

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing by Edward F. Fischer.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hb5v1tj>

Journal

American Anthropologist, 117(3)

ISSN

0002-7294

Author

Colby, Benjamin N

Publication Date

2015-09-01

DOI

10.1111/aman.12309

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

contest and highlights the importance of Mazatec song-writing education provided by the Prado brothers in building up an “authorial infrastructure” for other indigenous composers (p. 101). The contest tolerates “orthographic heterodoxy” (p. 126) in indigenous writing and taps into culturally embedded performing practices, which have helped to make it a popular platform to express and problematize locally sanctioned notions of indigeneity. Conversely, when discussing the emergence of the Mazatec Indigenous Church, Faudree shows how the radical innovations introduced in local religious practice by Heriberto Prado, Sierra Mazateca’s own Martin Luther, have encountered suspicion, perplexity, and disdain from Nda Xo’s residents and other cultural activists. Critics of the nativist church often point out that its practice contradicts collective work ethos and mushroom ingestion rules, among other “traditional” codes of behavior.

She considers that Mazatec language revitalization in Nda Xo owes much of its success to the use of singing as “a third linguistic mode,” one that is “relatively rarely considered in its own right alongside writing and speaking” (p. 18). I however found her analysis of this performance genre strongly biased toward text. She devotes little space to examine song performances, and her discussion of linguistic innovations in singing is unclear about their relation to music. Her descriptions of singing fail to convey the multiple influences and textures of Mazatec songs that transpire in performances such as those found on YouTube.

Faudree links these ethnographic findings with the broader discussions about indigenous literary movements nationwide. Her analysis concentrates on the paradoxical practice of “seeing double.” This is characterized by a noticeable tendency among indigenous authors to publish bilingual texts that equally aim to promote the development of an indigenous readership and to appeal to well-established Spanish reading audiences. Her ruminations consider how the

reception of Indigenous literature demands a “double reading” operation as well. In this, indigenous language speakers find themselves needing to use both the original text and its Spanish translation to fully apprehend the meaning of the former because full reading skills in indigenous languages are rare.

Faudree’s assessment of the diverging aspects of indigenous literary and cultural revival movements is, however, more conciliatory than that of other linguists and anthropologists. Following Mikhail Bakhtin, she observes that heteroglossic expressions of indigeneity act in synergy with an imagined “unitary” indigenous identity in the same way that variations in speech contribute to shape language. Thus, in spite of their differential appeal to local people, Faudree argues, song contests and religious reform work as a “symbiotic and mutually supporting pair” (p. 194). The same rings true for orality, singing, and literacy—and for indigenous text production and reception, which demand a “double vision.” All of them give shape to a political ecology of indigenous language revival within a context profoundly impressed by the imposition of Spanish as the nation’s tongue.

Faudree’s book represents an important contribution to empirically founded discussions of the role of artistic practice in linguistic revitalization. In her rich portrait of grassroots initiatives in symbiotic relation with national ethnic demands, Faudree gives us reasons to feel hopeful about the future of indigenous literacy efforts in Mexico.

REFERENCE CITED

- Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI)
2009 Índice de reemplazo etnolingüístico (IRE) 2000–2005 [Index of language replacement]. CDI. Dirección de Información e Indicadores. Mexico City, Mexico: CDI. <http://www.cdi.gob.mx/>, accessed June 4, 2015.

The Good Life: Aspiration, Dignity, and the Anthropology of Wellbeing by Edward F. Fischer.

Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2014. 280 pp.

DOI: 10.1111/aman.12309

Benjamin N. Colby
University of California, Irvine

What do decisions about buying eggs in Hannover, Germany, have in common with the decisions about planting and marketing high-end coffee being grown by indigenous Maya in Guatemala? Edward Fischer in his interesting book offers some ideas about wellbeing and happiness occasioned by his study of German shoppers in Hannover and Maya farmers in Guatemala. This juxtaposing of different peo-

ple and their cultural systems finds a commonality not in what they do so much as in the approach Fischer takes in characterizing “the good life” among both groups.

Maya coffee growers in the mountains of Guatemala sell high-end coffee beans flown to Miami for distribution in the United States and elsewhere. German shoppers in Hannover are concerned about where the supermarket eggs they buy come from—caged or cage-free, free-range, and organically fed hens.

So Fischer asks how economic choices in these two groups relate to their perceived wellbeing and their social obligations as expressed through fair trade and economic

decisions generally. Fischer's analytical categories are similar to The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) list, overlapping, for example, where Fischer's categories of aspiration, agency, and opportunity structures represent a finer gradation of the OPHI category, agency. Fischer's focus generally is subjective, "combining cultural critique with non-prescriptive, ethnographically informed positive alternatives that engage public policy debates" (p. 19). Thus, the author implicitly subscribes to the standard position of cultural relativism and the use of culture as a count noun (which takes a definite article—as opposed to a wider, interdisciplinary, and ecological base for cultural phenomena as a network or system). Unless anthropology can quantify variables in a testable theory that correlates with clear benefits or deficits, as in measures of physical health, psychological health, resilience, or adaptive potential, studies of wellbeing in anthropology remain subjective and should be, as Fischer says, nonprescriptive.

There are numerous citations throughout the book, Amartya Sen being a prominent influence in what Fischer sees to be a positive anthropology, paralleling work in positive psychology in which people are asked how happy they are in interviews with the widely used ladder scale on which respondents indicate their current felt happiness or wellbeing and where they hope they might be on that scale in the future. That and another type of data Fischer has collected, the Ultimatum Game, are part of the data considered. In the latter case, Guatemalan farmers playing the Ultimatum Game showed them paying a substantial premium to punish players who they felt played unfairly. Income inequality was tolerated as long as "those who do well are seen as treating others with fairness and generosity" (p. 209). Clearly, however, outside the game environment and in the real world, ethnic relations remain an oppressive source of inequality in social interactions between Latinos and Indians. But private ownership of land and improving educational opportunities for indigenous people can certainly diminish some of those inequalities.

Fischer has carved out an important piece of the wellbeing puzzle. A summary of his values and subjective conditions is depicted in a diagram that includes opportunity structures that enable (or could frustrate) the fulfillment of a respondent's aspirations (p. 211). A future project of interest would be to apply those categories to various other sectors and tiers of society.

At a time when financial leadership (e.g., the central bank) in Germany lacks the kind of stewardship, fairness, and value orientations exhibited by shoppers in Germany or farmers in Guatemala, worldwide problems in countries like Greece, Spain, and Ireland will continue to decline economically under the yoke of austerity imposed by those private banking interests. Thus, austerity is another variable that might usefully be added into the mix of negative conditions to consider in a positive anthropology in different tiers of society and politics and under different conditions of public safety.

Fischer does not gloss over the period of La Violencia in Guatemala. He describes former president and general Efraín Ríos Montt's recent more benign change and brings us up to date from those terrible days under his military leadership of violence and torture to the present. Although convicted for the Ixil genocide, Ríos Montt escaped his 80-year prison sentence through a higher court's ruling.

Currently there have been major changes in Guatemala but not for the better. There has been a disturbing growth of criminality, organized crime, former military officers in their own gang ("hidden powers"), and the emergence of a gang known as MS-13 that is involved in extortion, drugs, smuggling, and money laundering—a sharp contrast to staid Germany.

Fischer touches upon these negativities but keeps his focus on coffee production and egg selling, fair trade, and the good life. The book's ample footnotes are a useful survey of recent writings on subjective wellbeing. It will be interesting to see how positive anthropology develops as a new branch of the discipline. That is where anthropology can get exciting.

Imagined Globalization by Néstor García Canclini.

Latin America in Translation series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. 288 pp.

DOI: 10.1111/aman.12310

Florence E. Babb

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

At a time when many anthropologists are aiming to move beyond the long-entrenched Euro-American orientation of our discipline, the translation of a work by Néstor García Canclini into English is a notable event. Originally published in Spanish in 1999 and addressing time-sensitive theorizations of globalization, culture industries, and world-historical developments, it might be claimed that this book comes on the scene a bit late. After all, when the work first

appeared, the Internet had only recently begun transforming communications and commerce, 9/11 had not yet changed the way we view the world, and the BRIC countries' (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) emergence in the global economy was barely a trace on the horizon.

Nonetheless, the value of García Canclini's *Imagined Globalization* is better seen in the context of broader, extended debates among anthropologists and fellow travelers who have grappled with the reverberations of global processes, whether in academic culture, the arts and publishing, or the lives of the subjects of our research. This Argentine's distinction as an anthropologically oriented scholar long resident in Mexico and publishing leading works on culture,