

Can happiness be a political Leitmotiv?

If we take happiness as target of human beings, politics should support this aim. But can politics really have happiness as a guiding principle?

Happiness and Politicsⁱ

Plato described the perfection of life, by which he understood the happy and noble life of and in the community as the ultimate goal of the stateⁱⁱ Today, however, happiness seems to be something which is not really suitable for politics, as it should not interfere with individual lifestyles and the personal ideas about a good life. Nevertheless, politics is deeply committed to happiness, albeit indirectly. The secular trinity of happiness, freedom and justice is considered to be the core idea of modern Western liberalism, which prevails in Germany and many other countries.ⁱⁱⁱ

Policy is to enable the pursuit of happiness of the individual and thus the development of the personality by guaranteeing freedom and security, e.g. in the form of a functioning rule of law, a solid economy and sound social system.

However, the known solution of utilitarianism, to allow the greatest possible happiness of the greatest number seems to have since been varied or even redefined. The target appears in its current interpretation rather as "the greatest material prosperity of the greatest number".

That the maximum gross national product ensures the happiness of the people and thus acts as a model of policy seems given, but is neither logical nor true.

Recent happiness research shows again and again the limits of material wealth in relation to happiness. Around the globe a discourse is forming about sustainability and alternatives to the economic growth model, seeking to establish the idea of wellbeing / happiness as a new and central indicator of prosperity. From *Gross National Happiness* in Bhutan to *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador, from the UN to several EU countries.^{iv}

Whose happiness? Egoism contra Altruism

One reason for the skepticism whether happiness can be utilised for a policy is based on the assumption that happiness is a very selfish concept that therefore can not work for society as a whole. Every person would pursue his happiness at the expense of the other goes the argument. But this simple and catchy thesis is however debatable.

On the one hand, the results of research on happiness show that happiness/well-being is based widely on on social aspects – e.g. on the good relationship with friends and family, on meaningful activity (and meaning arises from the recognition of others), on helping each other and enjoying life together. In short: on living together, on the social life.^v

Secondly, political philosophy increasingly develops approaches that regard the social interaction of people as given. An "enlightened self-interest" refers to Kantian principles, seeking and finding the greatest possible well-being of the individual to the greatest benefit of all.^{vi} For society as a whole, Wilkinson and Pickett have put it, together with casting their formula "equality is happiness" on an empirical basis.^{vii} But it admittedly requires some effort to expand the horizon accordingly to a global level way beyond the nation-state, as it is necessary on issues such as sustainable development.



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Happiness cannot be made.

Happiness as a goal of policy will be ringing alarm bells quickly and evoke images of a "happiness-dictatorship" in which everybody has to be happy everytime, similar to the scenario in Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World*, where the population is prescribed the happiness drug *Soma*. Two pillars are however preventing such unwanted developments:

First, happiness is a very individual matter, as the term *subjective* well-being is already saying literally. Such an individual perception can not be prescribed, be regulated or even created, by a state. It is incompatible by definition.

Second, empirical studies show that human rights, political freedom and democratic institutions significantly correlate with subjective well-being.^{viii} In short: freedom makes happy, therefore happiness needs freedom.

Wellbeing/happiness and freedom are inherently connected. Every imaginary happiness-dictatorship would be a contradiction in terms. A policy for happiness that already knows and prescribes the happiness of its people cannot exist.

Politics for happiness

If politics wants to focus on the greatest possible happiness of the greatest number again it needs to relate it to a global, sustainable perspective. The increasingly materialistic lifestyle of our societies is to be discussed and questioned... and the prevalent concept of a primarily material prosperity. Linked to this lifestyle many of the modern "treadmills" such as consumerism and "workism" (working more than necessary) are connected.

This debate connects into almost all policy areas and resorts: how to reduce working hours, so that people can have more leisure time and personal energy? How can people be freed from the constant pressure to consume? (E.g. by restricting advertising^{ix}).

How can happiness and well-being of the public be assessed made a main topic of policy and politics? How can well-being and knowledge about the topic be promoted, for example in education or in health policy?

As part of the German enquete Commission "prosperity, growth, quality of life," some approaches have already been discussed, but very few have it made on the agenda outside the commissions realm.^x It is important to think further and to take action...

The theme of happiness belongs on the political agenda – again and ever more!



Jochen Dallmer, September 2014. Berlin.

This essay gives an insight into my ongoing research on the topic of happiness & sustainability. Feedback is very welcome!
For more information and my contact details see the website.

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Thank you.

References

(As my research is in German most literature used is German too.)

- i In German language one word (Politik) covers the different english notions of Politics, Polity, Policy. The english translation of the essay uses mainly the word politics, but this often includes policy and polity. A clear distinction is not being made, although it would be desirable.
- ii Aristoteles: Politik, Third Book, Chapter 10.
Slaves were excluded from the happy and noble perfection, but had to contribute their labour for the happiness of the citizen.
- iii Geuss, Raymond (2004): Glück und Politik. In: Kern, A.; Menke, C.(2004): Raymond Geuss. Glück und Politik. Potsdamer Vorlesungen. Berlin.
- iv Siehe z. B. Martens, Jens (2010): Thinking Adead. Development Models and Indicators of Well-Being Beyond the MDGs. Berlin
- v Stengel, Oliver (2011): Suffizienz. Die Konsumgesellschaft in der ökologischen Krise.
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Skidelsky, R; Skidelsky, E. (2013). Wie viel ist genug?!!!
- vi Linz, Manfred (1994): Der aufgeklärte Eigennutz. In: Däubler-Gmelin et al. (Hrsg.) (1994): Gegenrede. Aufklärung – Kritik – Öffentlichkeit. Baden-Baden. S. 221-230
- vii Wilkinson, R.; Pickett, K. (2010): Gleichheit ist Glück. Warum gerechte Gesellschaften für alle besser sind.
- viii Kroll, Christian (2008): Social Capital and the Happiness of Nations. Frankfurt/Main. S.48 ff.
- ix As suggested by a citizens movement in Berlin: <http://amtfuerwerbefreiheit.org/>
- x An overview on the work of the commission and a critical review is to be found on: <http://www.enquetewatch.de>