

The essential, the useless and the harmful (part 1)

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The Covid-19 crisis is still in its infancy, but it seems difficult to imagine that it will lead to a “return to normal” economically. In fact, confinement-fuelled reflections are already multiplying about the new world that could emerge from the unprecedented conjunction of a global pandemic, the freezing of half of humanity, and the brutal drying up of global flows and the economic activity. Among these reflections, many of which were initiated well before this crisis, the need to define what is really essential to human well-being stands out: what do we really need? What can we actually do without?

Let us first reason by the absurd, as Saint-Simon invited us to do back in 1819. “Suppose that France suddenly loses ... the essential French producers, those who are responsible for the most important products, those who direct the works most useful to the nation and who render the sciences, the fine arts and the crafts fruitful, they are really the flower of French society, they are of all the

French the most useful to their country, those who procure the most glory, who add most to its civilization and its prosperity: the nation would become a lifeless corpse as it lost them... It would require at least a generation for France to repair this misfortune...". It is in the mode of the parable that Saint-Simon thus tried to explain the hierarchical reversal that the new world of the industrial revolution implied for the country's prosperity, which could henceforth do without the monarchical classes, in his view, whereas "Science and the arts and crafts" had become essential.

Adapting Saint-Simon's parable to the current situation amounts to recognizing that we cannot do without those who provide the care, guarantee the food supply, maintain the rule of law and the supply of public services in times of crisis, and operate the infrastructure (water, electricity, digital networks). This implies that in normal times all these professions must be valued in line with their vital importance. The resulting definition of human well-being resembles the dashboard formed by putting together the different boxes in the [pandemic travel certificates](#) that every French person must fill out in order to be able to move out of their confinement.

But it is possible to flesh out this basic reflection by using the numerous studies carried out over

the decades on the [measurement of human well-being](#), work which has greatly accelerated in the last ten years in the wake of the “great recession”. We can start by considering what is essential in the eyes of those questioned about the sources of their well-being. Two priorities have emerged: [health](#) and [social connections](#). In this respect, the current situation offers a striking “well-being paradox”: drastic measures of confinement are sometimes being taken to preserve health, but they in turn lead to the deterioration of social connections due to the imposed isolation.

But how better to begin to positively identify the different factors in “essential well-being” that should now be the focus of public policy? Measuring poverty can help here in measuring wealth. The pioneering empirical work of Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq in the late 1980s resulted in a definition of human development that the Human Development Indicator, [first published by the United Nations in 1990](#), reflects only in part: “Human development is a process of enlarging people’s choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices are to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect.” More specifically, in the French case, the work undertaken in 2015 by the

National Observatory of Poverty and Social Exclusion (Onpes) on [reference budgets](#), and extended in particular by INSEE with its “[indicator of poverty in living conditions](#)”, has led to defining the essential components of an “acceptable” life (we could also speak of “decency”).

But let's suppose that these measurement instruments contribute, upon recovery from the crisis, to defining an essential well-being (which key workers would maintain in the crisis situations that are sure to be repeated under the impact of ecological shocks); expertise alone would not be enough to trace its contours. A citizens' convention needs to take up the matter.

This is all the more so as the definition of essential well-being naturally evokes two other categories that are even more difficult to define, to which this blog will return in the coming days: useless (or artificial) well-being, that which can be dispensed with harmlessly; and harmful well-being, which we must do without in the future because in addition to being ancillary it harms essential well-being, in particular because it undermines the foundations for well-being by leading to the worsening of ecosystems (this is the debate taking place in Europe on whether it is necessary to save the airlines). The debate over essential well-being has just begun...