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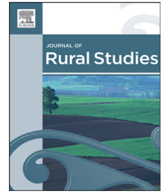

Editorial

Re-imagining the Good Life

1. Introduction

Across the globe and throughout history, people have striven for whatever vision of a Good Life held meaning for them. The many different schools of philosophy in ancient Athens – while sharing the conviction that *the* central goal for humans was to achieve the Good Life – attest to many divergent understandings of what constitutes a Good Life, who was entitled to it, and how society should be organised to deliver it. The possibility of consensus is no closer after two millennia. So, we offer no definition in foregrounding this collection of papers on 'Re-imagining The Good Life' for *The Journal of Rural Studies* – ideas on this subject are inevitably diverse – yet we acknowledge that all visions of the Good Life, explicitly or implicitly, are political as well as personal. Concepts and framings of the Good Life have power to legitimise or undermine certain opinions, to encourage or censure certain behaviours, to make visible or obscure certain aspects of life, and to include or exclude certain people. Long-standing, dominant framings of happiness can be mobilised to maintain political economies and power relations, and to undermine those who struggle for alternative possibilities (Ahmed, 2010). However, in contemporary liberal democracies, enduring and taken-for-granted notions of the Good Life[1]– those centred on individual wealth, job security, personal status and success, health, and happiness – are now under pressure. The present context of economic instability and crisis, environmental change, shifts in welfare state imaginaries, and growing social inequality has fuelled debates that are now disrupting the legitimacy of growth-centric economic strategies as the principal route to wellbeing. Understandings of the Good Life in many cultures are beginning to change and will likely need to change significantly in the future. In addition to the general, but abstract, awareness that current modes of living are unsustainable, a deeply personal, yet widely resonant, response to late capitalism is clear. A slow-burn existential crisis has emerged, as many individuals feel less and less able to fulfil their expectations of life and concentrate, not on reaching for their dreams, but getting through each day, with the result that life feels increasingly 'truncated' (Berlant, 2007: 27). What does living a Good Life mean in the 21st century? How can and should it be re-imagined?

This profound questioning has opened opportunities for alternative visions of development to find greater political legitimacy. Many governments across the globe, and supra-national organisations such as the EU, OECD, and UN, have responded by seeking to measure 'national wellbeing' or 'national happiness' (Bache and Scott, 2017). In the search for evidence to inform policies to tackle rising levels of mental health issues, perceived societal breakdown, and growing inequalities, in many countries there has been an increased focus on developing subjective wellbeing indicators which measure, for example, happiness, anxiety and fulfilment, in addition to more longstanding objective indicators of quality of life.[2] This is welcome, because it makes more visible, and provokes political discussion about, the intangible, yet fundamental, aspects of what makes life more or less worth living. Yet, at the same time, attendant narratives of 'flourishing' and 'thriving' linked to an emphasis on self-responsibility (rather than structural determinants of wellbeing), can increase feelings of pressure for those who already experience a lack of control over their lives, or worse still be used as a discriminatory and disciplinary tool (Friedli and Stearn 2015; Scott and Masselot 2017).

While many nations have been influenced by Western-centric notions of the Good Life, promulgated by European values that focus on individual rights and freedoms, this renewed questioning of life has allowed other philosophies to gain more traction. For example, an emerging literature on *buen vivir* (*or Sumak kawsay*[3]) translated as 'living well' has highlighted how traditional indigenous notions of wellbeing, based on the interrelatedness of all life, have gained new political legitimacy across several countries in South America. Indeed, *Buen vivir* was constitutionalized in Bolivia (2009) and Ecuador (2008), partly in response to powerful lobbying from indigenous people to respect their cosmology in a plurinational state,[4] but also in the attempt to mainstream alternative visions of development associated with a growing 'pink tide' of left wing activism which rejected the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s and 1990s, in favour of Twenty-First Century Socialism (see for example Bressa Florentin 2017; Calisto Friant and Langmore, 2015; Radcliffe, 2012). This work highlights the political and environmental contestations and compromises inherent in implementing these visions across diverse peoples in one nation. The emergence of a recent shift to the right in many countries in Latin America may mean these ideas fall into abeyance again, but it is clear that contestation will continue.

[1] We have not sought to explicitly define this idea but try to highlight dominant understandings linked to particular contexts. These terms, 'a good life' or "the good life, relate to an intuitively understood but difficult to articulate idea of living well. It is individually, culturally and societally diverse and therefore any definition risks the imposition of cultural norms. The papers here are focussed on four very different geographical, political and historical contexts and so we do not define what a good life means here, rather let the papers speak.

[2] For example the UK Office of National Statistics introduced four new questions in their national wellbeing survey asking about happiness, anxiety, life satisfaction and life meaning.

[3] *Sumak Kawsay* is the equivalent term in Quechua, an indigenous language family spoken by over 10 million people across Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

[4] 'Plurinational' is an idea embedded in the indigenous lobbying for political recognition and representation of the many and diverse peoples in one nation state.

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In New Zealand, new political narratives of wellbeing have emerged in close dialogue with those agendas in Europe, however, they have also been necessarily cognizant of the contemporary requirement to include Maori philosophies in a bicultural nation. A national Maori wellbeing survey, *Te Kupenga*, now exists alongside Pakeha wellbeing measurements and is an indication of the recent political settlement through the Waitangi Tribunal process, which attempted financial and political reparation for the atrocities white settlers inflicted on Maori people. In this settlement the transfer of land, or gaining resources to buy and protect land, has been paramount in recognising *rangatiratanga* - the authority and self-determination of a Maori tribe. Whilst acknowledging the diversity of Maori experiences and without wishing to essentialise or romantisize 'the Maori culture', the ability to live in relation to a specific place in specific ways according to cultural and spiritual commitments is central to Maori cosmology and therefore notions of a Good Life (Panelli and Tipa, 2007). As is the case in indigenous cosmologies in Ecuador, human and non-human life are entirely interconnected with each other and with the environment - the Maori word for land (*whenua*) also means placenta.

In imagining what constitutes a Good Life, from earliest recorded times to the present day, narratives of land, nature and the tensions between the city and the countryside have been important, if sometimes underlying themes (Williams, 1973). In classical Athens, for example, while Aristotle taught (to elite male citizens) that the best possible life could be achieved through dutiful engagement in civic life, Epicurus urged retreat to a walled garden outside the city to live a life of simple pleasures. While one idea of the Good Life can certainly be found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's cosmopolitan images of American Wall Street fuelled excesses during the Roaring Twenties, another reverberates in Flora Thompson's evocation of the quiet English rural idyll on the brink of modern transformation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Both these influential literary explorations of different ideas of the Good Life each build on the writers' lived experiences of engaged participation in that life, their capacities for creative observation and transposition, as well as their critiques of the dramatic social and economic changes of their time. The varied and often contradictory renderings of the Good Life in literature and art have been further explored in social history, social research and commentary. On one hand, 20th century urban and suburban development provided settings where a growing American middle class could amass and consolidate the material goods and status markers of the modern successful Good Life (Baritz, 1989). But on the other hand, rural and agrarian communities have long been seen as repositories of simpler living, traditions of hard, honest work and therefore higher virtue and fulfillment in American culture (Shi, 1985). These spatialized views of the Good Life may be somewhat specific to the American context. They arose unmarked by some of the more turbulent recent shifts and disruptures of the early 21st century and they certainly now seem limited in their engagement with issues of power. Living a Good Life in the US suburbs in the 1960s was a predominantly white affair, facilitated by housing legislation which promoted racial segregation (Smith, 2016). Even so, they underscore some basis for broader interest in and ongoing questions about the rural and rurality as either conducive to or inhibiting a Good Life. Indeed a plethora of studies have focussed on contemporary constructions and deconstructions of the rural idyll in Britain and elsewhere, on rural lifestyles and amenity migration in Europe and North America, on the wellbeing of certain groups such as young people or the elderly in rural areas, and on how quality of life has been affected by restructuring of rural areas and changes in policy (see Bailey et al., 2014 and Shucksmith et al., 2012 for examples of attention to some of these areas for the US and the UK; see Gilbert et al., 2016 for a recent illustrative example of research on rural subjective well-being). However, Rural Studies as an interdisciplinary field has so far engaged relatively little with the articulation of large cultural shifts in ideas of the Good Life – the existential as well as the empirical, and the link between them as possibilities for further research. This lack of attention is notable since threats to material and consumption-based definitions of the Good Life are glaring and consequential in many rural locales, and many emerging alternatives to these definitions are, perhaps not coincidentally, being developed and enacted in the countryside. Re-imagining the Good Life therefore necessitates consideration of the rural and rurality.

While rooted in ancient and/or indigenous philosophical traditions and debates, concerns about the Good Life have acquired renewed relevance today amidst the present context of rapid political, economic, and environmental upheaval, both ongoing and new cultural contentions and rising social inequalities. But what exactly is the Good Life in the early 21st century? Who decides? How is it best approached? Does it need to be defended? Who can and cannot achieve it? Here a philosophically invigorated notion of the Good Life could deepen longstanding related social science research constructs of "quality of life." It could potentially challenge and enhance ascendant policy goals of "well-being." At the same, however, the notion of the Good Life has been vulnerable to appropriation and trivialization by advertising and marketing in consumer capitalist economies (consider Good Life-themed tee shirts, beer, and luxury cars). Across scholarship, policy debates, popular culture and everyday life, notions of the Good Life today range broadly, yet remain unsettled, malleable and contested. Re-imagining the Good Life thus fits within a wider stream of inquiry about the changing conditions, potentialities, and consequences of human societies, as well as the challenges with which they must engage in the 21st century.

2. Paper summaries

In interrogating this idea of the good life, we include theoretical, empirical, and policy lenses on the rural – from discussions interrelating rural idyll, utopia and social justice (Shucksmith) to large scale surveys of lives failing to make the American Dream (Thiede et al.); individual searching for the Good Life from the "Disneyfication" of the Taiwanese countryside (Chueh and Lu) to the intentional rural communities of Colombia (Chavez et al.); from rural culture policy agendas in the UK (Scott et al.) to the fuller scope of rural social impacts associated with resource extraction and development in the US and Canada (Evensen and Stedman).

The papers assembled in this collection all engage broadly with questions about the shifting nature, importance and availability of the Good Life in rural places and communities experiencing forces of change. These changes include demographic shifts, political and economic restructuring, growing social inequalities, new technologies of resource extraction and competing claims on landscape and environment. The papers draw on different philosophical ideas, cultural constructs, data sources, policy framings and individual narratives from across the contemporary rural world to explore central notions of what a Good Life means, why this may matter, for whom and how.

Enfolding the Good Life within imaginaries of rural places, the paper by Shucksmith provides a provocative conceptual recasting of the rural for the 21st century – one that engages more explicitly and deliberately with the moral and political dimensions of rural. Shucksmith begins by recognizing the long scholarly legacy of the rural idyll in Britain, but proceeds to challenge its backward-looking aspirations and its glossing of power. As an alternative, he lays out the value of more anticipatory, deliberative and participatory approaches to envisioning rural futures that support a Good

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