

*The happiness industry: how the government and big business sold us well-being.*

DAVIES, William.  
Londres: Verso, 2015.

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Author of the books *The happiness industry: how the government and big business sold us well-being* (2015) and *The limits of neoliberalism: authority, sovereignty & the logic of competition* (2014) – none of them translated into Portuguese – William–Davies is a political economist with doctorate in Sociology and teaches at the department of Politics and International Relations of the Goldsmiths University of London. His research interests are focused in the interference of economy in the understanding we have about our lives, especially in the political and social spheres. The so-called “science of happiness”, and, especially, its economical dimension work as one of the most recent axes of his studies.

In *The happiness industry*, Davies expresses his concern with the intense promotion of “wellness” in the contemporary world in different fields such as marketing, health and technology. According to the author, the government and market efforts spent in the last years with the intention of bringing happiness to individuals end up propelling economical advances linked to the productionist dynamics of labor. In the foreword of his book, he proposes the reflection about what we should think about happiness, after all: “[...] a measurable, visible, improvable entity, it has now penetrated the citadel of global economic management”. (DAVIES, 2015, p. 13).

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Organized in eight chapters, *The happiness industry* selects some situations to clarify how we are conducted to the current concept of “wellness”, linked, as a requirement, to the premise of capitalist profit. In the first chapter, “Knowing how you feel”, Davies goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century to inform us about the first measurement instruments of the human body, such as the thermometer to measure our temperature. From that, he lists other moments in history in which we try to translate into data abstract aspects of our lives. The debate, in this chapter, is about to what extent this constant search for measurement is relevant, and even bring us to think how effective a measurement of feelings can be.

The second chapter, “The price of pleasure”, presents cases of our daily life in which we are forced to create value to what is abstract, as in the calculation made by insurance companies to refund victims of accidents with physical and/or emotional consequences or the projection of the value to be paid by a company responsible for environmental damages. These and other situations are reinforced by the recurring need to quantify each and everything. Davies (2015, p. 84-85) argues about the “emptiness of money” and the difficult, if not impossible, task of giving “value” to what is commonly defined in terms of “cost-benefit”.

In the following chapter, “In the mood to buy”, as the title anticipates, concentrate its attention in the act of purchase, investigating feelings and mental implications that follow consumers in this process. What makes us want a product? What kind of stimulus wakes our brain up for the act of shopping? How is advertisement using this type of information to make more profit? These and other issues are approached in this chapter using references of psychology, specially intellectuals that work with behaviorism.

In chapter four, “The psychosomatic worker”, the discussion about the pursuit of happiness in the work field continues. Reflecting about the philosophy of companies that aim to engage their workers with benefits, such as relaxing rooms and gyms, Davies thinks about the real condition of the health of extremely productive workers. Healthy and motivated workers are positively seen by companies; apathic and

discouraged workers are a costly burden. Because of that, it is necessary to take care of teams and give them benefits that ensure their satisfaction in the workplace (DAVIES, 2015, p. 135).

“The crisis of authority”, the fifth chapter, talks about the contemporary value of optimism and competition in different dimensions, such as physical performance, the quantification of professional achievements and affectionate bonds. The correlation between depression and competitiveness is reinforced in this part of the book. “Generally, competitions promote an indication of inequality”, says Davies (2015, p. 173). The feeling of inferiority among athletes or competitive professionals is constant and it is statistically associated with depression. It is encouraged, nowadays, to pursue our goals with all the strength and determination possible, and more: it is supported that we do that bringing our advances, so we have conscience of our superiority, “*Very rich, very successful, very healthy firms or people could, and should, become even more so*”. (DAVIES, 2015, p. 214).

The sixth chapter, “Social optimization”, approaches the social dimension of our pursuit of happiness. Acquaintances, close friends, everyone that belongs to our network can be useful to reach personal and professional goals. Not only marketing can monetize our bonds through the use of data we daily produce in interactions of digital environment, but we have the opportunity of benefiting from our connections. The sociability, as indicated in this chapter, can be “healthy” (DAVIES, 2015, p. 227).

In “Living in the lab”, seventh chapter of the book, Davies details how huge amounts of information are filtered in order to measure levels of happiness. Narcissism and consumption habits are some of the aspects that can be observed in individual’s posts and in behaviors on the internet. However, beyond punctual characteristics, it is possible to monitor the oscillation of happiness of people through the sharing of posts. Researcher developed, from a big number of keywords, a “happiness scale” to measure the intensity of posts on Twitter (DAVIES, 2015, p. 268). Again, another strategy to quantify the abstraction of feelings.

In the last chapter of the book, “Critical animals”, the author takes us to our roots, punctuating the benefits of nature to our body and mind. Outdoor tasks, gardening and interaction with animals are examples of contemporary techniques to reduce stress and help in the treatment of many diseases. The possible reasons to our lack of happiness are also discussed in the last part of the book: mental illness, economic inequality, power, unemployment, isolation and loneliness are some of them. Seeking to understand this context, Davies (2015, p. 314) warns us, finally, that we need to “take what people say more seriously”, because that would be the only way to understand what they are feeling.

The book gathers, thus, arguments coming from different areas of knowledge to describe how the contemporary transformed happiness in a tangible, measurable good, possible to be achieved. We could outline terms that gather some of the main ideas discussed in the book, such as economy, monitoring, work, profit, consumption, marketing, internet, and, of course, happiness. The reader might realize, when finishing the book, that multiple forces operate in the construction of this powerful “industry of happiness”; however, the comprehension of this feeling has been distorted and blurred nowadays. The care with the quantitative spectrum founded on the capitalistic competition logic, detailed by Davies, eliminated any residue of lucidity, fantasy and naiveté that could still remain in the adult conception of happiness.

### **About the author**

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