

# Colombia: Unlivable but Happy.

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## abstract:

This mostly theory and review article studies apparently unlivable but happy Colombia, “fool’s paradise”, in contrast to apparently livable but quite unhappy United States, “fool’s hell.” We argue that Colombia is not a fool’s paradise—genuine happiness is possible in an apparently unlivable environment, because livability tends to be measured mostly in terms of material comfort, and already very basic material comfort is good enough to satisfy human needs and produce happiness. On the contrary, it is the excessive pursuit of material comfort, such as that in the US, that arguably actually decreases happiness by: 1) having to focus on what’s unimportant, overwork, and alienate oneself; and 2) making an environment and interaction inhuman, sanitized, hospital/airport-like, and alienating. The main limitation is that we cannot fully rule out that Colombia is a fool’s paradise. We discuss alternative explanations and provide directions for future research.

LIFE SATISFACTION, HAPPINESS, SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, QUALITY OF LIFE, LIVABILITY, BEST PLACES TO LIVE, COLOMBIA, ALIENATION, DEGROWTH

Traditional progress/development measures like income, production, and consumption cannot fully account for people’s life experiences or emotions (Diener 2009, Stiglitz et al. 2009, Lambert et al. 2020). While acknowledged in theory as inadequate, the predominant focus in world development is still on economy and material comfort. The economic and material comfort champion, the US, offers progress/development lessons to developing countries.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is typically overlooked that there are wellbeing lessons from the developing countries. Notably Latin American countries such as Colombia tend to be happier than many developed countries.

Our study follows the classic happiness theorizing by Veenhoven (2000, 1995, 2014) and Michalos (2014); with Latin focus following Rojas (2015) and Yamamoto (2016). Further, we complement this traditional line of inquiry with rarely used perspectives in happiness research: folklore theory and Marx’s alienation theory. We conclude that happiness and material underdevelopment can coexist, and even that underdevelopment may promote happiness in some ways.

The article is structured as follows. We start by documenting the Latin American phenomenon (Rojas 2015, 2019) in Colombia: Colombians (like other Latinos) are satisfied with life (sec. 1) despite low livability (high poverty, insecurity, inequality, etc) (sec. 2). Having established an apparent paradox of high happiness despite low livability we move to the theoretical framework to understand it (sec. 3): Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life (2000) are used to map happiness to livability, and Michalos 2 variable theory (Michalos 2014) to describe the apparent contradiction as “fool’s paradise,” which is then explored with livability (sec. 3.1), folklore (sec. 3.2),

<sup>1</sup>With recent backlash from the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates) and others, the de-dollarization and trade re-orientation away from the West, and so forth. Still, the West, and especially the US typically sees itself as the righteous world leader with the lessons to teach to others—the point well made by world development veteran Jeffrey Sachs, see for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMPIhBLp1I>.

and Marx's alienation (sec. 3.3) theories. As a complement to fool's paradise in Colombia we turn to fool's hell (very livable but only moderately happy) in Singapore (sec. 3.4) and the US (sec. 3.5). We finish with discussion and conclusion (sec. 4). Subjective Wellbeing (SWB)/happiness is defined in first paragraph of section "1 Happy Colombia." Livability is defined in first paragraph of section "2 Unlivable Colombia."

## 1 Happy Colombia

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB), happiness, wellbeing, and life satisfaction are used interchangeably. Technically, we mean evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction as opposed to affective happiness, positive and negative affects/emotions, or Eudaimonia/flourishing/functioning. Evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction is measured in this section, the only section that uses happiness data. For elaboration and auxiliary points see online appendix.

A revered (or despised) US politician, Newt Gingrich, aptly observes that the US Declaration of Independence doesn't guarantee happiness, neither it binds the government to produce it, but merely guarantees its pursuit (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWA4EmeaLgc>). Accordingly, some Americans succeed and some fail this pursuit, and the US as a country is below the top quartile of world happiness rankings (46/160 in World Database of Happiness; table 1).

Colombia's constitution, on the other hand, states that happiness is the government's business—government should work to increase it: "The general wellbeing and improvement of the population's quality of life are social purposes of the State." (art 366, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia\\_2015](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia_2015)). And Colombians are indeed very happy, happier than Americans, but arguably not because of the Colombian government, rather despite it—in multiple ways Colombian government and outcomes it produces are a failure—see next section: "Unlivable Colombia."

Like other Latinos, Colombians are very happy, about 8.5 on 0-10 evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction scale, a score much higher than expected given economic, social, and institutional indicators (PNUD 2023). Colombia is one of the happiest countries—both World Values Surveys and World Database of Happiness<sup>2</sup> rank it top 3 in table 1. A World Values Survey (WVS) SWB item reads: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" on scale 1='dissatisfied' to 10='satisfied'. World Database of Happiness (WDH) is an aggregate of various surveys, and SWB survey items are very similar to that in WVS. Colombia is outstanding at achieving high happiness at low economic development. Colombia is happier than all other Latin countries in table 1 and about as happy as Mexico, but Colombia is significantly poorer than Mexico, at least 25% poorer either in nominal or Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) terms.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>We do not use Gallup data because Gallup data are designed for commerce, rather than research—Gallup charges \$30,000 (per year) for access (authors' inquiry). It is rather "happiness industry" (Davies 2015) than research. In general, an argument can be made that there is a corporatization of academia, which has some negative consequences (Mills 2012a, Cox 2013, Mills 2012b, Catropa and Andrews 2020, Schmidlin 2015).

<sup>3</sup>See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>.

**Table 1:** 10 happiest countries in the world. Data from World Database of Happiness (WDH) 2010-2019 out of 160 countries at [worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/rank-reports/satisfaction-with-life](http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/rank-reports/satisfaction-with-life); and World Values Surveys (WVS) 2005-2022 [waves 5-7] out of 88 countries at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>. Technical information for WDH is at <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/reports/finding-reports-on-happiness-in-nations/technical-details-to-rank-reports-of-happiness-in-nations/technical-details-to-rank-report-average-happiness-in-nations-2010-2019> and WVS documentation is at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>.

WDH			WVS		
rank	country	happiness (1-10)	rank	country	happiness (1-10)
1	Denmark	8.2	1	Puerto Rico	8.4
2	Mexico	8.1	2	Mexico	8.3
3	Colombia	8.1	3	Colombia	8.3
4	Switzerland	8	4	Qatar	8.0
5	Finland	8	5	Norway	7.9
6	Iceland	8	6	Nicaragua	7.9
7	Costa Rica	7.9	7	Tajikistan	7.9
8	Norway	7.9	8	Switzerland	7.9
9	Canada	7.9	9	Uzbekistan	7.9
10	Qatar	7.8	10	Ecuador	7.8

## 2 Unlivable Colombia

Livability is the degree of fit between the environment and human needs (Veenhoven 2014). Livability is measured in table 2 in this section, with further discussion in section “3.1 Livability Theory: Human Needs”

In sharp contrast to high Colombian happiness, Colombia is not livable or has low objective quality of life (QOL), as measured with objective indicators in table 2.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2:** Livability/Quality Of Life (QOL): objective indicators. For details on each indicator click the link under “Source” column.

Indicator	Value	Source
2019 poverty (national benchmark)	42%	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO</a>
2011 median daily income/cap PPP USD	\$7	<a href="https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/">https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/</a>
2019 percent on <\$5.5/day	30%	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=CO">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=CO</a>
2017 R/P 10%	40	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10</a>
2020 unemployment rate	15%	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TUTL.ZS?locations=CO">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TUTL.ZS?locations=CO</a>
2020 freedom rank	96/210	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores</a>
2021 corruption rank	87/180	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/col">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/col</a>
2020 political stability, no violence/terrorism pctile	20th	<a href="https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports">https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports</a>
2020 rule of law pctile	34th	<a href="https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports">https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports</a>
2021 working conditions decile	bottom decile	<a href="https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2021/countries/col">https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2021/countries/col</a>
2018 quality of roads rank	110/137	<a href="https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_EOSQ057.pdf">https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_EOSQ057.pdf</a>
2021 victims of intentional homicide rank	top decile	<a href="https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims">https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims</a>
2023 criminality rank	2/193	<a href="https://ocindex.net/rankings?f=rankings&amp;view=list">https://ocindex.net/rankings?f=rankings&amp;view=list</a>

Some of the objective indicators of quality of life from table 2 are remarkably deficient: About a third of Colombians live on less

<sup>4</sup>Colombia scores mediocre or low on all indicators in table 2. Still, there are many other ways to measure QOL. UsNews, for instance, ranks Colombia 68/78 (<https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/colombia>). World Economic Forum provides indicators, too (World Economic Forum 2017).

than \$5.50 a day (2019). Poverty (national benchmark) is at 42%—the whole nation has a higher poverty rate than one of the poorest cities in the US, Camden NJ, at 36% (also national benchmark, [census.gov/quickfacts/camdennewjersey](https://census.gov/quickfacts/camdennewjersey)). Median daily PPP per capita income in 2011 was at \$7 (the US was at \$56). Colombia is in the bottom decile of working conditions: there are murders and impunity, union-busting and dismissals. R/P 10% is the ratio of the average income of the richest 10% to the poorest 10%—Colombia ranks 3rd out of 70 at a remarkable 40—top decile of Colombians makes on average 40x the average of the poorest decile—even greater disparity than in the unequal US at 30. Unemployment rate is at 15%, with informal labor at about 50% of the workforce (Hurtado 2016).

All these deficiencies—insecurity, precarious labor, poverty, and inequality are expected to result in unhappiness. Inequality in Latin America was found to have negative effects on happiness as it signals persistent unfairness (Graham and Felton 2006)—unfairness seems to be more detrimental to happiness than inequality (Starmans et al. 2017). Inequality is a stark feature of Colombian life, and it is inequality that has sparked recent mass protests (International Crisis Group 2021).

Colombia is still being haunted by violence and conflict, much of which is rural (Turkewitz (2021), [hrc.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/colombia](https://hrc.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/colombia)). Colombia is less stable and more violent than 80 percent of the countries—in table 2 metric “political stability and absence of violence and terrorism” is only at 20th percentile. Colombia is only partly free, ranking 96/210, and quite corrupt 87/180. Rule of law is also problematic below about 2/3 of countries. Crime rates are high: in terms of homicides Colombia ranks in top decile, and by one “criminality” index it ranks as the 2nd most “criminal” country in the world (after Myanmar; out of 193 countries.)<sup>5</sup>

In terms of quality of roads Colombia ranks 110/137—part of the problem is mountains, yet, for example, equally mountainous Ecuador has relatively succeeded in road building. Transport is the blood of the society (e.g., De Vos et al. 2013)—roads are a basis for travel, commerce, and trade, especially that Colombia has no rail.

### 3 Unlivable but Happy—“Fool’s Paradise”?

In the previous two sections we have established that Colombia is happy, but unlivable. Hence, it could be labeled a “Fool’s Paradise,” a happy paradise, yet a fool’s paradise, because it is unlivable and so there is no reason to be happy. Now we will examine this apparent contradiction. The goal of this study is to try to explain this apparent massive mismatch or paradox, and spark the debate/future research.

It is instructive to start with Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life (2000) in table 3. Life chances as an outer quality in first cell (livelability of environment) should in theory correspond with life results as an inner quality in the last cell (satisfaction of the person). That is, a

<sup>5</sup>Although it is probably an overstatement in terms of how crime affects an average person—this “criminality” index weighs heavily organized crime networks: <https://ocindex.net/report/2023/02-about-the-index.html>.

livable place should be happy.

	outer qualities	inner qualities
life-chances	livability of environment	life-ability of the person
life-results	utility of life	satisfaction of the person

**Table 3:** Veenhoven's 4 qualities of life (2000)

Colombia's low livability/QOL should result in low satisfaction/happiness—it is unexpected for Colombia to be one of the very happiest countries in the world. Colombia scores mediocre or low on most livability/QOL indicators, but tops rankings of satisfaction/happiness. In other words, it appears to be unlivable but happy, a so called “Fool’s Paradise,” a place where people are subjectively happy, despite objective misery (Michalos 2014). An intersection of QOL and SWB can be visualized in a 2x2 matrix in table 4—expected outcomes are low-low or high-high, but there can also be unexpected low-high “fool’s paradise” or high-low “fool’s hell.”

	low livability	high livability
low SWB	real hell [deprivation, unhappy poor]	fool’s hell [dissonance, unhappy rich]
high SWB	fool’s paradise [adaptation, happy poor]	real paradise [wellbeing, happy rich]

**Table 4:** Michalos 2 variable theory: fool’s paradise and fool’s hell (Michalos 2014). Cummins classification is shown in square brackets (Sirgy 2002, p.61). For other examples of fool’s paradise and fool’s hell see Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente (2019).

There are a number of theories and explanations for high happiness despite low livability. The remainder of this paper is devoted to these: first two happiness theories (livability and folklore), second Marx theory of alienation, and finally a complementary analysis from the opposite side (very livable but only moderately happy): fool’s hell in Singapore and the US.

### 3.1 Livability Theory: Human Needs

Veenhoven’s livability/needs theory is a major and ideally fitting happiness theory, specifically about the link between livability and SWB, as conceptualized in the last section in tables 3 and 4 (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995, Veenhoven 2014). Humans, like all animals, have needs, as those on the Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow [1954] 1987)—the more the needs are satisfied, the more happiness—places or societies that satisfy human needs well are livable or have high QOL:

Societies are systems for meeting human needs, but not all societies do that job equally well. Consequently, people are not equally happy in all societies. Improvement of the fit between social institutions and human needs will result in greater happiness. (p. 3645 Veenhoven 2014)

The apparent Colombian chasm between livability and happiness may point to the limitations of livability theory. But we argue that, counter-intuitively, the livability theory may mostly hold true because: 1) Mediocre or even moderately poor development (physical and institutional infrastructure) is already good enough to satisfy most basic human needs and make a place livable; 2) Physical and institutional infrastructure mostly serves only first two steps of Maslow’s pyramid (physiological and safety) (Maslow [1954] 1987).

Human physiological needs are simple and easily satisfied without much economic or institutional development. 3) Higher needs such as personal freedom and social connection that are critically important for livability are rarely properly captured by livability metrics. 4) Given always limited resources and attention, there is an opportunity cost. Excessive pursuit of money or consumption at person level, or economic growth at community or society level sacrifices non-commodities such as personal freedom and social connection notably through overwork and alienation as elaborated in later section “Theory of Alienation.” This is an important mechanism that we cannot overemphasize, and it is often overlooked.

Next we provide examples of human needs that are overlooked by livability/QOL indices. These are human needs—they do count towards livability. In the examples we focus on Colombia, and also provide contrasts to the developed countries, and indicate trade-offs/opportunity costs.

Biophilia (Fromm 1964, Wilson 2021), a need for contact with nature is a fundamental human need, yet usually forgotten. "Nature is not a place to visit. It is home" (Gary Snyder). There is a clear tradeoff between economic growth and nature abundance and preservation, for instance, the more urbanization, the less natural the human habitat. Or next door in Brazil—the more economic expansion and growth, the less Amazon rain forest. Climate change is a critical challenge for human needs as it endangers the very habitat of homo sapiens (Pachauri et al. 2014), and again, the more economic growth, the worse the environmental degradation (e.g., Klein 2014). A reasonable course of action is to de-grow the economies (Hickel 2020, Kallis 2011), especially the rich and carbon intensive ones such as the US. Per Colombian natural resources use and economic growth see discussion in Rubiano (2022).

Related to biophilia and climate change is biodiversity. Biodiversity improves happiness (Adjei and Agyei 2015, Prescott and Logan 2017). Nature is extraordinary in Colombia. Colombia has 2nd largest biodiversity after Brazil, despite being about 7x smaller in area. Colombia has just about any type of natural amenities. Exposure to nature (as opposed to urbanism) is the key ingredient for happiness (Pretty 2012, Tesson 2013, Thoreau 1995 [1854]).

Social connection is a human need, and a key to happiness (Tönnies [1887] 2002, Lane 2000, McMahon 2006, Putnam 2001), and there is plenty of social connection in Colombia. Colombians are extraordinarily social, friendly, outgoing and spontaneous—social gatherings, events and festivals are widespread, frequent and long-lasting. Again, there is a tradeoff, the more focus on money, the longer the work hours, and the less social connection.

And it is not just wide spread but also deep social connection. The high level of SWB in Latin America, including Colombia, is supported by a key SWB predictor: strong affective relationships. In Latin America, the strength of the affective relationships of its people and the ties they build in the communities are one of the primary sources of happiness—SWB in this region has social and affective foundations (Yamamoto 2016, Rojas 2015). High SWB is also predicted by satisfaction with family relationships and a higher frequency of positive emotions. The quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships are pivotal for the region's high levels of

SWB. *Relational wealth*, which encompasses the strength and abundance of close and warm interpersonal relations with family, friends, neighbors, or colleagues, is a strong cultural characteristic in the region. On average, 85% of Latinos report having someone to count on in times of trouble. In some countries like Venezuela, Panama, Argentina, and Costa Rica, more than 90% of people report having a good social support network (Rojas 2019). This is in contrast to developed countries where people report spending only six hours weekly with friends and family, almost half an hour less than in the previous decade (van Zanden et al. 2020).

Freedom is a great human need, perhaps worth dying for. As a movie character Scottish warrior William Wallace put it:

Fight and you may die. Run, and you'll live...at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance—just one chance—to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives but they'll never take our freedom! ([imdb.com/title/tt0112573](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112573))

Colombia scores average on freedom listed earlier as a QOL metric in table 2, but that is one kind of freedom: “freedom from” (negative, objective): be no slave, live in a free country, have no coercion, be free from restrictions/impediments, lack obstacles. But there is another kind of freedom: “freedom to” (positive, subjective): be able to choose, control and direct one's own life, and be in charge. On scale 1-10, world's average is about 7; the legendary land of the free, the US, scores higher at 7.7, but Colombia scores higher yet at 8 (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2014, 2015). The US does have many freedoms, but Colombians (and Mexicans, too) actually do feel more free than people in the US. Arguably one reason for lower feeling of freedom in the US is too much focus on work, money, and consumption. The idea is further elaborated in “Theory of Alienation” section.

### 3.2 Folklore's Theory: Colombia's “Good Energy”

Folklore theory is an attractive explanation of fool's paradise (table 4). It is a theory put forth by Veenhoven as a competing explanation to his livability theory as discussed in the last section. The folklore theory states that happiness is a product of culture—tradition, national character and widely held notions about life determine one's happiness (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). Happiness is the reflection of broadly held perceptions about life which are rooted in traditions and the culture of a society (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). If a culture has an optimistic outlook on life regardless of circumstances, future generations will remain positive. Thus, a society may be happy, regardless of the socioeconomic situation, because of cultural influences (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). In other words, one can wear pink glasses and be happy no matter the circumstances (or see through dark lenses, have a bleak outlook and be unhappy no matter the circumstances). This is in sharp contrast to livability theory, where happiness is a result of a person's experience, satisfaction of her needs.

A Peruvian social psychologist specializing in happiness argues that the origins of Latin happiness can be traced to:

the minimalist well-being lessons of Andean and Amazonian small traditional communities which constitute the grounds of

Latin American happiness, a life style that mimics the ancestral environment, the deep nature where the happiness brain wiring occurred; a physical and social environment that naturally activates the brain pleasure circuits. Culture resembles evolutionary needs; resources to achieve needs are available for everyone; positive, interdependent collectivistic interaction is ingrained in behavior, supporting, working, competing, and sharing. (Yamamoto 2016, p.45)

Then Colombian happiness is due to tradition and culture (folklore theory), but notably at the same time happiness stems from satisfying one's needs (livability theory) as tradition and culture fit human needs. This is a key point: while in principle folklore theory is in contrast to livability theory (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995), in practice, in specific cases, the two theories do not have to be contradictory. If tradition and culture help satisfy human needs, as is the case in Latin America, the two theories are not contradictory.

There is an indigenous concept of "Buen Vivir" (Good Living) (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017), similar to Aristotelian "Eudamonia"—both emphasize harmony and community. Buen Vivir is also about environment and food sovereignty, and it arguably contributes to SWB in Colombia, as it does in Ecuador (Guardiola and García-Quero 2014). Notably, Buen Vivir helps to explain an apparent fool's paradise—economic poverty is relative—it depends on a specific way of life. For instance, households that grow their own food and are in an indigenous community depend less on money to be happy (García-Quero and Guardiola 2018). Likewise, kibbutzniks (Morawetz et al. 1977) and Amish (Surowiecki 2005) are able to be happy despite being poor. Francis Marquez, an indigenous Colombian vice president, proposed a similar concept to Buen Vivir, "Vivir Sabroso," to live in harmony with nature, traditions, and community: "vivir sabroso no es vivir con plata, vivir sabroso es vivir sin miedos" ("living tasty is not living with money, living tasty is living without fear.")

The folklore theory is about national disposition/trait/character. It does appear that Colombians have a slow-paced familial/social cheerful/happy disposition, which is conducive for happiness. Colombian happiness is arguably real, however, rather than just being due to cognitive cultural norms, wearing pink glasses. And again, it is not just due to culture on its own, rather due to culture that is aligned with human needs and satisfies them, so that the environment is livable (livability theory).

Colombians celebrate over 3,000 festivals or carnivals in small towns or large cities and have about 20 holidays per year. Folklore and carnivals are part of the festive character of the country. The government uses them as tools to promote reconciliation and build social fabric and identity (Gutiérrez and Cunin 2006). In Colombia, following a robust pattern in Latin America, collectivist values are ingrained in the culture (Mensing 2002). Family is at the center of collective values, close friends follow, and in the exterior layer are neighbors and the community. This interdependent collectivism is at the core of Latin American happiness (Yamamoto 2016).

Proper treatment of the folklore theory is left for future research as authors' anthropological and historical expertise is limited—but we discuss below popular explanations for Colombia's happiness—future research can test them properly and systematically. Two accounts are informative: Bargent (2016) and Wallace (2017).

According to an Englishman living in Medellin these are the things that make it happy in Colombia (Bargent 2016): putting most importance on family, friends, and fun—bravado and blind optimism may help, too; having less entitlement and appreciating what one has, having joy in small things, e.g., cheap coffee/alcohol are just fine; not worrying and not expecting much ("tranquilo," "no importa").<sup>6</sup>

Bargent (2016) wonders further that in Colombia emotions change seamlessly and effortlessly between shame and pride, despair and hope, sorrow and happiness—but shouldn't they? Isn't being natural, simple, and easy-going a good thing? As opposed to the US, where one is supposed to pretend to just be perfect, happy, and busy working as in "American Beauty" movie. Surface acting (faking emotions that are deemed appropriate) is emotionally draining (Brooks 2022).

Wallace (2017) offers many illustrative quotes by Colombians and about Colombians:

Money is nice but it's not the most important thing. In general we are a culture that values what you have. [...] Colombians are innocent. They're curious. [...] Colombians have become indifferent to situations of war. In other words, if the problem does not touch me directly, I must feel grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky. [...] Colombians have always demonstrated incredible, Herculean and powerful resilience to war, death and to the harsh history of violence and diplomatic failures [...] Colombians feed this resilience through human connections and the communal experience. [...] We live for parties, holidays [...] The dance frees you. It is a way of expression and feeling. Here the music is carried in the blood, in the veins, in our heart. It's a great passion we carry throughout our lives.

### 3.3 Theory of Alienation

Colombians are refreshingly connected, surprisingly so as from Western point of view. Indeed, there appears to be a chasm between Latin connection/integration and Western alienation/estrangement. The contrast strikes us as pointing to Marx's alienation theory.

"Alienation is the transformation of people's own labor into a power which rules them" ([marxists.org/subject/alienation](http://marxists.org/subject/alienation)). Alienation means separation of a person from the conditions of meaningful agency—a typical situation is when a person does not own means of production—such a person is only an appendage of a machine (Horowitz 2022). The overall alienation consists of alienation from: the product of labor, the activity of labor, one's own specific humanity, and others/society.<sup>7</sup>

In Colombia there is a human factor, good energy that we have lost in the West (Freud et al. 1930). It arguably does appear that the US (and the West) has given up some humanity to win the economic race. Colombia (and Latin America) gave up less humanity, remained happy, but lost the economic race (hasn't dominated the world economically). Fischer (1973, p.233) made an

<sup>6</sup>Bargent (2016) observes: "Colombia violence and cruelty became frighteningly routine"—indeed people can get used to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978), and even though the violence is frequent, it used to be even more prevalent in the 80s and 90s—and happiness can be produced through relative advantage or improvement (Michalos 1985).

<sup>7</sup>For elaboration see Horowitz (2022) and [marxists.org/subject/alienation](http://marxists.org/subject/alienation).

useful observation on large cities: urbanites pay “the emotional price for economic wellbeing”—likewise, we argue, so do Americans, Singaporeans, and other rich societies—as elaborated in “the US: Fool’s Hell?” and “Singapore: Fool’s Hell?” sections.

Colombians’ attitude and approach to life is spontaneous unbridled joy—similar to what Marcuse and Fromm advocated (and what has been lost in the West) (Marcuse 2015, Fromm 2013, 2012, 1964, [1941] 1994), also reminiscent of Nietzsche’s ideal of a child—curious, spontaneous, creative, and innocent (Nietzsche 1896). It is present time orientation—not living in the past or worrying about future, happy-go-lucky free spirit without shame or guilt—in sharp contrast to the West, where anxiety and calculating attitude prevail.

On the other hand, perhaps Latin culture simply could be just culture of poverty (Banfield 1967, 1974) that leads to poor development. Yet, not caring too much can be actually what is needed for much of a society in the West—see wonderfully refreshing Manson (2015).

The US way of life is unnaturally fast and mostly about money (Easterlin 1973), aka “busyness” (being busy with work all the time is very desirable) (Gershuny 2005, Musk 2018). The US way of life is also full of stress, anxiety, and alienation even outside of work and money pursuit. Another source of stress and anxiety may be a need to keep up with the Joneses, and the constant drive to excel in everything, be perfect (Frank 2012, Manson 2015)—so well portrayed in “American Beauty” and “Crash” movies. Excellence is pervasive, e.g., Plano TX, has on its official logo “City Of Excellence” ([planochamber.org/about-plano/](http://planochamber.org/about-plano/)), Rutgers University is a place “where excellence is earned” ([rutgers.edu/excellence](http://rutgers.edu/excellence).)

But excellence or perfection is not human, on the contrary, to err is human. Pursuit of perfection/excellence generates arms race and constantly raises the bar, creating even more stress and anxiety in a vicious cycle, and there can only be one or a handful of winners in any race (Frank 2012, Manson 2015). In addition to stress and anxiety, shame and guilt are arguably created as well.

Yet another source of stress and anxiety is quantity and quality of social relationships—in the US, a highly capitalistic society, social relationships are about business, not about actual meaningful social contact (Horowitz 2022, Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020). As compared to calculating and fake Americans, Colombians are spontaneous, innocent, closer to human nature, and more real. Colombians do not pay much attention to economics and politics; life is more about family, friends, and fun (Martínez 2017, Martínez and Short 2020).

In Cali, the third largest Colombian city, over 1,200 residents are surveyed each year since 2014 about what matters for their SWB (Martínez 2017, Martínez and Short 2020). What matters the most are family and personal relations. Very few consider politics, corruption, or other adverse external circumstances in their inner wellbeing assessments (Martínez 2017, Martínez and Short 2020). Hence, the poor livability by some indicators affects happiness less, as less attention is being paid to these adverse circumstances.

Colombians appear to be full of agency in contrast to alienated Americans Scitovsky (1976), Duany et al. (2001), Leonard (2010), Chomsky (2009), Wheeler (2015). For instance, in Colombia, pull over from the road and right there on a roadside you get a friendly personal cup of coffee. In the US, you can go to a Starbucks that feels like a hospital or an airport—robotic and inhuman.<sup>8</sup> Starbucks

<sup>8</sup>If you are from a developed country, you probably protest the proposition and think that Starbucks is friendlier, warmer and cozier than a hospital. Then

workers (McDonald's, etc) do seem to be alienated both from the product and the activity—they have no freedom, autonomy or latitude over the product and almost none over labor (there are strict procedures that must be followed).

Same holds for other chains that dominate the US, and could be extended to other businesses, delivery for instance. US Amazon drivers have cameras and motion detectors in a truck, and to meet the quota sometimes have to urinate in the bottle (Moyer 2022). Similarly in warehouses, workers are wearing a bracelet with GPS, and to meet the quota sometimes have to restore to painkillers that are freely available from dispensaries throughout the warehouse (Streifeld and Kantor 2015, Guendelsberger 2019). What else could be a better example of a loss of humanity or de-humanization than a human wearing a bracelet with GPS eating painkillers and working alongside robots in a giant warehouse? Movie fiction is becoming reality—see "Elysium" ([imdb.com/title/tt1535108](http://imdb.com/title/tt1535108)). Of course, not all workers suffer in such dire conditions, but this is arguably the trend. If innovative and efficient Amazon does it, others are likely to follow, or be out of business. In Colombia, on the contrary, much of delivery is informal—often a person on a motorcycle who has plenty of autonomy and freedom over the execution of her job. In fact, about half of the Colombian economy or more is informal (cited in Hurtado 2016).<sup>9</sup>

And there are two other types of alienation: from oneself and society—if one performs highly specialized tasks in a repetitive fashion for long hours (most of the US workforce), one becomes alienated from herself and the society. This can be easily observed after working hours—the US workers are like ghosts without much life in them and without much interaction (Putnam 2001, Duany et al. 2001). Colombians, on the other hand, are not alienated—their life is about family, friends, and fun, not about money—less money orientation, less alienation (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020).

As per livability theory (Veenhoven 2014), society is a system to satisfy human needs, but there are multiple serious discontents of the Western society and many human needs are suppressed and not satisfied (Freud et al. 1930). Notably highly capitalistic societies, such as the US, serve to satisfy the capitalists, rather than the working people (Marx [1867] 2010).

Yet so far the alternatives to capitalism such as communism did have failed spectacularly say as in Soviet Union and continue to fail in Venezuela and elsewhere. Still, what about fully automated luxury communism (Bastani 2019)?

There are many great things about the West and especially the US: vibrant international melting pot—Colombia may be a microcosm of Latin America, but the US may be a microcosm of the World; relative lack of (crude) corruption, working independent courts, un-corrupt law enforcement, abundance of goods and services (not that need that much for livability), and arguably the biggest advantage: some of the highest wages in the world.

Still, the bottomline is that alienation is not worth the money, unless perhaps it's millions of US dollars in annual salary. But even well paid jobs, so called “6 figure salary jobs” (100k-1m USD) are arguably not worth it as argued by many who quit such a

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you should go to a developing country, non-tourist destination (no Cartagena, no Cancun, etc) and spend time with locals for at least few months.

<sup>9</sup>Workers in the informal sector are less happy (Hurtado et al. 2017). This would contradict the alienation hypothesis, but it doesn't take into account confounders such as lower pay, lack of benefits and instability.

job and became much happier without the good paycheck but without alienation—for example see one such persuasive account (from Singapore, fool's hell): [youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_D4yJavp8M](https://youtube.com/watch?v=S_D4yJavp8M).

### 3.4 Singapore: Fool's Hell?

A useful counterexample to Colombia's "fool's paradise" is a "fool's hell"—a place that has high objective quality of life or livability, but low subjective wellbeing or life satisfaction.

Singapore, Switzerland of Asia, is impeccably clean, extremely stable/predictable/disciplined and safe (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022). Singapore, by many standards, is one of the best, if not the best place in the world. It has the world's 3rd highest (after Qatar and Luxembourg) Gross Domestic Product per Capita Purchasing Power Parity adjusted (IMF 2017). It has also the 3rd highest (after Monaco and Japan) life expectancy (Central Intelligence Agency 2017), 2nd highest economic freedom (Heritage 2017). Singaporean children score highest on educational tests (Coughlan 2016), it is making greatest progress in health (Fullman et al. 2017), has the world's fastest internet (McSpadden 2015), and 2nd best roads (World Economic Forum 2017). It even has the world's strongest passport (Chandran 2017). In short, one could say that Singapore is one of most livable places in the world, if not the very most livable. Singapore's life satisfaction rank is 68/160 (WDH). Again, Colombia is ranked 3/160.

Being impeccably clean, extremely disciplined and safe can hamper positive freedom (Singapore scores 7 v Colombia's 8 in WVS) and ultimately happiness. For instance, no smoking in Singapore—but cigars help a great deal in the struggle of life (Freud).<sup>10</sup> No marijuana, no gum chewing, and a list of prohibitions continues (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022).

### 3.5 the US: Fool's Hell?

The US, the world-renowned "best country in the world,"<sup>11</sup> home to the American dream, notably the very richest (per capita) country in the world (excluding small countries such as Norway), ranks 46/160 in WDH—the "best country in the world" doesn't even rank in the top happiness quartile. This indicates fool's hell, the opposite of the Colombian mismatch of QOL and SWB. Except that, also as in Colombia's case, there is arguably better match between QOL and SWB than the rankings show, because there are non-commodity components such as personal freedom and social connection that need to be taken into account. Colombia is actually quite livable and so it is happy, and the US actually is not that livable, and hence not that happy.

One would imagine that the US must have top income mobility in the world or surely somewhere near the top, it is after all the

<sup>10</sup> "Smoking is one of the greatest and cheapest enjoyments in life, and if you decide in advance not to smoke, I can only feel sorry for you," "[Cigars have] served me for precisely fifty years as protection and a weapon in the combat of life ... I owe to the cigar a great intensification of my capacity to work and a facilitation of my self-control." Per Freud see <https://www.freud.org.uk/2020/04/22/freud-and-his-cigars/> and Elkin (1994). Of course, as with everything, moderation should be exercised, for instance, smoking more than 2 cigars a day increases probability of health problems much more than smoking 2 cigars or fewer, and while some studies find no health effects of smoking 2 cigars or fewer, some studies find negative effects (e.g., Chang et al. 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Many people living in the US hold such a view—national pride tends to be high in the US ([worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-patriotic-countries](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/most-patriotic-countries)). And the US government under Trump also often tends to subscribe to such a view.

country of the American Dream where hard work results in success better than elsewhere. But many other countries actually have “more realistic dreams” than the US—for instance, it is easier to make it in Norway, Denmark, or Finland (Corak 2004, 2011, 2013, Economist 2013, 2012b,a). In terms of mobility, the US is somewhat like a Fool’s Paradise—people and especially immigrants think it is a paradise—you work hard, and you go to the top, but it is actually easier in other countries.

In the US, pursuit of money and pursuit of happiness are about the same thing (Easterlin 1973). But we know that a lot of money does not buy much happiness, and if anything, excessive pursuit of it, such as that in the US, may actually decrease happiness (Kasser 2016, Dittmar et al. 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005, Kasser 2003, Schmuck et al. 2000, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Leonard 2010). Arguably the major culprit is consumerism—in the US one can make a good living, make a good salary, the problem is people spend it on stuff they don’t need and end up on the hamster wheel.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The origin of the study has been the apparent paradox in the data of high happiness despite low livability. Conceptually and theoretically the article has followed and built on Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life (2000) and Michalos 2 variable theory (Michalos 2014), livability and folklore theories (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995, Veenhoven 2014), and Marx’s theory of alienation ([marxists.org/subject/alienation](http://www.marxists.org/subject/alienation)). In terms of specific happiness literature in Latin America we have especially built on “Handbook of Happiness Research in Latin America” by Rojas (2015) with chapters by Hurtado (2016), Velásquez (2016), Yamamoto (2016). The contribution has been to combine the above conceptual and theoretical approaches to offer new insights about high happiness despite apparently low livability in Colombia. In the process, we have contrasted Colombia against the US and West to learn happiness lessons from Colombia for the US and West.

Is Colombia “unlivable” but “happy,” a so called “fool’s paradise”? Arguably not. Colombia is a genuinely wonderful deeply familial/social place as many locals and travelers would attest (e.g., Roos 2019, Wallace 2017, Davies 2022). Colombians don’t seem to be weighted down by civilization and its discontents (Freud et al. 1930), or ghosts of the past (Pile 2005b,a).

The conclusion is that Colombia is not only one of the happiest countries, but also arguably quite livable. Surely many QOL metrics point to Colombia’s real and serious problems such as poverty and inequality, but at the same time Colombians enjoy great advantages such as positive freedom and social connection.

Only apparently great happiness is somehow possible in unlivable conditions. We enumerated earlier Colombia’s unlivable conditions (table 2), metrics that are mostly economic, some legal/institutional, and physical infrastructure. But these parameters are not the only ones that matter—there are other qualities that matter for human flourishing or happiness. Despite all the problems with poverty, roads, corruption, etc, Colombia arguably is a quite livable place. An important and often overlooked point is that given very basic

level of economic development and material comfort has already been achieved, the further focus on money and material comfort can actually be counterproductive and result in a less human friendly place. Colombians have a wonderful, joyful, stress-less, and spontaneous way of life, and they feel free and are socially connected. We can learn from Colombia.

#### 4.1 Takeaway for Policy and Practice

The world has much to learn from Colombia how to be happy. This paper argues that Colombia is one of the very best countries to visit, and it may even be one of the best places to live.

In contrast to Colombia, we have set forth a number of criticisms about the West, and especially the US, notably alienation. We think that this is a key lesson and area for improvement. The US and West needs to realize its alienation and learn from Colombia about what has been lost in the West (alienation is due to mass industrialization and rampant capitalism that are relatively recent, several generations).

In sharp contrast to Colombia—there is the great American alienation—a key point is that most Americans don't even seem to realize at all, give it the slightest thought, and question the status quo and current way of life—until perhaps when it's too late and one is on a deathbed wishing to have been less alienated (Ware 2012). A trip to a place like Colombia may be necessary to open one's eyes—when you change place, you change optics. For instance, it is clear from figure 1 that Philadelphia is built for big business or capitalists, and Cali is built for people. Figure 1 contrasts main public transit stations. In Cali it is much easier to interact, relax, sit down, buy food, find a local bus or taxi.<sup>12</sup> This is a specific lesson for the US from Colombia: to reorient its physical infrastructure from made-for-business, formal, and awe-inspiring to made-for-people informal, practical, cozy, friendly, and relaxed. Do note that many people would actually say (before reading this article) that progress/development is to make Cali more like Philadelphia. The mainstream Western ideal is Plano TX, Singapore, Dubai, etc: impeccably clean, organized, and excellent with perfect, formal, and awe-inspiring physical infrastructure. It is like proposing a golden cage for a lion, but no matter the amount of gold, the lion is still happier in its natural environment that fits its needs (livability theory).

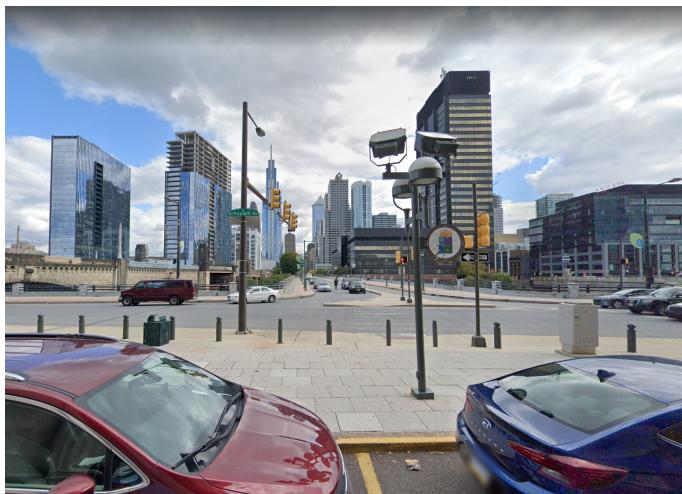
Related, there is great Western materialism, consumerism, and obsession with status, money, and material consumption (Leonard 2010, Frank 2012). In theory we know that material comfort is not everything (Stiglitz et al. 2009), spending on experience such as social connection contributes more to happiness than spending on material possessions (Ware 2012, Van Boven 2005, Kumar et al. 2014, Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014), and indeed what may be needed in the West is economic degrowth, not growth (Kallis et al. 2012, Kallis 2011). This Western materialism, consumerism, and obsession with status and money is in contrast to and arguably at the expense of social connection, positive freedom, and unbridled spontaneous joy that characterize Colombia. This is another lesson

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<sup>12</sup>It is getting worse in Colombia, however—notably the urban landscape is being Westernized with commercial centers "centro comercial" (Western-like malls). Villages are still spared.

**Figure 1:** Getting out of the city's main transportation hub (Google Maps). (Zoom in to see the details.)

(a) Philadelphia 30th st station



(b) Cali's terminal de transporte



from Colombia.

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# ONLINE APPENDIX

for convenience appended here [but note: this section will NOT be a part of the final version of the manuscript, but will be available as online appendix instead]

## 1 Universality of the Research Results and the Limitations

The arguments and results presented here likely generalize to some degree to other Latin countries, as there are many similarities across the continent, perhaps especially the Caribbean—there may be “Caribbean energy.” Ecuador’s energy, for instance, seems more flat. So perhaps a part of the Colombian happiness magic mixture is climate and topography—one direction for future research.<sup>1</sup>

Still, even within Colombia, there are important differences. Colombia is a diverse country partly at least due to poor roads connecting remote areas. And likewise, the most connected city,<sup>2</sup> Bogota, the capital, is actually quite different from the rest of the Colombia, more Western, more alienated.

Colombia is westernizing as tourism has been booming and foreign capital flowing, e.g., as seen in multiple tourist destinations throughout the country and commercial centers (*centro comercial*).

This paper argues Colombian and possibly wider Latin American effect on happiness. Future research can disentangle what it actually is about Colombia that results in happiness. We have hypothesized a number of factors, notably social connection and positive freedom. Moreno (2013) lists various hypotheses as to happiness predictors in Colombia that could be used in the future research: biodiversity, climate diversity, plenty of festivals/holidays, healthy lifestyle and food, dancing. Furthermore, future research could disentangle happy Colombians from unhappy Colombians—despite very high average happiness of 8.5 out of 10, some Colombians are unhappy—who are they and what makes it miserable in the paradise?

Limitations of the present research are explored in the following subsection.

### 1.1 Alternative Explanations and Counterarguments

The proposition of “fool’s paradise” in Colombia may have some merit. The concept of “fool’s paradise” is related to the concept of “ignorance is a bliss.” Likewise, perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia—see online appendix for discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>There are studies on climate and happiness (e.g., Rehdanz and Maddison 2005), and some topographical features such as body of water (White et al. 2013), but we need more.

<sup>2</sup>By far the largest airport and multitude of highways.

The survey data does show that Colombians living in Colombia and making Colombian salary are very happy on average. But would they still be happy if they knew life, salary, and opportunities in the West, say in the US. Would they stay in Colombia if they could easily move? Is ignorance a bliss? Is it paradise only because people don't know any better?

We argue that livability is mostly good enough in Colombia, but this is with a caveat—as long as the problems are not extreme, and in Colombia they sometimes are. For instance, mediocre or relatively poor road condition does not hamper human flourishing much, but extremely bad condition such as a falling bridge does create great unhappiness. Same with poverty—one can live happily on very little, indeed be poor by western standards, without hot water, without car, etc, but abject poverty such as malnutrition does create great unhappiness. There is considerable abject poverty in Colombia, and no amount of nature, festivals, or cheerfulness can help with it. If the malnourished in abject poverty among rampant crime are even only moderately happy, this is indeed “fool's paradise.” (Still, such extreme un-livability is not typical of Colombia; it is minority).

Colombians, especially those in poor and isolated areas, may not know about good/comfortable life, may not realize the possibilities and opportunities in the West (or any rich area such as Singapore). For instance, inhabitants of poor municipalities in the Choco are happy to know only that environment in which they were born and raised, but when they know and live in other municipalities with greater socio-economic development their demands and expectations increase (Muñoz-Cardona 2018). Many poor may be relatively segregated and isolated into their neighborhoods, not knowing better, and thus being satisfied with little what they have. Similarly, poor women in rural China were happy, and only became unhappy once they became exposed to higher standard of living (Rosenthal 1999).

Resilience may be reinforcing fool's paradise. Curiously, Martínez and Short (2020) reports that in Cali residents in the poorest districts were satisfied with their lives,<sup>3</sup> and speculates that it may be so due to the high resilience of this population being affected by crime, poor health, and insufficient provision of public goods. It may be similar at country level, Colombia was ravaged by largest civil conflict in Latin America and drug-trafficking related violence in 80s and 90s (Martínez and Short 2020), and now while still poor and unsafe as compared to the West, it is much better than 30-50 years ago, and the terror it went through might have made it resilient.

Adaptation is strong in Latin America, for instance poor people such as peasants can be happy because of adaptation; crime and corruption decrease happiness, but less so when they are more prevalent—people adapt (Graham 2009). Adaptation (Brickman et al. 1978) can help explain at least a part of the Colombian paradox of high subjective wellbeing despite objective problems such as poverty and crime—humans are able to adapt to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978). Perhaps, Colombians have adapted, at least to some degree, to poverty, inequality, and even violence having suffered through recent civil war and breakdown of the state—now that things are better than they used to be just few decades ago, Colombians are making best out of the conditions. In other words, the sources of Colombian happiness may be also resilience, positive outlook, ability to make out most of little.

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<sup>3</sup>Likewise, in general, Colombian poor are happy—In the poorest income quintile life satisfaction was above 8 on a 10-point scale (Hurtado 2016).

In the West, and especially in the US, materialism and consumerism are so extremely rampant and widespread that they are not even noticed (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, Ware 2012)—equating happiness with money is a norm (Easterlin 1973). So then it appears unthinkable to the Westerners that not a wealthy country such as Colombia can be very happy. For instance, Graham and Pettinato (2002) and Graham (2012) wonder about paradox of happy peasants v frustrated millionaires—but is it that unexpected? Graham argues adaptation—the poor have adapted to their miserable lot and are happy with little they have. But so do the rich adapt: “the more one has the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs” (Durkheim [1895] 1950), or “wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame” (Schopenhauer).

There is plenty of theory why a peasant would be happy (notably contact with nature) and there is empirical evidence, too (e.g., Miñarro et al. 2021). There is actually less theory arguing that a millionaire would be happy—only neoclassical economic theory would predict that only money matters and always the more the better (Rayo and Becker 2007, Autor 2010).

The reasoning is sometimes, especially among the economists, that there must be something wrong with happiness measure (e.g., Deaton 2013, Stevenson and Wolfers 2013, 2009, Glaeser et al. 2014, 2016), or with Latinos (paradox of happy peasants, fool’s paradise, etc). It simply seems wrong that with little money there may be great happiness. But again, we actually do know that a lot of money is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness, and indeed excessive pursuit of money, such as that prevalent in the US, may kill happiness (Kasser 2016, Dittmar et al. 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005, Kasser 2003, Schmuck et al. 2000, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Leonard 2010).

While degrading SWB to a commodity item in utility function probably only makes sense to economists: “happiness is a commodity in the utility function in the same way that owning a car and being healthy are” (Becker and Rayo 2008, p. 89), still, happiness is not everything. Then Colombia may be as well happier than the US, but the utility may be higher in the US (as there are more commodities). And this could help explaining how people vote with their feet—it is Colombians (and Latinos) who flock to the US (and the West), and not the other way round. Although recently there is a significant movement in the other direction—see online appendix for a brief discussion.

Perhaps, one reason for lower life satisfaction in the US (v Colombia) is that there are more regrets as there are more opportunities (the pond is bigger and it’s more difficult to be a big fish)—similarly as urban (v rural) life tends to result in more regrets (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2024). Likewise, expectations or aspirations may be higher in the US v Colombia, and they decrease happiness as per equation: *happiness = experience or achievement – expectations or aspirations*. Colombians’ happiness seem to depend less on economics, politics and external affairs in general; rather it is about family and personal relations (Martínez and Short 2020).

How much Colombian happiness is about a person and how much about environment? For instance, are Colombian immigrants in the US happy? Does it help if they live in a Colombian enclave? And the other migration side—are Westerners happy in Colombia, and

does it hurt if they are mostly around other Westerners?<sup>4</sup>

A big question and an elephant in the room remains. If Colombia (and Latin America) are so great, why Colombians and Latinos flock in the droves to the West, notably the US? And those who stay—is ignorance a bliss, are they wearing pink glasses?

A preliminary short answer we offer is that people simply are not informed well, both Colombians and Latinos flocking to the West, and Westerners staying away from Colombia and Latin America.<sup>5</sup> The perception of Western livability or quality of life is overrated and that in Colombia and Latin America are underrated—livability metrics overemphasize material comfort and undervalue experience.

### 1.1.1 Who Would Move Where?

Much further research needed, especially in terms of systematic and deeper approaches—here the goal was to paint a broad picture.

A big question remaining is who would move where, ie if a person had reasonable information and opportunity to chose a place to live—would a better choice be the West, e.g., the US, or Latin America, e.g., Colombia. Ideally actual moving should be measured, not self-reported plans or ideas as it is likely to be biased especially if a person haven't actually experienced life in both countries.

There is obviously large migration from Latin America to the US, and surely more people want to come to the US than leave it, but this doesn't mean that the US is the best place to live—people mostly come to the US for the money, not necessarily for quality of life.

Indeed recent media reports argue the opposite—people are leaving the US for Latin America for better quality of life there, eg Californians and others are moving to Mexico; and anecdotal evidence—many westerners fall in love with Colombia.

So while presumably many Colombians would like to move to the US, and not many Americans would like to move to Colombia, it should be noted that indeed many Westerners, from better objective conditions, do move to Colombia.

To provoke discussion and spark research, these are only speculations so far.

## 2 Subjective Wellbeing Defined; And Explored Across Countries

Again, the body of the paper have used evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction as opposed to affective happiness, positive and negative affects/emotions, or Eudaimonia/flourishing/functioning. But here we offer an extended discussion and auxiliary points.

The most general definition of wellbeing refers to people's feelings, experiences, and perceptions of their overall quality of life, including the positive and negative assessments people make of their lives and how they interpret their experiences (OECD 2013). Three measurements are widely accepted: evaluative, affective, and eudaimonic (OECD 2013). The evaluative measurement is commonly

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<sup>4</sup>There are studies on happiness and migration, notably by David Bartram (e.g., Bartram 2014, 2013, 2011), but need more on Latinos and Westerners including their living environment.

<sup>5</sup>Also note that as we argue that people are not informed well, the goal of this paper is both to educate and to spark more research and debate.

used in policy-making discussions and typically uses overall life satisfaction (or Cantril's ladder of life) on a Likert scale (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004). Affect measures focus on measuring emotions (positive and negative) that people feel, like happiness or worry (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). Eudaimonic measures focus on the functioning and fulfillment of the person seeking to capture elements of wellbeing such as autonomy, learning, goal orientation, or purpose in life (Huppert et al. 2008). In this article, we use the concept of *subjective WellBeing (SWB)* to encapsulate the different accepted metrics in the field.

## 2.1 Affective v Cognitive; Hedonia v Eudamonia

"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question." John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (1863)

Overall Subjective WellBeing (SWB) can be broken down into components. Notably, there is affective happiness (feel happy) v cognitive life satisfaction (perceive/evaluate life as satisfying).

The two would overlap/correlate moderately but they are conceptually different—e.g., I am happy at the moment because I see blue sky and eat a tasty burger, but I am dissatisfied with my life because I have no friends, no money, and bad health. Or I can be satisfied with my life as a whole because I have many friends, excellent health, and great job, but I am unhappy now because the weather is bad and my lunch is not tasting good.

Likewise, a typical Scandinavian, say from Iceland, looks grumpy, cold, unfriendly, and rather sad, doesn't talk much, doesn't smile, yet Scandinavians consistently report very high life satisfaction. Latinos report quite high life satisfaction, and are extremely happy: warm, cheerful, friendly.

Another notable distinction is hedonia: more joy and fun than pain and misery (Bentham) v eudamonia: good life, realizing one's potential, becoming who you are (Aristotle, Nietzsche). Perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia. For discussion see Diener (2009), Weijers (2011), Weijers and Jarden (2013), McMahon (2006), Ryff (2014).

## 2.2 Happiness v Life Satisfaction

Colombia is one of the happiest countries in the world, or indeed the happiest (Roos 2019). Colombia scores in top decile in terms of life satisfaction (Scandinavia often (not always) tops the rankings). Yet in terms of emotions and daily life experience: smiling and laughter, respect, enjoyment, worry, sadness and anger: positive daily experiences and emotions, the top countries are: Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Of the 10 countries that rank highest on positive experiences, 7 are Latin American (Roos 2019).

Colombians seem to have warm, welcoming, and unshakable spirit; and they appear resilient—grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky, and even innocent (Wallace 2017).

### 2.3 High Cognitive/Evaluative Life Satisfaction in Scandinavia, and High Affective Happiness in Latin America

Countries where people have better individual and social conditions report greater subjective wellbeing—Scandinavians are closest to achieving the best possible life (Cantril's ladder) (e.g., Helliwell et al. 2020). In addition to the individual conditions of high salaries and basic needs covered, Scandinavia is characterized by the strength of its institutions, respect for civil rights, high interpersonal and institutional trust and social cohesion, low gender gaps and inequality (Martela et al. 2020). Likewise, other high income developed countries tend to be have high life satisfaction. People in developed countries have a greater chance of achieving the best possible life and be satisfied with their lives.

However, when SWB is measured through affective balance (positive and negative emotions), the correlation between GDP per capita and SWB is moderate only (Rojas 2015, 2019). The frequency of positive emotions experienced by people in the developed nations is not as high as one may expect. The positive emotions (such as positive affect and happiness) are often lower in developed countries than in developing countries, especially Latin America. SWB is not only about economic progress. Personal relationships and positive emotions play a significant role (Campbell et al. 1976). Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark, well known for their high living standards and low inequality, increasingly report low happiness. In developed countries in 2020, people report spending only six hours weekly with friends and family, almost half an hour less than in the previous decade; and 1 in 11 people report not having close friends or relatives to count on for help (van Zanden et al. 2020).

## 3 Purchasing Power in Colombia Not That Different From The West

For all of the US economic might, Purchasing Power is not that different—on a minimum wage in Colombia of 1,300 pesos, can rent a studio for 400; and can have a very good meal: soup, meat with starch and salad and juice for 7.

In the US, minimum wage comes out to about the same number but in US dollars: \$1,300. But in the US probably cannot rent a studio for \$400, only a room; and definitely cannot have a good meal at a restaurant for \$7. Housing is the main expense for most people, and food is a critical commodity.

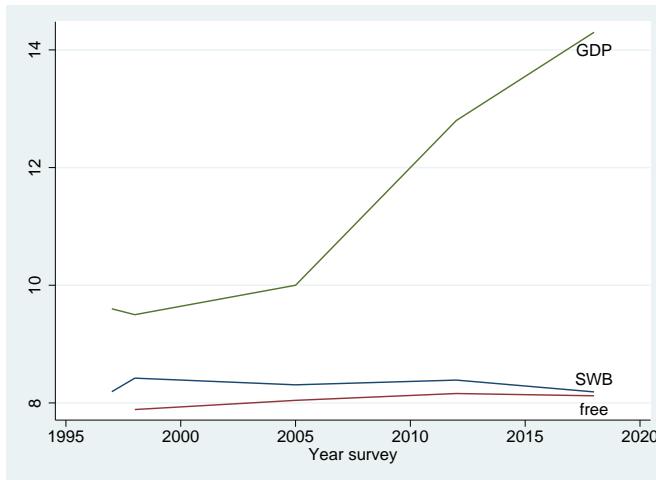
Still, many things are relatively cheaper in the US, for instance a gallon of gas is about \$3; in Colombia it is about 10 pesos. And while restaurant food in the US is expensive and unhealthy, it is possible to buy cheap basic and healthy food at a store.

But the difference in purchasing power is not very large for many commodities and services, which is surprising for all the rhetoric about the US as the best country in the world, and the richest country.

## 4 A Look Over Time

First we have observed a paradox across space (v other countries) of happiness amongst un-livability. Another paradox is within Colombia and over time. There is Easterlin's Paradox—PCGDP went up 50% but SWB remained flat.

We use GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) in thousands <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=CO>— Colombian GDP went up by 50% over 1997-2018. Colombians happiness and feeling of freedom are among the highest in the world, but they did not change over 1997-2018. In Colombia, GDP has no relationship with SWB, i.e., the Easterlin Paradox holds.



**Figure 1:** Easterlin's Paradox

Other metrics improved, too—Gini dropped from 59 in 2000 to 51 in 2019 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POVTGINI/?locations=CO>. About a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day in 2019, but strikingly, that's a progress, it is down from about 2/3 of Colombians in 2000.

## 5 The US v Colombia in Pictures: The More Stuff, The Less Happiness

It is recognized even by some economists that not only commodities matter for wellbeing (e.g., Stiglitz et al. 2009); yet few seem to notice that Latin America shines on non-commodity dimension and that the West should learn from Latin America. Notably social relations, quantity and quality, are arguably the best in the world in Latin America.

World development is typically about dollar amounts and physical stuff: more income, less poverty, more and better roads, more labor force participation and less unemployment and so on. But such focus produces an outcome of a “Lion in a Golden Cage.”<sup>6</sup> The idea is that we focus on the cage, making it expensive and pretty, but we forget about the lion—and no matter how fancy and expensive

<sup>6</sup>I am grateful for this idea to Mariano Rojas at ISQOLS 2023. Any misinterpretation or misunderstanding is mine. Inspiration also comes from Quercia (2014)—the idea is that what matters when traveling is not only speed and distance.

is the cage, lion won't be happy in it.

The point is that the apparent economic or even livability superiority of the US over Colombia actually is mostly economic. And more expensive physical infrastructure doesn't make it more livable and actually can make it less livable.

It is often overlooked point that something less developed economically and cheaper is actually better (happier).

The US infrastructure is great for business or making money, but it is bad for living there. It could be a difficult tradeoff to solve: economic growth v wellbeing, except that a very convincing argument has already been made that we do not need any more economic growth (Kallis et al. 2012, Kallis 2011, Van den Bergh 2011).

The US has this strange obsession with excellence/perfection and productivity, also in terms of built environment apparently thinking that the more ordered, organized, and man-made, the better. But the thinking was not always this way. Thoreau, for instance, was an American (Thoreau 1995 [1854], 1993).

The following are one of the authors own subjective/anecdotal opinions. Note: when picking images I dropped the Google's yellow man more or less randomly only given rural, urban, suburb, toll, etc and took first useful image. I tried to avoid to cherry pick positive and negative imaginary. Comments welcomed! Contact the corresponding author. For best results zoom as much as screen allows.

In fig 2 obvious difference is width, 6 v 2 lanes, and economically 6 beats 2—can move more stuff faster, but assuming the same traffic per lane, it is more interesting and fun or joy to ride on smaller roads.<sup>7</sup> The other less obvious difference is vegetation—around I-95 it is pedigreed nicely trimmed man made fake nature; around 25 it is real wild nature—more happiness there too. In figure 2 the US appears more boring, robotic, and fake (alien-like); all that matters is to get from A to B.<sup>8</sup>.

**Figure 2:** A major road/highway in the middle of nowhere.

(a) US I-95 rural MD, couple miles N of Susquehanna River



(b) Colombian 25 (Pan Americana), between Cali and Popayan



<sup>7</sup>And adding more lanes does not automatically mean less traffic, often on the contrary, people decide to drive more—adding more lanes for traffic is like loosening your belt for obesity (e.g., Duany et al. 2001).

<sup>8</sup>And why not more fun highway, say from rural mountainous Tennessee? Because the contrast is for the flat, dense, developed and wealthy North East—that's where economic productivity thrives. As a side note, keep in mind that 25 is not some small rural road—it's perhaps the most major road in the Americas, the Pan Americana. Picking less major road in the US and less major road in Colombia would not change the contrast much

In fig 3 here we are passing through towns—on 295 through Cherry Hill, but who would have noticed looks the same as I-95 in previous picture, whether rural or urban, there's the same fake nature on the side.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 3:** Passing through a town.

(a) Cherry Hill on 295



(b) El Bordo on 25



In fig 4 we are approaching toll (Del Mem Br)—looks unwelcoming, like an entrance to minimum security prison—can't pull over, rest, eat, or relax. Toll (peaje) on 25 looks better, again natural wild vegetation, can pull over and rest a bit, buy an organic orange.

**Figure 4:** Approaching toll.

(a)



(b)



In fig 5 even toll booth looks little more friendly and welcoming in Colombia.

Last but not least let's hang out in a city in fig 6. Say you are a weary traveler arriving at 30th st station in Philly. You get out of the station, and it's a desert—nowhere to hangout, have to keep walking. You arrive to terminal de transporte in Cali, get out of the building and plenty of places to buy food, drinks, and sit down.

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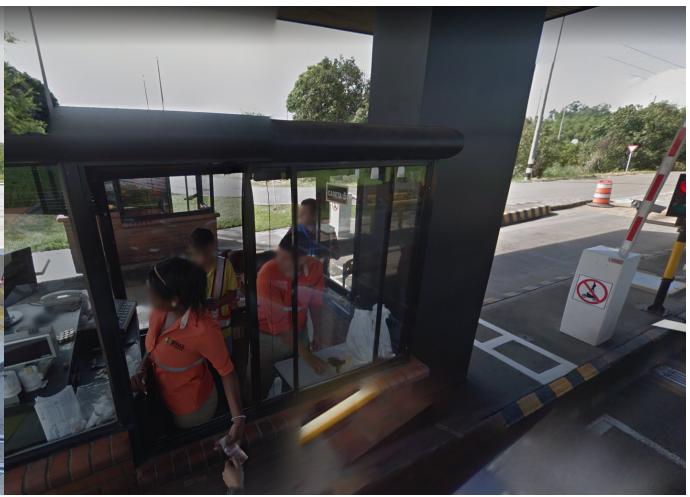
<sup>9</sup>295 not NJ Turnpike, to be conservative, NJ Turnpike is even more fake.

**Figure 5:** Paying toll.

(a) Del Mem Br

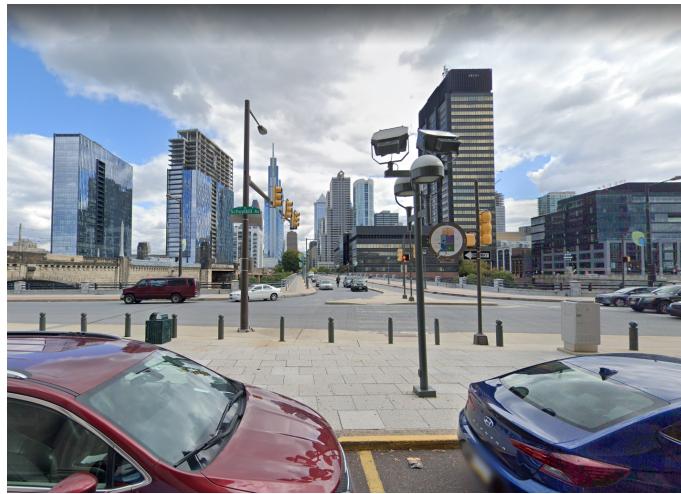


(b) Peaje on 25 south of Cali



**Figure 6:** Getting out of the train station and bus terminal. (Note: no trains in Colombia.)

(a)



(b)



Below are links with geographic coordinates to all pictures so that the reader can locate each of the places discussed above and explore more.

fig 2:

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6003437,-76.0444379,3a,75y,249.22h,83.1t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD6>  
<https://www.google.com/maps/@2.7886904,-76.5521276,3a,75y,177.41h,100.48t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sDBBNlUaixNJL9>

fig 3

[https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUaahWE2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUaahWEkdG9iXbg%26cb\\_client%3Dmaps\\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D108.39489%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192](https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUaahWE2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUaahWEkdG9iXbg%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D108.39489%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192)

[https://www.google.com/maps/@2.1191142,-76.9827811,3a,75y,29.76h,78.92t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLx2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb\\_client%3Dmaps\\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.com/maps/@2.1191142,-76.9827811,3a,75y,29.76h,78.92t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLx2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656)

fig 4

[https://www.google.com/maps/@3.1520675,-76.460229,3a,75y,181.56h,83.61t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s27q\\_DTIQZ3Tc67jR2e0!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.com/maps/@3.1520675,-76.460229,3a,75y,181.56h,83.61t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s27q_DTIQZ3Tc67jR2e0!7i13312!8i6656)

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6962957,-75.5445256,3a,75y,284.53h,94.14t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s6XzK4mx61AETyW2e0!7i16384!8i8192>

fig 5

same as above just move ahead

fig 6

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9556825,-75.1809809,3a,75y,98.3h,91.96t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sx0T6m0Tfk7frupGV2e0!7i16384!8i8192>

<https://www.google.com/maps/@3.4656412,-76.5213045,3a,75y,89.77h,81.78t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sWYCkArtZNxDNuKT2e0!7i13312!8i6656>

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