

WHAT IS THE TRUE WEALTH OF OUR NATION?

National Public Radio, the one mass medium my wife and I listen to regularly, informs us several times a day of the rise and fall of the stock market. This “information” plays out against the oft-repeated claim that the U.S. is the richest nation on earth, as shown by the GNP/GDP.

But, if we are so wealthy, why is there so much poverty, homelessness, and hunger abroad in our land? Why is the use of opioids and other mind-altering drugs rampant when employment is hovering around the highest levels ever? Why is the distance between the richest and the poorest increasing every year? Why does the United States reveal serious disturbances and uncertainties regarding the “progress” we are supposed to be witnessing? If the GNP/GDP is rising why is our society so fraught?

What is the GNP/GDP? It is the aggregated number primarily standing for the total exchange of monetary goods and services expended in the United States. It is used because most professional economists are schooled to believe that the so-called “exchange economy” is the most reliable indicator of the nation’s wealth and the social binder that keeps the nation strong and united. When increasing, we are assured that all is well in spite of the shortage of money, which calls for the need to cut back on the so-called “entitlements” so the exchange of goods and services can continue to increase.

The late economist, Kenneth E. Boulding, pointed out that there are actually “Three [economic] organizers of society”: the systems of Threat, Exchange, and Integrative (what economist Hazel Henderson calls “the Love system).” All of these systems play a role in every society, the weakest being Threat. Exchange is more powerful, but is dependent on the other two. Its strength is that it can be counted and measured in a single unit: Dollars. And GNP/GDP is its measure. The third system is vastly the most important social organizer. It includes the planetary ecosystem’s incredibly complex systemic interrelationships, with the human as an integral part of the whole. It is obviously much more difficult to “corral” so it can be counted. But it can be described in stories, songs, voluntary associations, and studied in the social sciences.

In some ways the GNP/GDP is useful, in that it measures the dollar value of the sale and purchase of goods and services in the legal market economy as a whole, so in a general way we can tell whether the Exchange System is growing or shrinking. But as a tool for measuring wealth and the health of the entire economy, the GNP/GDP is inadequate and misleading. Great and serious distortions are found in the numbers themselves. One of the greatest is that of counting waste as a value. Examples: Household and industrial waste disposal, especially in urban settings, industrial agriculture, needless imprisonment, clear-cutting of forests, lack of mass public transportation, weapons manufacturing. These are only a few. On planet Earth — a “spaceship” as it has been aptly called — waste that cannot be recycled contributes to physical death: entropy.

The story we tell ourselves about our freedom as individuals living in a highly competitive society of winners and losers in a hostile world emphasizing financial success and progress in monetary terms, entirely misses the mark if we aim for human happiness and global health. Reliance on numbers like GNP/GDP, are used by the powers-that-be to support the fatal status quo. A new story is being told by visionaries like David Korten, Hazel Henderson, Thomas Berry, and many others. Their feet are firmly planted on solid ground; they present possibilities far greater and all-encompassing than those who can only see the numbers that stifle the imagination and understanding of is and what can be.