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## **Book Review**

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**Happiness, Economics and Politics: Towards a Multi-Disciplinary Approach**

**by: Amitava Krishna Dutt and Benjamin Radcliff (Eds.)**

**Published 2009**

**by Edward Elgar**

**The Lypiatts 15 Lansdown Road, Cheltenham, Glos GL50 2JA, UK and**

**William Pratt House 9 Dewey Court Northampton,**

**Massachusetts 01060, USA, 362pp**

**ISBN: 978 1 84844 093 7**

**and**

**The Political Economy of Human Happiness: How Voters' Choices Determine the Quality of Life**

**by: Benjamin Radcliff**

**Published 2013**

**by Cambridge University Press**

**Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road,**

**Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK, 205pp**

**ISBN: 9781107644427**

In terms of its political and media profile, quantitative survey-based happiness research has been rapidly on the ascendant worldwide for well over a decade. It is energised by anticipation that governments and other institutions may be able to apply findings in policy and practice. Still, this optimism must be tempered by the increasing realisation that findings remain controversial and perhaps endlessly inconclusive on some of the most important policy issues. There is, for example, little prospect of an emerging consensus on how happiness interacts with key politico-economic variables like money, economic growth, financial inequality, democracy, political attitudes, the size and functions of governments, and the generosity of welfare regimes. These two books make significant contributions to those debates, but stoke more controversies rather than coming close to resolving any arguments. While most of the authors share a faith in the value of teasing out new insights from numerical representations of happiness, the diversity of their interpretations confirms that quantification is just as slippery and indeterminate as is the case with non-quantitative, interpretive approaches to happiness.

*Happiness, economics and politics* is a collection of papers from a multidisciplinary conference in 2006. Contributors come from the disciplines of history, psychology, philosophy, sociology, economics and political science. The editors have given this diverse collection a simple structure, sandwiching two parts on 'economic' and 'political' approaches respectively, between the conceptual and epistemological papers of Part 1, and the policy papers of Part 4, although as always the idea of separating economics, politics, and policy is in practice unfeasible and most essays are effectively on what used to be called 'political economy'.

The editors argue that the strongest message of the collection is the importance of multidisciplinary approaches. Although this implies a promisingly open approach to diverse viewpoints and methods, the editors contradict this at the start by equating the 'science of happiness' with use of 'quantifiable and measurable concepts ... to analyse its determinants.' This reveals two kinds of bias that spoil Radcliff's book and some of the papers in this edited collection. First, happiness science is better understood as the systematic use of evidence and analysis to further our understanding of how people succeed in living well. Quantification has important roles but the emerging discipline of happiness scholarship would not be 'scientific' (or humane, or empathetic) if it relied solely on the numerical reductionism of survey responses. Secondly, the tendency among some scholars to see happiness primarily as an outcome that is 'determined' by other factors is a worrying source of bias. Happiness is not an end product but a rubric we use to understand interactions between minds, bodies, and environments. Scholars who forget this are liable to make causal inferences that are not warranted by their data.

It is salutary that the collection opens with McMahon's essay on the history of happiness, which gives due warning of the slippery and ultimately ungraspable nature of happiness concepts. The next paper, by Ong on 'measurement and mismeasurement', should further strengthen readers' awareness of the dangers of reductionist numerical simplification. He insists on recognition of the multiple 'dimensions' that can be used when trying to quantify happiness – the clear implication being that quantification may be helpful in opening or facilitating debates, but should never be expected to settle any debates once and for all. Alternatively put, happiness 'science' can easily become unscientific if people mistake quantified reductions for factual information about happiness. Further helpful conceptual papers are offered by Veenhoven and by Easterlin and Sawangfa, both showing useful tools for helping us interpret intelligently whatever surveys may seem to be telling us.

There are places in some essays where the power of numbers becomes too assertive. Coshov and Radcliff make the basic error of presenting correlations between trade union membership and life satisfaction as evidence of an 'effect' of the former on the latter (p.291). A different and more complex numerical *faux pas* is committed in Sheldon and Lyubomirsky's essay, where they claim that "the heritability of SWB is approximately 0.50, so genetics presumably account for half of the variance in SWB" (p.326). This is simply a *non sequitur*: genetic heritability of traits may be measurable, but their influence on the complex interactions that facilitate happiness are obviously far too complex and situationally variable to reduce to a number like that. Thankfully, most of the essays are more circumspect in their causal analysis and more humble in their claims. For example, the stimulating analyses of will power (Stutzer), democracy (Inglehart), politics (Pacek), welfare regimes (Ridge, Rice and Cherry), and inequality (Graham and Felton), all show suitable awareness of complex causality and consequent indeterminacy of the findings.

Radcliff's *Political Economy of Human Happiness* offers probably the boldest academic case yet provided in favour of recognising strong causal links between political choices and happiness. Being remarkably assertive, it is an entertaining and stimulating read. It is also wonderfully informative on many decades of scholarship and policy debate relating to governance, socio-economic processes, and welfare. For these reasons alone, it will serve well for many years as required reading for courses on the politics of happiness.

However, Radcliff's overall argument rests on some astoundingly heroic assumptions, particularly these three:

- First, that 'left' and 'right' are still the most useful rubrics we have for analysing 'political programmes', with left standing for compensatory equalisation through government intervention in the economy, and right standing for market freedom (pp.1–2 and chs. 1–3).
- Second, that happiness surveys offer the best 'scientific' evidence of how well people live (pp.3–4 and ch. 4).
- Third, that by combining numerical information from happiness surveys with information on political interventions (particularly on the welfarist redistributions and strengthening of trade unions that combine to enhance freedom by 'decommodifying' labour), we can tell clearly whether 'left' or 'right' programmes in general work better at producing happiness (p.3 and chs. 5–8).

Radcliff echoes the strategic political naivete of Layard's *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* in arguing bluntly that 'left' works better. We can prove this if our evaluative approach 'stresses the extent to which our needs as human animals are fulfilled' – i.e., decent living standards matter more than 'inner psychological processes' (pp.6, 77). It is a 'relatively simple empirical question', he assures us, to ask whether happiness is facilitated best by a 'large, activist state' (p.110). But even his own efforts at analysis show us that the multiple qualities and functions of welfare regimes are anything but simple.

The complex interactions between specific aspects of welfare regimes and citizen happiness are certainly well beyond what the analytically useless and confusing 'left vs. right' dichotomy can cope with. Radcliff uses 'the left' and 'the right' as if they were real people, making them the subjects of verbs (p.1). To be sure, both people and political parties still often polarise rhetorically towards one caricature or another. But in practice, what governments or voters are either against market freedom in general or against compensatory equalisation in general? And what about his similarly simplistic distinction between internal versus external causes of happiness? Does it really help political decision-making in any way to pose choices in such stark terms? Other kinds of academic discourse may be misled by unhelpful dichotomies (think of 'positive-negative' in the psychology of emotion, or 'us-them' and 'primitive-modern' in early anthropology); but none combines this crass oversimplification with the socially divisive and pseudo-moralistic force of the 'left-right' dichotomy. 'If there is a moral core to happiness politics, it surely includes the idea that by taking happiness seriously we promote empathy across bureaucratic and cultural divides'. 'Left-right' discourse leads us away from empathy, offering lazy thinkers a licence to rob alternative points of view of any sophistication, dignity, or reason.

Happiness researchers will be more interested in Radcliff's second two assertions, concerning the scientific evidence and its applicability to political choices. Here again, Radcliff's desire to simplify will rush him towards a tide of criticism. He declares that "for social scientists the [happiness] concept is agreeably straightforward: it refers simply to the *extent* that people enjoy their lives" (p.78, emphasis added). Again, like Layard, the simplification of his utilitarian calculus approach may be politically appealing, but it depends on reducing the complexities of happiness to an 'extent' or 'quantity' that can be counted and maximised. But there are plenty of social scientists resistant to this idea, who are interested in social justice and in the justifications and narration of happiness, and who understand happiness not solely as a quantifiable entity but as a rubric for far more complex conversations about how to learn and promote the art of living well, and how to evaluate people, performances, and states of affairs.

Radcliff's efforts to develop empirical tools for assessing specific aspects of the 'decommodification' of labour are well-intentioned and helpful, but marred by his evident political bias. He ignores a large amount of empirically based literature (much of it summarised in the articles mentioned above, by Pacek and by Ridge, Rice and Cherry) showing that the generosity of welfare states does not correlate with citizen happiness. The chapter on the 'scientific study of happiness' is the most problematic – indeed it is so misleading that readers disinclined to believe his subsequent causal claims about welfare regimes may justifiably not be prepared to read on. Although Radcliff is clearly very experienced in sophisticated statistical analysis and modelling, throughout this and all other chapters he makes frequent elementary blunders in presenting correlation research as if it were evidence of causation, using words like 'effect', 'affects', 'predicts', and 'determines' when referring to correlations.

Although such mistakes are commonly made by most of the prominent names in happiness statistics, Radcliff is conspicuously tendentious in this regard, reviewing evidence on education, income, marriage, employment, health, and religion as if correlations between these and self-reported happiness told us clear stories about how they cause happiness. Note that happiness throughout his analysis is treated as an outcome not a cause, and that this latter possibility – revealingly labelled 'reverse causality' – is only dealt with in a brief and dismissive passage much later on (p.136).

In the later chapters where he presents the evidence of his own analysis of survey data, he goes one step further and invites us to speculate wildly, assuming not only that the correlations tell us that generous welfare regimes cause happiness, but also that we would make massive leaps towards happiness if we just migrated from a less generous welfare regime to a more generous one (pp.129, 171). To be fair, he is only suggesting these as thought experiments. But in a book which purports to use reliable empirical evidence to predict outcomes of practical actions, such speculation simply adds to the impression that his faith in numbers and impatient dismissal of complexity have led him into fantasy-land. The willingness of academics to cut through complexity in order to tell a simplified narrative is in principle an admirable quality. The ability to do so without significant loss of academic plausibility is quite another matter.