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# The complex history of 'happiness' reveals that it is an unstable concept with political undertones



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"Be happy!" Mary Wollstonecraft exhorted her estranged lover and tormentor, Gilbert Imlay, in late 1795. What did she mean? It had been only days since she had been fished from the sea after having failed in a bid to drown herself. Scorned, shamed and diminished in her view of the world, Wollstonecraft had chosen death. Here too she was thwarted, "inhumanly brought back to life and misery".

Imlay's philandering was the source of her ills, and she told him as much. Why, then, be happy? Was this forgiveness? Hardly. Wollstonecraft knew Imlay's new mistress was "something sacred" in his eyes, and that her death would not quell his "enjoyment".

Wollstonecraft's use of "happiness" was not idiosyncratic. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary defined it as "felicity" or "blissfulness" or the "state in which the desires are satisfied". Wollstonecraft was telling Imlay to satiate himself physically, implying that he had no depth of feeling. "Happiness, in other words, was all she thought him capable of. In her suicide note, addressed to Imlay, she wrote: "Should your sensibility ever awake, remorse will find its way to you, and, in the midst of business and sensual pleasures, I shall appear before you, the victim of my deviation from rectitude." Be happy then but, if it turns out you are human, you'll be miserable when you fuck her.

### Unstable concept

A recent paper in Nature Human Behaviour claimed to present "historical analysis of subjective wellbeing". To do so, it relied on a quantitative analysis of digitised books and magazines from the past two centuries. It focused on "words with stable historical meanings". The effort, by Thomas T Hills of the Turing Institute and the Department of Psychology at the University of Warwick in the UK, caused dismay and not a little mockery among historians. The Wollstonecraft story above shows what many "Twitterstorians" point out: there are no words with "stable historical meanings", particularly not big and important words. "Happiness" is an unstable historical concept, a false friend in historical sources. No

The ignorance of the basic methods of the discipline of history is surprising, given that the subfield of the history of emotions. Over the past two or three decades, the history of emotions has developed a rich set of tools with which to chart the ways that emotions have changed over time. Emotions such as anger, disgust, love and happiness might seem commonplace, but they are not so readily understood in the past. These concepts and the experiences associated with them are not historically stable. In addition, many emotions have ceased to exist, from "acedia" or apathy to *viriditas* or greenness; from "ennobling love" or *tendre* or the tender emotion. Accessing them involves building an understanding of historical concepts and past expressions in order to unlock what people once felt and experienced. This requires the forensic reconstruction of cultural-historical context. It is inherently qualitative.

### Society building

Not too long before Wollstonecraft presented happiness as the shallow satiation of desire, her acquaintance and fellow revolutionary writer Thomas Paine had consciously remade happiness as part of a republican vision. To do this, he elaborated an innovative concept of "common sense" as a social and political sensibility. Paine's 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* had as much to do with the creation of a new field of feeling as it did with reason. By scripting it, Paine shaped in fashion the American public to which he sold it. He instructed Americans that happiness was entangled with authority and government, and that a breed of happiness associated with monarchy must be the wrong sort. Good government, Paine taught, is for "freedom and security", to safeguard happiness. Monarchy was not the "means of happiness" but "misery to mankind".

While reason has oft been heralded as the vanguard of revolutionary ideas, Paine was not always guided by feelings and those feelings had to be brought into existence in order to justify practices of revolt. Revolt had to feel right in order to be right. For all that the new American constitution was to be formed "in a cool deliberate manner", it was to be formed so as to guarantee "the greatest sum of individual happiness". This historically specific and ideologically political happiness became a precondition for nation-building, a process that also depended upon assertions of dishonour, pain and disgust at the colonial yoke. America would not be founded on pure reason, but on controlled emotion.

The "pursuit of happiness" that found its way into the Declaration of Independence was Jefferson's adaptation of John Locke's ideas on the pursuit of life, liberty, and property. As historian Nicole Eustace has shown, it was a happiness that endorsed and justified the institution of slavery. Slave owners' happiness depended upon slavery, after all. To the signers of the Declaration, the right to pursue happiness was for white men. When critics held up the contradiction of slavery and the pursuit of happiness as contradictory, a paradox to be smashed, Paine shifted tack, asserting that slaves had no capacity for happiness. Blackness itself was held to averred, an inescapable biological cause of unhappiness. While happiness was a right to all humans as the product of a political system, it was nonetheless predicated on a category "human" to those deemed capable of the quality of "happiness". Wollstonecraft understood that the revolutionary age had also put women outside of the category "human". "Happy would it be for the world," she wrote in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, "if the unavailing solicitude to attain worldly happiness were turned into an anxious desire for the understanding."

### It's all political

These contradictions and conflicts tell us that, whatever happiness is or was, it is always political. The recent history of happiness, of which Hills's paper forms a part, is entwined with the neoliberal metrics of, and prescriptions for, "wellbeing". A whole academic industry

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the workforce be maximally productive while liking it? In this "emotional capitalism" sociologist Eva Illouz of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem styled it, happiness has repackaged as a confidence trick to reward conformity or else to erase the individual of abstract categories of wellness, and all for the sake of economic gain.

While authoritarian regimes from Venezuela to the United Arab Emirates have created of happiness in order to institute population-wide surveillance and reward 'good' - v say, conformist - behaviour, the same ideas are alive in Western democracies. They celebrated through United Nations programmes such as the World Happiness Report OECD's commitment to placing wellbeing "at the centre of governments' efforts' in growth. This is "happiness" far removed from quotidian definitions. A country such for example, which regularly tops the "happiness" charts, nonetheless has a history suicide rates. Happiness and wellbeing markers for the state of a national economy do with how a given individual feels. They are part of a complex history of happiness pursue, experience or eschew it should give us pause, for what happiness means is evident.

This article first appeared on Aeon.

Dailyhunt

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