume resonates well with ongoing efforts within the debate on ‘degrowth’. Here, a challenge has been precisely to develop a more diverse manner of criticising growth than those which immediately refer to planetary limits. This has led to exploration of concepts such as autonomy, justice and *dépense*. In the second regard, however, *The Good Life Beyond Growth* diverges from these efforts in a manner not merely complementary. The question is whether the prominence in the latter of concepts such as ‘the common good’, and references to scholars such as Alasdair MacIntyre, speak of a metaphysics ultimately at odds with that which underwrites much discourse on degrowth. This does not apply to all chapters, but much of the book stands in closer proximity to Pope Francis than perhaps any book on the topic since Skidelsky and Skidelsky’s *How Much is Enough?*

The book offers a distinct approach to the issue of growth, in which it may contribute to a significant transformation of the debate on (de)growth. In so doing, perhaps, it may then aid in the task of reshaping the political categories of modern liberalism itself.

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