

# The Importance of Happiness

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**W**HAT IS or what should be the purpose of political activity? Most people would say it should be to strive for a better or more progressive society. But how should one define “better” or “progressive”?

Since Marx identified the growth of the productive forces as the motor force of progress, there has been a tendency to judge the progressiveness and desirability of various forms of society primarily by economic criteria. If an economic system developed the productive forces it was progressive and therefore desirable. Thus, for Marx, because capitalism developed the productive forces it was progressive compared with the previous feudal and mercantilist societies. It only ceased to be progressive when it became a fetter on their further development.

In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx enthuses: “The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation.”

In this view the fact that the growth of capitalism was accompanied by massive poverty, slums, wars and exploitation – i.e. possibly avoidable misery – seems to be of secondary importance; they were unavoidable “growing pains”. It is true that elsewhere Marx points to the dehumanising aspects of capitalism, to alienation etc. But that is seen more in the context of the contradictions of a more mature capitalism leading to its demise. Capitalism in its youth was progressive; it was necessary for the further development of the productive forces which would later make communism possible and historically inevitable. This implied that the accompanying misery and exploitation was an inevitable cost of progress.

Marxists are not the only ones who argue that economics and economic growth are the most important, even determining factors in the health and desirability of societies. Economists, politicians, both New Labour and Tory, repeat that a healthy economy and economic growth are the key to well-being and essential to the solution of all social problems. Market forces determine everything. Only get the economy right and everything follows.

Both Marx and the modern neoliberals are

guilty of this economic determinism. This over-emphasis of the economic over other factors – political, cultural, ethical, emotional is wrong. It is wrong on two accounts. Firstly as an explanation of how societies work. Secondly as the sole, or even main, criterion for judging the “progressiveness”, “health” and desirability of different societies.

Why economic determinism is wrong

In places Marx writes as if the material forces of production have a built-in, intrinsic urge – almost a will of their own – to expand quite independently of human decisions or actions. Further, he argues that the stage of development of the productive forces rigidly determines the relations of production, i.e. the economic (and hence the political) relations between classes. “The hand mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist” (*The Poverty of Philosophy*).

As one critic of Marx, Peter Singer, comments: “But isn’t all this much too crude? Should we take seriously the statement about the hand mill giving us feudal lords, and the steam mill capitalists? Surely Marx must have realised that the invention of steam power itself depends on human ideas, and those ideas, as much as the steam mill itself, have produced capitalism” (Peter Singer, *Marx*, OUP, 1980).

History, real empirical history – not history tailored to suit abstract theory – is a history of social changes brought about by the complex interaction of economic, political, ideological and cultural factors. It is not a history of the economic base exclusively determining the political and ideological superstructure but of a multi-way interaction between all these factors. Causality runs both ways between base and superstructure. Even Marxists acknowledge that when the superstructure becomes a fetter on the productive forces it is events in the superstructure – i.e. political struggle, socialist revolution – that are necessary to bring about changes in the economic base.

And political struggles do not have to depend on a supposed “ripeness” of economic development.

Referring to the Marxist argument that early capitalism was progressive because it enabled the

productive forces to grow we must ask whether it was inevitable that the growth of mankind's productive forces should take place in a capitalist way? That it should be accompanied by ruthless exploitation and misery? Were these unavoidable accompaniments of this growth? Was it not possible that this growth could have occurred under different relations of production than capitalist ones?

Was it really inevitably determined by the then level of development of the economy that the Chartist movement should have been defeated and in retreat from 1848 onward?

No! It was the relationship of *political* forces that determined that the Monster Petition and mass demonstrations of 1848 failed to win reforms and that subsequently the movement declined. If the Chartists had been successful in winning sufficient extensions to the franchise to enable a radical reforming government to win elections such a government might not have established socialism but it might have been able to introduce significant reforms. The Chartist programme was not just about parliamentary reform. Its activists were imbued with the ideas of Robert Owen, of advocates of land reform and cooperation and of the early socialists,

One must admit that the concept and the feasibility of the central planning of a mainly state-owned economy could only arise after the further development of capitalism had given rise to large enterprises and the socialisation of the productive process. The level of development of the economy in the early and middle nineteenth century, the existence of a multitude of small enterprises and the relative primitiveness of communications and statistics certainly made central planning of state-owned industries unfeasible. But the common ownership of the means of production does not necessarily mean state ownership and central planning. Common ownership can also mean co-operatively owned enterprises interacting via the market. And could not have such a government, resting on a working class constituency, carried out Robert Owen's socialist and co-operative policies? Could not a wide extension of co-operative ownership have prevailed over capitalist ownership – or at least competed on equal terms? With all that this implies for better working conditions?

Eventually reforms such as the limitations on child labour, reduced working hours, progress in housing and sanitation, pensions, sick pay and unemployment benefits were achieved even under Liberal and Tory governments right up to 1914. A Chartist breakthrough in 1848 or earlier and the election of radical reforming governments would have meant the far earlier achievement of these reforms. It might not have been socialism. It might still have been capitalism but it would have resulted in a more humane capitalism and the reduction of the sum of human misery and a better quality of

life. Surely not an unimportant consideration. For some Marxists the struggle for reforms is important mainly as a means of raising class consciousness in preparation for the final struggle for power. The fact that the reforms won might actually reduce misery and make for a better quality of life are largely ignored.

If we go back further in time to the English Revolution we know that ideas of common ownership of the land and economic and political equality motivated the radical wing of the Cromwellian Model Army. Was it really inevitably determined that the Levellers should have been defeated? Certainly the emergence of socialist ideas did not have to await the development of the productive forces to a specific stage, whether the steam mill, electricity or even telecommunications. Even more than in the 19th century the conditions of simple reproduction with thousands of independent producers that existed in the 17th and 18th centuries were unfavourable to either the idea or feasibility of socialist central planning; but they were not inimical to co-operatives operating in a market economy and a democratisation of land tenure as well as a long lasting democratisation of the state structure. A co-operative and democratic Commonwealth arising out of the English Revolution was not an impossibility.

We know of course that this did not happen and that, in actual fact, industry did develop from this time under capitalist property relations, i.e. private ownership. But the adoption of new technology, division of labour and concentration of production into large units making economy of size possible could also have taken place under co-operative ownership. It was not the level of development of the productive forces and the level of technology that held back the growth of co-operative ownership and democratisation of land tenure but the general ideology of the time – which favoured the idea of private ownership and private pursuit of wealth. Obviously the general economic and material conditions of the time and the interests of the various classes and strata of society were important factors in forming this general ideology. But they were not the only factors.

In our explanation of why society developed in a certain way and not in others we need to abandon the idea that the economic base mainly, or even in the final analysis, determines the superstructure. We need to see how the superstructure – political forces and ideology – themselves affect the economic base. Sometimes the main current of causality flows from the base to the superstructure. At other times it flows the other way.

Premature revolutions?

This leads to the question of whether attempts to introduce socialism (or any other change in the economy) are premature. And, if so, when?

Marxism's theory of stages of social change,

dependent on the development of the productive forces reaching a stage when the political superstructure “became a fetter”, implied that only when capitalism had reached its full development could a socialist revolution be possible. Hence, as orthodox Marxists, Kautsky and the Mensheviks argued that the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 was premature because the level of economic development in Russia was inadequate and any attempt to introduce socialism bound to fail. Subsequently the isolation of the Soviet regime in a hostile capitalist world and its degeneration and eventual collapse back into capitalism was deemed by many to have confirmed this. I too, in an article in *New Interventions* on the 80th anniversary of the revolution, described it as “premature and diseased from infancy”. I think such a description is only half correct. In the context of *political possibilities* it was not premature. The Bolsheviks banked everything on the spread of the revolution to Germany and other advanced industrial countries and the establishment of a federation of Soviet states with a sufficiently powerful industrial base to make the construction of socialism feasible.

Was it inevitable that the revolutionary situations in Germany from 1918 to 1923 should have failed to result in a Soviet Germany? The abortion of the revolution in 1923 was due as much to political factors – the mood of the masses, the mistakes of the Communist Party leadership – as to purely economic factors, i.e. the stabilisation of the economy and the end of inflation at the end of August 1923 – themselves the result of *political decisions*.

So in that sense the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 was not premature. The subsequent degeneration of the regime was not due solely to economic causes. The policies of the Bolsheviks diseased it from the beginning. Firstly the refusal of Lenin and Trotsky – mirrored by the equal intransigence of the right wing Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries – to accept a coalition government of all the pro-Soviet parties. Secondly the forcible dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. These policies led to the complete isolation of the Bolshevik government and its increasing reliance on terror to survive; leading to the suppression of the Kronstadt revolt and the eventual rise of Stalinism.

The Russian revolution could only be described as premature if one accepts Marx’s argument that socialism can only be built on the material foundations developed by advanced capitalism and that no social formation, no economic system, leaves the stage until it has exhausted all its potential for development. Since it is now evident that in 1917 capitalism had by no means exhausted its potential to develop the productive forces, then – according to Marxist theory – it could be argued that the Russian revolution was premature. But I think I have shown why this conclusion is wrong.

The Russian revolution also shows how, in certain situations when the combination of economic, political, military forces is finely balanced, the decisions of a small group of individuals, the dozen or so members of the Bolshevik Central Committee, and one individual among them, can have a profound influence on history. If the Bolshevik Central Committee had not decided to seize power there would have been no October Revolution – and the future of the whole world would have been different in many incalculable ways.

There is no reason why socialists should wait until capitalism has exhausted all its potential before trying to replace it. In any case how does one decide at exactly what point capitalism has indeed exhausted its potential? Lenin and others thought that outbreak of the first World War in 1914 had marked this stage. In 1939 Trotsky and the 4th International thought that capitalism was over-ripe. They were wrong. But capitalism survived not because it had not exhausted its potential for growth – as the subsequent post-war expansion showed – but because of the relationship of forces on the political plane. Capitalist society was on the brink of collapse following the two world wars – in 1917-23 and 1943-45. It was the weakness of the forces of social revolution and the support given the faltering regimes by social democracy and Stalinism that helped it survive. At the same time it must be remembered that after the initial political crises had been survived it was capitalism’s continued potential for economic recovery after 1923 and 1948 that finally turned back the tide. The fact that capitalism had not exhausted its economic potential (making an increase in the general standard of living and the establishment of the Welfare State possible) was a factor making possible its political victory and hence its survival. Another example of the interaction between the economic and the political.

If, in 2005, the prospect for the advance of socialism in the near or immediate future seems dim it is not because the economic conditions are not ripe but because the political conditions are not. And these will only become ripe if and when socialism wins the battle for the hearts and minds.

We must reject economic determinism and reinstate the role of the political – and indeed the role of individuals and assemblies of organised individuals (parties and governments) – as at least as important factors as the economic in determining history. We must analyse societies and their histories in a holistic way; seeing the economic, the political, the ideological as a complex assembly inter-reacting with each other within an overall context.

We must also rescue the role of the individual and of organised individuals as important factors in history.

Marxists may argue that I am being unfair to

Marx and Marxists. They will point out that Marxism does recognise the role of individuals and the political superstructure. They will remind me of Marx's comment that "men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past". However, many (fortunately not all) Marxists take the reference to circumstances not chosen by themselves but "directly given and transmitted from the past" to mean essentially the level of development of the productive forces. And we are back to economic determinism.

#### The quality of life

Let us now deal with how economic reductionism is wrong in the second way – in its overemphasis on the state of the economy in determining well-being and in the neglect of other factors, the cultural, the psychological and the personal.

Oliver James, a well known psychologist argued in his book *Britain on the Couch* (Century, London 1997) that though people in Britain were materially better off than in the 1950s they were unhappier.

He quotes from statistics showing that the incidence of stress, depression, suicides, violence, drug abuse, alcoholism, and marriage breakdown had all increased compared with the 1950s despite the increase in material wealth of the majority of the population, including the working class.

James argues: "It is almost a tenet of modern life that as a nation becomes wealthier, the satisfaction and well-being levels of its citizens will rise accordingly – affluence should breed happiness and this is the ultimate justification offered by politicians for placing increased prosperity at the heart of their politics. Yet this principle seems to apply only up to a certain basic level and not beyond. Large surveys of national well-being and satisfaction levels show that when a nation moves from developing ('Third World') to developed status, there is a significant increase in well-being. But once nations reach the level where most or all of their citizens' basic needs for food, shelter and so on are being met, relative affluence beyond that does not make a difference. Although there are large variations between developed nations in how happy they say they are, the explanation is not differences in wealth. The well-being of three of the richest, Germany, Japan and the USA, is less than that of many poorer nations, such as Ireland, Finland and Australia. Furthermore, the surveys have consistently found little change over time, despite increases in wealth. The USA, for example, is much richer than in the 1950s yet about the same numbers say they are happy today as compared with then. Even more dramatically, the Japanese real per capita income increased fivefold between 1958 and 1987 without any change in the

reported amount of well-being. Thus within developed nations, it appears that raising the incomes of all does not increase the happiness of all" (pp.44-45).

James' basic explanation for this is the way advanced capitalism has developed. The drive to encourage consumerism as a means of expanding its markets has created, even in well-off people, expectations that cannot be met.

"Put crudely, advanced capitalism makes money out of misery and dissatisfaction, as if it were encouraging us to fill the psychic void with material goods. It can also profit from fostering spurious individualism by encouraging us to define ourselves through our purchases, with ever more precisely marketed products that create a fetishistic concern to have 'this' rather than 'that'. Even though there is often no significant practical or aesthetic difference" (p.xi).

"A sharp rise in aspirations and individualism since 1950, necessary for continuous economic growth, has led to an all-consuming preoccupation with our status, power and wealth relative to others. No sooner than we achieve a goal, we move the goalposts to create a new and more difficult one, leaving ourselves permanently dissatisfied and depleted, always yearning for what we have not got, a nation of Wannabees" (p.xii).

"Since 1950, expectations have risen dramatically for personal and professional fulfilment (especially among young women as well as men). Likewise, demands for individualism have inflated. The media (particularly television), increased hours spent at school and competitiveness there and increased pressure to compete at work make us obsessively preoccupied with how we are doing compared to others and whether we are individual enough" (p.7).

"For that vast majority unable to achieve their inflated aspirations and to obtain objective confirmation of their sense of their individual importance, upwardly comparing simply rams home their inadequacy and encourages depression.... In a society undergoing rapid industrialization and expansion social mobility may be widespread. But in traditional agrarian societies, social status is hereditary. Where there is little or no possibility of changing your social position through ability, such as in a feudal or caste system you are unlikely to make undiscounted comparisons with your betters. Princes or kings are simply a different category of human to which you cannot aspire by the definition of your society. It would not occur to you. This may explain the ostensibly surprising fact that the most oppressed group of women in the developed world, the Japanese, are also by far the most satisfied compared with men" (p.88).

One can disagree with many of James' arguments; it can be objected that he exaggerates today's discontents and minimizes those of previous periods. Is it really the case that the feudal serf was

not so discontented; or that Japanese women do not suffer unhappiness because of their low status? And is it not a fact that people in 1950 – and earlier – did aspire to better status and compare themselves unfavourably with others? If they did not, what is the explanation for all the struggles by the working class and the disadvantaged such as women, gays and racial minorities against discrimination and for better treatment?

It can also be argued that many of the statistics of depression, stress and mental illness quoted are misleading and exaggerate the increase. For example the awareness and diagnosis of such conditions have changed since the 1950s. People did suffer from stress and depression then but their condition was not recognised, they were not diagnosed as suffering from these conditions. They did not appear in the statistics.

James is wrong in citing the increase in the incidence of divorces and separations as a cause of increasing unhappiness. Undeniably the process of divorce and separation and the break-up of personal relationships is stressful and traumatic. But the situation that existed when divorce was difficult, when people were trapped for a lifetime in unhappy marriages – with all that it entailed in misery for both partners and children – was far worse than it is today. The old restrictive sexual mores condemned young women who had children out of wedlock to ostracism. Women were forcibly separated from their babies and forced to give them away for adoption; the women were put in institutions. This caused untold misery. So did all the old taboos and prejudices. The sexual revolution of the sixties which introduced much more tolerant attitudes, easier divorces and more sexual equality and the decriminalisation of homosexuality has not abolished all problems of sexuality but it has improved matters and eliminated at least some causes of unhappiness.

Even if we disagree with much of what James argues, he nevertheless draws welcome attention to the fact that much of the quality of life is determined by non-economic factors. The overall quality of life depends not just on the economy but on cultural, emotional and psychological factors; on perception of one's social and material situation, on personal relationships and self-esteem.

What is to be done?

James links depression and unhappiness with low serotonin levels in the brain. He does not make clear whether he believes unhappiness causes the low serotonin levels or whether it is the low serotonin levels that cause the unhappiness. James seems to argue that it is a bit of both. Unsurprisingly, as a clinical psychologist, he advocates the better use of medication, government action to make medicines cheaper and more available, and increased resources for mental health care. One

cannot quarrel with that. But is there not also the need to change society?

James does acknowledge this. He writes: "It is neither a necessary condition nor an inevitable destiny of advanced capitalism that it should induce low levels of serotonin. By changing the social environment to one that is more in accord with our species' inherited tendencies we could correct the chemical imbalance. In the short term, low-serotonin individuals can do so through psychotherapy as well as by taking pills. But only changes in the way we are organised as a society will address the fundamental problem" (p.xiii).

So what conclusions are we to draw from this re-emphasis on the overall quality of life as opposed to over-emphasis on the economic?

We must remember that the ills James identified in advanced capitalism are nothing compared with the misery of the masses in the Third World, in Africa, Latin America, large parts of Asia and Eastern Europe. The priority must be to combat this poverty. It can only be done if their peoples struggle for themselves. But we in the wealthier countries have an internationalist duty to assist in their struggles.

Some on the left argue that the only solution to Third World poverty is world socialism. Just as some have also argued that campaigning for feminist issues, or for gay rights, that any single-issue campaign that cuts across class lines is a distraction from the fight for socialism. That only the overthrow of capitalism and world socialism will resolve all these issues. And that the main aim of fighting for demands (which many argue cannot be achieved under capitalism) is to prepare and train the working class for the final onslaught on capitalism.

This is nonsense. A sufficient motive and justification for political activity is the maximisation of human happiness. So any reforms or measures that increase the potential for happiness and reduce misery are worth pursuing for that reason alone, even if they are merely reforms within capitalism. In the Third World this includes campaigning for the cancellation of debt, increased aid for providing clean water to villages, making medicine and services to combat the Aids epidemic more available, and a whole host of immediately feasible objectives.

In advanced capitalist countries, in addition to combating the residual poverty of the poorest layers, attention must be given to improving the non-economic as well as the economic quality of life – altering society to make it more compatible with our emotional needs. Some progress has been made. There has been some improvement in the status of women, the liberalisation of sexual mores, improvements in other non-economic fields. But much remains to be done in campaigning for improvements even within the parameters of capitalism. For example the legalisation of volunt-

ary euthanasia – saving thousands from the avoidable agony of lingering and undignified deaths.

How does all this relate to the fight for socialism? A socialist world is still desirable. But one does not have to wait till it is achieved to win measures that increase well-being.

The conclusion to all this is that the aim of all political activity must be to create a social framework that maximises the potential for happiness and reduces misery. Social change – whether it be

the achievement of a socialist society or merely reforms within capitalism – is a means to an end. And that end is not just economic growth in itself but economic growth that is sustainable, is not destructive of the environment and underpins a social framework that maximises the potential for better personal relationships and a better emotional life, i.e. that maximises happiness.

The ultimate end – to which all else is a means – must be the maximisation of happiness. ■

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