

# Well-being and Sustainable Development: Relationships, Challenges and Policy Implications

Defra/SDC *well*being conference  
22<sup>nd</sup> May 2007

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# Who are nef?

- An independent UK think-tank (founded 1986)
- Inspired by 3 principles
  1. Ecological Sustainability
  2. Social Justice
  3. People's Well-being
- Well-being programme set up in 2001 to address question: What would policy look like if people's well-being was its aim?
- ***centre for well-being*** - 2006

# Well-being and SD

- What do we mean by well-being?
- Measuring well-being
- Relationships between Well-being and Sustainable Development
- Opportunities and Challenges

What do we mean by “well-being”?



Well-being = The quality of people’s experience of their lives

*WHO definition of health as:*

**dynamic**

*“A ~~state of complete~~ physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity”: 1946*

A 1960s definition of self-esteem...

*“Feeling good AND doing well”*

# Well-being and SD

Different approaches to well-being:

- **Objective** (externally defined 'lists'): Quality of Life; Liveability; Basic needs; Domains
- **Preferences** (revealed wants & desires)
- **Hedonic** (pleasure, emotions, feelings)
- **Evaluative** (cognitive, satisfaction)
- **Aspirational** (development, flourishing)

Paul Dolan

## Well-being data



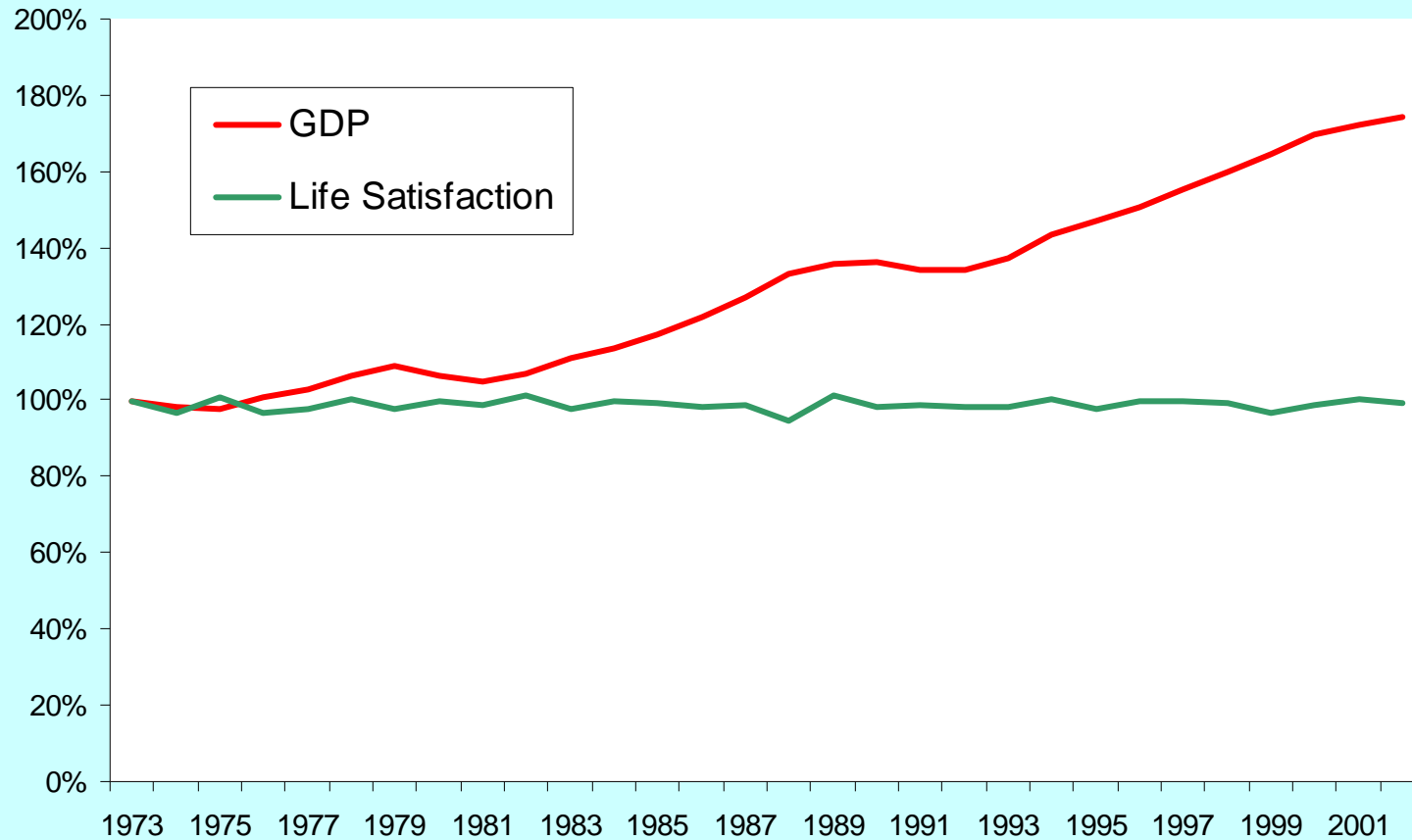
Most data is limited to Life Satisfaction, but it is pretty robust and useful.

- Converges with other measures
- Predicts people's behaviour consistently
- Many predictors are malleable to policy

# GDP and Life Satisfaction



## GDP and Life Satisfaction 1973 - 2002



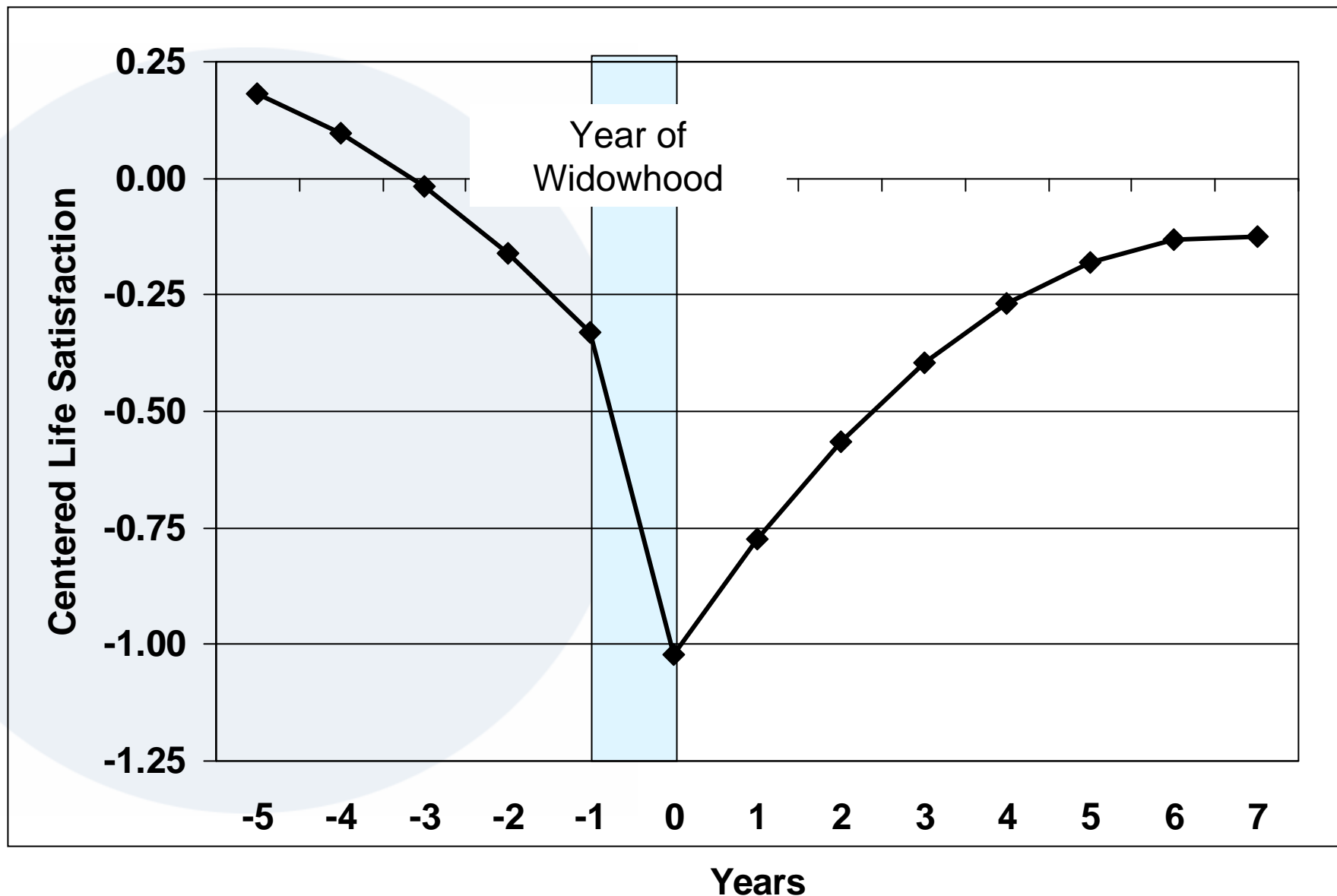
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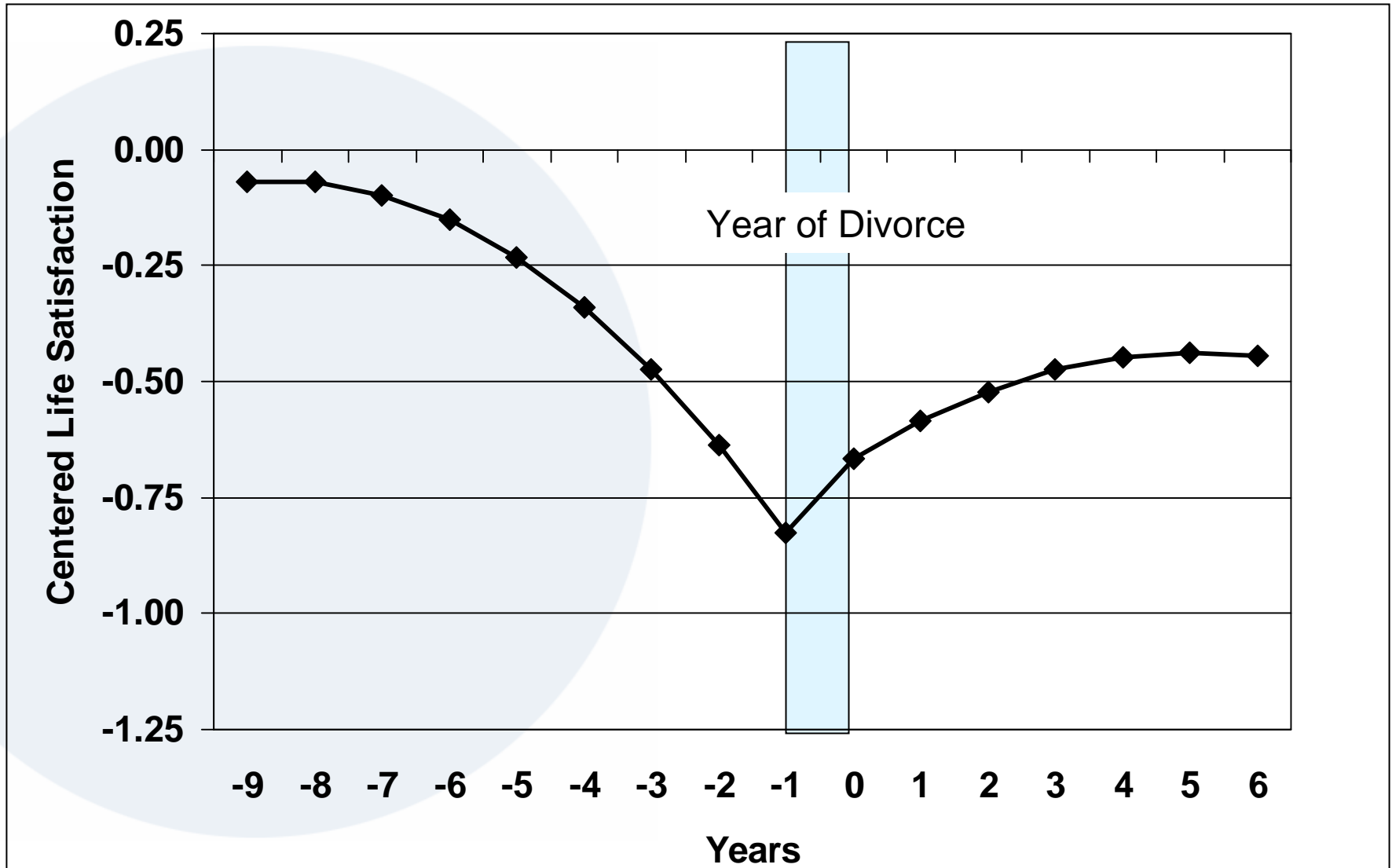
- Converges with other measures
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But note averages 'hide' a lot of variance. Micro-data illuminates this as well as challenging set-point theory & adaptation.

# Micro data: Widowhood and Well-being



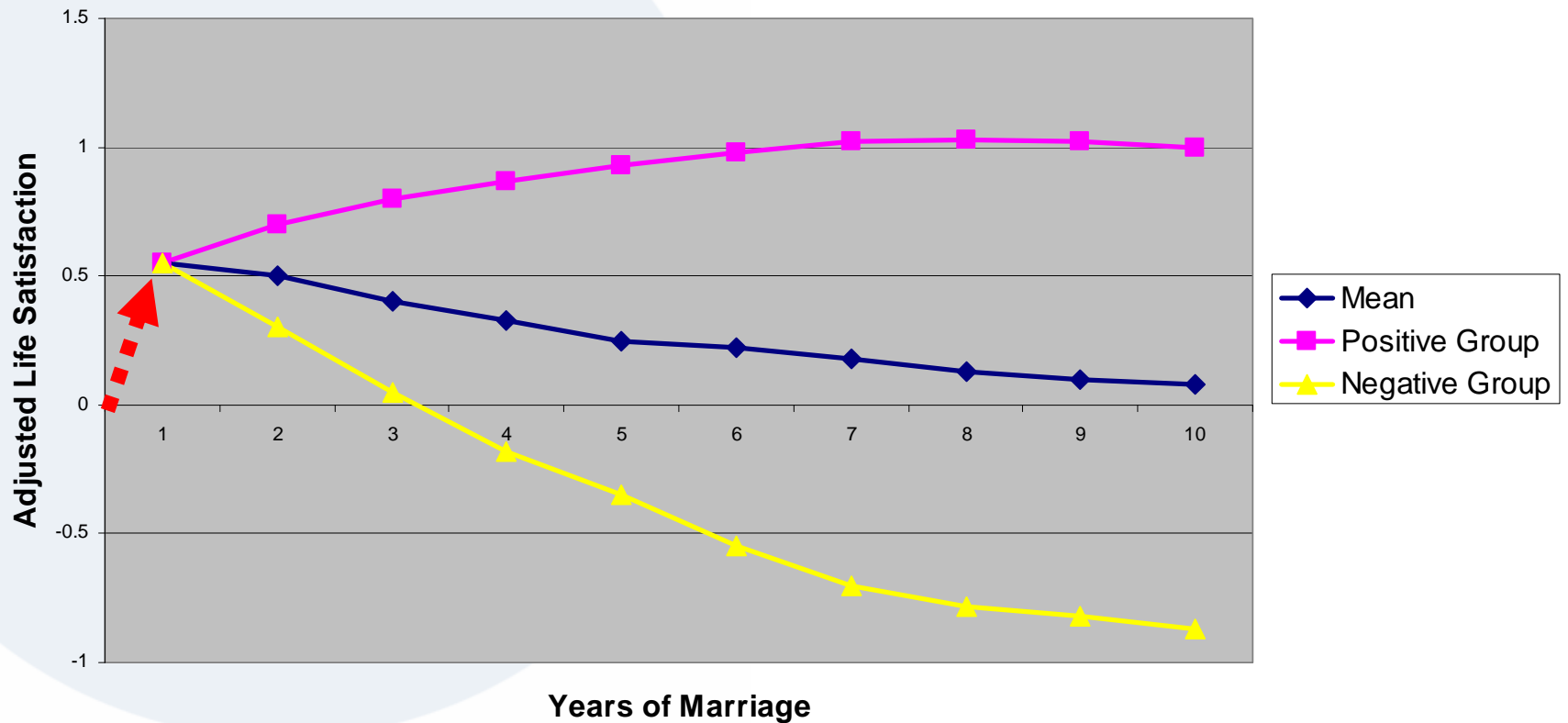
# Micro data: Divorce and Well-being



# Micro data: Marriages and Well-being



## Marriage Paths of Life Satisfaction



# Exploring the current model



- Need for ‘sustainable development’ policy implies that current development model is *unsustainable*.
- Economic theory suggests that rising consumer expenditure is strongly related to individuals’ WB.

# A bleak choice?



- If this is true, and current material consumption is unsustainable, we have a bleak choice:
  - compromised well-being for future generations
  - compromised well-being now due to curtailed consumption opportunities

- A relationship between income and well-being exists for individuals, but it is weak and suffers from marked diminishing returns of personal consumption.
- Some of the effect of income on well-being is a function of relative status effects. At best these are a 'zero sum game', and may have collective negative effects.

## At multiple levels:

- ***Transparent pathways:*** resulting directly from physical and psychological processes and not mediated through attitudes or behaviours.
- ***Semi-transparent pathways:*** Mediated through attitudes and behaviours with directly attributable environmental consequences.
- ***Opaque pathways:*** Mediated through attitudes and behaviours without directly attributable environmental consequences.

# *Transparent pathways*



- Many current and future effects of climate change have a negative impact on physical WB.
- Environmental impacts on psychological WB include:
  - positive effect of contact with green spaces
  - negative effect of airborne pollutants and localised environmental damage
- Some evidence that even minimal access to community parks and gardens in urban areas has a significant impact on sociological variables (e.g. crime rates).

# *Semi-transparent pathways*



- Pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours positively associated with psychological WB.
- Need for personal mobility satisfied through car use and air travel support WB through enhanced autonomy.
- Some resource-intensive behaviours in the home support WB through eliminating unpleasant tasks.

# *Semi-transparent pathways*



- Perceptions of the future may impact on current WELL-BEING and environmental behaviour.
- Prospect of dramatic socio-economic and environmental change may result in maladaptive responses:
  - Denial
  - Fatalism

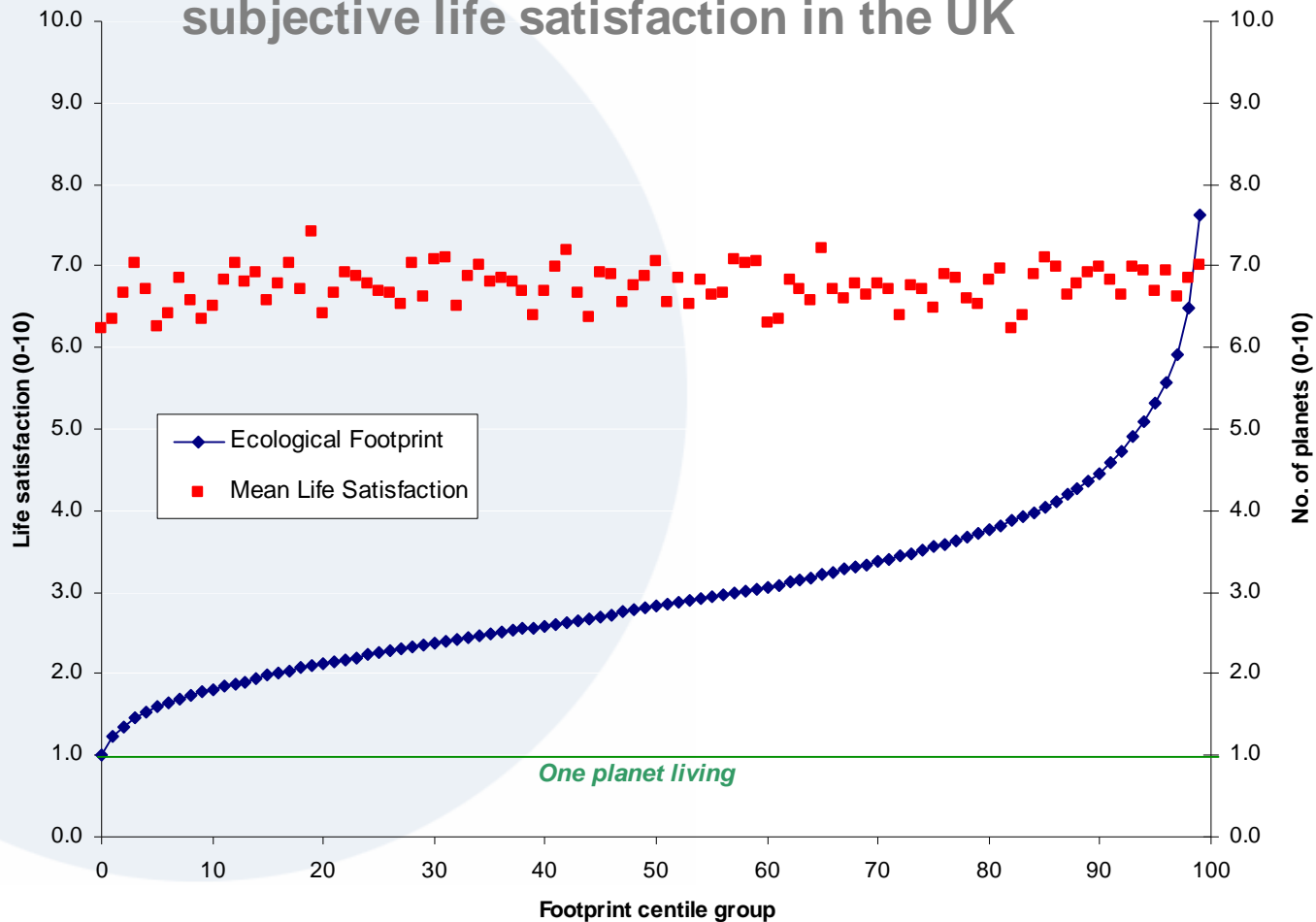
# *Opaque pathways*



- Strongly materialist values and motivations are associated with dissatisfaction, anxiety and lower WB.
- Some speculation that an over-emphasis on the individual, may have caused (or catalysed) the breakdown of certain social structures that support well-being.

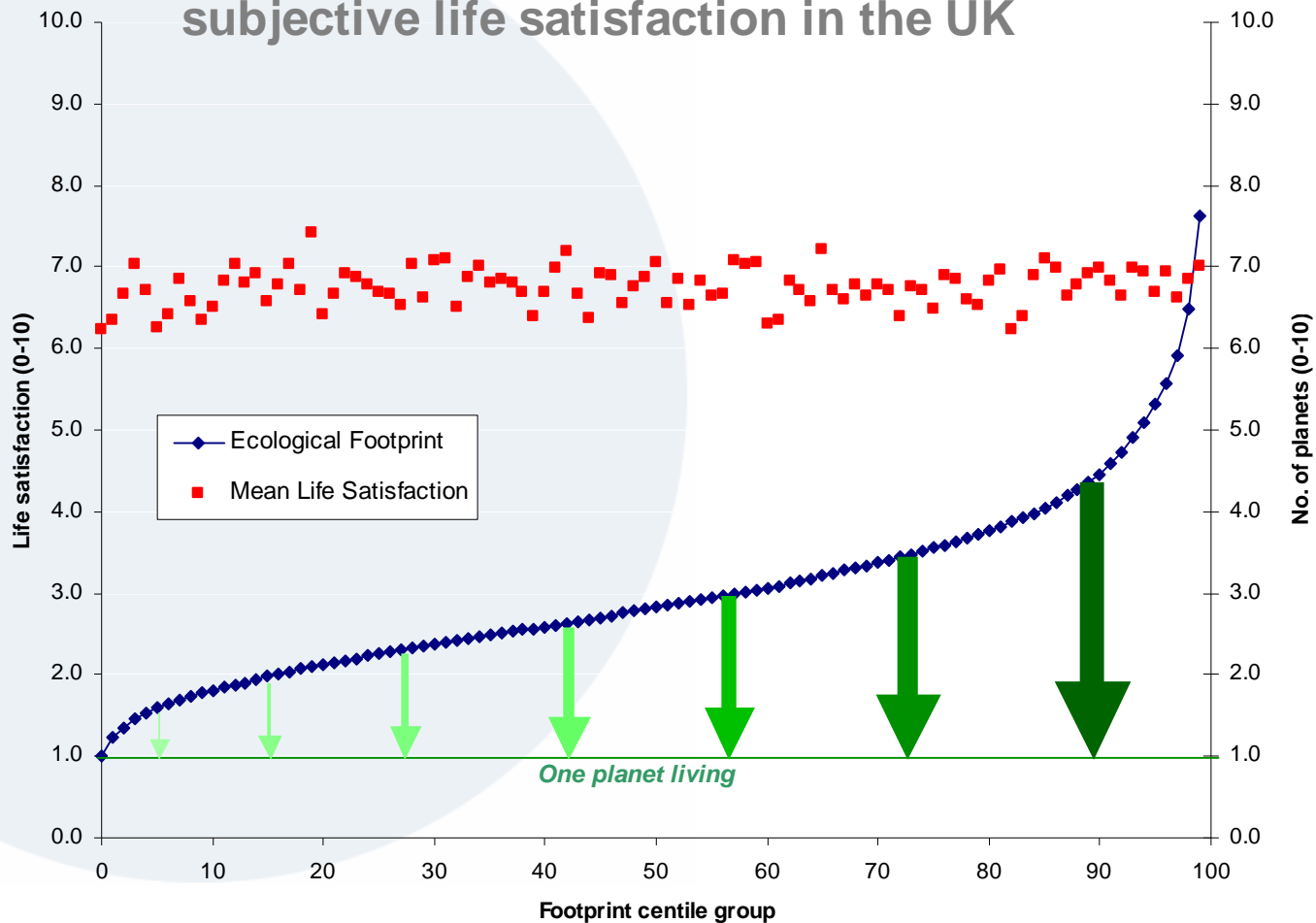
# The Opportunity

Figure 2: Ecological Footprint and subjective life satisfaction in the UK



# The Challenge

Figure 2: Ecological Footprint and subjective life satisfaction in the UK



Can we find a pathway to a:  
“Materially lighter economy characterised by  
high levels of well-being?”

***“Good lives don’t have to cost the Earth”***

nef’s Happy Planet Index

***Living well / redefining prosperity***

SDC and Tim Jackson

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Reports downloadable from  
[www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)

1. Chasing Progress – MDP
2. Power & Potential of W-B indicators
3. Well-being Manifesto
4. Well-being and Environment
5. Spoiled Ballot – democracy and well-being
6. Happy Planet Index [www.happyplanetindex.org](http://www.happyplanetindex.org)



**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

# *REDEFINING PROSPERITY*

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# CO2 emissions for China and the U.S., 1850-2003

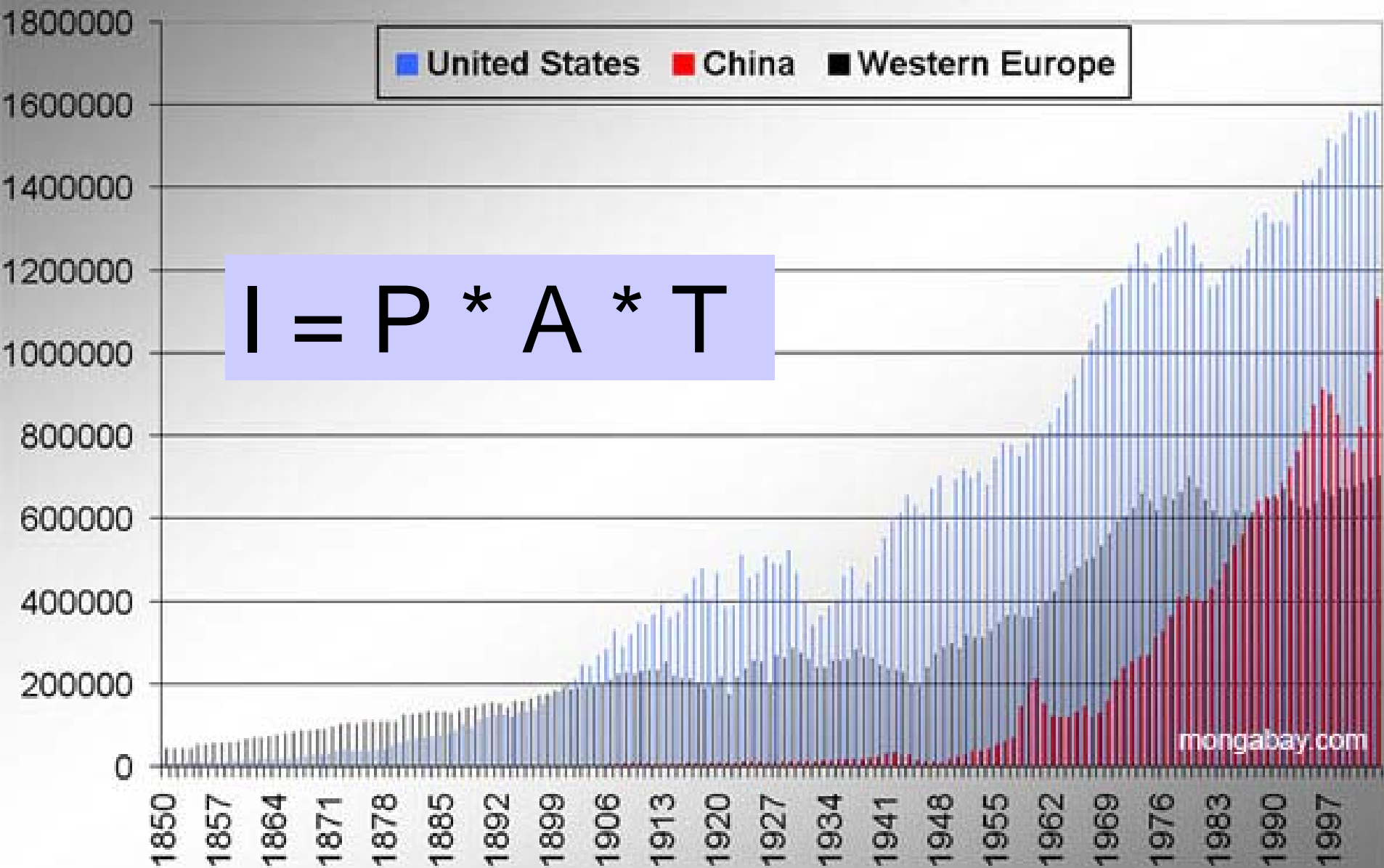


Image created by Rhett A. Butler of mongabay.com using data from the Carbon Dioxide Information Analysis Center.

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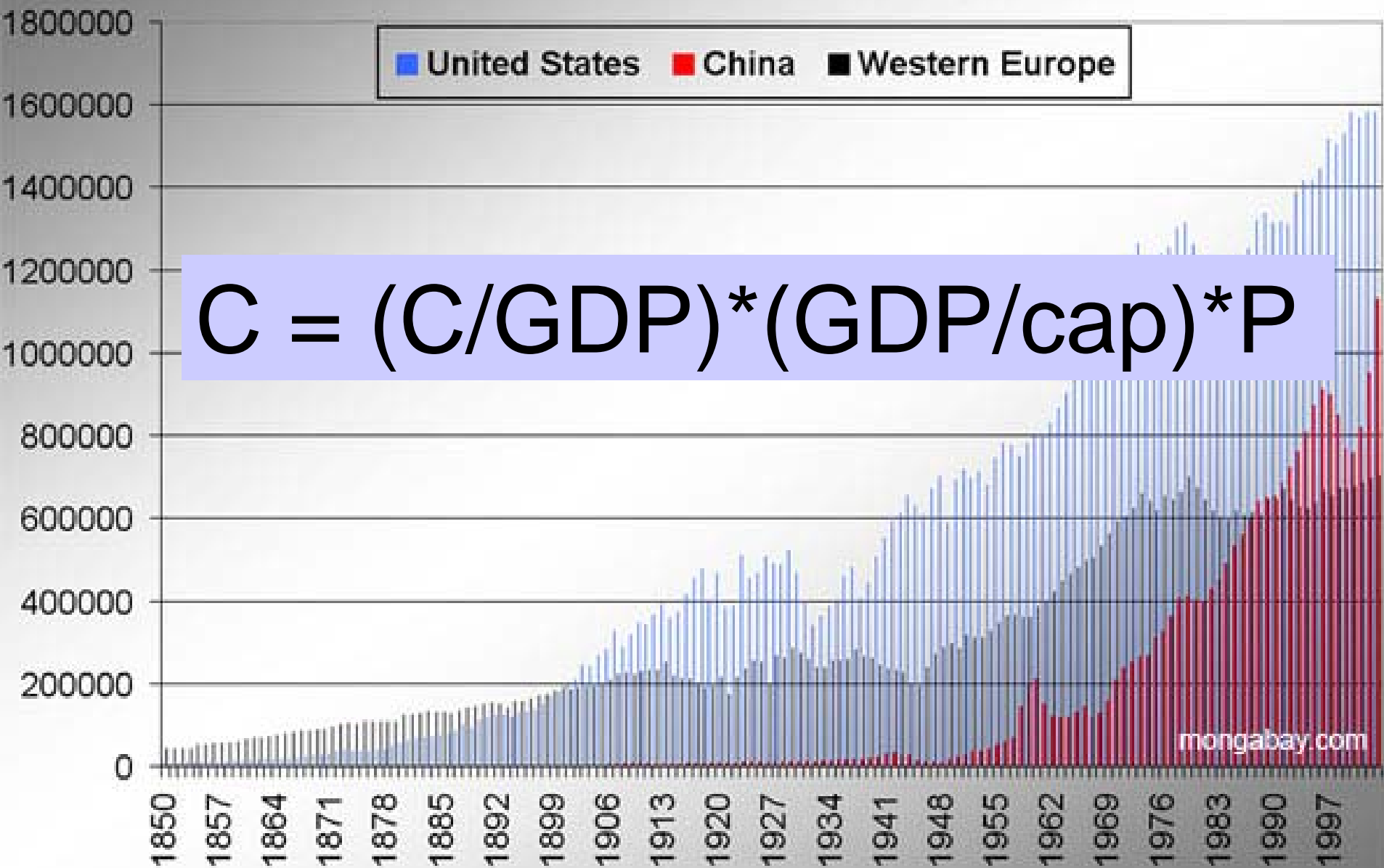


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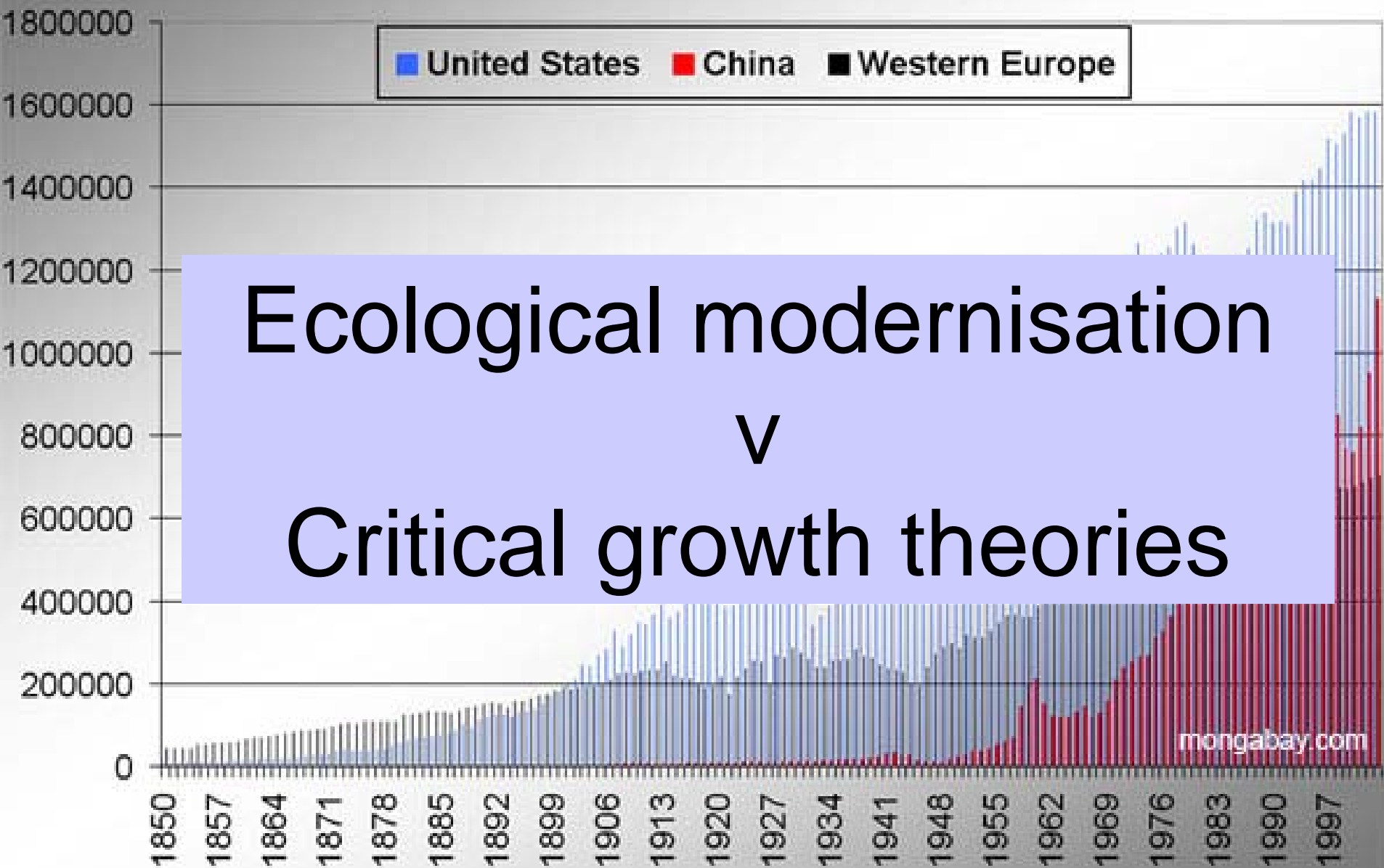
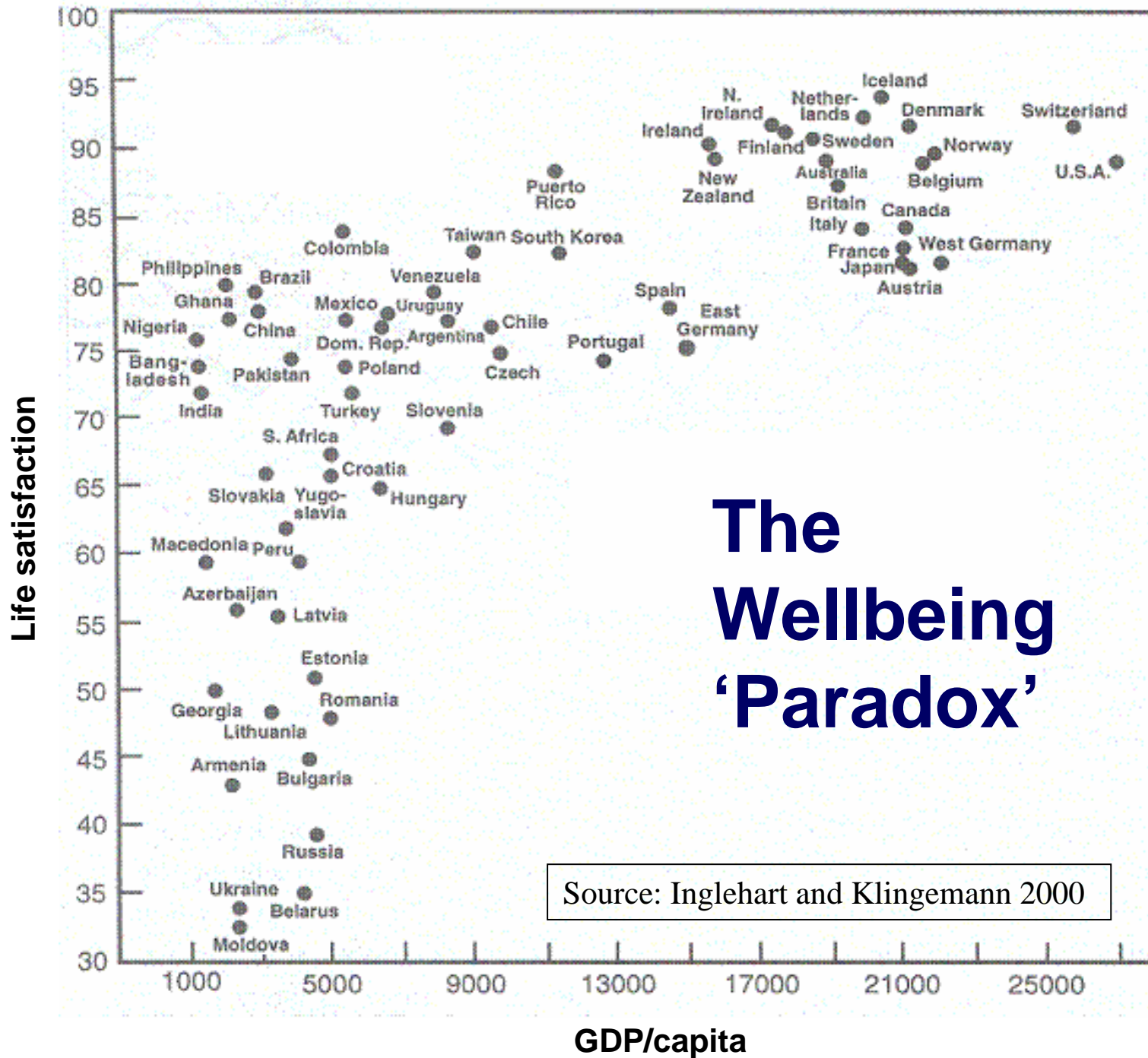


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# Redefining Prosperity

can growth deliver sustainability?

And if not...

...what then?



# Visions of Prosperity

- community groups
  - faith groups
  - cultural 'creatives'
  - young people
- 
- creating intellectual space

# 'Economy Lite'

Living & Giving  
can decoupling work?

'The alternative to expansion is not an England of quiet market towns linked by trains puffing slowly and peacefully through quiet meadows.. the alternative is slums, old factories, cramped schools, stunted lives...'

Ted Heath

# Confronting Structure



I believe that the rising intolerance and incivility and the eroding generosity and openness that have marked important aspects of American society in the recent past have been, in significant part a consequence of the stagnation of American middle-class living standards during much of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Benjamin Friedman 2005

- public spending
- employment
- competitiveness
- profitability
  
- purpose

# Living Well...

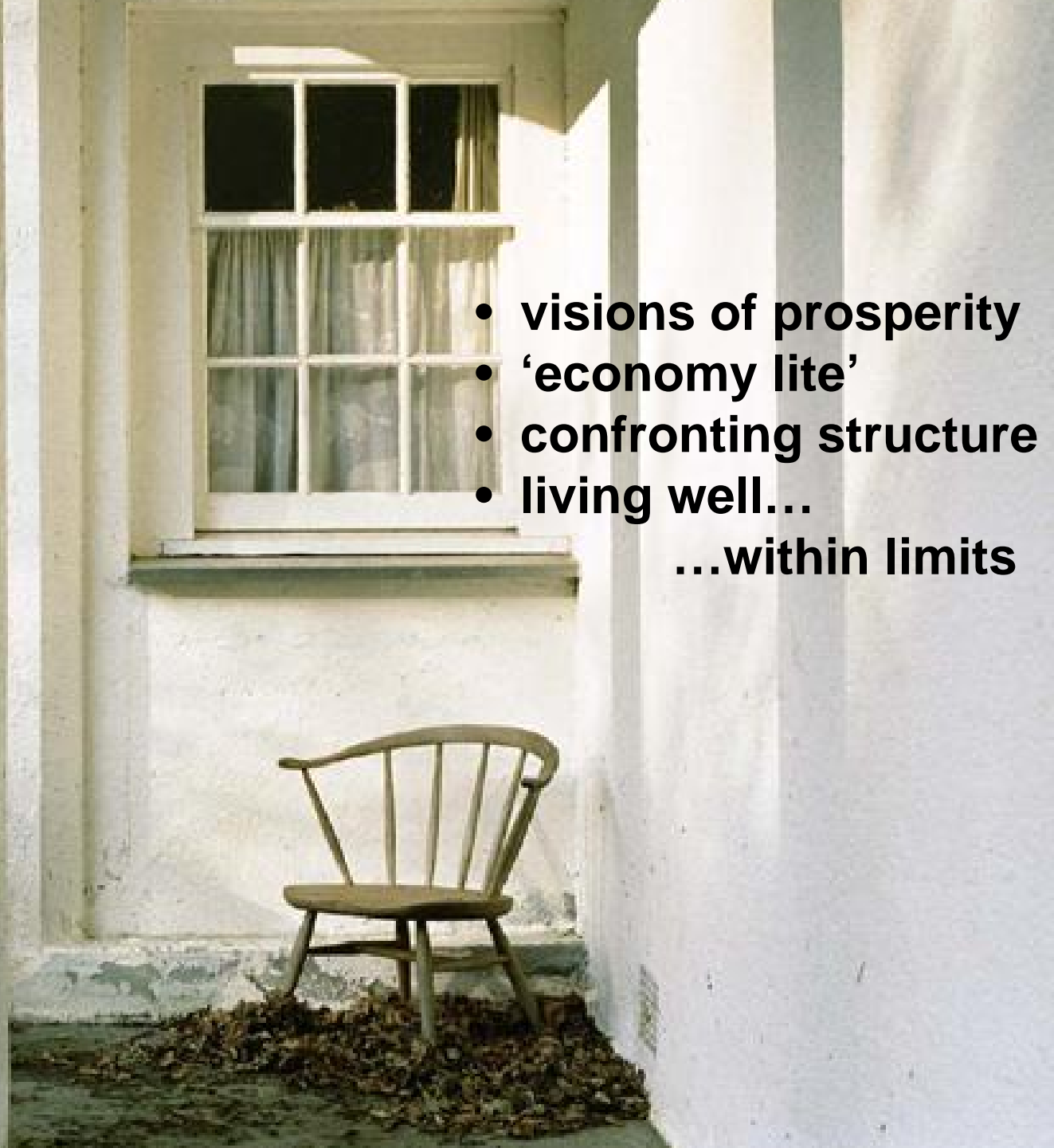
‘... there are factors associated with modernisation that, in part, offset its positive impacts. A concomitant breakdown of traditional institutions...a marked rise in social pathologies.. a decline in political participation and trust and the erosion of the institutions of family and marriage.’

Economist Intelligence Unit 2005

**...within limits**

# Redefining Prosperity

- visions of prosperity
- 'economy lite'
- confronting structure
- living well...  
...within limits





**Sustainable**  
Development Commission

# *REDEFINING PROSPERITY*

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