

And They Lived Happily Ever After

The last 500 years have witnessed a breathtaking series of revolutions. The earth has been united into a single ecological and historical sphere. The economy has grown exponentially, and humankind today *enjoys* the kind of wealth that used to be the stuff of fairy tales. Science and the Industrial Revolution have given humankind superhuman powers and practically limitless energy. The social order has been completely transformed, as have politics, daily life and human psychology.

But are we happier? Did the wealth humankind accumulated over the last five centuries translate into a new-found contentment? Did the discovery of inexhaustible energy resources open before us inexhaustible stores of bliss? Going further back, have the seventy or so turbulent millennia since the Cognitive Revolution made the world a better place to live? Was the late Neil Armstrong, whose footprint remains intact on the windless moon, happier than the nameless hunter-gatherer who 30,000 years ago left her handprint on a wall in Chauvet Cave? If not, what was the point of developing agriculture, cities, writing, coinage, empires, science and industry?

Historians seldom ask such questions. They do not ask whether the citizens of Uruk and Babylon were happier than their foraging ancestors, whether the rise of Islam made Egyptians more pleased with their lives, or how the collapse of the European empires in Africa have influenced the happiness of countless millions. Yet these are the most important questions one can ask of history. Most current ideologies and political programmes are based on rather flimsy ideas concerning the real source of human happiness. Nationalists believe the political self-determination is essential for our happiness. Communists postulate that everyone would be blissful under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Capitalists maintain that only the free market can ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number, by creating economic growth and material abundance and by teaching people to be self-reliant and enterprising.

What would happen if serious research were to disprove these hypotheses? If economic growth and self-reliance do not make people happier, what's the benefit of Capitalism? What if it turns out that the subjects of large empires are generally happier than the citizens of independent states and that, for example, Ghanaians were happier under British colonial rule than under their own home-grown dictators? What would that say about the process of decolonization and the value of national self-determination?

These are all hypothetical possibilities, because so far historians have avoided raising these questions – not to mention answering them. They have researched the history of just about everything – politics, society, economics, gender, diseases, sexuality, food, clothing – yet they have seldom stopped to ask how these influence human happiness.

Though few have studied the long-term history of happiness, almost every scholar and layperson has some vague preconception about it. In one common view, human capabilities have increased throughout history. Since humans generally use their capabilities to alleviate miseries and fulfill aspirations, it follows that we must be happier than our medieval ancestors, and they must have been happier than Stone Age hunter-gatherers.

But this progressive account is unconvincing. As we have seen, new aptitudes, behaviors and skills do not necessarily make for a better life. When humans learned to farm in the Agricultural Revolution, their collective power to shape their environment increased, but the lot of many individual humans grew harsher. Peasants had to work harder than foragers to eke out less varied and nutritious food, and they were far more exposed to disease and exploitation. Similarly, the spread of European empires greatly increased the collective power of humankind, by circulating ideas, technologies and crops, and opening new avenues of commerce. Yet this was hardly good news for millions of Africans, Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians. Given the proven human propensity for misusing power, it seems naïve to believe that the more clout people have, the happier they will be.

Some challenges of this view take a diametrically opposed position. They argue for a reverse correlation between human capabilities and happiness. Power corrupts, they say, and as humankind gained more and more power, it created a cold mechanistic world ill-suited to our real needs. Evolution molded our minds and bodies to the life of hunter-gatherers. The transition first to agriculture and then to industry has condemned us to living unnatural lives that cannot give full expression to our inherent inclinations and instincts, and therefore cannot satisfy our deepest yearnings. Nothing in the comfortable lives of the urban middle class can approach the wild excitement and sheer joy experienced by a forager band on a successful mammoth hunt. Every new invention just puts another mile between us and the Garden of Eden.

Yet this romantic insistence on seeing a dark shadow behind each invention is as dogmatic as the belief in the inevitability of progress. Perhaps we are out of touch with our inner hunter-gatherer, but it's not all bad. For instance, over the last two centuries modern medicine has decreased child mortality from 33 percent to less than 5 percent. Can anyone doubt that this made a huge contribution to the happiness not only of those children who would otherwise have died, but all of their families and friends?

A more nuanced position takes the middle road. Until the Scientific Revolution there was no clear correlation between power and happiness. Medieval peasants may indeed have been more miserable than their hunter-gatherer forbears. But in the last few centuries humans have learned to use their capacities more wisely. The triumphs of modern medicine are just one example. Other unprecedented achievements include the steep drop in violence, the virtual disappearance of international wars, and the near elimination of large-scale famines.

Yet this, too, is an oversimplification. Firstly, it bases its optimistic assessment on a very small sample of years. The majority of humans began to enjoy the fruits of modern medicine no earlier than 1850, and the drastic drop in child mortality is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Mass famines continued to blight much of humanity up to the middle of the twentieth century. During Communist China's Great Leap Forward of 1958-61, somewhere between 10 and 50 million human beings starved to death. International wars became rare only after 1945, largely thanks to the new threat of nuclear annihilation. Hence, though the last few decades have been an unprecedented golden age for humanity, it is too early to know whether this represents a fundamental shift in the currents of history or an ephemeral eddy of good fortune. When judging modernity, it is all too tempting to take the viewpoint of a twenty-first-century middle-class Westerner. We must not forget the viewpoints of a nineteenth-century Welsh coal miner, Chinese opium addict or Tasmanian Aborigine. Truganini is no less important than Homer Simpson.

Secondly, even the brief golden age of the last half-century may turn out to have sown the seeds of future catastrophe. Over the last few decades, we have been disturbing the ecological equilibrium of our planet in a myriad of new ways, with what seem likely to be dire consequences. A lot of evidence indicates that we are destroying the foundations of human prosperity in an orgy of reckless consumption.

Finally, we can congratulate ourselves on the unprecedented accomplishments of modern Sapiens only if we completely ignore the fate of all other animals. Much of the vaunted material wealth that shields us from disease and famine was accumulated at the expense of laboratory monkeys, dairy cows and conveyor-belt chickens. Over the last two centuries tens of billions of them have been subjected to a regime of industrial exploitation whose cruelty has no precedent in the annals of plant Earth. If we accept a mere tenth of what animals-rights activists are claiming, then modern industrial agriculture might well be the greatest crime in history. When evaluating global happiness, it is wrong to count the happiness only of the upper classes, or Europeans or of men. Perhaps it is also wrong to consider only the happiness of humans.

- Yuval Noah Harari
Sapiens
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