

Compulsory Happiness

by Rémy Pawin

In a stimulating essay, Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz denounce the ‘sciences of happiness’. In the service of neoliberal ideology, it encourages us to abandon any idea of political change and induces guilt in the ‘psytizens’ who are unable to follow its directives.

Reviewed: Edgar Cabanas, Eva Illouz, *Happycratie. Comment l'industrie du bonheur a pris le contrôle de nos vies*, Paris, Premier Parallèle, 2018, 270 pp.

This book, of Foucauldian inspiration, seeks to dismantle the ‘science of happiness’ that has rapidly become a device in the soft power system, and a neoliberal tool to govern souls and bodies. The title that recalls Huxley’s famous dystopia sets the tone of the work by underscoring ‘how the happiness industry has taken control of our lives’. The essay, as that is what it is, rapidly presents the authors’ intentions: to reveal the vanity and the danger of the self-proclaimed ‘science of happiness’.

The Equation 50-40-10

This is not the authors’ first venture of this type. Born in 1961, in Morocco, Eva Illouz holds a Ph.D from the University of Pennsylvania, the cradle of positive psychology. Her research focuses on the psychology of emotions and she has long opposed the psychologization of social life, and the new norms related to the emergence of *homo psychologicus*.

After studying the sociological dimensions of love, or the manufacturing of emotional capitalism, she went on to look at the ‘apostles’ of positive psychology in order to show that ‘Happiness, as it is formulated today, is nothing more than a slave to values imposed by the

neoliberal cultural revolution' (p. 17). In this undertaking she chose to work with Edgar Cabanas, also a critical specialist of positive psychology, as this doctor of psychology from the University of Madrid has worked on the economic, political and social uses of the notion of happiness.

The demonstration is spread over five chapters written in a lively style. The first traces the history of the main disciplines that contribute to the 'science of happiness'—positive psychology and the economics of happiness—focusing mainly on the two prophets in this field: Martin Seligman and Richard Layard. Despite their 'disparate, ambiguous, inconclusive and even contradictory results' (p. 45), they have managed to impose the idea that happiness is an objectively measurable good that can be quantified by the famous, so called, 'subjective well-being' surveys, so much so that 'happiness has become one of the main economic, political and moral barometers of our neoliberal societies' (p. 64).

This statement may seem odd in the French context, where television news broadcasts and public policy remain dominated by growth and its key indicator GDP. But nonetheless, subjective well-being polls are often highlighted and presented as revealed scientific truths—which they are not—instrumentalized to justify the existing state of the world, and to refuse any attempt to subvert the established order.

The second chapter addresses the content of these disciplines to show how the happy individual they suggest as an archetype, corresponds perfectly to the neoliberal ideal. Theoreticians of positive psychology have suggested a 'formula for happiness', postulating that each person's happiness depends for fifty per cent on genes, 40% on psychological factors, mainly related to the way they see their lives, and for only 10%, on 'life circumstances and external factors'. (p. 83).

In other words, everyone is responsible for their own happiness, which is in no way determined by social factors. 'Highly questionable at the scientific level' (p. 83), this equation for happiness seems to be a direct product of the neoliberal ideology that perfidiously encourages us to abandon any desire for socio-political change and withdraw into an 'internal fortress' in order to find the keys to well-being within oneself.

Responsible For Your Own Happiness

The third chapter deals with work. The authors convincingly show that the pseudo concern with employees' well being is only a new, more insidious form of domination. Psychologists are often employed to make people accept terminations smoothly, increase employee productivity levels or to recruit staff by probing 'the positivity they emit' rather than their technical skills (p. 128).

Similarly, organisational transformations linked to the emerging role of Chief Happiness Officer are only cosmetic, and speeches praising autonomy and flexibility ‘incite the company’s employees and collaborators to internalise the control exerted upon them by the employer’ (p. 132), including those occupying subaltern, little valorised positions. The benefits for the company and its managers are immediate, but far less obvious for the employee, who is now responsible for organisational contradictions and social tensions.

The next chapter reviews the qualities of the happy citizen, as postulated by the science of happiness, to methodically destroy the injunction to ‘manage one’s emotions’. The science of happiness develops an ideal image of the citizen as a self-manager, a ‘psytizen’ whose key qualities are ‘emotional self-management, authenticity and self-fulfilment.’ (p. 155).

These new moralists, who deny the existence of unconscious psychic processes, claim that ‘all individuals would be endowed with a psychological mechanism, or an internal muscle, that allows them to govern themselves entirely’, so much so that their advice is to ‘acquire and develop these aptitudes for good self-management’. (p. 156).

Guilty of Being Unhappy

The final chapter describes the consequences of this consecration of happiness in the normative world, and underscores that the ‘champions of positive psychology do not stop at describing what they believe happiness should be: they moreover stipulate what a good life should be’ (p. 224). Along the way, they classify emotions as two watertight categories—positive and negative—and order us to eliminate the negative.

The authors of the work show that it is impossible, and even undesirable, to eliminate negative emotions (to take just one example, positive psychology would find it difficult to bring sickness and death to an end), given that negative emotions may have positive consequences. Further the construction of the ideal of the happy individual aggravates the pain of those who are suffering, turning it into a sort of double sentence: they not only suffer, they also feel guilty about it.

To conclude, the authors consider that the science of happiness will never provide the keys to happiness, but conceals an old store of common sense under a particularly pernicious scientific facade. In reality it constitutes a new tool of governance to produce obedience. The argument is well developed and coherent. The timing of the publication is perfect, to contrast with what has become a dominant discourse. Its success in France is also certainly due to the

stronger resistance the ideology of happiness has met with there, compared to other parts of the Western world.¹

A Revolutionary Aim?

Nonetheless, several points are worth discussing. The work recalls that tests are to science what science fiction is to innovation: both open up research programmes and the echo this work has provoked may have the merit of launching one. It would be useful to carry out a deeper study of these ‘apostles of the science of happiness’, whom the authors assimilate collectively and somewhat hastily with charlatans greedy for profit. This could take the form of a prosopographic study or participant observation, for example.

Similarly, the somewhat cursory analysis of the methods and results of these ‘64 000 studies’ could be re-evaluated, in order to establish a more nuanced appraisal. It is true that positive psychology can often be reduced to a new form of autosuggestion, but the nature of the human psyche is precisely its malleability. Certain, little known, psychological abilities are certainly worth exploiting, which does not mean renouncing the desire for socio-political change: the fact that the ideology subjacent to the science of happiness is essentially neoliberal, does not signify that it should be allowed to take over this field, quite the contrary.

Lastly, the main stumbling block concerns the values that should orient research and action. The explicit of the work (‘Justice and knowledge, rather than happiness, determine the ethical revolutionary aim of our lives’) reveals an almost religious choice, which doubtless informed the authors’ entire undertaking.

Now, it would seem that this ancient axiom could be re-examined today. Clearly social justice must prevail, but the aim of happiness does not exclude equality, and certain jurists already envisage a horizon where happiness is justiciable.² Hence, the somewhat hasty equation of individual search for happiness with a selfish and unfair ideal, and the explicit denial of the possibility of any kind of scientific knowledge existing in this area, would need to be demonstrated more widely.

As for knowledge, postulating knowledge as an end in itself raises an axiological question that can only have a democratic answer. As the authors rightly invite us not to follow authoritative commands, and to create a balance, we can recall this verse by Anna de Noailles :

¹ Pawin, Rémy, ‘La conversion au bonheur en France au second XXe siècle’, *Vingtième siècle, revue d’histoire*, n°118, April-June 2013, pp. 171-184.

² See the bon droit international research programme, launched by the University of Angers (<http://bondroit.univ-angers.fr/fr/presentation-du-projet.html>).

« Retenez, du savoir, ce qu'il faut au bonheur ;
On est assez profond pour le jour où l'on meurt. »³

'Of knowledge, retain enough to be happy;
We have the depth we need to face death'.

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³ Quoted by Oster, Pierre (dir.), *Nouveau dictionnaire des citations françaises*, Paris, Hachette, 1970.