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**Review of Amitava Krishna Dutt and Benjamin Radcliff (eds.), *Happiness, Economics and Politics. Towards a Multi-Disciplinary Approach*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2009, 362 pp.**

*Elena E. Nicolae*

This volume presents a unique and interesting study of happiness from both economic and political perspectives. It offers an overview of contemporary research on the emergent field of happiness and tackles issues such as the history and conceptualization of happiness, the effects of consumption, income growth, inequality, discrimination, democracy, the nature of government policies and labour organization on happiness. The ways in which economic and political factors both separately and interactively affect the quality of human life are observed, demonstrating the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to the field. The sixteen papers of the volume originate from the conference "New Directions in the Study of Happiness: US and International Perspectives" held at the University of Notre Dame during October 22-24, 2006.

The authors start from the self-evident truth that it is very difficult to define happiness. Psychologists, theologians and economists have tried to give meaning to the notion of happiness, but being such a complex, abstract concept it has never been an easy task. Darrin McMahon, a historian, begins with a captivating view on how happiness has been perceived and how the concept of happiness has evolved over time. McMahon points out that until the 18th century people did not think of happiness as a worldly experience occurring during one's lifetime, but more as a condition of the future or another dimension such as Heaven (p. 27). Starting from Aristotle, for whom happiness was a prize to be won over during a lifetime of good, virtuous behaviour, McMahon shows that most religions preached, for a long time, that true happiness was something one

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could achieve in the afterlife after uniting with God. It was during the Enlightenment era, with the weakening of religion on everyday life, that happiness started being perceived as the human being's end and goal (p. 29) which is closer to today's view.

Looking at theories and methodological directions within the concerns to measure or mismeasure happiness, Ong argues that happiness and well-being cannot be represented from one dimension only and that researchers should approach happiness from a multidisciplinary angle, examining both the eudaimonic and hedonic indicators of happiness to achieve a more thorough understanding of human happiness and well-being. What is obvious from McMahon's and Ong's contributions is that caution is necessary when dealing with conventional, mainstream indicators based on surveys of happiness or life satisfaction. Conventional surveys asking people to decide on a certain scale how happy they are or how satisfied they are with their lives implicitly rely on the respondents' personal understanding of the concepts which leads to the conclusion that often different results are based on a different definition of the terms and should be analyzed before being used in research.

The basic assumption of economists interested in whether happiness increases when people consume more goods and services is not entirely justified by empirical research. The studies presented in the volume look at *Happiness when temptation overwhelms willpower* (A. Stutzer), a cross-disciplinary investigation in the fields of economics and psychology contributing to the economics of happiness; *Happiness and the relative consumption hypothesis* (A.K.Dutt), putting forward a simple formulation of the relative consumption hypothesis in a model that is static and all individuals identical; *The Easterlin Paradox revisited* (R. H. Frank) which looks at the relation between happiness and welfare; and ask questions such as *Does inequality matter to individual welfare?* (C. Graham, A. Felton), for which the answer depends on the concept of inequality used, and *Perceptions of discrimination, effort to obtain psychological balance and relative wages: can we infer a happiness gradient?* (A. Goldsmith) which offers an interesting analysis and a list of further questions.

The third part of the book focuses on happiness and politics. It is relatively recent that political scientists have started to focus on the study of happiness and well being. This part begins with a comprehensive article from A. Pacek who discusses the role of politics as a factor determining the quality of life that

citizens experience. Pacek discusses in detail the role of organised labour as an interest group in favour of the working class, the size and qualitative characteristics of the welfare state and the overall taxing and spending policies of governments, topics which are further addressed by contributions to the volume.

R. Inglehart tackles a topic which has quite fascinated the media and the lay person and has raised thought provoking questions: does democracy lead to greater happiness? Inglehart's research shows that in the long run a climate of free choice is conducive to happiness. But even though democracy is conducive to human happiness, rising levels of democracy do not necessarily go with higher levels of happiness. Inglehart offers a good example in the countries of the former Eastern European communist block that did not start showing higher levels of happiness after the fall of the regime even though the level of democracy was increasing. In many former communist countries democratization came hand in hand with social and economic collapse. The study is challenging and leaves the reader with a serious dilemma: does democracy promote satisfaction or are satisfied citizens a necessary condition for the successful operation of the democratic process?

In conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the need for a multidisciplinary approach towards helping people and societies lead happier and more fulfilling lives and also to take into account individual happiness, group happiness and global happiness. The editors present a wide range of approaches, a task that was made easier as this volume represents the outcomes of the conference "New Directions in the Study of Happiness: US and International Perspectives" held at the University of Notre Dame during October 22-24, 2006. This interdisciplinary volume represents a distinctive contribution to the relatively large and clearly increasing literature of the subject. It will prove a worthy reading for all those, students or researchers, with a special interest in the analysis of happiness and human well-being.

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