

Capitalism and the politics of happiness

[BOOK REVIEW]

Davies, William (2015) **The happiness industry: How government and big business sold us well-being**. London: Verso. ISBN 978-1-78168-845-8 hbk. Pages 314

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This book is an interesting commentary and concise analysis of the plethora of philosophical, scientific, social scientific, economic and psychological forays into the measurement, and utilitarian deployment of happiness as both a subjective experience, and an objectively measurable aspect of human beings. It is, seemingly, not premised on any empirical research carried out by the author. The book charts the emergence of happiness as a domain of inquiry and its importance in the emergence of technologies of psychological control. The book focusses on the Benthamite/Behaviourist tradition within the human and social sciences, but also looks at the emergence of neuroscience as a major contributor to both the understanding of happiness, and the instrumentalization of happiness in the pursuit of specific economic and social outcomes.

Davies has produced a text that is part polemic, part historical analysis, part conspiracy theory and (very small) part critical theory. The conspiracy theory nomenclature may seem a bit harsh, but it is not meant in a pejorative sense. Davies provides supporting evidence for his claims about the agendas of Big Pharma, Big Data and Big Corporate, and the usual array of suspects implicated in the battle to understand our

emotions, predict and control our behaviour, in particular in respect to work and our consumption decisions.

The polemic part of the book argues that historically, capitalist society has problematized negative affect, in particular depression and anxiety and has valorized happiness, wellbeing and health, and has in effect instrumentalized wellbeing and happiness in the pursuit of utilitarian goals, productivity and psychological control of people. Davies points out that Gallup calculated that unhappiness costs the US economy about half a trillion dollars per year in lost productivity and tax revenue. The entire book is essentially an argument against the Benthamite/Behaviourist instrumentalization of positive affect in the pursuit of utilitarian and economic goals. The historical part, which is essentially the main focus of the text, is a commentary on the history of ideas and practices that have emerged in relation to happiness and well-being, and its value in relation to the management and control of people in society.

The critical theory part of the book makes an argument for an acknowledgement of the political effects of scientific knowledge, and an argument that psychology and psychiatry need to acknowledge the broader factors at play in the existence of mental health issues like depression and anxiety. Davies argues that psychology and psychiatry need to shift the focus from the individual, which is where the Benthamite/Behaviourist tradition focuses the agenda for change, and develop a political discourse which aims to change iniquitous social conditions. Davies acknowledges the difficulty of achieving this any time soon.

Each chapter engages with a particular theme, or historical moment within the happiness industry both as a scientific endeavour and as an instrument of social and psychological control. The early chapters investigate the historical and epistemological significance of Jeremy Bentham's contribution to the happiness industry and the science of happiness. Bentham, according to Davies was inspired by a passage in a Joseph Priestley essay which declared: "the good and happiness of the members, that is, the majority of the members, of any state, is the great standard by which everything relating to that state must finally be determined" (p 13).

This passage provided the basis for the doctrine that was the defining contribution of Bentham's oeuvre, i.e. utilitarianism, or the notion/theory that the "right action is whichever one produces the maximum happiness for the population overall" (p 13). Davies provides an historical perspective on Bentham's basic premise, and he argues that a science of happiness was pursued in the aftermath of the Enlightenment's optimism about the rational pursuit of knowledge and amelioration of human welfare. During this period, it was believed that a deeper, more objective understanding of

happiness would assist governments in creating social and economic policies, laws and institutions that would enhance the welfare of all humankind. The book is thus chiefly about how the science of happiness becomes a basis for political and moral foundations in capitalist societies and how there was a “race” to measure happiness objectively. In doing so, Davies touches on, amongst others, the work of Fechner, and his idea of “the pleasure principle”, the emergence of economic psychology, and the hard science of neuroscience which emerges much later and provides a materialist, or biological insight into the experience of happiness.

Davies also discusses the emergence of the economics of happiness and provides a brief historical analysis of the relationship between money, the (free) market and happiness. He provides an interesting historical account of the attempt to understand whether, or how, money could be used to provide a measurable representation of our feelings. He charts the rise and fall of economic psychology and explains how people such as William Jevons and Richard Jennings began combining psychology and economics, and warned economists that they could, “not ignore psychology any longer, given that labour was central to the classical view of capitalism” (p 50). This, according to Davies, leads to a rush, in Britain in particular, to formulate a method of reliably measuring psychological states, or “psychic measurement”. Devices such as Edgeworth’s “hedonimeter” are proposed to provide an objective measurement of human pleasure and pain. These early ideas are the antecedents of what was to come later in psychology with the emergence of the psychometric movement. This nascent desire to measure human emotions provided the impetus for psychology to develop instruments and scales to measure aspects of human psychology, to better understand, predict and control us. Davies argues that economists quickly became disillusioned with psychology and the two, psychology and economics, went through a quick “divorce” in the late 1800s.

Davies then gives some attention to the increasing desire to understand consumer behaviour. He interrogates the idea that science can provide an insight into, and measurement of, things such as consumer attention, consumer emotional states and consumer decision making. Davies demonstrates how these technologies emerge and evolve from crude devices that measure or track our eye movements, to sophisticated face scanning programmes that provide data on our emotional states in response to advertising and marketing campaigns. It is an insightful account of the emergence of increasingly sophisticated, scientifically derived, advertising and marketing technologies that are deployed to influence consumers. He points out how advertisers and marketers expertly target our unconscious desires and insecurities, and how neuroscience fundamentally changed marketing by allowing marketers to understand “what forms of image, sound and smell produce emotional attachments to specific brands” (p 73). Davies explains how observation and the search for a “hard, objective

reality of the psyche” comes to dominate the emerging science of psychology. Davies demonstrates how behaviourism comes to provide assistance to both government and private industry, both in respect of labour and management issues and consumption.

The latter half of the book begins to look critically at the emergence of Positive Psychology. Davies looks at the emerging interests in issues such as employee engagement, commitment and their importance in maintaining worker health and wellbeing. It is argued that there was a correlation found between apathy, disengagement and chronic health problems. Chronic health issues and apathy were identified as potentially the new form of worker resistance, costing the US economy upwards of \$550 billion a year in 2013. Disengaged workers, who appeared to be in the majority, were at risk of health problems and costly apathy, costly not only in terms of lost production and declining efficiency, but also rising medical costs. Disengagement and low commitment is also correlated with mental health disorders which is estimated to cost 3-4% of GDP in Europe and North America. So, a big problem, which Davies expertly unpacks, and demonstrates how government, business and “organisational scientists” deal with this problem. What Davies articulately demonstrates is how worker health, mental and physical, is instrumentalized, how it becomes a means to achieve business and government goals of high productivity, profitability and lower medical costs. Workplace happiness becomes valorized, and is seen as a panacea for falling profit margins, declining productivity and elevated stress levels. Davies looks at developments from Taylor to Mayo, and cogently weaves a critique of the instrumentalist approach to worker happiness, maintaining that despite much change in terms of ideas and approaches, industrial management remained fixated on the problem of extracting the maximum productivity from the human factor for the lowest cost to industry, and society.

The concluding chapters focus on inequality, competition and mental health problems, in particular, depression, and also the emergence of social media and the age of “big data”. Davies argues that depression is more common in unequal societies and is less common in equal societies such as most Scandinavian countries. He also states that competition, an ethos of neoliberal capitalism, by its nature, produces unequal outcomes, and that competition itself is correlated with depression.

Davies shows in his analysis how social relationships become the focal point of both managerial and organizational theory, as well as consumer behaviour. Davies argues against the instrumentalization of social relationships, and shows how the reduction of social life to achieve Benthamite (utilitarian) outcomes emerges post the famous Mayo studies (Hawthorne Studies). Davies argues that this instrumentalization of social relationships and social life has continued apace in contemporary capitalism with the emergence of social media. He shows how “Big Corporates” have leveraged social media

to achieve corporate outcomes. We (the public) can now be “friends” with big corporates on Facebook, or follow them on Instagram and Twitter.

Davies suggests that the enormous amount of data available about us is being used to develop sophisticated “scientific advertising” campaigns. Our smartphones, GPSs, exercise fitbits, Facebook profiles, Strava etc, are a mine of valuable information that is seemingly freely available to marketers, our medical aid companies and government. All this data, and the attendant social media algorithms, mean that advertising and marketing campaigns can be targeted to our specific data. Davies points out that we are in the middle of a mass psychological measurement project, a project linked to social sciences and political outcomes. Davies constructs a convincing argument, and while some may label him a conspiracy theorist, the evidence is compelling, and a little alarming. We are under constant surveillance, and the data accumulated is being mined to find out what makes us happy, not because being happy is a good thing for us, but because happy humans make for better societies, better organizations, i.e. a utilitarian outcome. Human welfare, according to Davies, has been thoroughly instrumentalized.

Davies’ book gives a nod to both Foucault and the broad ideas of critical theory. He has documented the manner in which our happiness and wellbeing has been instrumentalized in the service of political and economic interests. This is the key achievement of this book. However, unlike Foucault, Davies’ account is not an in-depth analysis of the politics of subjectivity, and, unlike critical theory, he does not provide much in the way of emancipatory action for us.