Quality of life or well-being: a fundamental choice for urban and regional planning

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1. Introduction

Since the race riots of the 1960's in the USA, researchers have been preoccupied with the tasks of measuring the spatial disparities of quality of life and well-being. Until then, the performance of the economy could be measured through indices of industrial production, productivity and GDP, but social problems of the time required identification and policy recommendations to their solution. A plethora of studies has ensued using an objective, scientific method of approach to evaluating regional disparities of levels of living within nations [1].

In the aftermath of social unrest spilling into violence on the streets of Britain in 1981, the British Government has adopted a similar approach to identifying areas of greatest multiple deprivation in order to guide expenditure toward areas of most need [2]. This study, like others of its type, uses quality of life indicators to measure levels of living. Well-being is a more complex concept and few researchers have discussed the more subjective variables associated with its measurement, namely, sense of place or habitat preferences of social groups [3].

In much the same way as researchers in resource management have advocated a more subjective, qualitative approach to the evaluation of landscapes, the regional scientist is also incorporating subjective indicators into a spatial evaluation of well-being to include values placed by user groups to their existing physical and socio-economic environments. It is the purpose of this paper to clarify the differences between the concepts of quality of life and well-being through the example of France, and to highlight the policy implications of this research.

2. Quality of life and well-being: two different concepts

Much of the research on the quality of life and well-being has its roots in Maslow theory in the hierarchical levels of needs [4]. Maslow differentiated between

1. Physiological needs such as hunger
2. The needs of security (defense)
3. Social needs, including materialism
4. Needs of autonomy and independence (territoriality)
5. The need to understand one’s ego

The basic needs of survival and materialistic requirements relate to the quality of life whilst the last two categories refer to well-being.

We can consider well-being as the result of relations between man, society and the environment, between the ego and the outside, between the individual and the group . . . most of all it is relative and dynamic [5]. Consequently, quality of life indicators reflect the state of material conditions and the standard of living of a human group. Well-being is not so readily measured as it involves the monitoring of public preferences toward both their physical and socio-economic environments. Although studies of quality of life are important in demonstrating regional imbalances, is it not desirable for the regional scientist to follow the example of landscape planners who try to understand from a local level the relationship between the individual and society and his/her attachment to the environment? In the UK and in France research into landscape evaluation over the last fifteen years has moved from an objective, landscape description approach to that of monitoring public preferences [6]. The drawback to the application of any technique of landscape evaluation is the large number of determinants which make up an individual’s space preferences. Unlike other social surveys where standard variables—socio-economic group, car ownership, sex and education—can be sometimes used to predict behavioural patterns—for example shopping behaviour—well-being evaluation is more complex, introducing determinants such as childhood experiences, length of residence in parts of the country and familiarity with territorial environment which must be appraised in the evaluative process. The facture of many of the objectively derived techniques in the UK could be attributed to attempts at achieving a consensus view from a national perspective. Local communities may attach a high social value to an area deemed nationally to be of mediocre landscape quality and ripe for development proposals [7]. This feeling of territorial attachment is a part of well-being and highlights the importance of understanding regional life and how it integrates into national policy objectives.

3. The components of regional well-being

In any study of regional well-being, it is imperative that a holistic approach is undertaken to comprehend all of the forces which have shaped regional development. Of the studies on the geography of well-being, the work by Campbell, Converse and Rogers [8] is of particular relevance. They group the main components of well-being and quality of life in the US into 5 categories:

- Socio-economic (the main variables are standard of living, savings and education)
- Employment (main variables are the rate of employment and unemployment)
- Family (main variables are the quality of family life, of marriage and friendship)
- Institutions (main variables are those connected with national government, with administrative and religious organisations)

* The author would like to thank John Fernie for his very helpful comments on this paper and the choice of the British examples.
Space (main variables are the quality of the habitat, of
the neighbourhood, and of communal life)

A similar approach was adopted in a study (Institute for
Behavioral Research, York University) on 3288 Canadians
in 1977. Among the aspects considered essential to the
quality of life and to well-being, were the family (love,
mortality, children, friendship), work, health, the socio-
economic level (education, revenue), the environment
(housing, neighbourhood, town) and at last institutions
(nation, government).

From these studies it is possible to consider the region
as a system made up of four principal aspects: the func-
tional aspect, which reflects the education and the
economic levels of the population; it is well integrated
into quality of life analyses. The employment aspect
linked with the main questions of employment and unem-
ployment invariably included in quality of life analyses.
The subjective aspect, more personal, rarely approached,
is the result of family life and of the quality of the sense
of place; it is an integral part of well-being as is the struc-
tural aspect, which corresponds to the institutions that
organise our administrative, political and social life.

4. A renewed system of regional values: a French
case study

In order to illustrate, among the four aspects, those most
comparative analysis of French départements. Through a
principal component factor analysis of 18 variables taken
from the statistics of Le Point [11] dealing with the quality
of life in France [12], 8 factors explained 75.3% of the total
variance. These allow a comparison of the wealthy and
well equipped départements, the old rural départements,
and those of ancient industrialisation; other phenomena
also appear which show a strong link between urban and
industrialised départements having social problems (for
example the high level of delinquency and crime); certain
départements differ from the others through their rate of
suicides and that of mortality due to alcohol, thus illustrat-
ing a deep social problem; distinct also from the other
départements are those that attract, for certain subjective
values, tourists and secondary residents.

This image of France is therefore much more complex
than one borne of a simple study of the functional aspect
of local life. Through a discriminant analysis (programme
Congroup) (Fig. 1) a triple face of France is evident in
1978: a Paris region well equipped, possessing a high
standard with regard to functional regional aspects; a
rural West-South-West, having pathology linked with an
ageing-process and a strong rate of mortality through
suicide and alcoholism; and an industrialised North,
North-East, East, South-East, educated, but undergoing a
strong rate of delinquency in particular where unemploy-
ment levels are high.

The analysis of these same variables in 1981 allows the
role of subjectivity and of activity in regional life to be
perceived more clearly. The results are particularly inter-
esting since the 1978 image is substituted by a finer
image which dissociates the industrial zones from the
rural areas less affected by unemployment. Besides this
aspect which has grown in importance since 1978, we
continue to find départements which are marked with high
levels of alcoholic and infantile mortality (North,
Massif Central, Brittany) and other départements with a
great power of attraction due to their amenities. A 1981
Congroup analysis confirms that the quality of life by
itself would not give a sufficiently detailed image of reg-
ional life (Fig. 2). It is true that a high income Paris, well
placed with regard to the functional aspect, quickly
differentiates itself from the remainder of France, but its
suburbs are distinct according to their lesser or greater
resistance to unemployment; the same process applies to
industrial regions more or less subject to delinquence,
alcoholism and unemployment. On the other hand, we
find certain rural départements, especially those which
attract tourists and people looking for other values than

Figure 1: Well-Being and Quality of Life in France, 1978

Figure 2: Well-Being and Quality of Life in France, 1981
those of a society of materialistic values. A new image of France has emerged under the recession with its aspects of activity and subjectivity which modify the 1978 results. France as many other countries is experiencing counter-urbanisation trends which have been a feature of western societies during the last few decades [13]. The drift of young people to major metropolitan areas has been arrested and the flow of migrants has reversed. In the case of Switzerland, Berne, Basle, Lausanne and Zurich have lost population from their central cities between 1970 and 1980. Researches by Walter-Busch, Müller and Schönberger [14] confirm this trend in Switzerland and investigate, through economic and social indicators, the reasons of these movements. In France also, for the first time since demographic records have been kept, Paris and its region lost more people to the rest of France than it gained from population; rural areas in western France also experienced in migration. The reasons for these changes are complex and involve interrelationships among all aspects of regional life – functional, employment, subjective and institutional. It can be argued that institutional initiatives (French “régionalisation”), such as government dispersal policies toward population and industry and agricultural subsidisation, and increase in local administrative power, have fostered this rural revival. On the other hand, the recession and the acceleration toward a post-industrial society has led to a re-evaluation of values in recent years. The resurgence of rural areas can be attributed to the greater equalisation of economic opportunities between rural and urban areas than hitherto, their more valued physical environments and the lower incidence of social problems.

Nevertheless, in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the factors behind these counterurbanisation trends, more detailed research is necessary on the motivations of incoming migrants to rural areas. One of the few areas which has been studied is that of the rural Cornwall region in the U.K. [15]. After 1861, the peak population year, the region experienced continuous out-migration for a century, only to increase its population from 330,000 to 430,000 during the last two decades. The study team’s investigation into the reasons for this change by interviewing non-return migrants have produced interesting preliminary results such as:

a) migrants were relatively better educated than the non-migrant population
b) “non-return” [16] migrants in employment were seeking a “better environment”
c) “non-return” migrants who were self employed were trying to “escape the urban rat race” [17].

5. Conclusions

The Cornwall study endorses many of the general points raised in the French case study, namely that non-economic factors play an increasingly important role in decisions pertaining to residential location. However, government initiatives toward regional development have a strong bias toward the functional and employment aspects within the regional system rather than the more subjective elements of regional life. Perhaps this can be attributed to the ease with which quality of life can be measured compared to the more qualitative approach necessary to assess well-being? Nevertheless, unless there is a better understanding of regional well-being, policy may be channelled in the wrong direction. For example, if people migrate to rural areas to escape from the social and environmental problems in urban areas, should we continue to encourage the “export” of industry to rural areas? As information technology throws us into a period of further rapid social and economic change, it is imperative that future strategies take into consideration the qualitative elements of well-being in the process of policy formulation.


[9] When proceeding by analogy with behavioural geography, we can say that to appreciate quality of life and regional well-being each person proceeds in two ways. First of all he acquires a basic scheme through apprenticeship which allows him to assess the main components of regional space (function—activity—subjectivity—structure). The individual thus situates his objectives, according to this basic scheme. He will then call for second order schemes, these being extensions of the main scheme in the sphere he prefers and which will help him to make a choice of localization and of activity. These secondary schemes depend mostly on the individual personality, on his aims and on the socio-economic context.


[12] We do not use, as Knox and Scoth do (1977), all variables given by Le Point since, from a multiple correlation study, we have noticed that many of them were reflecting the same phenomena and are redundant. Our 18 variables have then a different importance for a group of students.

[16] Born in Cornwall but having lived away from the country for more than a year.

Résumé
Qualité de la vie ou bien-ètre: un choix fondamental pour la planification urbaine et régionale
Les indicateurs de la qualité de la vie sont destinés à être le reflet du niveau de vie d’une société. À l’opposé le bien-être, notion individuelle, reflète la perception des relations entre une personne, la société, son milieu de vie, entre l’individu et le groupe. Toute analyse régionale, pour tenir compte de ces deux notions, doit s’attacher à la fois aux aspects fonctionnels et à l’emploi régional, mais aussi aux aspects subjectifs et structurels de la vie régionale. Pour illustrer l’évolution des valeurs dans nos sociétés nous avons choisi de traiter par analyse factorielle et analyse typologique le cas des départements français (1978 et 1981). Nous constatons l’importance croissante des éléments non économiques et subjectifs dans les choix résidentiels, alors que les politiques gouvernementales s’attachent surtout aux aspects fonctionnels et à l’emploi régional. Un renouvellement des politiques d’aménagement, pour incorporer les éléments de la vie subjective, devient de plus en plus nécessaire aux stratégies régionales.