

## Smiling through the Depression: the ‘Happiness movement’

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During the 1932 Presidential elections in the USA, a satirical poster produced by the Democratic Party urged voters to ‘smile away the Depression’ by wearing a smilette, a ‘wonderful little gadget that would solve the problems of the nation’. So far, not even the would-be entrepreneurs who contribute to the appalling Dragon’s Den have sought to re-invent a smilette to help us through the current Depression. That said, April 2011 saw the launch in the UK of Action for Happiness, a new organization which, according to one its founders, ‘will offer access to the mushrooming knowledge about how we can influence our own happiness, or the happiness of our place of work or school, or our community and society’ (Geoff Mulgan, *Observer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2011). Alongside ‘common sense’ suggestions such as taking more exercise, other tips offered by the author of the article were ‘more surprising: for instance, thanking people each evening for the good they have done you during the day serves as a protection against mild depression’.

It is tempting – and often appropriate - to treat such initiatives with ridicule and contempt. Strange as it may seem, however, a concern with issues of happiness and well-being is not confined to the paid ideologues of New Labour think tanks but has become something of a pre-occupation of governments across the developed world. Following the example of President Sarkozy in France, for example, in 2010 David Cameron instructed the Office for National Statistics to introduce a question on happiness and well-being into the General Household Survey. Meanwhile, the Scottish wing of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘happiness movement’ is represented by the Centre for Confidence and Well-being, set up in 2004 with funding from the (then) Scottish Executive, with a particular focus on the Scots’ alleged crisis of confidence (Craig, 2003).

Clearly all of us have an interest in improving our own happiness and well-being as well as that of society in general. What is questionable, however, is the extent to which the analyses which currently dominate government thinking and the prescriptions which they offer will achieve that end.

Firstly, the analyses. The starting point for many of these theorists is what Labour peer and LSE academic Richard Layard in his influential best-seller *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* calls “the paradox at the heart of our lives”:

Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier ... But aren’t our lives infinitely more comfortable? Indeed we have more food, more clothes, more cars, bigger houses, more central heating, more foreign holidays, a shorter working week, nicer work and, above all, better health. Yet we are not happier. Despite all the efforts of governments, teachers, doctors and businessmen, human happiness has not improved.

The notion that all of our lives are indeed “infinitely more comfortable” in the ways which Layard suggests is one to which I shall return below. The finding, however,

that increased average wealth in recent decades has not led to increased happiness does appear to be supported by research evidence. According to one summary of this evidence:

Study after careful study shows that, beyond some point, the average happiness within a country is almost completely unaffected by increases in its average income level... [A]verage satisfaction levels register virtually no change even when average incomes grow many-fold (Wilkinson, 1996)

The main conclusion which Layard and his co-thinkers draw from these findings is that there is no necessary connection between money and happiness. Not surprisingly, therefore, the main prescriptions of the happiness theorists involve not structural change but instead, changes in the way in which individuals see the world. Layard, for example has been central to promoting mass Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) as a solution to the problem of depression south of the Border. Similarly in Scotland, Carol Craig, the founder and leading theorist of the Centre for Confidence and Well-Being has argued that many of Scotland's social problems stem from 'an attitude problem', rooted in a left-wing collectivist tradition.

Not surprisingly then, while there is some recognition of the impact of inequality and consumerism on levels of happiness and mental health (Layard in particular calls for increased taxation of the rich), in general, this literature treats the attainment of happiness primarily as an individual task, unrelated to wider social factors and concerned mainly with the way in which individuals interpret the world. What these writers signally fail to do is to look at what else has been happening in the lives of millions of people over the last few decades as a result of the neoliberal policies espoused by both Conservative and New Labour governments. These policies have impacted upon the lives of working class people in four main ways.

The first has been to increase poverty. The issue of poverty hardly figures in the happiness literature, for two main reasons. One is because it is seen as a residual problem which affects relatively small numbers of people. This complacent attitude is evident, for example, both in Layard's suggestion above that "out lives are infinitely more comfortable" and also in a 2007 Deutsche Bank study of 'the Happy Variety of Capitalism' which asserts that:

Nearly every OECD country has achieved a high level of material prosperity. The questions now facing individuals and societies are which priorities to set for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Scotland, of course, and especially the West of Scotland, is often portrayed as an exception to this forward march of prosperity. Certainly, by any criterion poverty levels in Scotland in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century remain high. According to one authoritative report, in 2007 910, 000 people in Scotland, almost one in five of the population, were living in poverty, including 23% of the child population.<sup>2</sup> Space does not allow for a full exploration of the roots of this poverty but there is no evidence that they lie in negative popular attitudes or deficits in the national psyche. Such deficits a hundred years ago did not stop Glasgow from becoming the "Second City" of the British Empire and one of the most prosperous areas of Britain. A much more convincing explanation is that these problems are rooted in

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<sup>1</sup> Bergheim, *The Happy Variety of Capitalism*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> McKendrick, Mooney, Dickie and Kelly, *Poverty in Scotland 2007*.

the long-term decline post-World War Two of the heavy industries on which the West of Scotland's strength was built, followed by the devastation wrought on industries such as shipbuilding and steel by Conservative governments during the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher's premiership.<sup>3</sup> The material effects of that devastation were, of course, profound and well-documented but so too was the social and spiritual damage wreaked on communities and individuals across Scotland during these years.

The other reason that poverty is neglected within much of the happiness literature is that as we have seen, above an extremely low level, income and wealth are seen as having little relationship with happiness and well-being. Certainly, as Oliver James argues in his book *Affluenza*, being fabulously wealthy in its self is no guarantee of a happy life.<sup>4</sup> In addition, as I shall argue below, focusing *solely* on poverty levels omits a range of other factors, such as inequality and insecurity, which also impact on health and well-being. It is important, however (not least for the fairly well-off academics and policy-makers who produce much of this literature) to retain a sense of perspective here. Few of us would be surprised by the "consistent finding" cited by Richard Wilkinson that "richer people are, on average, more satisfied with their lives than their poorer contemporaries".<sup>5</sup> Nor would we regard as counter-intuitive the finding of a government-commissioned study of the influences on happiness and well-being that "overall, there appears to reasonably robust evidence that individual or household income has a positive but non-linear effect on life satisfaction".

The second way these policies have impacted on working-class lives is to increase inequality. The emphasis in much of the happiness literature on how "we are all better off" with its focus on the rise in *average* income obscures the extent to which some of "us" have actually become much better off than others. In his study of inequality in Britain following a decade of New Labour governments, for example, Lansley found that: "Britain has been slowly moving back in time – to levels of income inequality that prevailed more than half a century ago and to levels of wealth inequality of more than thirty years ago."<sup>6</sup>

In few countries of the world are these inequalities as pronounced as they are in Scotland. The true extent of the country's inequality was revealed in a study compiled by the *Scotsman* newspaper in early 2006.<sup>7</sup> This study disentangled NHS data and concentrated on two blocks: "Prime Scotland", which comprises the best 100 neighbourhoods, and "Third Scotland", where life expectancy is closer to the third world. The study found that if "Prime Scotland" were a country, it would have the longest life expectancy in the world. "Third Scotland", by contrast, has an average male life expectancy of only 64.4 years - meaning an eighth of the men in the country can expect to die before the official pension age. This life expectancy is lower than in Bosnia, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Iran or North Korea. In practice, this means that a child born in the country's wealthiest suburb has a life expectancy of 87.7 years, while a boy born in the poorest area of Glasgow can expect to die at 54.

The implication of such health inequalities for happiness and well-being are so obvious that they hardly require comment. But they also help explain other aspects of

<sup>3</sup> Bambery, "Two Souls of Scotland", 30-34

<sup>4</sup> James, *Affluenza*.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson, *The Impact of Inequality*, 294

<sup>6</sup> Lansley, *Rich Britain*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> *The Scotsman*, 4 January, 2006.

Scottish society, including, for example, low self-esteem and high levels of violence, especially amongst young men. For as the social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson has shown, inequality impacts on every aspect of our health, well-being and relationships, including factors such as the level of trust in fellow citizens. Given that trust levels are cited in most studies as a key determinant of a “happy society”, it is reasonable to assume that the extreme levels of inequality in Scotland affects both how people feel about themselves and also the levels of trust and respect they feel towards their fellow citizens.

Another impact is increasing insecurity. When Aneurin Bevan wrote his defence of the welfare state he called it *In Place of Fear*. One consequence of the neoliberal policy of State withdrawal from the provision of welfare is that for many people, especially older people and people with disabilities, that fear has returned in the form of increased insecurity around issues such as housing, pensions and (especially south of the border) securing a decent education for your children. That said, it would be interesting to know the extent to which some of the mildly “collectivist” policies of the Scottish Government, such as free personal care for older people, however limited, might have impacted positively on people’s sense of well-being.

The fourth and final impact is the result of profound changes that have taken place in many people’s experience of work. According to economist Frances Green, the past two decades have been a “hard day’s night” for many of those in work. Among his findings are that more people are working long hours *and* more are working, especially short hours; and that hours have become concentrated in households, with the average two-adult household working an extra seven hours compared with the early 1980s. No less importantly, Green argues, there has been an *intensification* of work since the early 1980s. For example, in his research the proportion of workers who strongly agreed that their job required them to work very hard rose from 32% to 40% in just 5 years from 1992. The proportions working at very high speed all or almost all of the time rose from 17% to 25% in the 5 years from 1991. During this period, work intensification was faster in Britain than anywhere else in Europe due, Green argues, to falling union power.<sup>8</sup> Similar findings emerge from a more recent TUC survey of 984 workers in Britain.<sup>9</sup>

Back in the 1960s, when television transmission was less reliable than it is today and programmes were prone to loss of reception, it was common to see a message appear on the screen saying: “Do not adjust your set - there is a fault in transmission”. During the great social upheavals of the late 1960s, when real social and political change seemed imminent, one slogan writer amended this to read: “Do not adjust your mind – there is a fault in reality”. If there is a single message that emerges from the happiness literature, and from the prescriptions of organisations like Action for Happiness, it is precisely the opposite of this: happiness, well-being and confidence are to be attained not through a collective challenge to poverty, inequality and oppression, but rather through individuals changing their minds, their attitudes and their lifestyles. In reality, it is a counsel of despair. If, however, the magnificent half-million strong demonstration against cuts and unemployment called by the TUC in London on March 26<sup>th</sup> is a portent of the struggles to come, it is also one which growing numbers of people appear to reject.

<sup>8</sup> Green, “It’s Been a Hard Day’s Night but Why?”

<sup>9</sup> TUC, cited in Womack, “Employees like the Pay but not the Work”.