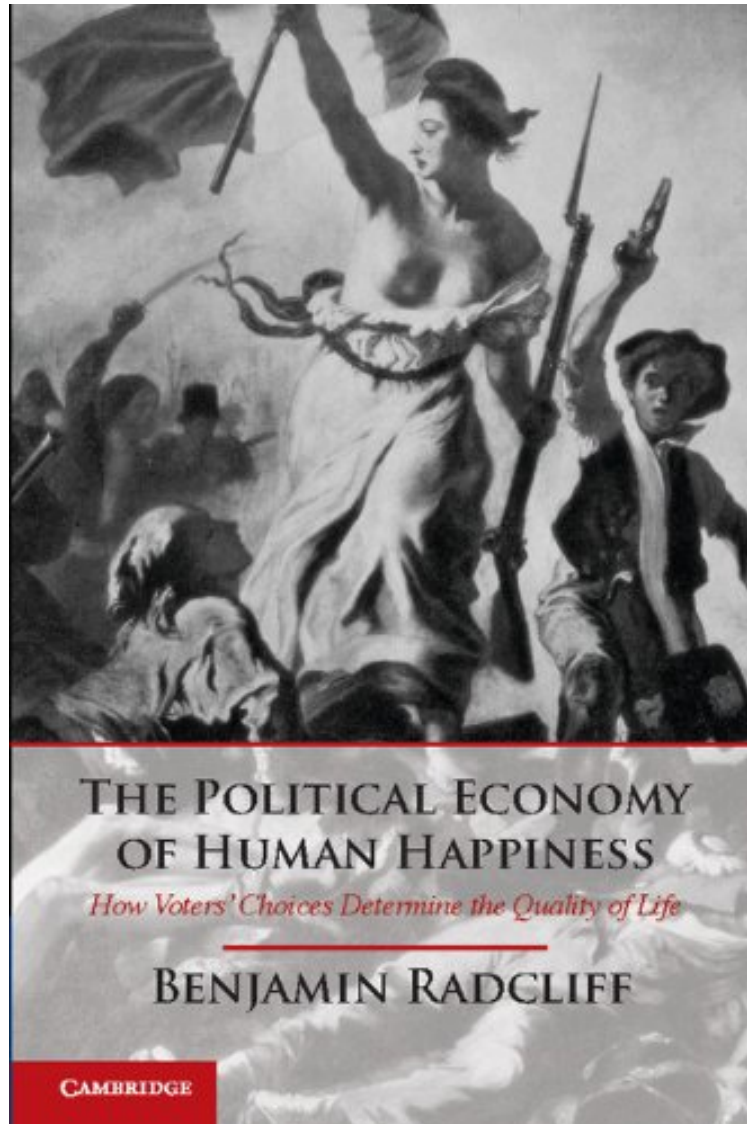


The Political Economy of Human Happiness

Benjamin Radcliff

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Benjamin Radcliff : The Political Economy of Human Happiness before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Political Economy of Human Happiness:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Democracy versus the Free MarketBy Barry N. BishopThis volume sets out to demonstrate empirically that the citizens of any country are happier when they exist in what is termed a "welfare state" and when the market is externally controlled and regulated democratically. Professor Radcliff marshals an impressive amount of data from different studies to prove his thesis. Since I am not a social scientist I am not the best judge of his empirical success. He clearly does not begin the study in a neutral position--he stands on the "left"

and attempts to show that the argument of the "right"--that an unregulated, free market creates conditions for the optimal level of freedom of all people--has been flawed for centuries. One wonders if, since he attempts to prove what he believes in advance, his argument might be circular. With that caveat, however, I find myself rather convinced by his argument--but then I may not have started from a neutral stance either. The thesis regarding happiness is stated in the Introduction: "Happiness, then, is a function of public policy--and thus a result of our collective choices as citizens in electing the governments that make policy." (p.9) That might appear altogether too grandiose except that his eventual definition of happiness is fairly limited: "What we hope to measure and eventually to explain is nothing more--and nothing less--than the degree to which people enjoy their lives." (p. 78) Examining studies of exactly how much people enjoy their lives in different societies with different market policies and different levels of welfare, Radcliff's project is to show that with more market control and with a greater social safety net all people are happier, including those who own and manage the means of production and commerce. Toward the end of a chapter on "The Size of the State", he offers this conclusion: "The analysis above has provided compelling evidence in support of the contention that 'big government' promotes human happiness." (p. 133) In the course of the argument Radcliff concerns himself with a number of important ideas relating to happiness and the effects of different kinds of government and different policies related to the market. A central idea is "commodification", which is the degree to which laborers and service professionals in a society become mere commodities to be bought and sold on the market. Another concern is the degree to which all citizens are free and equal as a result of government policy and market regulation, or the lack thereof. And a further central concern is sovereignty: where, in different societies, does sovereignty reside, in the people (as in a democracy) or in the market? "As will become apparent, the underlying axis of conflict ultimately concerns where sovereignty should be presumed to reside: in a self-regulating market of free individuals making free choices or in a democratic process of authoritative allocation through free political competition." (p. 55) Radcliff argues that this axis is very real and he comes out clearly on the side of "democratic process". There are several flaws in the book. One concerns the definition of happiness. Radcliff rejects Aristotle's view (eudaimonia) and, by extension, most philosophical and theological understandings of what happiness might be. With his concern for measuring happiness empirically, it would be altogether too difficult to discuss the sorts of dynamics these other conceptions might entail, and yet is happiness no more than how fully we enjoy our lives? Then there are some essentially erroneous concepts that are surprising for a social scientist, such as the assumption that an introvert will tend to be less happy, because less social, than an extravert. But the flaw that struck me as most serious was the fact that throughout the book there is an implicit ethical argument against the project of the "right", but it is only rendered explicit in the last chapter, on the last two pages, and therefore almost as an afterthought. Radcliff correctly identifies the primary flaw in the argument of the "right" as a violation of Kant's categorical imperative: "not to treat others as means to one's own ends." Since the market, through commodification of labor and services, does precisely that, it is "transparently immoral". (p. 187) I would argue that the market is inherently amoral but easily becomes immoral through mechanisms such as Radcliff identifies, but however that may be it seems unfortunate that he does not really include ethical argumentation in his thesis. That said, this is a very important book that lands squarely in the middle of much of the current political unrest in this country. It needs to be noticed in the midst of the current conflict(s), which threaten democracy, the market, or both. 12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. a breath of fresh air By 21st Century Scholar I spent much of the past summer reading books on "happiness economics," a couple of which I have previously reviewed here. This was easily the most rewarding of these books, and the one I wish in retrospect I had read first. This book has a number of strengths that prompt that comment. The first is the way that it is organized. It begins with the history of happiness both as an idea but more specifically as a subject of politics, using the debate between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison at the time of the American Founding as introducing what we would today call the progressive and the conservative approaches to how government can best help individuals in their "pursuit of happiness." It was an inviting and fun introduction to the subject. Chapters Two and Three are marginally more challenging, but still entirely accessible to someone (like me) who is neither an economist nor a specialist in this area. The first of those chapters develops a simple but powerful conceptual model for thinking about the role government, tracing out how the basis of a market economy produces the two logical tendencies we see in politics in general: the basic struggle between left and right over the control of public life. The second is a summary and an analysis of all the conventional arguments we see for and against "big government" and economic regulation and so on--nothing exactly new, but a beautiful summary for anyone interested in a rigorous treatment of those matters (and one that I think is fair to both sides). It is also a chapter though that one could skip without missing the main thread of argumentation if you really didn't want to have these arguments rehearsed. Chapter Four is a general introduction to (as the author calls it) "the new social scientific study of happiness," and again marvelous in setting up this field for people who know nothing about it--especially those who are skeptical about it. I imagine college instructors may be taking this one chapter out and using it in all kinds of classes as providing a user-friendly but still exhaustive summary and introduction, again especially valuable for those (like me) skeptical about the idea that we can study "human happiness like any other human attribute." Then comes the empirical part of the book: in three successive chapters the author asks the question of whether left or right public policies best contribute to people leading happier (and

otherwise just better) lives, in three areas: the size and scope of government (including but not limited to the social safety net), economic regulation (such as labor market regulations like the minimum wage) and labor unions. Most of the analysis is cross-national, so that it looks for evidence by comparing countries. One chapter is a case study of the United States, using the American States as the equivalents of countries, and seeing if the same patterns emerge when comparing States as when comparing countries. It would take pages to really summarize what the author finds, since he doesn't look at left vs right policies in some simplistic way, but at many individual and particular policies (and then to be sure he's finding "real" relationships, looks at the same policies in multiple ways using different kinds of data). He also considers not just the relationships at the level of national (or State) averages, but for subgroups of the population--always showing, for instance, that this or that policy affects the rich about as much as the poor, or men and women, union members and non-members, and so on. The short version: he finds that "big government" (measured in all kinds of ways) improves quality of life for everyone, as does economic regulation, and labor unions. In regard to the last, he shows that not only does belonging to a union make you (and your family) happier, but that the greater the level of union "density" (the percentage of workers belonging to a union) is a massively strong predictor of overall levels of happiness for everyone in a given country (or State), whether they belong to a union or not (or again whether they are rich or poor, etc). [I saw a segment about this on the "Ed Show" a few days ago, which in part prompted me to finally get around to writing this review.] The book has an extremely thoughtful and interesting concluding chapter. It seems to have two points. One, mostly interesting to scholars, stresses that we should approach the study of happiness beginning with the idea that for most people, the economic struggle to get by and prosper is center to (and that this struggle in turn affects all the other important things, such as the quality of one's personal relationships, that also affects happiness). The second is of course the empirical relationships showing that it is progressive rather than right-wing policies that best contribute to happiness, which is given more nuance and extension. Conservatives are not going to like the conclusions of this book, but the ones who actually read it might, given that the author is constantly at pains to point out the powerful and wonderful aspects of capitalism. He goes so far as to say "The market economy is one of humanity's greatest achievements," and he is clearly writing as a friend of the market. It is (as one of the blurbs on the back by a famous conservative economist notes) a very "judicious" book in that regard. If you are looking for (or afraid of) some kind of Michael Moore type left wing screed, this is not it. This is the book of a serious and thoughtful public intellectual, not somebody pressing a crude ideological agenda. While in the end the conclusions will hearten those of us (and I confess this includes me) who are at least moderately liberal, it should give food for thought for anybody actually interested in reality and reasoned assessment of evidence.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. For happiness, it takes a village
By Greeny
This book is a pleasure to read. One of my favorite literary genres is that of 'happiness,' or what Aristotle called the 'good life.' I started this journey with Martin Seligman's 2004 book, *Authentic Happiness*. I also got interested in *Blue Zones* - geographic locations where people live longer. Comparisons of happiness throughout the world fascinates me. Various studies performed by the United Nations and other entities rank Denmark as the happiest country on earth. Denmark has laws and political policies that almost seem extreme by American standards. Access to health care is a basic civil right in Denmark. Their gender equality laws are perhaps the most advanced in the world. Danes have high voter turnout; they make choices about happiness. In *The Political Economy of Human Happiness*, Benjamin Radcliff examines statistical research on happiness. Radcliff identifies and interprets patterns that hold internationally and also across states within the U.S. Professor Radcliff finds that government plays a major role in human happiness. This shows that what government does about education, healthcare and employee rights has a measurable bearing on our happiness. Empirical evidence cited throughout the book supports government taking an enormous role in our lives. Big government is a difficult concept for me and partly what motivated me to read the book. I've witnessed some extraordinary inefficiency in the operation of government. I don't believe our government can operate efficiently and wonder how things are different in Denmark, Canada and generally in Western and Northern Europe. Years into the Great Recession, I am prepared to accept the merits of Professor Radcliff's findings. Danish families get access to state-supported early childhood education. I have two children currently attending preschool and would be happier if government supported their education. I recommend this book. I was provided a promotional copy and this is my honest, unbiased review.

Data, methods and theories of contemporary social science can be applied to resolve how political outcomes in democratic societies determine the quality of life that citizens experience. Radcliff seeks to provide an objective answer to the debate between left and right over what public policies best contribute to people leading positive and rewarding lives. Radcliff offers an empirical answer, relying on the same canons of reason and evidence required of any other issue amenable to study through social-scientific means. The analysis focuses on the consequences of three specific political issues: the welfare state and the general size of government, labor organization, and state efforts to protect workers and consumers through economic regulation. The results indicate that in each instance, the program of the Left best contributes to citizens leading more satisfying lives and, critically, that the benefits of greater happiness accrue to everyone in society, rich and poor alike.

"A growing number of social scientists and policy makers are starting to explore the implications for public policy of the newly emerging measures of happiness. I highly recommend for their consideration this pathbreaking, scholarly, and judicious work." Richard A. Easterlin, University of Southern California

"One of the most intellectually sophisticated, empirically convincing, and politically relevant books I have read in years. Radcliff's central conclusion - that the principal determinant of the quality of human life is the degree to which public policies empower citizens against the arbitrary power of the market - could hardly be more compelling or more persuasively argued." Alex Pacek, Texas A and M University

"This is a splendid and very courageous book. Based on an unusually impressive amount of high-quality data and using sophisticated analytical techniques, Benjamin Radcliff succeeds in answering a question that few of his colleagues have dared to pose: What type of public policies creates and increases human well-being? The answer is as profound as it is radical. In a time when the relevance of political science is under attack, this book is the answer." Bo Rothstein, August Rouml;hss Chair in Political Science, University of Gothenburg

"We will never agree on matters of ideological taste, but we can agree on facts. This book demonstrates how facts about happiness can be used in the ongoing debate on the welfare state. Although it may not tell the last word, it shows the way to evidence-based consensus building." Ruut Veenhoven, Emeritus Professor, Erasmus University Rotterdam

"[T]he book provides an eloquent demonstration of how a fundamental departure in the objectives of government - aiming for meaningful and happy lives for the greatest number of citizens - underlies the origins of public policy in the United States and in modern social democracies more generally. It also shows the new tools that well-being metrics provide to assess how well different governments are doing in meeting that objective. The book is a worthwhile read for scholars and students of economics, political science, philosophy, and public policy." Carol Graham, *Journal of Economic Literature*

About the Author Benjamin Radcliff is a Professor in the Department of Political Science and is affiliated with the Rooney Center for the Study of American Democracy and the Higgins Labor Studies Program at the University of Notre Dame. He has also held academic positions at Rutgers University and Vanderbilt University. He has been a fellow at the Merriam Lab for Analytic Political Research at the University of Illinois, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Study of the Humanities, and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies. Radcliff has published extensively in the leading peer-reviewed journals in political science, including the *American Political Science*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, the *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics* and the *British Journal of Political Science*, along with a variety of other distinguished journals. His work has also appeared in prominent journals in sociology (including *Social Forces*), labor studies and public policy. He has co-edited two books, including the well-received *Happiness, Economics, and Politics* (2009).