

# **Beyond Modernity: An Anthropological Approach to the Concept of Gross National Happiness**

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and its implementation in Bhutan, in relation to the epistemology lying behind the present global ecological and social crisis of the planet. This analysis is preceded by a discussion of anthropological notions such as Culture, Cultural Foundational Myths, and Modernity as a Specific Type of Culture, as well as of the Future of Mankind.

## **Introduction**

My work *Beyond Modernity, From the Myth of Eternal Progress to the Myth of Eternal Return* (Armand, 1998) is an approach from the perspective of anthropology, of that phenomenon commonly known as *Modernity*. In that work we argue that as a social phenomenon, modernity cannot be regarded any longer after the 19th century Theory of Social Evolutionism, as the last stage of a supposed general evolution of mankind, but rather as a specific type of culture.

As we know, modernity originated in Western Europe between the last decades of 17th century and the end of 18th century, as the outcome of the economic, social, intellectual and political changes known as the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Due to the fact that its emergence is a much localized occurrence in both ethno-geographical and chronological terms, the phenomenon of modernity should be regarded restrictively as a *cultural phase* of Western Civilization.

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Hence seen as a culture, modernity is but one of the many types of culture that compose the *Etnodiversity* of the planet. From the same point of view, the so-called ‘universal history’, regarded as a succession of evolutionary stages beginning with the pre-Classical Age, passing through the Classical Age to the Middle Age and the Renaissance and ending with the Modern Age, is no more than an expression of deep-seated ethnocentric prejudice. Moreover, the concept of ‘universal history’ is based on the wrong idea that humankind has progressed in a unilineal fashion, with western modern culture in the vanguard, providing the model for the rest of the world to follow.

Nevertheless, based on their comparatively great technological, military and economic power, some Western countries, during the last 300 years, have expanded in various degrees of depth and extension the culture of modernity to a large portion of humanity, and in certain cases, entirely transplanted it to vast areas of the world, as for instance, the North American Continent, and Australia. This was done, in most cases, after disseminating or displacing both physically and culturally the autochthonous populations. And of course, this was how Modernity came to be wrongly viewed until now as a ‘universal culture’.

### **The foundational myths of modernity**

Before describing the foundational myths of the culture of modernity let say that *in general a culture is essentially an epistemological system*. A system that is shared by the members of a given social group, be it a nation, a corporation, a socio-economic class or other. Each separate culture represents a unique system of epistemology, which has meaning and functions only for and within each of them. In this sense, *culture can be defined too as the collective mind of a given social group*. Hence there is no such a thing as a ‘universal culture’. We also claim that a cultural epistemology is made up basically of an articulated set of non-rational premises, which we call Foundational Myths (of the culture) for they condition directly or indirectly both the origin and the traits of each culture.

What are the foundational myths of that culture we call Modernity? As we know, the 17th and 18th centuries' French and English thinkers Descartes, Bacon, Newton and others, established the philosophical basis for the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Simultaneously, their ideas became the seeds for the emergence of the culture of modernity, as they rapidly permeated the collective mind of western societies, where they sprouted as new socio-archetypical ideas or foundational myths of the emerging culture. Such foundational myths can be roughly described as follows:

1. The belief in Reason as the Way to Knowledge or *Myth of Rationalism*, replacing Religion and Magic.
2. The belief in an All-powerful Rationalistic or Cartesian type of Science and Technology or *Myth of the Techno-Scientist Reason*.
3. Man as Center of Cosmos or *Myth of Anthropocentrism* (which is a modern version of the biblical myth of Genesis). This myth replaced the Myth of Man as Part of the Cosmos.
4. Individual human being as the Center of Society or *Myth of Individualism*.
5. The conception of Progress as a Perpetual Movement towards a Promised Earth (by definition impossible to reach) called *Future*. This includes the conception of time as rectilinear. This myth we call *Myth of Eternal Progress* and is opposed to the *Myth of Eternal Return*, in which time is conceived as circular.

The ideas of progress and future became socially generalized in western societies only after the 18th century. Before these societies were rooted in the myth of Eternal Return, as it has always been the case for the rest of human societies. In fact, in all traditional non-western societies the idea of future and social progress, if they do exist, they have no social or practical

significance.

From 17th century onward the growing requests for new inventions to be used in industry and overseas military conquests provided positive feedback to western societies for increasing technological changes. These changes combined with the occupation of new continents, produced great modifications in western life-style and in the prevailing ideas about the world, and of course in the way Westerners saw themselves. In the short span of two centuries, the West underwent deeper social and intellectual bouleversement than in the previous two thousand years. The pastoral stability that characterized European economy, technology, social organization and politic in their Middle Age, and that was associated with the concept of Time and History as symbolized by the Myth of Eternal Return, was disrupted by the rapid succession of such changes. The final result was the birth in the collective mind of western societies of the ideas of Progress and Future, as well as of Science and Technology as a new Absolute.

The first-hand experience that Nature could be modified scientifically and technologically as Man saw it fit, was interpreted by 17th and 18th centuries Westerners as a death-blow to the traditional magical and religious concept, whereby Man was an interacting part of something greater and more transcendental than himself (God), and as such he was to surrendered to the Cosmos. This traditional attitude was replaced with an anthropocentric vision of Cosmos, with Man seen as an independent element, but powerful on account of his newly acquired scientific and technological knowledge and abilities, and thus free to exercise these as he saw useful exclusively for him.

During the pre-Modernity cultural phases of Western Civilization, as in all non-western cultures, what was magic or whatever necessary to obtain power over this world was not seen as distinct from the Divine or transcendent. Both were inextricably connected in a conceptual unity. The western Renaissance and

the scientific and technological revolution of 18th century made a radical distinction between these two aspects of reality, burying the divine aspects of science and labeling them as 'occult' or esoteric and discrediting them as non-scientific.

The origin of the separation of reality into two opposed halves lies in the Cartesian concept of Science, which take as its starting point the supposition that the world is a set of discontinuous and essentially unrelated systems. This 19th century non-rational premise or dogma continues to dominate scientific thought until our days, in spite of the discoveries that are being made since mid-20th century in the fields of quantum physic and ecology. The Cartesian paradigm of the separateness of reality marks the beginning of the existential antagonism between Man and Nature, as well as the profound sense of individual isolation and loneliness that man of modernity feels not just in the cosmos but in human society itself. On the other hand, in the pre-modernity western cosmos vision and in all non-Western peoples, the dominant concept is that everything is connected and man is subject to fundamental religious and natural laws according to a holistic concept of the cosmos. From the last 2000 years, Western Civilization has been strongly influenced by the biblical dogma of man as lord and master of nature. Thus, long before the advent of Cartesian Philosophy, this dogma created an insurmountable distance between man and nature and this clearly facilitated the development of Cartesian Science.

Now, all of the above described foundational myths- acting separately or as a whole, directly or indirectly, constitute the root-causes of typical materialism of modernity, which manifests particularly in its tendency to consumerism and heavy emphasis on industrial production and economic growth. This tendency and disproportionate emphasis on some variables of the social system constitute the factors that nurtured during centuries and triggered recently the present global ecological crisis.

## **Our contemporary global crisis**

The gravest single effect of this crisis is the phenomenon known as *global warming* or *climate change*. But there are as well other ecological effects accompanying global warming, such as the critical reduction of *biodiversity*, the depletion of world natural resources (especially the hydric resources), the increasing contamination of soils, seas and rivers, and the pollution of air, particularly in big cities, to mention just few well known examples of the ecological impact of modernity or modern way of life.

It would be a mistake to think that the global impact of modern culture is only on the ecological sphere. Related to the same foundational myths are also the growing number of suicides, drug consumers and chronic stress, common to the dwellers in modern cities, to mention a few of the social foes associated to modernity. Historically, the same myths are responsible for the 18th and 19th centuries human migrations in Europe from the countryside to the cities, which ended in the formation of hypertrophied cities or megalopolis. In Latin America, Asia and Africa, this type of migration created those huge sub-urban areas of chaos and poverty known as *slums*, *favelas* or *ranchos*. The same phenomenon can be seen today in Western Europe, where vast masses of Africans, Eastern Europeans, Latin Americans, etc. are flooding France, Germany, Spain, etc., driven mainly by the poverty and unemployment prevailing in their nations.

In 2014, the well-known International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) organized by UN, concluded that present global warming is a consequence of an abnormal accumulation of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere created by industrial plants and vehicles using oil or carbon as source of energy and thus producing the so-called *greenhouse effect*. As a result, the planet mean temperature is 1.5 centigrade higher today that it was before the Industrial Revolution. This Panel also declared that if the volume of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere keeps accumulating at the same pace - pushed by permanent encouragement of economic growth, the planet

mean temperature may reach the level of 4 centigrade above pre-industrial temperature, before the end of 21th century, which would be catastrophic for both global ecology and socio-economic conditions of humankind.

### **The future of mankind**

The future of mankind is uncertain and disturbing. It could be that we have reached a crossroads where it is still possible to choose a direction, or it could be too late, or perhaps the possibility to choose a historical direction was simply never part of human condition. We have no idea in any case. But gazing at the horizon from my mountain high dwelling facing the sea, I imagine humanity as if it were a fragile boat, sailing a rough and dangerous sea, sticking stubbornly to the same course. But where is it going?

We have gone beyond the time of dogmatic forecasts- Marxist, Comtien, Positivist, etc. However, extrapolating current world trends, it seems clear there are three courses open to this fragile boat (the possibility of going back to the past can be dismissed because of the inertial movements operating over the centuries). These three possible courses or scenarios we have called the *Apocalypse*, the *Brave New World* and the *Utopian*.

### **The apocalypse scenario**

On the base of studies of the dynamic of systems (Meadows, 1976), researchers have been predicting for decades that an exponential worsening of the current global environmental crisis, particularly of global warming, coupled with the emergence of new world pandemics, famines, wars, massive human migrations, etc. - all of which being associated to the current environmental crisis, will unquestionably culminate in an acute and irreversible systemic chaos, or state of generalized entropy, of the social, economic and political world order, the consequences of which, in terms of human suffering, will be apocalyptic. To reiterate warnings that go back to several decades, this alternative seems not only possible but also highly probable. If the current pace of

change of the global variables is maintained, the world will find itself in the state we have described at some point of the second half of present century.

To end our examination of the Apocalypse scenario, we shall look briefly at the use of nuclear energy. From some decades this form of energy has been touted as the only realistic alternative in 21th century to fossil fuels, since these are being exhausted or making their polluting effects too obvious. From the conventional point of view, alternative sources, such as wind, solar power, tides, etc., cannot generate power on a large enough scale to satisfy the growing demand for power in a world conceived of by modern civilization as one of perpetual economic growth. However, the radioactivity released by disasters occurred not long ago in nuclear plants in Japan, USA and Russia will continue to affect the genetic system of plants, animals and people for centuries to come, which is as nothing compared to the escape of radioactivity from nuclear waste dumps which the hundreds of projected stations will necessarily release.

At the same time, the possibility of a nuclear war, which would swiftly finish off the human *genus*, in spite of the almost universal agreement that this would be the height of madness, has not disappeared, as some would like to think, with the end of the Cold War. Although many of the nuclear warheads capable of destroying almost all life on the planet have been disarmed, they can be rearmed at a moment's 'notice. At the present time it seems that the danger of a thermonuclear war was disappeared, but if take into consideration the resurgence of fanatical and powerful Islamic terrorist organizations, the emergence of new nuclear nations rival to the West, and certain new fascist tendencies in Europe, it seems unwise to discard completely a thermonuclear war.

Although many scholars naively try to forget the fact, this would not be the first time a great civilization has collapsed. The Greco-Roman Civilization is a well-known example. The difference lies in the magnitude of the factors at stake. In the case of Greco-



Romans the technology had no effect on the basic mechanisms of the biosphere, nor did it attempt to affect them. Also, the peoples who made up this civilization were limited to the European Continent and a few colonies in Africa and the Middle East. On the other hand, Western Modernity extends over almost the whole planet, affecting more than 6 billion people, and its technological power is affecting the very foundations of life on earth-human life not excluded. Hence the collapse of modern civilization would affect to a greater or lesser degree all nations and all types of life on the planet. This, of course, would be a quicker process of disintegration and fall of present civilization, if compared to the relatively slow process of disintegration and fall we have outlined.

Just as the collapse of Greco-Roman Civilization led to the European so-called Dark Ages, so the collapse of Modern Civilization would usher in a new Dark Ages, which according to Morin (1980) would have a planetary dimension. The period following a collapse of Modern Civilization would exhibit sociological characteristics of a Dark Ages, such as autonomous local centers of power being the norm rather than national governments as we have now. These centers would follow ethnic lines, or would be simply forms of defense for traditional communities. In relation with this we could also have permanent wars between these centers and between different mafias, as well as a general banditry. It is also probable that there would be a recrudescence of planetary epidemics similar to the plagues of the Middle or Dark Ages as a result of the decay or disappearance of international health controls. We would also predict that the middle classes would disappear and that poverty would be the normal way of life, including in countries of the so-called First World. As a result of all this, the world population would shrink dramatically. The perceptive reader will have realized that all of these features typical of the Dark Ages have already begun to appear, and though alarming they are so far in embryonic form. For instance, the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, the unprecedented power of mafias in Russia, the rampant increasing of crime in many big cities, the steady unemployment

and impoverishment of middle classes, etc.

However, although the collapse of Modern Civilization might appear terrifying, the survivors would at least preserve a human psychology. For after an initial period of chaos and uncertainty, they will eventually develop new foundational myths leading to new types of cultures. Thus, the fall of Modern Civilization might mean a drastic change in all areas, but nevertheless mankind would keep its human nature, which is not of minor importance as we will see next.

### ***The brave new world scenario***

The Myth of Techno-Scientist Raison lies in the collective mind of man of modernity as an unconscious archetype, just as the myth of divine power of Nature or God is present in the collective mind of members of cultures that differ from the modern. Hence man of modernity trusts blindly in the power of science and technology to control anything that threatens his world. From this it is obvious that in the mind of modern man the solution to all the problems arising from the natural or social environment are to be found in science and technology. *Its inexorable and predictable progress will put an end to all facets of the contemporary global crisis*, or so modern man feels. The logic of the Cartesian view of the cosmos that underlies the culture of modernity leads, at least in theory, to a total control of the *biosphere*. Hence eventually science and technology will be able to replace the biosphere by the *Technosphere*, in which ecological problems are impossible. Taken to its last consequence, the Cartesian Science leads also to control even that non-tangible aspect of the biosphere represented by human soul, that is the emotions, feelings, thoughts, hopes, concerns, conscience, etc., that make up a human being.

Substituting the human brain and soul for mechanisms that are more efficient and pliable from the technological point of view, and achieving what we might call the *Rationalization of the Human Phenomenon*, is no longer the stuff of science fiction. Cybernetics is replacing the natural faculties of the

human brain with computers that are more powerful every day. Genetic engineers are right now in the position to mass-produce genetically pre-selected human beings by cloning. In a non-far away future, Biochemistry, Psycho-Pharmacology and Behavioral Psychology will be capable of conditioning totally the human soul, determining what moods, desires and tendencies in the individual are socially convenient and blocking those which are not. All of this, chiefly by ever-more efficient psychotropic drugs, creating consumer or political needs by subliminal and hypnotic suggestion on television radio, etc. A few more steps towards perfecting these social technologies and rationalizing of the human phenomenon, and modernity will have gained control over that subtle part of biosphere called human soul, in that it will control those psychic tendencies that cause social problems, such as rebelliousness, the critical or questioning spirit and the need of freedom. To sum up, from the perspective of modern man, the final and establishment of the kingdom of science and technology, apart from being the definitive triumph of Reason over Nature, will mean the end of all crisis that beset mankind, beginning the ecological crisis, the population explosion, hunger, poverty, maladies, unemployment, wars, crimes and even psychological depression, stress and spiritual emptiness. Would this not be a Brave New World?

Now, even after an apocalyptic disaster demolishing present civilization, people would certainly go on being human. But in that Huxleyan 'Brave New World', this option is ruled out. A world made up of beings created and manipulated by Technology, even if these beings were really happy, would not be a human world. And although this possibility seems too many to be far-reaching or impossible, this is where the logic of modern culture is leading us. So, unless disaster intervenes to prevent this goal being reached, men will cease to be humans and become robots or elements of a system governed by the most perfect, efficient and irreversible totalitarian political system: *Technocracy*. By way of consolation to people like myself (and I am sure there are many like us), the possibility of a Brave New World is much less than that of the destruction of present civilization. If Aldous

Huxley did not see things this way, it was because when he wrote his famous novel (1932) he could not predict the ecological crisis of our time. Perhaps this is why in his novel, *John the Savage*, who represents the last real human being on earth ends up committing suicide in his refuge away from civilization.

***The utopian scenario***

A question arises: Is it realistic to avoid the apocalyptic destruction of civilization or the dehumanization of this creature ironically labeled *Homo sapiens*? Is there a third choice? We cannot say with any certainty, but on the basis of current trends, this possibility seems the least likely, or rather, it is utopian. Paradoxically, however, it is only a utopia that can save Humankind from extinction. Under these circumstances, utopia must cease being something unattainable and become an over-riding necessity. In the words of Edgar Morin (1980):

All great changes, all great leaps forward, both in the history of life and the history of mankind, have been victories of the improbable. In the biological as well as in the social world, exponential curves sooner or later become 'S' curves, with the intervention of regulating forces that are either external (environmental pressures) or internal (self-control). Thus, the predicted collision course with catastrophe is no more than an abstract vision. Moreover, the apocalyptic warning is a concrete help in correcting the course (p. 273).

In our opinion, up to a point, there are reasonable grounds for believing that the ability of man to overcome our contemporary global crisis is realistic. Indeed, the self-correcting feed-back mechanisms of human species, which have worked in other periods of human evolution to avoid cataclysmic disasters, are fortunately starting to work today. As Berman (1987) rightly points out: "The emergence of holistic thinking in our time can be considered in itself as part of the process of self-correcting feed-back" (p. 187).

### **Bhutan or the path that leads beyond modernity**

Before we analyze the case of Bhutan, let us say that there is no such thing as the *neutrality* of Technology and Science, for each culture develops its own type of technology and science in concordance with its own foundational myths and relative needs and social values. Furthermore, let us add that there may exist in future a specific type of technology and science corresponding to a *Post-Modernity Culture and Civilization*. Hence technology and science cannot be neutral. In this respect we have already explained that all of our world ecological and social problems are not, as commonly assumed, of technological nature, but rather of anthropological nature - or let us say it more precisely: of ethnological origin and nature. Hence the only way to escape from a global ecological and social catastrophe or of avoiding a dehumanized future, is by means of a radical change of the social values and foundational myths of present world civilization. Precisely this is what, essentially, a tiny and until very recently not well-known nation called the Kingdom of Bhutan or *Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon*, is modestly intending to do.

In 2008, a new Constitution was adopted by Bhutan democratic Parliament, in which a new paradigm of development, denominated Gross National Happiness or GNH Index has been introduced in place of the conventional Gross Domestic Product or GDP Index. This is the first time that a concept such as this has been established as a central *desideratum* in any national Constitution in the world. This concept has been defined by the Bhutanese themselves as a holistic and sustainable approach to development, which balances material and non-material values with the conviction that humans want to search for happiness. Gross National Happiness (GNH) is a global indicator of progress, which measures both sustainable economy and social development, while protecting the environment and culture. The GNH is a concept realized in Bhutan by the former king, who is known for challenging the conventional materialistic nations of humankind. It is based on four pillars and nine dimensions. The four pillars describe the promotion of sustainable development,

the preservation and promotion of cultural values, the conservation of the natural environment and the establishment of good governance. The nine dimensions are as education, psychological wellbeing, health, time-use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standard (CBS, 2015).

Bhutan has pledged to remain CO<sub>2</sub> neutral and to ensure that at least 60% of its landmass will remain under forest cover in perpetuity. In the last 20 years Bhutan has doubled its expectancy of life, enrolled almost 100% of its children in primary school and overhauled its infrastructure. Psychologist Adrian White, a researcher from Leicester University, published the World Map of Happiness (White, 2006). Bhutan ranked in it 8th, while USA was 23th, and other large countries included: China 82th, India 125th and Russia 167th. In 2012, the GNH concept has been endorsed at UN by 68 countries.

With the political implementation of the concept of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan entered the path that leads *beyond modernity*. This implies the development of a new kind of society characterized by *optimizing* instead of *maximizing* the variables that make up the social system. An *optimizing type of society* is a self-perfecting homeostatic system, that tends to balance all the variables of the social system, while a *maximizing type of society* tends to what Bateson (1972) calls *cysmogenesis* or a state of permanent crisis (at all levels). This last is in the very nature of modernity, and is reflected by the exacerbated emphasis this culture puts on some specific variables of the social system, such as economic growth, industrial production and consumerism. The new kind of society Bhutan is trying to develop search for equilibrium, perfecting and perpetuation of the *Great Global Ecosystem*, which comprehends both Nature and Society. To achieve this holistic ideal is the essential meaning of the *Myth of Eternal Return* or *Myth of the Self-Perfecting Circle*.

The question now is: can Bhutan's social experiment be replicated in other nations? Bhutan is a peculiar nation and so

can hardly be imitated. This country remained until about 1960 politically and economically secluded, and thus beyond western influences. In fact, television for instance, was introduced only in 2000. Besides, its population is less than one million, mostly living in rural areas, out of which 83% are of Buddhist according to 2015 GNH survey. Therefore, for its simplicity and small size, Bhutanese society is ideal for attempting this experiment. Nevertheless, whatever be the results of its experiment, Bhutan has become a light that may guide humanity to a new and happier World Civilization. In this sense, it is very significant that in 2012 a group of 68 nations at the UN endorsed Bhutan Gross National Happiness as a way to development. Finally, let's hope, that as was the case for some past natural species, our present human species can mutate, in our case culturally, in order to survive.

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