


INTO THE STACKS

The Politics of Happiness

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With its annual *World Happiness Report*, Gallup has been ranking the feelings of different nations since 2012 (Figure 1). In the latest contest, Finland edged out Denmark for happiest nation on earth. The United States placed nineteenth. South Sudan came in last. The results are based on surveys with queries such as the following: “Please imagine a ladder, with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?” and “Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your freedom to choose what you do with your life?” Respondents also report whether they have made charitable donations, and whether they have smiled, laughed, or experienced feelings of enjoyment or happiness recently.¹

The Happiness Report assumes that Gallup’s definition of happiness—measured in terms of smiles, laughter, charitable donations, individual choice, and a competitive ladder of life satisfaction—is a universal measure. But actually it represents the very particular preoccupations of twenty-first-century Americans. As Daniel Horowitz notes in his timely and important book, *Happier? The History of a Cultural Movement that Aspired to Transform America* (2018), the obsession with happiness has flourished since the mid-twentieth century, abetted by the rise of positive psychology. According to Horowitz, positive psychologists have given a specific shape to contemporary happiness, conceiving of it as based on individualism, optimism, “personal transformations through rebirth,” and a “reliance on open market capitalism.”²

It is worth remembering that people in other times and places defined the good life differently. In *Happiness: A History* (2006), Darrin McMahan offers a sweeping account beginning with the tale of Croesus, the King of Lydia, who asked the Athenian Solon who the happiest man on earth was, convinced that it was he himself, since he had great wealth. Solon, however, declared that the happiest person was an Athenian warrior who had died in battle; the second happiest were two brothers who expired after pulling their mother to a festival while “yoked to her cart like a pair of oxen.”³ These dead men were deemed the happiest, because they had lived good lives and died at moments of nobility. The ancient Greeks believed one could only judge true happiness at death. It was the sum total of a life, a reflection of how one had lived and died, not a passing feeling. It was therefore only safe to assess posthumously, for at that point, fortune, joy, and well-being could not be lost.⁴ They used an array of words to describe this condition, including eudaimonia, but none of their terms quite equate to the English word happiness. And frankly, it is hard to know how the ancient Greeks would fare in the *World*

¹World Happiness Report: *World Happiness Report*, 2019, https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2019/?utm_source=workplace-newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=WorkplaceNewsletter_Test-A_March_031919&utm_content=downloadexitpp-CTA-6#read (accessed Nov. 6, 2019); John F. Helliwell, Haifang Huang, and Shun Wang, “Statistical Appendix 1 for Chapter 2 of World Happiness Report 2019,” https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2019/WHR19_Ch2A_Appendix1.pdf (accessed Nov. 6, 2019).

²Daniel Horowitz, *Happier? The History of a Cultural Movement that Aspired to Transform America* (New York, 2018), 4.

³Darrin M. McMahan, *Happiness: A History* (New York, 2006), 1–2.

⁴McMahan, *Happiness*, ch. 1.

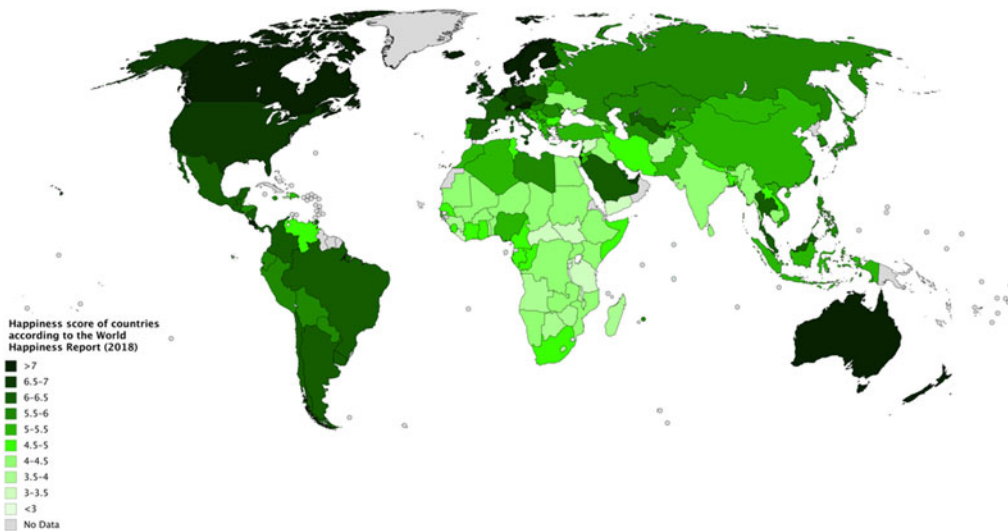


Figure 1. Map showing happiness of countries by their score according to the 2018 *World Happiness Report*. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Happiness Report, since they would be unable to answer poll questions about how their lives were faring until they had died.

The *Happiness* survey also questions respondents about emotions assumed to be undesirable, asking whether they experienced worry, stress, or sadness. Gallup interprets these feelings to be sure signs of an unfulfilling life. Yet again, this is a relatively new definition of happiness and fulfillment, for in past centuries, people sometimes considered melancholy a sign of virtue. Suffering was to be expected, for life was a vale of tears, but sadness also was redemptive and gave meaning to existence.⁵

These accounts of the emotional life of earlier generations should make historians think critically about current American definitions of happiness, how they arose, and what kinds of values and behaviors they promote. Some might invoke Thomas Jefferson's promise that all could pursue happiness as evidence that the emotion has always been with us. Twenty-first-century happiness, however, differs dramatically from Jefferson's notion of the feeling. McMahon argues that, for the founding generation, "the pursuit of happiness" implied both "private pleasure" in moderation and "public welfare"—two meanings of happiness they regarded as inextricably linked.⁶ But that pairing did not long persist. A number of works document how, over the last two centuries, the pursuit of happiness became ever more individualistic and also increasingly market oriented.

Scott Sandage's insightful book, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (2005), offers a sense of this transformation. Sandage takes as his central problem the question of how "financial circumstances evolve[d] into everyday categories of personal identity," and how ambition became "an obligation" in the United States. To find answers, he traces key permutations in nineteenth- and twentieth-century emotional life, including the shifting value of a feeling related to happiness but not identical to it: contentment. Long celebrated as virtuous, and crucial to justifying stratification and ascribed status, contentment involved accepting one's

⁵Carol Zisowitz Stearns, "Lord Help Me Walk Humbly': Anger and Sadness in England and America, 1570–1750," in *Emotions and Social Change: Toward a New Psychohistory*, eds. C. Stearns and P. Stearns (New York, 1988), 39–68; Peter N. Stearns, *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style* (New York, 1994), 53.

⁶McMahon, *Happiness*, 314–31, here 330.

circumstances and limited opportunities rather than striving for more. In the early years of the republic, freeholders were taught to be content with a modest “competency.” By the mid-nineteenth century, however, Americans experienced growing pressure to embrace ambition, pursue happiness, and hope for greater success and expanding fortunes. That pressure continued to mount over the course of the twentieth century. Sandage studies the many who failed to achieve such goals, and in so doing offers a history of discouragement—a “hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism.”⁷ The new emotional expectations that arose with expanding markets led (and continue to lead) Americans to look for the cause of their fortunes and failures within their psyches. Sandage writes that over the course of the last 150 years, many who failed in the economy believed (echoing Emerson) that there was “a reason, in the man” for their plight. They became convinced that character and psychological make-up (for instance too much contentment and too little ambition) were more consequential than larger economic exigencies.⁸

Other scholars have shown how, over time, contentment became an inappropriate feeling for free agents in an entrepreneurial economy, signaling a want of ambition. Michael Woods demonstrates how white Southerners believed they were entitled to pursue hope-infused states of happiness, while enslaved people were only entitled to cultivate contentment.⁹ My own book, *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890–1930* (2003), likewise shows how traditional notions of contentment, long considered the antidote to envious striving, were gradually repudiated. Meanwhile, envy, long condemned, was increasingly embraced in an expanding consumer economy that promised happy fulfillment with every acquisition.¹⁰

As they abandoned contentment as a desirable emotional state, many turn-of-the-century Americans began to hope for something more—a feeling that did not require resignation or the acceptance of limits. This stemmed in part from religious and self-help movements and, in particular, the “New Thought” movement. Those who followed New Thought came to believe their health, well-being, and prosperity were wholly under their control. David Schuster traces this lineage in *Neurasthenic Nation: America’s Search for Health, Happiness, and Comfort, 1869–1920* (2011), arguing that neurasthenia’s rise signaled not only an unease with the accelerating economy but also a new attitude toward suffering. The neurasthenia diagnosis essentially pathologized tiredness, pessimism, and nervousness. It made “discomfort and unhappiness seem like abnormal conditions—medical symptoms that required therapeutic treatment,” rendering “happiness and comfort as the norm of good health.”¹¹ While the number of neurasthenics remained small, the number who embraced the goal of happiness grew large. By the twentieth century, happiness, increasingly tied to notions of market success, emerged as the baseline of emotional experience. Advisors such as Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale suggested that those who cultivated amiable, cheery emotional styles could control their economic fortunes. Success or failure seemed a matter of emotional disposition and willpower. If Americans could just teach themselves to be happy and optimistic, they would be successful, which in turn would make them even happier (Figure 2).

Eva Moskowitz offers a critical assessment of this culture in her book, *In Therapy We Trust: America’s Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (2001). She maintains that during the twentieth century, Americans embraced a “therapeutic gospel” with three core beliefs: “happiness

⁷Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 2, 9–10, 14, 71, 81–2.

⁸*Ibid.*, 44–6.

⁹Michael Woods, *Emotional and Sectional Conflict in the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge, UK, 2014), 35–72.

¹⁰Susan J. Matt, *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890–1930* (Philadelphia, 2003).

¹¹David G. Schuster, *Neurasthenic Nation: America’s Search for Health, Happiness, and Comfort, 1869–1920* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2011), 2.



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In Prices*

*Real
Opportunities
In Buying*

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Success—Happiness! More Success! More Happiness!

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MEN'S DEPARTMENT

RHEINAUER & CO.

OCALA, FLORIDA

Figure 2. Rheinauer & Co., "Kuppenheimer Good Clothes," Oct. 29, 1920, advertisement in *The Ocala Evening Star* (Ocala, FL), Library of Congress, Serial and Publications Division.

should be our supreme goal"; "our problems stem from psychological causes"; and, finally, "the psychological problems that underlie our failures and unhappiness are in fact treatable and that we can, indeed should, address these problems both individually and as a society." That gospel, widely promoted by mass media, reverberated across twentieth-

century society, shaping everything from antipoverty campaigns and social protest movements to marriage advice.¹²

The happiness movement gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century with the rise of positive psychology. Horowitz traces its antecedents, showing how Abraham Maslow, Viktor Frankl, and John Bowlby, among others, grappled with the trauma of World War II and searched for meaning in its wake. That quest led them to reevaluate what psychology could and should do. Rather than treat neuroses, they became interested in nurturing feelings that led to self-realization. This preoccupation would be taken up in later decades by the founders of positive psychology, including Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Sonja Lyubomirsky. Appealing to the upper and middle classes, positive psychologists (and their popularizers, including Oprah and Gretchen Rubin) suggested that techniques like mindfulness, gratitude, and forgiveness could enhance the joyfulness of life. Horowitz sees this obsession with happiness as supportive of the neoliberal order, placing the responsibility for one's contentment and joy on self-help habits rather than on larger structural forces. He writes, "The last third of the twentieth century, approximately the same time the systematic study of happiness came to the fore, witnessed arrival of key aspects of a neoliberal economy, including an optimistic emphasis on unbounded choices and new beginnings." Positive psychology, Horowitz argues, "promised tens of millions of ordinary people that they could rely on individual experience to bypass, temporarily forget, or transcend social, political and economic difficulties."¹³

In *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives* (2019), Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz similarly note that the growing international obsession with happiness reflects neoliberal priorities and might distract people from more consequential and meaningful goals. "We no longer believe that happiness is somewhat connected to fate or circumstances," they write. Instead, "happiness is now generally seen as a mindset that can be engineered through willpower." Like Horowitz, they trace the current obsession to positive psychology, characterizing its core belief as the idea that "all individuals are driven by an inherent urge to be happy, so the pursuit of happiness should be seen not only as natural, but as the highest expression of their realization as human beings." This creed is based on the assumption that "there are no structural problems but only psychological shortages." They describe how many nations have created happiness ministries and collected happiness data to gauge their citizens' well-being, rather than gathering more "hard, objective indexes of economic and social progress."¹⁴ But they show the weaknesses of such measures, including the fact that the yardsticks designed to quantify happiness end up equating dissimilar experiences. They are predicated on the belief that happiness can be universally recognized and measured across lives, cultures, and political systems. Perhaps most troubling is the way happiness is used to justify inequality. They cite "new economic studies on happiness," which "claim that the deeper the inequality, the more opportunities individuals will see for themselves in the future, so the more happiness it brings."¹⁵ Cabanas and Illouz suggest that when policy makers rely on aggregate happiness data rather than on citizens' political opinions about resource distribution and justice, they can more easily justify policies that promote or sustain radical inequality.

Together these books reveal that the pursuit of happiness, often considered an unchanging feature of American culture, has in fact changed dramatically over time. No longer tied to notions of public welfare, happiness has become a private state, to be achieved individually

¹²Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore, 2001), 2–3.

¹³Horowitz, *Happier?*, 5.

¹⁴Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz, *Manufacturing Happy Citizens: How the Science and Industry of Happiness Control Our Lives* (Cambridge, UK, 2019), 3, 6, 9, 35.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 41–2, 47–8.

and often at the expense of others. Until very recently, this transformation would have been invisible, for most historians ignored feelings, believing them to be the ephemera of history—transient, frivolous, private, and inconsequential. Yet these histories make clear that feelings are anything but.

Susan J. Matt is Presidential Distinguished Professor of History at Weber State University. She specializes in U.S. social and cultural history with a particular focus on the history of emotions. She is co-author of *Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Changing Feelings about Technology, from the Telegraph to Twitter* (2019), and author of *Homesickness: An American History* (2011), and *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890–1930* (2003). She is co-editor of *Doing Emotions History* (2013), and co-edits the history of emotions series for Bloomsbury. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*.