

Beyond GDP ?

Towards a new system of social accounts.

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By asking in February 2008 Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, Jean-Paul Fitoussi and a group of economists and of social scientists to reflect on new measures of "economic performances and social progress" to make up for the inadequacies of the GDP, the President of the Republic has contributed to legitimise an already established undertaking whose aim is to build "alternative" well-being indicators, whose visibility had increased thanks to the Human Development Indicator (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme, at the beginning of the 1990s and accelerated during the recent period with the work conducted in the OECD, the European Commission, in think tanks and in the academic world, especially around what is now called "the economics of happiness".

The strong echo of the Stiglitz Commission, whose published report gave rise to an official and quite mediatic launch campaign, has heightened certain tensions around the project of new "well-being", "economic performances" or still "sustainability" indicators: is the purpose for example to extend the principle of "monetisation" to the non-merchant sphere to integrate the "damages of progress" or to relativise the monetary measures of wealth to the benefit of other counting units?

This contribution questions some of the issues of the Stiglitz Commission and, more widely speaking, addresses the various facets of the current movement aiming to promote "new wealth Indicators". We shall focus more particularly on the divergences running through that space and on the possible resistances raised by such a movement in various sectors (public statistics, the social movements, the world of professional economists, etc.).

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The report of the "Commission on measuring economic performances and social progress", so-called "Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi commission" or more often "Stiglitz commission", appointed by President Nicolas Sarkozy in February 2008², underlines the belated consecration of the quest for better wealth and performance measures which had come to light as soon as in the 1970s, in France with the "social indicators" promoted by Jacques Delors³, and had gained in visibility at the beginning of the 1990s with the launch of the human development indicator by the PNUD⁴. When the report was published in September 2009⁵, then in the form of two books published by Odile Jacob Pub. in November 2009⁶, high French and foreign political, administrative officials as well as worldly recognised famous scientists concluded that in-depth transformation of the statistical recording method in the socio-economic and environmental fields was necessary. The idea is to overcome the limits of the current measuring systems, by modifying "performance" measuring modalities which are considered as basically faulty, legitimately disputed and unsuitable for the contemporary stakes.

The limits of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), most of them known for a long time and sources of an already flourishing⁷ scientific literature, are the starting point of this observation: centred on production, this indicator describes the incomes and their evolution increasingly poorly, in particular due to the globalisation of economies; "defensive" expenditures such as the reconstruction of pollution-damaged environment or prison expenses are then considered as contributions to wealth; households' production, which is non-monetary to a vast extent, is not taken into account; the production of the non-merchant sector, assessed by the production costs, is poorly measured; its calculation relies on various by partial "inputations" (a housing expenses is attributed to owner-households); it is based on the notion of average and not of that of variance.

According to the Commission, all the national accounting systems set up after the second world war must hence be revamped thoroughly. The public statistical institutions are bound to implement, relatively in the short-term, noticeable changes in the intellectual architecture on which they have been built: their investigation devices, their measuring instruments and other indicators must thoroughly evolve to correct the just aforementioned defects.

In terms of public policies, this change must enable better assessment of the economic and social performances at different levels and thus promote the implementation of more appropriate strategies, on a par with the citizens' expectations. The public "decision makers" themselves must grab hold of

² A first version of this abstract of our text has been published in *Savoir / Agir*, in the "Alterindicateurs" column. F. Lebaron, "The Stiglitz report: towards a statistical revolution", *Savoir / Agir*, 10 December 2009.

³ J. Gadrey, F. Jany-Catrice, *Les nouveaux indicateurs de richesse (The new wealth indicators)*, Paris, La Découverte, 2nd ed., 2008.

⁴ On the birth of the HDI, E. Stanton, « The Human Development Indicator : A History », Working Paper Series, 127, PERI, University of Massachusetts, February 2007.

⁵ See the official web site of the Commission: <http://www.stiglitz-sen-fitoussi.fr/fr/index.htm>

⁶ J. Stiglitz, A. Sen, J.-P. Fitoussi, *Performances économiques et progrès social. Richesse des nations et bien-être des individus*, (economic performances and social progress. nations' wealth and individuals' well-being), Paris, Odile Jacob, 2009 and J. Stiglitz, A. Sen, J.-P. Fitoussi, *Performances économiques et progrès social. Vers de nouveaux systèmes de mesure* (Economic performances and social progress. Towards new measuring systems), Paris, Odile Jacob, 2009.

⁷ See for example D. Méda, *Au-delà du PIB. Pour une autre mesure de la richesse* (Beyond the GDP. For another wealth measure), Paris, Flammarion, 2008.

innovations and apply them in their ordinary concrete activity: they form the explicit target audience of the report.

The particularly ambitious and grandiloquent speech by the President of the Republic on the launch day contributes to granting an official character to said change: "*A formidable revolution lies ahead of us. Each of us is now fully aware of it. This revolution will only take place if nurtured in our minds. (...) Statistics, accounting, reflect our aspirations, the value we ascribe to things. They are indissociable from a Weltanschauung, from economics, from society, from an idea of man, from his/her relation to others. To consider them as objective data, external to ourselves, which are unquestionable and indisputable is undoubtedly reassuring, comfortable, but surely dangerous. (...) For many years, people whose life was becoming increasingly difficult were told that their standard of living was increasing. How should they not feel led astray? (...) For a number of years, the statistics have pointed out an increasingly high economic growth as a victory over shortage, until said growth appeared to destroy more than it created, by jeopardising the future of the planet. (...) Behind the religion of numbers, behind the whole edifice of our statistical and accounting representations, also lies the religion of market which is always right (...) If the market had the right answer for everything, it would be common knowledge. If the market were never wrong, everyone could see it. (...) The market is not meaningful. It does not equate with responsibility. It does not equate with project. It does not equate with vision. The financial markets even less.*"⁸. For the President of the French Republic, the report is hence the opportunity of a true "cultural revolution", leading to break away from exclusively merchant measures that the crisis would have ruled out definitely. He also states that "*France will open everywhere the debate on the conclusions of this report (...) It will include the study of this report in the syllabus of all the application schools of its public service*"⁹.

The decision to mandate Joseph Stiglitz¹⁰, alongside with Amartya Sen¹¹ and Jean-Paul Fitoussi¹², to make a collection of proposals in this area, can be considered as the somehow paradoxical victory of a multifaceted movement, which some years ago still seemed to be doomed to remain neglected by institutions, before asserting themselves successively, to a limited extent, in different international organisations (United Nations Organisation, Organisation for Economic Cooperation

⁸ Nicolas Sarkozy, Great amphitheater of the Sorbonne, Monday 14 September 2009, repeated in J. Stiglitz, A.Sen, J.-P.Fitoussi, *op. cit.*

⁹ The contrast between the communication offensive around the Stiglitz report and the small echo of the reports of the Economic, social and environmental council, as that dedicated to sustainable development Indicators (Philippe Le Clézio, June 2009), is significant.

¹⁰ Joseph Stiglitz was Chief economist at the World Bank up to 2000, before he was awarded the prize of economic sciences in memory of Alfred Nobel in 2001 (alongside with M. Spence and G.Akerlof). He now teaches in the Graduate School of Business of Columbia. He came to world fame by his critical stances on the management of the Asian crisis by the IMF and by his neo-keynesian orientations, in particular during the *subprime* crisis. He has thus come closer to the "alterglobalists".

¹¹ Amartya Sen, "Nobel prize-winner" in 1998, teaches currently in Harvard. A theorician of development, well-being and of economics as a "moral science", he is an honorary president of Oxfam, an international NGO and a founder of the International ethical, scientific and political collegium, an association based in France, founded in 2002 by Milan Kucan, president of Slovenia, Michel Rocard, a former French Prime Minister, co-presidents, Stéphane Hessel, vice-president, and Sacha Goldman, general secretary.

¹² Jean-Paul Fitoussi is the prime mover of the Stiglitz commission and undoubtedly the author or at least the partial inspirer of some of the most committed texts derived therefrom (including that of the President of the Republic). A professor in Sciences Po Paris, where he is a member of the scientific council, Jean-Paul Fitoussi was Chairman of the French monitoring centre for economic conjunctures. He is a member of the Economic analysis council. Known for his neo-keynesian orientations, Jean-Paul Fitoussi is bent on the independence of economic experts.

and Development, World Bank...). The crisis has contributed to strengthen the promoters of this statistical "renovation" even more: the introduction to the report¹³ explicitly indicates that "*certain members of the Commission believe that the latter makes [their recommendations] all the more urgent*"¹⁴. It is in particular what the President of the Republic expresses in his preface, who states that the crisis reveals the inadequacy of current statistical tools. The text published by the three economists to outline the philosophy of the report (entitled "Essay on measuring") goes even further along those lines, considering that the crisis is even partially the product of deficient measuring instruments, a thematic which falls into a vaster movement of criticism of the accounting¹⁵ and financial Indicators:

Text box: a multifaceted and long-term movement

The movement of the "alternative indicators" (according to one of the labels currently used) both corresponds to a work completed in certain public bodies, NGOs and by researchers regrouped in independent centres. It has grown in successive "waves" in scattered sectors, without coordination nor global coherence, without common denomination and with a rather small degree of institutionalisation.

The notion of "social indicators" crystallised in the 1960-70s in the United States, primarily within the academic world, with the publication of several books and then as of 1974, of a journal entitled *Social Indicators Research*. Jacques Delors and a group of Ecole nationale d'administration (ENA) students imported this scientific movement to France in 1967-1968, by endeavouring to suggest "social indicators" within the framework of the French plan, within which Jacques Delors was a civil servant. This politico-administrative guarantee confers mediatic visibility to the movement, even if the latter retracts from public space with the 1973-1974 crisis. The movement is then again mainly discussed in academic reviews. The human development indicator no sooner appeared within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) than in the beginning of the 1990s, after years of internal discussions about the choice of the best development indicators and of a necessary synthetic measure, to which partake economists such as [Mahbub ul Haq](#) and Amartya Sen.

At the end of the 1990s, independent companies emerged at the intersection of universities and certain NGOs. In France, the BIP40 is one of the most known, and also of the most criticised (especially by the official public statistics). In Canada, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) enjoys great success with the Index of Economic Well-Being (Andrew Sharpe and Lars Osberg), often presented as quite "innovating", in particular because it emphasises the notion of "economic insecurity" among other dimensions. Researchers and associative actors get together. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), to a lesser extent the World Bank, join the UNDP in a movement which henceforth impregnates certain of the main international organisations, within which the neo-liberal discourse has got the upper hand. The OECD published its first social indicators in 2001, but in the form of a dashboard and

¹³ It is entitled *Synthesis and recommendations*.

¹⁴ p.9.

¹⁵ For a presentation of the issues of environmental (private) accounting: Jacques Richard, « Pour une révolution comptable environnementale » (For an environmental accounting revolution), *Le Monde de l'économie*, 5 February 2008.

not of a synthetic indicator. The national public statistics organisations are now being concerned as well.

Parallel to this movement limited to the most "critical" fringes of international organisations, the "economics of happiness" develops in the world of academic economists, in the wake of the work of Easterlin. They are mainly centred on the study of the relations between wealth (GDP) and well-being or "happiness". The turning point towards the economics of happiness of the academic research became more obvious in the second half of the 2000 and has further somehow marginalised the most prominent research work in social sciences in the 1990, such as the attempts originating from NGOs (in France, the BIP), or independent centres such as the Institute for innovation in social policy (Miringoff, United States) or the Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS, Canada)¹⁶.

The outlines of the report: ambition and technicity

The text of the report combines two features which may seem contradictory at first view: ambition and technicity. In more than one way, it comes across as a "manifesto" and contains a strong programmatic dimension. The recommendations and numerous formulations here and there vigorously claim for new practices: "*a major effort should also be conducted...*"; "*... should be taken into account*"; "*... must be taken into account*"; "*allocate statistical means to the fields wherein the available Indicators remain insufficient*", etc. If the demands addressed to the statistical devices remain relatively vague, they are nevertheless numerous, involve significant public investment and are presented as major inflections which should allow for noticeable social and political changes.

On the other hand, the report is both long (the French version entailed 324 pages of a very dense text¹⁷) and often technical, let alone esoteric, juxtaposing concepts and indicators borrowed from sometimes contradictory or still quite distinct theoretical frameworks. Numerous developments, in particular in the first part dedicated to the GDP, pertain to improving national accounting¹⁸. As a bureaucratic-scientific project developed after the war, confronted with many issues (or "anomalies"), national accounting was hence supposed to go from strength to strength and grow steadily so as to integrate the response to said issues, but sadly lacking simplicity and coherence. Without giving up totally on using the GDP, the report recommends for example increased usage of actual household incomes and

¹⁶ "The Institute for Innovation in Social Policy devotes its full capacity to the analysis and publication of social indicators. Established in 1985, the Institute has worked on social indicators at the national, state, and international levels as a way to improve the reporting and understanding of social conditions. The Institute's work has had significant impact on public policy, public education, and the academic community. Since its inception, the Institute has released numerous social indicator reports and working papers. The Institute staff also collaborated on a book, entitled *The Social Health of the Nation*, published by Oxford University Press, as well as articles in journals and other publications. In addition, over the past decade, the Institute has conducted eight national conferences on social health and social indicators. Director: Marque-Luisa Miringoff, Ph.D. Associate Director: Sandra Opdycke, Ph.D ».

¹⁷ The publication by Odile Jacob pub. consists of two books, whereof the first, prepared by the three supervisors of the Commission, includes an essay on measurement which goes beyond collective, more moderate conclusions. For want of direct testimonies, it is difficult to know far more on the nature of disagreements and resistances raised by the analyses of the three supervisors.

¹⁸ About the history of the national accounting in France, see F. Fourquet, *Les comptes de la puissance. Aux origines de la comptabilité nationale et du plan* (The accounts of power. At the origins of national accounting and of the plan), Paris, Encres, 1980.

consumption, as many items already present in national accounting, but still poorly measured. Its purpose is hence to focus the representation of economy on actual consumption and incomes, including on their unequal distribution (which however comes second, after the "central tendency" measure), aspects that a representation focused on sole global production should smooth out. This first point partially challenges a "productivist" vision, which has hitherto innervated the different streams of political economy and of economic thinking, but to the benefit of a conception which remains monetary and partially "consumerist" or "utilitarian".

Insisting repeatedly on the *principle of equivalence* (an identical service for a household for example should not be accounted for differently according to the public or private legal status of its provider), the report appeals for better measure of non merchant services (in particular healthcare or education) thanks to which households enjoy a well-being which is for the time being vastly ignored by official statistics. Along the same line of thought, the aim is to develop patrimony accounts at all levels and to submit the balance sheets thus prepared to "resistance tests" based upon various exploitation hypotheses, "where there are no market prices or when said prices are subjected to erratic fluctuations or speculative bubbles"¹⁹. The difficulties associated with the monetary measure of patrimony, in an extended meaning, hence open up immense perspectives for national accountants. The vision developed in the report confers greater significance to non merchant public services and to the wealth they generate, to the domestic activity and to all the stock variations that affect the activity in the long run. It hence offers more integrated representation of the whole social activity, less strictly "economic" or "economicist", a vision which corresponds more to that long-developed vision in social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science, etc.).

As regards the "quality of life", which is the subject matter of the second part, the developments bearing upon the three conceptual frameworks presented as the most "useful" for analysing this issue (measures of the subjective well-being²⁰, "capabilities" and "fair allowances" theories) refer to the corresponding theories or economic work, which are represented within the Commission by their main promoters. The report attempts to convince the reader of their "operational" usefulness. The methodological difficulties and the lack of reliable data are, and the report readily admits it, the main obstacles to scientific knowledge in the field: quarterly or *a fortiori* monthly homogenous data bearing upon work conditions or subjective well-being are not or hardly available. The report thus recommends the multiplication of investigations for measuring realities hitherto remained little objectivated: a concern prevailing since the beginning of the movement of social indicators is a similar instance. Another element to be noted is the report focusing on citizens' subjective perception of the ordinary activity, as measured by surveys on the timetable which integrate attitude issues, along the lines of the work of Kahneman on the "U index" ("unpleasant"), a dissatisfaction indicator constructed on the basis of a detailed subjective assessment of daily activities.

The indicators presented in the third part dedicated to "sustainability" are abstract intellectual constructions akin to sophisticated national accounting methods,

¹⁹ p. 15.

²⁰ Here appears a recent breakthrough of the problematics for measuring the "subjective" happiness, derived in particular from the New Economics Foundation, at the origin of the "Happy Planet Indicator" and which have set the trend in the wake of international conferences on the issue of "happiness" measure.

as is the case of net adjusted savings (NAS), derived from the work of the World Bank, especially from research conducted by "Nobel" Kenneth Arrow, a member of the Commission. In a 2004 report, the Bank evaluates the "net internal savings" for the quasi-totality of countries in the world²¹. The starting point is gross savings measured by national accounting, from which the capital consumption of generated assets can be deduced, which allows to obtain net savings. Said value is added the educational expenses, measures of human capital investment. The depletion of various natural resources can be assessed, on the basis of the profit derived from said resources, and the damages resulting from global carbon dioxide pollution can be estimated. The data obtained from the NAS are, little intuitively at first glance, quite favourable to China, where gross savings are very high. The variations in NAS do not provide radically different estimates from gross savings. Especially, the aim of this indicator is to monetise the notion of sustainability, which proved to be one of the most problematic and controversial items of the work of the Commission and of its reception. Between the draft and the final version, the wording has been smoothed out and attenuated, due to quite critical public reactions from certain members, influenced by "decrease" theories and the ecology stream.

Many critical diagnoses are contained in the report: for example, the inability of the GDP, focused on merchant assessment, to measure not only well-being, but even economic performance, which net domestic product, or even better, actual household incomes, can approximate with greater accuracy. The American counterexample used by Stiglitz (an increasing GDP whereas households cannot see their incomes rise) is the most striking, and it is also highly symbolical: the "American model" has thus lost its dominating status explicitly. Similarly, the depiction of the blatant limits of public statistics in terms of objectivation of the *quality of life*: lack of surveys, of comparable data, of measure of the positive or negative time perception as experienced by individuals, etc. Finally, the little satisfactory, contradictory and poorly unified character of the set of current sustainability indicators, which cannot only be monetary, but must also be "physical" and which should measure variations in *stocks* so as to come closer to the idea of sustainability: the current consumption should not affect the future consumption possibilities. The report, on this score, leads to a moderate and pragmatic vision, by advocating limited usage of physical and monetary indicators.

Text box 1

The recommendations of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report

Recommendation 1: When assessing material well-being, one should refer to incomes and consumption rather than production.

Recommendation 2: emphasise the household perspective

Recommendation 3: consider income and consumption jointly with wealth

Recommendation 4: give more prominence to the distribution of income, consumption and wealth

Recommendation 5: broaden incomes indicators to non-merchant activities

Recommendation 6: the quality of life depends on the objective conditions of people and on their "capabilities" (dynamic capacities). Steps should be taken to improve

²¹ See *Vers de nouveaux systèmes de mesure*, (Towards new measuring systems) *op. cit.*, p. 325 et sq.

measures of people's health, education, personal activities and environmental conditions. In particular, substantial effort should be devoted to developing and implementing robust, reliable measures of social connections, political voice and insecurity that can be shown to predict life satisfaction.

Recommendation 7: quality-of-life indicators in the dimensions covered should assess inequalities in a comprehensive way.

Recommendation 8: surveys should be designed to assess the links between various quality-of-life domains for each person, and this information should be used when designing policies in various fields.

Recommendation 9: statistical offices should provide the information needed to aggregate across quality-of-life dimensions, allowing the construction of different indexes.

Recommendation 10: measures of objective and subjective well-being provide key information about people's quality of life. Statistical offices should incorporate questions to capture people's life evaluation, hedonic experiences and priorities in their own surveys.

Recommendation 11: sustainability assessment requires a well-identified dashboard of indicators. The distinctive feature of the components of this dashboard should be that they are interpretable as variations of some underlying "stock". A monetary index of sustainability has its place in such a dashboard; still, under the current state of the art, it should remain essentially focused on economic aspects of sustainability.

Recommendation 12: The environmental aspects of sustainability deserve a separate follow-up based on a well-chosen set of physical indicators. In particular, there is a need for a clear indicator of our proximity to dangerous levels of environmental damage (such as associated with climate change or the depletion of fishing stocks).

The legitimacy of the Commission or the boundaries of "expert" knowledge

Announced at the beginning of 2008, the composition of the Commission proved to be a major stake, expressed publicly on several occasions by most critical commentators. The Stiglitz commission indeed includes economists who are admittedly rather "critical" against *mainstream thought* and especially neoliberalism in its more radical version, but consecrated by international academic institutions²²; internationally recognised neoclassical economists who have enriched the well-being theory or to national accounting, and officials in charge of national and international statistical organisations; finally a few economists, closer to other social sciences, who have contributed to original empirical work in the field. It has mobilised members of national (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, INSEE, Observatoire français des conjonctures économiques, OFCE) and international (OECD) bodies, involved in the reforming movement, as "drafters".

The Commission also illustrates, as this has been far less emphasised, the outstanding American domination in economics (of happiness), which has become overwhelming in the contemporary French context. Out of the 24 members of the Commission, 12 hold a position in an American university, among whom 3 in Princeton, 2 in Chicago and 2 in Columbia. 5 are economics "Nobel" prize winners. The Commission has hence mobilised strong academic symbolical capital associated with the United States, representatives of statistical organisations and with recognised expertise: it is in the heart of "international" economic science that the

²² After the model of the three people responsible, who can be classed diagrammatically in the category of "consecrated heretics", as coined by Pierre Bourdieu: P. Bourdieu, *Homo academicus*, Paris, Minuit, 1984.

signal of statistical revolution originates, although prone to multiple internal tensions can be seen between the lines in the report²³.

The first implicit exclusion relates to human and social sciences. Psychology (apart from punctual mentions), sociology, demography, political science, let alone history²⁴, geography or anthropology, are left aside to the benefit of the national accounting / economic theory combination, supposedly at the core of the stakes and issues of well-being and socio-economic performance, which means implicit bias in favour of an utilitarian vision, regardless how moderate, of well-being and especially of accounting monetisation, especially in terms of environment. This contributes to giving more technician and anhistoric vision of the issue, centred on the way that national accounting and theoretical economics could develop in the future in new directions²⁵ and thus fuel the work in this field. It is one of the aspects of the symbolic "captation" and "closing" due to the creation of the Commission: it restricts a set of intrinsically pluridisciplinary research issues to the domain of economic science, which causes favourable bias to both utilitarian and monetary representation of well-being and sustainability. Constantly reasserted, the measure and the explanation of (economic, social, environmental) inequalities are thus pushed in the background *de facto*.

The second exclusion concerns actors of the "civil society" some of whom, quite variably, have still racked their brains for some years around the issue of alternative indicators, in particular by constructing indicators²⁶, databases²⁷ or by making radical propositions in this respect, sometimes with strong mediatic and political echo. Still, the "participative" dimension of the project of "new wealth indicators" has often been put forward in the numerous social debates on the subject²⁸ : it is a democratic mobilisation project as well as a scientific project. The French BIP40, for instance, is not mentioned when the synthetic poverty and inequality indicators are evoked, in the part dedicated to "quality of life". The FAIR forum has formed, precisely, around Jean Gadrey, to offer a democratic approach to the preparation and the choice of indicators. More generally, the constructions of synthetic indicators are contested for the sake of resorting pragmatically to "dashboards", which *in fine* translate in "sets of indicators" (which corresponds to the leadership within official, national and international statistical organisations²⁹). Some authors wish that the "non-merchant", especially associative, world were more emphasised in the Stiglitz report, contrary to what authors such as Patrick Viveret or

²³ By mobilising reputed academic economists known for work in some concurring cases, the people responsible have run the risk of adopting ecumenical compromise positions, which is indeed the case on numerous occasions, where conceptual frameworks or partially contradictory indicator are juxtaposed, without the report leaning in favour of a particular item. Cf. the remarks by J.Gadrey and D.Méda on this score, *art. cit.*

²⁴ Any reflexive perspective on the social usages of quantification and of "indicators" is for instance largely and strangely missing from the report. See A.Desrosières, *Pour une sociologie de la quantification et Gouverner par les nombres* (for a sociology of quantification and governing through numbers), Paris, Ecole des Mines, 2008.

²⁵ The next step of the international consecration of the economists working on new well-being measures will undoubtedly be the attribution of a "Nobel" prize.

²⁶ One of the most quoted and discussed is the « Happy Planet Index » of the New Economics Foundation : <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>. The Institute for Innovation in Social Policy has developed the Social Health Indicator in the United States, with a strong impact. In France, the BIP40 has initiated a construction movement of local Indicators: www.bip40.org

²⁷ In particular that of Ruut Veenhoven of the University of Rotterdam : <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/>

²⁸ See for example: <http://nopib.fr/>

²⁹ The main cleavage in the debates on indicators indeed concerns the opposition between synthetic indicators, defended by the most radical, in particular in associations and think tanks, in the wake of the UNDP and the "dashboards" defenders

Bernard Perret, associated with the "second left" (in particular in the *Esprit* journal) and with the promotion of the "third sector", used to do a few years ago.

Other authors insist, in the wake of Dominique Méda, on the feminine under-representation also conspicuous within the Commission, which is the third objective exclusion, characteristic thereof. Patrick Viveret, answering a question on the www.terraeco.net site, clearly asserts such a posture: *"it is important that a commission with economists of this calibre should recognise the well-foundedness of the criticisms addressed to the GDP for several years; but which remained associated with alternative sectors by public opinion. It tells us that indicators have made us blind and underlines the need to measure ecological and social sustainability. The point is that this commission has worked exclusively between economists and statisticians, with few ladies, whereas feminine sensitivity is needed on the activity-inactivity theme"*³⁰.

Finally, the discussion on sustainability indicators is a far cry from the dominant environmental specialists, linked with natural sciences, biologists in particular. Still, the former have already embarked on intense scientific struggle around the construction of durability Indicators and are involved in quite numerous researches on damage to natural environment.

The commission finally appears as a relatively confined space, centred on the dominant academic economic science and on the official statistical devices³¹. This explains that a portion of the criticisms made thereto precisely pertains to its composition and its intrinsic limits. such is the case for instance of the criticism made by Dominique Méda, a graduate from Normal Sup, a philosophy professor, a member of the Inspection générale des affaires sociales and senior scientist in the Centre d'études de l'emploi, who explains: *"The commission only included two ladies and a vast majority of economists who worked behind closed doors, without ever meeting with the civil society. It refused to query the way citizens might decide together what is really important to them. Furthermore, it left significant room for very individualistic approaches. I refer to the quality of life measured by individual satisfaction or to indicators which are vulnerable to criticism, such as net adjusted savings. On the other hand, the commission has firmly opposed the idea of GDP-alternative or complementary synthetic indicators. It is a pity. Finally, its recommendations have not been implemented for the time being, or in homeopathic doses, and apparently they are not on the agenda any longer today"* (an interview to *L'Hebdo*, by Philippe Le Bé, put on line on 16 June 2010). This social confinement, with its consequences on the generated and diffused "contents", may however be seen as a condition of the political and social efficiency of the commission, inasmuch as the political leaders have obviously attempted to mobilise a maximum of scientific capital, a particular form of symbolic capital.

In the midst of radical rejection, scepticism, qualified criticism, pragmatic acceptance and proselytistic enthusiasm: a mixed reception

If the quite mediatised publication of the report has given rise to numerous comments, they originate in the first place from the usual actors of the political game, party speakers, journalists and other "generalists" news analysts. The main

³⁰ <http://www.terra-economica.info/Sortir-de-la-demesure-et-accepter,7598.html>

³¹ This is the case here of a device for quasi-undermining the controversy, avoiding confrontation of adverse stances - whereas the heterodoxical and not institutional voices are relegated to the edge or outside the device thus set up.

newspapers, just like the political parties, nevertheless cover the event rather obligingly, with limited effort to *politicise* the contents (see text box 2 on the communiqué of the PS.) *Libération* even invites Joseph Stiglitz, whose democrat orientations and criticisms of neoliberal policies are well-known, to comment upon current affairs in its pages on 15 September 2009.

Text box 2

The socialist party and the Stiglitz report

Committed to an undertaking of doctrinal renovation around the notion of "care", the Socialist Party harshly reacts to the publication of the Stiglitz report, by supporting its goals while condemning current public policies and by mobilising an indicator, the "gross domestic happiness", calculated by the *Centre for the study of living standards*, which is clearly favourable to the "plural left" government policy. *"The conclusions of the Stiglitz report reflect the rather wide consensus today on the necessity to have economic indicators which are not limited to measuring the production of goods and services. For enlightened citizens' information, democratic debate, experts work, political choices, items such quality of life, environment, health, culture, quality of public services or still inequalities in plain and simple synthetic indicators must be considered. The Socialist Party demands their implementation and eagerly anticipates their revelations. Indeed since 2002, the right-wing policy has accumulated regressions, which is clearly shown by existing well-being indicators. The "gross domestic happiness" index calculated by the Centre for the study of living standards (Canada) reached its peak in France in 2002, after an exceptional growth period between 1997 and 2002, and has decreased continuously since then. Is it any wonder? (...). as usual, the words of Nicolas Sarkozy totally contradict his actions. His whole policy defeats the logic associated with well-being indicators in place. And it is particularly shocking to hear him suggest to put an end to "the religion of numbers", whereas he was the one to impose that "religion", in particular for the security policy, with many perverse effects. Considering well-being in all its dimensions and the necessity to be done with outrageous consumer society lies at the heart of the socialists project and of the civilisation offensive launched at the Summer University in La Rochelle. "* (Communiqué of the Socialist Party, September 2009).

The range of attitudes, as can be described sketchily for want of a (underway) quantitative study, reveals vast interpretive amplitude, from radical rejection to proselytistic enthusiasm via all nuances and "viewpoints", all possible tones, on the report: as in numerous cases, the announcement also functions like a "projective test" which sometimes tells as much about commentators as about the study object. Certain analysts thus interlace their presentation of the report with their own ideological conceptions: *Le Figaro*, who was privy to reading the report, outlined on 11 September a legitimisation of "individualistic" approaches, which triggered a harsh reaction from Jean Gadrey, who embodies the "critical" wing of the commission³². Christine Boutin, on the right of the political spectrum, seizes the issue of the criticism of the GDP. In an official commentary, "Christine Boutin, the president of the Christian-Democrat Party (PCD), in the wake of the Copenhagen climate summit, considers the reformation of the GDP as a "matter of urgency" so as to incorporate

³² <http://alternatives-economiques.fr/blogs/gadrey/2009/09/13/le-figaro-et-le-%C2%AB-rapport-stiglitz-%C2%BB/>

"the environmental and human capital", as suggested by the Stiglitz report. "Among the various causes of failure" in Copenhagen she notes, in a communiqué, the "unfounded fear of the signatory countries to have to curb their growth and hence to become poorer" (...), "the blatant inability of the people in power" to measure their increasing wealth "other than through the GDP" which is but a "productive activity indicator". If France adopts a "double measure of its growth", one in compliance with international classifications, the other taking into account the social and environmental dimensions of the economic activity, it will be "at the forefront of the struggle to protect the planet and to eradicate poverty", Ms Boutin concluded". Some appeal for the use of happiness indicators, after the "model" practiced by the State of Bhutan since the 1970s with "gross national happiness", incidentally mentioned quite often in magazine commentaries as illustrating these "alternative indicators": this rather "conservative", possibly "traditionalist" monarchy, defends a hostile position to the development of tourist industry and uncontrolled globalisation. On the whole, the reactions nevertheless seem to be more numerous and more favourable on the left than on the right of the politico-mediatic spectrum.

Reactions, in particular, accumulate on newspapers Websites and on "blogs": 54 "reactions" for instance on the *Figaro* site, where, alongside with asserted supports, more than one internaut is extremely critical against the report, against Joseph Stiglitz, sometimes against Nicolas Sarkozy, and in some cases point out a contradiction between the critical tone of the report and the orientations of the government in power, also emphasised on left-wing newspapers websites. Some scepticism can be felt as regards the spirit of the report. For Fanch12, *"the temperature is either too high to too low, who cares, change thermometer! As feelings today have superseded reality, we shall feel less warm or less cold all of a sudden. Fantastic, is it not?"* (*Figaro* site, 11/09/2009). For Sacripant, *"able to transcend his ideological preferences and to call upon Stiglitz who makes no bones about his political preferences(at the antipodes of Nicolas Sarkozy's) and then capable of ignoring the recommendations he might have advocated (see Attali), and finally to carry on with sudden insights unseating his own camp. Nicolas Sarkozy, a potential great reformer, but constantly held on a tight lead by the daemons of demagoguery, electoralism and communication. What a pity!"* (*Figaro* site, 11/09/2009).

The 94 reactions to the article announcing the Stiglitz report on the *Libération* site are also often negative, since they often first and foremost address the President of the Republic and "the right", again accused of "breaking the thermometer", of pursuing an "ideological scrambling" strategy", etc. Scepticism about the spirit of the report is just as assertive: *"Well, one may wonder how they're going to measure such a relative value as well-being! A first-class hoax! We shall rise by 10 degrees at least on the Sucker scale"* (professeurMaboul - NuttyProfessor, *Libération* site, 14/09/2009). The spontaneous politicised way in which the report was received outlines the ambiguity of its significance: it is perceived, and often denounced, as a political "feat" pulled off by the President of the Republic, a simple communicational "soliciting" operation. "I would like to add to my previous comment that Mr Sarkozy has a gift for misinterpreting the reality of things. *On the brink of the biggest economic and financial crisis of the century, Mr Sarkozy was preaching for full employment, full blast economics, etc. etc. (al of us were full blast economics). Not once could he forecast that crisis. This time again, with an oxygen mask on his nose, he offers a "gross national happiness" and ideas worthy of an exalted. We're going to relapse, Mr President, and you still don't catch the tide of the way history is going.*

Once again, you will of course save the world and the whole universe. But you might be well-inspired to take the appropriate measures before the situation really stinks. "We the people do beg you" ("onvouslavaitdit - wehadtoldyouso", Libération site, 14/09/2009). The propositions of the Commission sometimes tie in with alterglobalist criticism. "It would pay to listen to alterglobalists. They have been saying for a long time that GDP-based calculation of wealth is an aberration. GDP measures partly false things. For example, a storm destroys and conditions reconstructions which raise the GDP, whereas everything was destroyed. It does not take the weight of education into account, since knowledge-induced wealth is difficult to assess, because it takes a while to realise. It is contrary to neoliberal short-term conception. » (Robert, Libération site, Monday 14 September).

The press, sites and blogs³³ offer numerous supporting attitudes, which may be unconditional, marked or more nuanced³⁴. The "movement" is launched officially, which strengthens the actors mobilised. At the same time, the national and international statistical offices will play a decisive role for the future of the propositions put forward by the commission.

The level of consensus on the stakes and the significance of the report appears rather low, which confirms the assumption of notable and generalised cognitive disturbance, as well in political actors (diagrammatically, the left supports the "spirit" of the report by blaming the government, whereas the right is divided between those that follow the government and the most critical, who abruptly reject what appears to them as a "severe ideological blow") as in journalists and internauts, as many unconstrained interpreters who deliver a portion of actual political and symbolical usages which can be derived therefrom.

Text box 3: "Eco is facts" or head on clash against profane neoliberalism

On the *Figaro* site, the reactions to the slightly early announcement of the publication of the report are numerous and sometimes hefty. The reaction of that Internaut expresses a "neoliberal" ideological posture which can be found on numerous occasions and which crystallises a number of discursive features, as invoking economic discipline as a source of scientific truths omitted in the report, or still the "concrete" character of monetary measure. *"[HDI] is not an economic performance measuring instrument. To what extent is life expectancy characteristic of eco-performances? Still, it is included in the HDI... HDI represents a subjective vision of what Good looks like for a nation whose main objective it to have well-fed citizens regardless of what they do. (...). Economics is not poppycock, it's not simplistic, it's not so complicated either. Eco is FACTS. When you're loaded with it, there are two possibilities. Either you've stolen it or you've got someone who found it judicious to give you money in exchange for something he deemed worthy of that price. That's it. Anything else is crap. Either you earn money without any constraints or you extort it. This is concrete. The rest is Byzantine considerations on "right, but what shall we do with this money is not ours (yet)?" Enough of governments' mass extortion led insidiously by "higher aspirations" which are always Trojan horses for the cupidity of the men in power who capitalise on poor people's jealousy. (...) Who creates wealth in France? The CAC 40 or Healthcare? Small and mid-sized companies or the ministry of economy? Growth IS an imperfect indicator, but it is the best we have*

³³ A systematic corpus of stances has been constructed. See a few appended illustrations.

³⁴ Such as for instance on the site of "feminist" orientation, the news which consecrate its first column to wealth indicators: <http://www.lesnouvellesnews.fr/index.php/component/content/article/39-editorial/55-editorial>

because it is concrete: How much dough have we generated? Obviously, currency does not represent all the value, but it still may represent the whole merchant value. And merchant value is what we are willing to exchange voluntarily. The rest, taxes, etc. is akin to foreclosures (with or without cooperation). It is wealth too, but wealth acquired by force, whereas capitalists' wealth you have in mind is a created wealth. (...). As Stiglitz is knowingly a NEW KEYNESIAN, he is diametrically opposed to neoliberal theses".

The space of "expert" positions

In the world of economists, the legitimacy of the Commission, with its five "Nobel" prize winners, imposes relative silence on the French academic elite. The Paris School of Economics however organised in March 2010 (within the framework of the Master of the Public Policies and Development Ecole Normale Supérieure) a conference around the results of the commission, with François Bourguignon, Marc Fleurbaey (members of the commission), Denis Cogneau. No economist in the Toulouse School of Economics, traditionally with predominantly neoliberal orientation, has weighed in visibly in the debate. Most "moderate" neoliberal economists hardly step in, but the council of economic analysis, predominantly neoliberal for several years, was referred to in 2010 by the President of the Republic and German Chancellor Angela Merkel about the request for creating a set of 20 well-being and sustainability indicators. Christian de Boissieu, president of the Council of economic analysis (official advisers of the prime minister), defends this project publicly, which is in line with the Stiglitz report. The ultraliberals are fairly isolated in view of an apparently overwhelming position, since it encompasses a spectrum of "streams" ranging from critical sociologists to official economists.

It is among heterodoxical economists and socio-economists that stances, which can be characterised generally as a support embellished with criticisms, are the most visible. Jean Gadrey, quoted enormously and repeated on a multitude of websites of associations, political parties, newspapers (in the first place of course the monthly newspaper *Alternatives économiques* which hosts him) expresses this critical support. He is significant of a current stance in the promoters of synthetic well-being indicators, among whom Dominique Méda, who participates with him in the FAIR forum, Florence Jany-Catrice (senior lecturer at the university of Lille) or still Patrick Viveret can be mentioned, followed by many other authors and organisations abroad. This "internal criticism" has materialised rather rapidly during the work of the commission, after a fit of temper against its composition, which led Dominique Méda to contest it publicly. An Emeritus economics professor in Lille 1, Jean Gadrey has been since the beginning of the 2000s one of the main promoters in France of the new wealth indicators movement. He has recently developed his critical and radical analyses, increasingly inspired by the thematic of "decrease", via the FAIR forum (and in *Alternatives économiques*). In a text published on the FAIR forum with Dominique Méda, Jean Gadrey developed in June 2009³⁵ a nuanced criticism of the Stiglitz report, which will operate as a reference stance in a "non-official" sphere of influence: he maintains that fair diagnoses can be found therein, as well as interesting but timid propositions, and at the same time the expression of the stranglehold of economists and of a dangerous "monetisation" volition of indicators,

³⁵ As soon as in the report draft put on line in June 2009, they put forward a first analysis: J.Gadrey, D.Méda, « Commission Stiglitz : un diagnostic juste, des propositions (encore) timides » (Stiglitz commission: a fair diagnosis, (still) timid propositions), IDIES, 9 June 2009.

especially in terms of environmental sustainability³⁶. His criticisms focus around this third aspect incidentally, which reflects the growing intensity of the stakes around public policies in terms of environment and their economic consequences. These stances are widely shared by the organisations and increasingly numerous initiatives around these stakes.

As regards sociologists, reference, although significant, to social inequalities (including inequalities between socio-professional categories) does not raise overflowing enthusiasm, since it is again "captured" by economists and relegated to a secondary and corrective role. The report admittedly remains mostly "economic", whether in the first or third part, with a focus on "performance" measures, and the "social indicators" issue as that of economic performances or sustainability, has not mainly been treated through the prism of social inequalities, as often put in the foreground by social sciences. In the same manner, the authors' blind faith in "subjective" indicators, as measured quite roughly by answering "satisfaction" questions can only raise cautious reactions in specialists of questionnaire-based investigation methods, who know that answers to questions not always have a single meaning. Finally, monetisation of environmental damage measuring comes across as a dangerous technical sophistication since it may strengthen the "artificial" market construction processes.

Rejection stances nevertheless are voiced among economists, including those called "heterodoxical". Such is the case first of all of the Marxist and Keynesian economists most bent on "value-added sharing" (hence GDP sharing). Christophe Ramaux, a Keynesian economist, a senior lecturer in Paris and a member of the Left Party, defends the GDP as a productive activity measuring instrument in an article in *Politis* published in July 2009, entitled "Long live the GDP! But not on its own": although ascribing an "anti-capitalist" character to the GDP (by officially integrating non-merchant services) and reminding that we are dealing here with a convention based on an irreplaceable monetary measure for macroeconomic analysis, Christophe Ramaux still acknowledges the relevance of other indicators. He criticises nevertheless the limits of the "ecological footprint" as an environmental indicator which is advocated in the report and more widely speaking in the public space. Michel Husson, a former economist of the Revolutionist Communist League (LCR in French) and close to the "critical left" (he is a chronicle writer in the *Regards* review supervised by Clémentine Autain), an administrator of the INSEE and an economics professor shows, in an ironic note published on his personal web site, that the subjective happiness indicators advocated vigorously by the Commission are highly correlated with the logarithm of the GDP, which leads him to relativise the scope of the "alternative" developed by the commission and to repeat a "productivist" stance often encountered in the field of economics of happiness. Many criticisms address the environmental indicators suggested. As noted by Yannick Rumpala, they have multiplied impressively over the last years, in connection with the recompositions of the public action³⁷, within the framework of a new mode of governance, analysed incidentally as one of the aspects of "new public management" ³⁸. Their signification and their usages may appear ambiguous and ambivalent.

On the economists' and ultra-liberal thinkers' front finally, quite violently hostile stances at times target Joseph Stiglitz primarily, who is coined as one of the main

³⁶ We have repeated this stance in the *Alterindicateurs* column of the *Savoir / Agir* review: F. Lebaron, art. cit.

³⁷ Yannick Rumpala, « Mesurer le « développement durable » pour aider à le réaliser ? » (Measuring "sustainable development" for assisting its realisation?), *Histoire & mesure*, vol. XXIV – n°1, 2009, p. 211-246.

³⁸ See also the research of Jean-Pierre Le Bourhis in the CURAPP.

enemies of the "true liberals". But they have little access to the mediatic space, apart from the blogs and of "reactions" on the sites. Slightly isolated in his fiercely reactionary stances in *Le Figaro*, Alain-Gérard Slama frontally contests the usage of indicators such as the HDI: *"The adoption of these new [HDI] criteria has seen the emergence of another configuration of the planet (...) We're surely much the better for it: history-laden tumultuous nations, bursting with invention, noise and fury, cynically overestimated by the GDP index have been superseded by the fabulous destiny of the Northern countries with their civilising ideal, whose unfathomable boredom and stifling conformism has been depicted by Bergman's unforgiving look"*³⁹. On his blog⁴⁰, the ultraliberal essayist Guy Sorman goes even further: *"Jean-Philippe Cotis has presented the Stiglitz report to his UNO colleagues where it is suggested to replace the conventional measure of national wealth (GDP) with a qualitative evaluation of the Gross national happiness (sic). The communication has raised the interest of the poorest countries (Morocco in particular) who thus hope to realise that they are no so poor after all! The Americans have looked askance at that project(Stiglitz is rather giped at in the United States) and have reminded that the already existing qualitative measures (as adopted by the UNO) surprisingly reveal that the richest nations are also those where people live the best and longest lives".* The financier Georges Ugeux, whose blog is often quoted, tends to agree and well illustrates the discrepancy between the narrow-minded world of economic elites and the problematics raised by the Commission: *"I was in a restaurant in New-York and one of my table neighbours asked me what President Sarkozy had in mind when suggesting to incorporate life enjoyment in the Gross National Product. I had not paid much heed to these presidential words which had apparently interested the my American interlocutors, who wondered whether France had a monopoly on life enjoyment. And they went on to mention the attempt to include French gastronomy in Unesco's cultural heritage of humanity. The conversation evolved into various directions: I felt ill at ease at first. I was rather upset by such a superficial statement in the midst of widespread unemployment. This reminds of the "brioches" (little buns) that Marie-Antoinette wanted to distribute to the people who had no more bread in 1789. How can a recently jobless man's or woman's life enjoyment be measured? Is this statement sarcastic or thoughtless? (...) The French Commission on this subject confirms the flimsiness of its proposer, Nobel prize-winner John Stiglitz who, when he was the Chief Economist of the World Bank, raised many eyebrows."*

The "sequels" to the report: the revolution underway?

Several critical comments insist on the cumbersome changes implied by the implementation of the report's propositions. The GDP remains quite dominant in the ordinary economic and social analysis, inspite of the increasing and dormant questioning of this indicator, which can only be exacerbated by the publication of the report. The most radical propositions concerning general patrimony accounts have met with scepticism, expressed for instance by French economist André Babeau in the *Commentaire* review⁴¹.

³⁹ A.-G.Slama, « Le bonheur devient un droit » (Happiness becomes a right), *Le Figaro*, 16/09/2009.

⁴⁰ Blog http://gsorman.typepad.com/guy_sorman/2010/02/keynes-combien-de-divisions-.html

⁴¹ A.Babeau, « Mesurer le bien-être : retour sur le rapport Stiglitz » (Measuring well-being: a look back on the Stiglitz report), *Commentaire*, Hiver 2009-2010, Vol. 32, 128, p.1054 et sq.

In a press conference on 17 November 2009, followed by articles (especially in the daily newspaper *Le Monde*), Jean-Philippe Cotis, the director general of the INSEE, announces that the INSEE will take into account the impulse given by the Stiglitz report and puts forward a far-reaching work programme, as well as a bundle of early results in its extension, in particular in terms of international comparison. Nevertheless, he maintains the idea of "completing" the GDP with other indicators and insists on the multidimensionality of the real world. In the light of this omnipresent GDP and of the still limited legitimacy of "alternative" indicators, changes in perspective stand little chance of translating in short-term turmoils in the official representation of economic and social performances. The director of the INSEE besides insisted on a continuity rather than a break: *"this report, which marks a milestone, still does not break away from current statisticians' work. It rather calls for accelerating engaged mutations; the better to meet with social demand. Innovate the better to meet with social demand, such is the mandate anyway we have been given by the highest authorities of the State. As the Anglo-Saxons like to say, "mainstreaming" work remains to be done: i.e. to switch from emerging work in prototype stage to regular production, accessible to a very wide audience (...)* At international level, the INSEE will work in close cooperation with the OECD and Eurostat to implement the orientations of the Stiglitz report". Jean Gadrey, commenting the recent evolutions of the INSEE, expresses moderate optimism, symmetrical to the scepticism with which he had welcome the launch of the Stiglitz operation.

The controversies around the Stiglitz report hence refer to a very specific configuration: a Commission formed fairly closely around dominant economists, which proposes multifaceted renovation of the statistical device with the explicit support of official institutes, but which both "delineates" and limits the magnitude and the possible practical consequences thereof, while leaving the main operational choices "open" (and to the responsibility of the statistical administrations); a Head of state quite involved in the promotion of a discourse which seems to question some of his previous ideological stances and triggers significant cognitive disorder in his electoral "clientele"; "profanes" torn between "politicking" interpretations, radical rejection, enthusiasm and all possible attitude nuances concerning a projected turmoil of the official representations of economics; political actors who endeavour to integrate the "new discourse" while *politicising* their analysis of the content of the report; critical experts who are pleased about the legitimisation of their investments while deploring that a few dominant economists have closed the case on a problematic they have kept close to their chests, which economists have set a monopoly on the thematic of alternative indicators, while undermining a number of potential effects: the report may thus paradoxically close the space of the debate around academic economists and simultaneously render the most prominent promoters of alternative indicators less visible and less legitimate to some extent.