

## Happiness on a World Scale

Richard Dienst

Long ago Hegel taught that “history is not the soil of happiness. The periods of happiness are blank pages in it.”<sup>1</sup> Of course for Hegel there’s something suspect about happiness: insofar as we want to be happy, to be in harmony with ourselves, we would be withdrawn from history; and insofar as we are caught up in history, we would be looking for something besides happiness. It is not immediately obvious why we would choose one over the other—history over happiness or vice versa—if indeed there is such a choice.

Assuming that we all want to be happy, whatever that might mean, does not get us very far. Instead of asking *what* happiness is, it might be more useful to ask *where* it is. That way we can immediately set aside all the merely metaphysical definitions of what happiness could or should be, as well as the stubborn doubts about whether it exists at all. And in the next step we can bracket off the all-too-abrupt answers that it is anywhere or everywhere to be found. In the end we find ourselves wondering, with all the sincerity and skepticism we can muster, whether it is possible—somewhere, somehow—to live a happy life.

So let’s ask: where is happiness? In the landscape of common sense there are two opposing answers: “in here” and “out there.” To say happiness is “in here” affirms its status as embodied affect, combining pleasure, contentment and well being. In blending sensuous and intellectual states of being, happiness would touch upon the highest good and the deepest selfhood at once. Whether it feels like a spontaneous disposition or a hard-won accomplishment, a fleeting moment of truth or an abiding sense of satisfaction, happiness would mark the spot where inwardness moves most freely around an intimate center of gravity.

By contrast, to say that happiness is “out there” attests to the way it can prompt us to get out of ourselves, to be with others, to find or to make a place where we feel like living. Those who look outward for happiness expect that it always touches upon something or someone else: certain combinations of bodies, places, and circumstances, more or less numerous, more or less expansive, more or less reliable. Wherever we come across it, happiness would be whatever releases us to the world.

Although there are countless ways of weaving between these inner and outer maps of happiness, the prevailing culture tends to treat inward happiness as the true homeland, and outward happiness as a temporary or illusory detour. Just ask around. Over and over you will hear the trump card: “ultimately” happiness comes down to what we can find inside, whether we call it mind, body, spirit or soul—so much so that the best reason to look inside yourself seems to be the prospect of finding happiness there. It has become a universal imperative: you must make yourself happy. All the solicitations of the happiness industry say the same thing: the sales pitch only works by reminding you that nobody owes you happiness and it doesn’t come cheap.

That is why “the pursuit of happiness” still serves as a magic phrase in the capitalist lexicon, reconciling the innocence of appetites with a well-trained capacity for disappointment. We are supposed to enjoy the pursuit whether we find happiness or not. As long as we buy into this deal, we will be rewarded with a higher-level consolation: by following our inward inclinations as selfishly as possible we have joined in building the great hive-mind of the marketplace. This remains the most stubborn myth of modernity: the aggregate efforts of all those passionately self-interested individuals are supposed to be ceaselessly transformed—through the mechanisms of impersonal exchange, supervised by impartial institutions—into the best possible social system, which would be precisely not a “society” at all, but something like eBay and Twitter writ large. All it takes to set this virtuous circle in motion is “the pursuit of happiness,” installed as the inner spring of human nature itself.

And now to put this pursuit on a properly technocratic footing, contemporary behavioral economics, bolstered by neurobiology, offers itself as a science of happiness. Richard Layard, a popularizer of the field, draws upon the work of economists such as Daniel Kahneman, neuroscientists such as Richard Davidson, and a burgeoning group of specialists to propose a comparative and prescriptive approach to the problem of happiness. At last the answer to the question “where is happiness?” has become crystal clear: like all positive feelings, it is lodged somewhere in “the left side of the pre-frontal cortex, somewhat above and in front of the ear.”<sup>2</sup> Now that we know exactly where happiness is, why is it still a problem? Surely rational, unhappy individuals can simply target the pre-frontal cortex with some legal and affordable drug, and the age-old problem will be solved. Layard concedes that things are not so simple. It turns out that *homo economicus* may have to take the happiness of other people into account after all. There are social and historical dimensions to the problem of happiness that must be addressed, even if you believe that the solution ultimately depends on what happens inside the skull.

Layard begins his argument by observing that measurable levels of individual happiness have stalled, even while economic growth has boomed (and now busted):

People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become richer, they work much less, they have longer holidays, they travel more, they live longer, and they are healthier. But they are no happier. This shocking fact should be the starting point for much of our social science.<sup>3</sup>

As an especially stylized fact, the proposition that “people in the West” are, in the aggregate, no happier than their grandparents might not seem shocking at all. (By “people” Layard means those living well above the poverty line, and by “the West” he means North America, Western Europe, and Japan.) Did we ever assume that greater material prosperity would inexorably boost the collective mood, regardless of highly concentrated accumulations of wealth and deepening inequalities? Can anybody point to something—like indoor plumbing, the polio vaccine, or gourmet coffee—that would have permanently cheered us up? In fact, it is hard to believe that there has ever been a steady correlation between rising GDP and collective happiness. Perhaps if a whole society could be rearranged so that it could meet its own needs while allowing everybody to enjoy reduced working hours, more vacation time, and longer life

expectancy, we might be able to test whether overall happiness would improve. At the moment it is hard to foresee any auspicious conditions for such an experiment.

Taken on their own terms, however, the happiness statistics are full of suggestive findings. In the US, it appears that the percentage of people who declared themselves “very happy” peaked around 38% in the late 1950s, and it has been sliding generally downward ever since. (The Seventies look somewhat happier, with a blip around Nixon’s resignation, the Eighties look choppy, and the Nineties flattened on the low side.<sup>4</sup> Indeed it appears that the most sustained rise in GDP per head started at about the time the ranks of the “very happy” began to thin out. And again, it should be kept in mind that Layard’s choice of indicator [GDP per head] obscures the effects of income polarization and disguises the stagnation in real income growth for most people since the 1970s.) His interpretation of the data revolves around two mechanisms he calls “habituation” and “rivalry:” first, people get used to material improvements, so that their satisfaction with them wears off; second, people tend to perceive their own happiness in relation to, and especially in competition with, the happiness of those around them. The quest for status and the “arms race” of consumerism reinforce an “individualistic distortion” in our perceptions of happiness.<sup>5</sup> To a utilitarian liberal like Layard, it comes as a relief to conclude that happiness functions as a relational norm rather than an absolute demand: it absolves the current order of any blame for structural inequality or irreversible damage to the lifeworld. Unhappiness can now be modeled as a kind of mental disturbance rather than intractable discontent and refusal. Layard’s recommended remedy, beyond more treatment for the mentally ill, would be a somewhat more progressive tax system that could “disarm” the most flagrant conflicts between the richer and the poorer, or at least soften the perception of them.

In the current ideological climate, even these modest measures in the name of greater collective happiness have been judged too radical. Martin Wolf, economics columnist in the *Financial Times*, saw in Layard’s argument nothing less than “an assault on modernity itself.”<sup>6</sup> If the achievements of the welfare state and various civil rights movements have not increased happiness in any measurable way, Wolf argues, what more can be done? Wolf sees Layard’s fight against the status system as a non-starter, and he insists that more progressive taxation would be a violation of the ironclad principle that government can never be the vehicle of happiness. A certain degree of unhappiness, like a certain degree of inequality and a more or less thick layer of poverty, is simply the price that “people” are supposed to pay for living in modern times.

The dispute between Layard and Wolf neatly splits the paradox that gave the “pursuit of happiness” its original ideological force. At an individual level, the ever-expanding offerings of consumerism offer diminishing returns as a reward for accepting the status quo, while at a social level the system can convince fewer and fewer people of something they care less and less about, namely, that the system should deliver a good life for everybody. From now on the pursuit of happiness will come across as a race we have to run and an offer we can’t refuse, whether the tone is sweetly cynical or stoically tough.

Perhaps we can gauge what has changed in the past 50 years by reading what Theodor Adorno had to say about compulsory happiness in *Minima Moralia* (originally published in 1951):

The admonitions to be happy, voiced in concert by the scientifically hedonist sanatorium-director and the highly-strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry, have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office. It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the concentration camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain. That is the model of an unhampered capacity for happiness.<sup>7</sup>

On the contrary: Layard's statistics—the very existence of which would have terrified Adorno—actually suggest that “people in the West” did not obey the mental health experts and studio chiefs who have been commanding them to be happy all these years. Television (to take one example), despite its efforts to feed the populace with insatiable programmed desires, instead accelerates the exhaustion of whatever pleasures it has to offer, while stoking extravagant and unappeasable rivalries. It seems fair to say the world is an unhappier place as a result. Recognition of suffering has not been entirely forbidden: some share of it has been turned inward, where a wide array of personal regrets, frustrations, and the rage of envy serve as the last affective links to the notion of a community bonded by emotion.

And so the task falls to dialectics, bolstered by psychoanalysis, to offer a science of unhappiness. But this science is not itself dismal: on the contrary, it takes its bearings from pleasures and joys unknown to “happiness studies.” As Fredric Jameson has tirelessly demonstrated, it is not through naive optimism that we keep asking ourselves where we might find happiness: that place, named Utopia because its *topos* remains unknown, serves rather as the orientation point against which we can measure just how far astray we have gone. All of culture can thus be approached as a vast catalogue of determined negations and recurrent failures, an inexhaustible archive we continue to explore even though we can never expect to discover the blank pages of happiness.

Does that mean that every inquiry into the location of happiness will be met by a rebuke from a theory that has already decided against it? Adorno offers us something more to chew on:

There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more. [...] Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused, instead of storming under a confused compulsion to the conquest of strange stars.<sup>8</sup>

Happiness can survive, but only under certain conditions: not as something that some people earn and enjoy at the expense of others, not as an inner refuge or cranial enclave, but simply as the place where we allow each other to keep living. To locate such a place of repose requires neither a pressing-forward nor a turning-back, but a holding-on (to others as much as oneself) and a letting-go (of pleasures as much as disappointments). Although such postures have become familiar through self-help handbooks and pop therapy culture, the ideal goes back at least to Epicurus:

The cry of the flesh: not to be hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be cold. For if someone has these things and is confident of having them in the future, he might contend even with Zeus for happiness.”<sup>9</sup>

The cry of the flesh can hardly be heard wherever unhappiness is understood as a personal misfortune, and hoarded as if it were private property.<sup>10</sup> A pervasive unhappiness is perpetually channeled into individualized forms, where it attempts to heal itself through various self-confirming, self-defeating rhetorics. What every remedy lacks, disastrously, is a declaration of peace that can only be collective, prevailing throughout the common spaces where we all must live together. Adorno offers the simplest guideline to keep the peace: not the fulfillment of a personal plan but the prevention of overall impoverishment. That may seem like the least we can ask, but it is still far beyond us. Perhaps that is why there can be no politics of happiness, but only a politics of the conditions of possibility for happiness. Its achievement would require fundamental changes in everything that currently passes for pleasure, satisfaction, and well being. Indeed, it is hard to know how the world will look once this elementary demand has been met. We may imagine that at that point, all the countless expressions of happiness—full of inexplicable idiosyncrasies, familiar banalities, and marvelous discoveries—will be seen to have written themselves into history after all.

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<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Layard, “Happiness: Has Social Science a Clue?” delivered as part 1 of 3 in the Lionel Robbins Memorial Lectures series, London School of Economics, March 3-5, 2003. Available online at: <[//cep.lse.ac.uk/events/lectures/layard/RL030303.pdf](http://cep.lse.ac.uk/events/lectures/layard/RL030303.pdf)> (accessed February 12, 2009). Quotation at page 9. Henceforth cited in the text as Layard 2003a. These lectures provide an early outline of the argument presented in Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Layard, 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>5</sup> “A Brookings Briefing: Happiness: Lessons from a New Science,” transcript of a discussion with Richard Layard held at The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., February 9, 2005. Available online at: <[www.brookings.edu/events/2005/0209poverty.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/events/2005/0209poverty.aspx)> (accessed February 12, 2009). Quotation at page 25.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Wolf, “Why progressive taxation is not the route to happiness,” *Financial Times*, 6 June 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 62-63; translation modified. Where Adorno described the sanatorium director as “wissenschaftlich lebemännische,” Jephcott translated this phrase as “scientifically

epicurean.” I have replaced the key word with “hedonist,” which is not much better, but the change is necessary because I would propose that happiness can be better grasped through a properly Epicurean notion of katastemic pleasure, as opposed to the dynamic pleasures offered by the entertainment industry. For the German text, see *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 68. Future references to this work will cite the English and the German texts. Adorno’s link between the demand for happiness and the worst kinds of violence has been updated by Slavoj Žižek, who connects happiness studies to the new techniques of torture. See Slavoj Žižek, “Happiness and Torture in the Atonal World,” in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 44-51.

<sup>8</sup> Adorno, 156 & 176.

<sup>9</sup> “The Vatican Collection of Epicurean Sayings,” Volume 33, *The Epicurus Reader*, trans. and ed. by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 38.

<sup>10</sup> See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, “Happiness and the Work of Relationality,” trans. Sally Poor, *Polygraph* 2, no. 3 (1988), 186-192. This piece is an excerpt from *Geschichte und Eigensinn*, now republished as the second volume of *Der unterschätzte Mensch* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 2001), 924-929.