

Economy without Soul

A Critique of GDP *from
the Edges of Life*



Teófilo Cuesta-Borja

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1. Introduction

For decades, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been regarded as the primary indicator of a nation's economic development and social well-being. This quantitative instrument summarizes the monetary value of goods and services produced in a country during a given period, offering an ostensibly objective view of economic growth. However, this hegemonic approach has been increasingly questioned by various streams of critical thought, particularly from the philosophy of complexity and the epistemologies of the South. These critiques argue that GDP, rather than reflecting the true health of a society, conceals deep inequalities, environmental injustices, epistemic exclusions, and structural violence that shape the social fabric—especially in contexts like Latin America.

The complexity paradigm, inspired by authors such as Edgar Morin (1990), and Fritjof Capra (1996), invites us to rethink social, economic, and ecological systems as interconnected, dynamic, and irreducible wholes. From this perspective, GDP represents a linear and oversimplified outlook that fails to capture the richness of the social, cultural, and ecological interactions that constitute communal life. Latin American thinkers like Enrique Leff (2004), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009), and Manfred Max-Neef (1991), have contributed conceptual tools to decolonize development indicators and propose an economy more attuned to cultural diversity, social justice, and ecological sustainability.

This essay offers a deep critique of GDP from the standpoint of complex thinking, analyzing how this indicator has contributed to the reproduction of a technocratic, extractivist, and exclusionary model in Latin America. It examines the historical and

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epistemological background of GDP, explores its structural limitations, and contrasts it with emerging proposals such as “buen vivir” (good living), ecological economics, and alternative indicators grounded in integral well-being and reciprocity. The critical lens applied here does not merely aim to denounce but rather calls for a paradigmatic transformation that recognizes the plurality of knowledge systems and ways of inhabiting the world.

2. GDP as a Modern and Reductionist Construct

GDP emerged in the context of industrial capitalism in the 20th century as a tool to measure national production, particularly after the Great Depression and World War II. Initially conceived by economists like Simon Kuznets, its purpose was to offer a macroeconomic indicator to support public policy planning. However, Kuznets himself warned that “the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measure of national income” (Kuznets, 1934). This warning was disregarded, and with the rise of developmentalism, GDP became synonymous with progress, serving as the technocratic foundation for economic and geopolitical decision-making.

From a complexity perspective, this consolidation of GDP as the hegemonic index reflects a reductionist and mechanistic logic characteristic of modern Western thinking. As Morin (1990), states, “simplification mutilates reality,” and in the case of GDP, this mutilation involves excluding essential dimensions of life: unpaid labor, ecosystem services, community ties, ancestral knowledge, and more. This epistemological mutilation is even more severe in Latin America, where the cultural, ecological, and spiritual wealth of Indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples is systematically rendered invisible by accumulation logics that recognize only what can be monetized.

3. A Critique from the Epistemology of Complexity

The philosophy of complexity provides a powerful framework to challenge the centrality of GDP as a development metric. This school of thought, which emerged in response to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm, emphasizes interconnection, non-linearity, and emergence as essential characteristics of living systems. From this perspective, GDP is an epistemologically inadequate tool for understanding social and ecological realities.

As Morin (2006), suggests, “complexity is not in things but in our way of thinking about things.” This implies that the reduction of well-being to a statistical figure reflects a simplifying epistemology that fragments the totality of the human and the living. In contrast, complex thinking calls for the construction of transdisciplinary indicators that integrate economics with ethics, ecology, culture, and territory. As Max-Neef (1991), argues, an economy oriented toward human well-being must

begin with fundamental human needs, not only material ones, but also affectivity, participation, identity, and subsistence in a broad sense.

4. Latin America and the Growth Trap

In Latin America, the adoption of GDP as a development compass has had particularly dire consequences. Even though many countries have experienced economic growth cycles, these figures have coexisted with high levels of inequality, exclusion, environmental destruction, and structural violence. As Gudynas (2011), notes, "growth measured by GDP has been functional to extractivism, but not to the well-being of the people."

Extractivism, in its mining, oil, agro-industrial, and forestry forms, has been justified by its contribution to GDP, yet it has led to profound territorial impacts: community displacement, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the criminalization of environmental defenders. The logic of GDP fails to account for these costs because it only records what enters the market, not what is lost in terms of life, culture, or ecosystems. In this sense, GDP is blind to the complexity of Latin American territories and becomes complicit in a development model that produces wealth for the few at the cost of collective impoverishment.

5. Alternative Indicators and New Epistemologies of Development

Faced with these limitations, various proposals have emerged to construct alternative indicators that respond to the complexity of human development. In Ecuador and Bolivia, for instance, the principles of buen vivir (Sumak Kawsay) and vivir bien (Suma Qamaña) have been enshrined in constitutions, inspired by Indigenous worldviews that understand development as harmony with nature, community solidarity, and existential fulfillment.

Ecological economics has also proposed metrics such as the Ecological Footprint, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), and the Gross National Happiness Index, which seek to more holistically capture living conditions. According to Costanza et al. (2014), "a measure of well-being must reflect sustainability, equity, and quality of life, beyond consumption." At the regional level, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), has promoted measurements that include indicators of inequality, education, health, participation, and environmental sustainability.

Nonetheless, as de Sousa Santos (2009), warns, changing indicators is not enough; it is necessary to transform the epistemologies of development. This means decolonizing economic knowledge by recognizing the plurality of knowledges and ways of life historically subordinated by the modern paradigm. A truly complex and emancipatory indicator cannot be constructed without the active participation of

communities, without a dialog of knowledges, and without a territorial reappropriation of knowledge.

6. Conclusions

Critiquing GDP from a perspective of complexity doesn't simply mean proposing a new number, but rather opening a deep conversation about what we mean by development, well-being, and the good life. Complexity thinking and the epistemologies of the South invite us to abandon the logic of simplification and accumulation and think in terms of interdependence, relationality, and regeneration.

In Latin America, this task is urgent; overcoming the GDP trap is part of a broader struggle for epistemic, territorial, and ecological justice. It involves imagining and building an economy of life, where indicators serve people, not markets, where development is measured not by monetary growth but by the plenitude of life.

Furthermore, a critical perspective from a perspective of complexity challenges us to reframe public policy as a process of co-creation among multiple knowledge systems: academic, ancestral, practical, and poetic. This means that alternatives to GDP must not be built solely on technical expertise, but also through democratic and intercultural participation. Only by weaving together the narratives of Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant communities, jungle movements, feminisms, and ecological struggles can we redefine the metrics that guide our collective futures.

Another profound implication of this critique is the recognition that well-being is not a sum of individual satisfactions, but an emergent property of relational networks: between people, with their ecosystems, cultures, histories, and spiritualities. GDP, in its isolated abstraction, cannot capture these living interconnections. Therefore, any transition toward alternative indicators must be rooted in territorial knowledge, community autonomy, and a pedagogy of complexity that fosters critical consciousness and systemic perception.

Finally, this critique does not simply call for a reform of current economic metrics, but for a civilizational transformation. In a time marked by the climate crisis, social fragmentation, and existential uncertainty, the search for post-GDP futures opens the door to a plural, situated, and ethical horizon. Latin America, with its deep traditions of resistance, conviviality, and regenerative cosmologies, is not only a victim of GDP-centered developmentalism, but also the cradle of alternatives. Thus, embracing complexity is not only an epistemic necessity, but a political and spiritual act of re-inhabiting the world.

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