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## **Unhappy Dialectics**

Review of ‘Critical happiness studies’  
edited by Nicholas Hill, Svend Brinkmann, and Anders Peterson

Joachim I. Krueger  
Brown University  
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(excluding references)

Correspondence:

Joachim I. Krueger  
Department of Cognitive, Linguistic & Psychological Sciences  
Brown University  
190 Thayer St.  
Providence, RI 02912  
Phone: (401) 863-2503  
Home page: <http://research.brown.edu/research/profile.php?id=10378>

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“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your *dialectics*.”

Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1998/1891). *Quincas Borba*, p. 234, italics in the original

This edited volume on *Critical Happiness Studies* is an attack on contemporary Western culture, performed by a group of ‘progressive’ intellectuals nursed on the works of classical critics of the Enlightenment, such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Adorno, the neo-classical criticism of modernity offered by authors like Lacan (and Foucault, needless to say), Bauman, Bourdieu, and Bruckner, and the pronouncements of recent critics of Neo-liberalism such as Ehrenreich, Davies, Binkley, and McMahon. ‘Interrogating,’ as one might say using postmodern lingo, research on human happiness is a way of lodging larger cultural complaints. Some of what the present authors write is novel and interesting, but much of it is a rehash of earlier criticism, an afterglow of the Frankfurt School and its efforts to dim the Enlightenment by noting that it is, like everything else, a *dialectic* (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947). Quincas Borba, Joaquim Machado’s fictional street philosopher – and his homonymous dog – would understand. In fact, Machado was more critical of modernity than our present cast of authors. Ignorant of bourgeois social tactics, Rubião, Machado’s hero, fails to win Sofia’s heart and find happiness. His ego fragments as he descends into madness. Not a crazy response given the circumstances.

Having taught a lecture course on the psychology and philosophy of happiness, I am familiar with critical scholarship and the tensions between the compromises required by empirical research and the demands of conceptual analysis (Krueger, 2016). A central concern, to my mind, is that *criticism* in the philosophical sense, if it advances unchecked, becomes destructive to the point of tossing out the baby with the bath water. The coin of criticism must have two sides; after tearing down, there also needs to be building up. While *Critical Happiness Studies* offers a few constructive bits and pieces along the way, it develops no coherent view of how happiness should be studied or how it might be attained by those who seek it; the book focuses squarely on deconstructive criticism. In eleven chapters and an introduction, the authors make three broad claims. I will now present and discuss each in turn. As there is much overlap in spirit and letter among the chapters, I will refer to the authors collectively. After reviewing the three claims, I will end with a glimmer of hope.

### **To each their own axiom**

The first claim, which is of direct interest to empirically working psychologists, is that there is no credible and testable psychological theory of happiness. Psychological science, the authors proclaim, has committed an “axiomatic error” by assuming that there is something that reasonable people may call happiness. This is, they assert, an “epistemological fallacy.” Denying that there is a there, this assertion should be a conversation stopper. Yet, as foundational postulates made prior to theory and research, axioms are not open to refutation. Unlike theorems, axioms can be only be stated or denied; they cannot be proven or refuted. There can therefore be no such thing as an axiomatic error. One could posit alternative axioms by claiming, for example, that there are states of pleasure and pain. As in the case of happiness broadly defined, the study of pleasure and pain depends on self-reports and other circumstantial evidence as the thing itself is not directly revealed. Critics of the happiness axiom need to explain why they accept some psychological constructs as legitimate while rejecting others.

Perhaps sensing that merely pronouncing the construct of happiness bankrupt is not compelling, many of the authors question the validity and utility of the measurement procedures available to research psychologists. They question whether people do or even can

know how happy they are. Although self-report studies have yielded many replicable statistical findings, the authors consider these to be examples of empty statistification. They deny the existence of a psychological science of happiness, dismissing research as pseudo-scientific and putting the word 'science' in scare quotes. On this view, the epistemological fallacy of happiness research is so deep that statistical data, however strong or coherent they might be, can never overcome the nihilistic charge of meaninglessness. It is not without irony then that some of the authors seem quite enamored with the data they have gathered from qualitative interviews, including insights arising from the analytical couch. Now, either subjectivism is false, in which case all self-reports of happiness are cheap talk, or it is not, in which case quantitative data need to be admitted to the conversation.

The axiomatic attack on happiness might have been more compelling had the authors considered a parallel case. Would they, for example, be willing to argue that the concept of health is point- and hopeless, that health is no more than the absence of disease much like happiness is no more than the absence of suffering? They do seem to accept the view that suffering is real. They also accept Mill's paradox as a source of epistemological headaches. Mill noted that the more we search for happiness, the less likely we are to find it (see Gilbert, 2005, for a contemporary treatment). Indeed, deeper unhappiness is often the result. The pursuit of happiness thus poses a tricky and troubling dilemma, one that would be self-nullifying if there were no such thing as happiness. In short, the study of happiness is admittedly fraught with challenges, paradoxes, and dilemmas. This acknowledgement treats happiness as a hard problem, not as a pseudo-problem.

### **Culture, capitalism, and conscience**

The second claim, which should be of interest to a broader range of social scientists, is that contemporary Western culture plays a con game on its citizens. It holds out the promise that happiness may be pursued, while making its attainment all but impossible. When flickers of happiness do enter consciousness, it's a consciousness of the false kind. As many people end up less happy than they think they could be and should be, the ideology of personal agency returns a verdict of guilt. Since society has opened the door to the attainment of happiness, the person who does not walk through it has no one to blame but the self. There is, in other words, a destructive loop from the promise of happiness to redoubled discontent and self-recrimination.

The authors refer to the Enlightenment, modernity, and capitalism in one breath, and perhaps with sufficient cause. The common denominator is an ideology of individualism, which provides opportunity while holding the individual accountable for the outcome. This ideology institutionalizes internal attributions while discounting other forces affecting human affairs, such as fate, luck, or economic circumstance. The exercise of cultural criticism appears to lie at the heart of the authors' interests, as is clear from the works they cite and their general allegiance to *critical theory*, or what's left of it. At this socio-political level too we may ask about alternatives. Those who wish to return to the European Middle Ages or to a Pleistocene world of hunting and gathering, please stand up. These eras had their own problems, such as the domination of society by an authoritarian church in the former case and short life spans punctuated by violence in the latter. What is the society that critical theorists say we should want? Even in their Frankfurt heyday, Adorno and his colleagues did not advocate for Soviet-style Marxism. Indeed, most of their criticism targeted the prosperous post-war societies of the West, which, by today's standards were paragons of social

democracy. The authors owe us, I believe, a positive vision. At least, they should answer the question of whether the three-headed hydra of Enlightenment-modernity-capitalism can be saved by judicious reform or whether we should start from scratch. Either way, as happiness is the topic of the book, we'd need to see how in a better society the various happiness paradoxes and dilemmas might be resolved.

### **The commodification of happiness**

The third claim, which should be of great direct interest all those still living within these paradoxes and dilemmas, is that aside from the overriding issue of spurious guilt and false consciousness, capitalism, and especially its neoliberal variant, has betrayed humanity's search of happiness by turning all its moving parts into commodities. The ego is reified as the self has become an object subjected to relentless evaluation – by itself and others. Happiness remains illusory as these evaluations can never reach desired levels, and the market economy does not allow us to opt out.

When every act becomes a production and every concept a commodity, whatever at one time may have been intrinsic to happiness is hollowed out. The authors, I should say, are onto something here, and they could have noted that psychological research itself has provided much of the data supporting these conclusions (cf. Lyubomirsky, 2014). The object of science is to understand processes of cause and effect and their boundary conditions. The object of radical criticism is to argue that causal processes can never work and that any claims to the contrary, however modest and contextualized, are mere ideology.

The authors thus complain, with some justification, that the Western person has become a product and a life well lived has become a creditable accomplishment. With this mindset, many people feel that it is not enough to live one's life; instead, they need to carefully craft it and submit it for review. And when it's over, there is no revise and resubmit. Having only one shot at it is stressful and conducive of unhappiness. All lived experience becomes work, and the alienated kind to boot. Even emotions, so the authors, are submitted to regimens of labor. It all sounds very much like self-enslavement. Whether these critical charges are empirically true is less clear as the authors are not into hypothesis testing. That would be positivism!

A narrower, and empirically more tractable, charge is that good deeds become instrumentalized and thus lose value. Most societies put a moral premium on prosociality. Now that psychological science has found that prosocial acts bestow a warm glow – at least briefly – on the actor, some people may end up performing acts of kindness *in order to* optimize their own emotional returns. Morally speaking, their good deeds become contaminated. This is surely a problem for the moralist, but it need not be a problem for the realist. Most moral action is costly. If there is an emotional benefit for the doer, why must this be bad? Perhaps rates of benevolence could be raised if people understood more fully that they can find happiness in making others happy. There is no denying that the instrumentalization of moral action has potential downsides, but this is far different from claiming that this is all there is.

### **Outlook**

*Critical Happiness Studies* is an interesting collection of papers showing what criticism can do (i.e., criticize) and where it falls short (providing actionable alternatives). The lack of constructive progress is a pity because in an early contribution to critical theory, Marcuse (1968/1938) gave an example of how it might be done. Marcuse articulated a vision of a sensual or 'receptive' kind of hedonism, which, being open to rebellion and passionate

enjoyment, might just be the sort of happiness worth having. As noted above, the present authors offer tidbits of advice, and they could have done well gathering them up and bundling them in an afterword. Doing this for them is not the reviewer's job, but I will say that three names come up repeatedly, and their bearers make strange bedfellows. Aristotle is foremost among them, but who *really* understands what he meant by eudaimonia? A positively critical work would explain to the readers how, not being Macedonian aristocrats of the first millennium b.c.e., they might pull off living a eudaimoniatic life, without of course, objectifying themselves. Kierkegaard, a post-Lutheran pre-existentialist, makes a few appearances, particularly in the chapter of his fellow Dane, co-editor Svend Brinkmann, who acknowledges that we cannot afford not to care about happiness, but says we have to find ethical ways to go about it. Brinkmann gives no instructions on how to do this. Finally, there are several nods to Freudian psychoanalysis, and I say Freudian because, like Marcuse (1955), the authors have no patience for Neo-Freudians, ego-psychologists, and other debasers of the true faith. Freud famously cautioned that ordinary unhappiness is all we can hope for, but I ask, does pessimism automatically have first dibs on truth? To say that it does might be a claim of the axiomatic kind.

Contemporary psychological research gives a few hints as to how we can move the hedonic needle. After hundreds of hours of lecturing, I tell my students that I do have a one-sentence take-home message for them: 'Take a walk, in nature, with someone you love – or at least like.' A moving body is happier than a sitting one; nature stimulates our biophilic instincts, human connection curbs existential dread. Sages of the past have said similar things (e.g., Russell, 1930). I am particularly fond of a pithy verse attributed to Alfonso X, El Sábio (the Wise), King of Castile in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Do this, don Alfonso said: *Quemad viejos leños, leed viejos libros, bebed viejos vinos, tened viejos amigos*, which translates to 'Burn old wood, read old books, drink old wine, have old friends' (Find this quote at [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alfonso\\_X\\_of\\_Castile](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alfonso_X_of_Castile)). Winning a few battles against the Moors also helps, but that's a story for another day. For me, a glass of Montrachet Marquis de Laguiche goes a long way, especially when enjoyed with a slice of Manchego and in non-critical company.

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