
Book Review

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**Happier? The History of a Cultural Movement
That Aspired to Transform America**
by: Daniel Horowitz
Published 2018
by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA, 320pp
ISBN: 9780190655648

This book by Daniel Horowitz, a Cultural Historian, claims to be the first history of how Americans and others around the globe have managed depression and anxiety in order to overcome mental illness and enjoy genuine emotional well-being. The author contends that this transformation was aided and abetted by major historic events – World War II, the Holocaust, post-war prosperity, the crises of the 1970s as well as the conservative revolutions of the Reagan-Thatcher-David Cameron eras. His work falls mainly within the domain of ‘positive psychology’ and so not surprisingly, the analysis and explanations offered, borrows liberally from sources as diverse as Eastern spiritual traditions, behavioural economics, evolutionary biology and even the intersections of moral philosophy, philosophy of mind and neuroscience. The book’s ultimate goal appears to be explaining how positive psychology, one of the most influential academic fields of our time, inspired a US culture eager for self-improvement, with captivating promises of a happier future.

Chapters 1 and 2 mainly review the expansive body of research that have shaped happiness studies and positive psychology as we know it today. The historical review shows how positive psychologists drew on what came before them, sometimes in ways that their predecessor could not have anticipated. Chapter 3, titled ‘Crisis of confidence’ points to the USA’s tarnished image on the world stage over the 1970–1983 period and attributes this to years of stagflation, the Arab oil embargo, the ever-escalating Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal, etc. These dismal and dramatic events which marked the 1960s and 1970s, also provided “ample fodder for the growth of American pessimism” at the time. It is widely believed that given the era’s enormous national and global turmoil, systematic studies of happiness were neither produced nor expected. This chapter however argues that even during this period of gloom and doom, a scattering of researchers from various fields were wrestling with questions of personal satisfaction. This is why even before 1984, there were numerous books, approaches and studies that later researchers could draw from and this in turn led to the emergence of happiness studies and positive psychology as defined, self-conscious fields. Chapter 4 identifies 1984 as the turning point in the history of happiness studies. 1984 was indeed a remarkable year. This was the year when the Library of Congress established BF204.6 as

the call number of books on happiness, thereby acknowledging its status as a bona fide sub-field in psychology. The chapter also provides compelling evidence that by 1989, most of the key elements of happiness studies and positive psychology were firmly in place. Chapter 5 is an interesting discussion of both academic and popular writings on subjective well-being. The chapter lucidly describes how since the mid-1980s, both serious academics and freelancers have been reaching out to a broader, general audience using a wide range of promotional tools and the presentation of advice in the form of self-help books. While academics were highlighting the most important findings published in specialised journals, non-academic authors were offering highly optimistic, self-help books to a growing audience eager to enhance their sense of well-being. In closing, the chapter details the inevitable conflict that emerged between academic scholars and their freelance counterparts. At times, academic writers have even ventured into policing the pure and the impure, the soberly verifiable from the highly exaggerated claims of the freelancers. Chapter 6 explains how the works of both serious academics and freelancers contributed the central ideas that positive psychology coalesced around in the early 21st century. In the process, it also depicts the field's huge dependence on concepts drawn from psychology proper, from Eastern spirituality and from neuroscience. Chapter 7 details how positive psychology came of age by the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. This was partly facilitated by entry of social scientists and economists into territory that positive psychologists had traditionally occupied. This intervention by economists was significant as it made the vision of positive psychologists less individualistic and enabled them to engage more fully in public policy debates. Chapter 8 is titled: 'The business of happiness'. Happiness, it is correctly pointed out, is big business as people and organisations willingly spend billions to increase their subjective well-being. This chapter illustrates how the media (both old and new) has not only given happiness studies and positive psychology very significant traction, but widened and amplified their reach as well. In the process, the author contends that commerce triumphed, transforming academic disciplines and spirituality into mere marketable products.

This is a very intensely argued book and those readers not familiar with the literature, will most likely be overwhelmed by the level of detail. This notwithstanding, the book is a pleasure to read. The writing is very lucid and because the author frequently crosses the border (from academia to the popular), those looking for stimulating interpretation and discussion, will find here much to ponder about. For this reason, I consider this book to be a valuable contribution to the literature and recommend it highly.