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The return of happiness – the end of utopia? Rankings of subjective well-being and the politics of happiness

Introduction
In July 2011, the General Assembly of the United Nations unanimously adopted Resolution 65/309. Entitled ‘Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development’, the Resolution recognized ‘the need for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth’ with the aim of promoting ‘sustainable development, poverty eradication, happiness and well-being of all peoples’ in line with the Millennium Development Goals. Member States were invited to elaborate measures that can better capture the importance of the pursuit of happiness and well-being with a view to guide future public policy. The Resolution also called upon Members States as well as regional and international organizations to develop new indicators and to share information on these at upcoming sessions of the UN General Assembly.2

Following the aims spelled out in the Resolution, the world’s first World Happiness Report was released in early April 2012. Commissioned by the ‘United Nations Conference on Happiness’ – also a global first – the report begins by noting that ‘happier countries tend to be richer countries’. According to the report, the happiest countries in the world are clustered in

1 The author wishes to thank Anna Alanko, Nicholas Aylott, Inga Brandell, Yonhyok Choe, Pauli Ket- turnen, Klaus Petersen, Hannele Sauli, Varda Soskolne, Michael Kuur Sørensen, and Jaakko Turunen for valuable comments and critique on an earlier draft of this chapter.
Northern Europe, with Denmark, Norway, Finland, and the Netherlands at the top. The least happy countries are all in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Togo, Benin, Central African Republic, and Sierra Leone registering the lowest self-reported happiness.³

But it is not just wealth that makes people happy, the report underlines: Political freedom, strong social networks, and absence of corruption are – if taken together – more important factors than income in explaining well-being differences between the top and bottom countries, according to the authors. At the individual level, good mental and physical health, job security, and stable families are crucial, as well as having ‘someone to count on’.⁴ 'Behaving well' makes people happier, too. In addition, the report also tracks differences between different groups with regard to happiness. In advanced countries, for example, women are generally happier than men, while the situation is more mixed in poorer countries. Happiness is lowest in middle age. The report confirms that mental health is the biggest single factor affecting happiness in any country. Yet, only a quarter of mentally ill people get treatment for their condition in advanced countries and still fewer in poorer countries.⁵

On average, the report states, the world has become ‘a little happier in the last 30 years’. However, as living standards rise, self-reported happiness has increased in some countries, but not in others.⁶ Apparently, happiness does not rise in tandem with economic growth.⁷ Several recent studies suggest that affluence and wealth has a tendency to generate new sets of problems which are detrimental to self-reported happiness.⁸ This observation has also been connected with the widespread notion that wealthy Westerners have become relatively unhappier throughout the past half century.⁹

⁵ Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2012, 74.
While increasing income thus has a direct and positive impact upon self-reported happiness in poor countries, the correlation is weaker in rich countries, as growth itself appears to generate problems of adaptation and adjustment. Thus, economic growth and level of income does not necessarily improve self-reported happiness, as first scientifically observed by American economist Richard Easterlin.\textsuperscript{10} The so-called ‘Easterlin paradox’ observes that richer individuals may be happier than poorer persons at any particular time, but that society as a whole does not become happier as it becomes richer. The most common explanation for the Easterlin paradox is that people compare themselves to others: When the economy as a whole improves, individuals’ relative status remains unchanged as those who gain the most quickly adapt to their new higher income while the gains may not have been evenly shared.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet another aspect of the paradoxical relationship between income, wealth, and happiness is identified by the authors of the \textit{World Happiness Report}. They observe that various ‘societal factors’ may have ‘counteracted any benefits felt from the higher incomes’, noting that ‘[u]ncertainties and anxieties are high, social and economic inequalities have widened considerably, social trust is in decline, and confidence in government is at an all-time low’.\textsuperscript{12} By inference, social policies that target the improvement of social conditions and generate social equality – or a less competitive work culture and excluding labour market, one may add – may thus have a positive impact upon self-reported happiness, which in turn can have positive effects upon the economy.\textsuperscript{13}

Happiness is thus not necessarily a primarily private affair, but something which is inextricably linked with economical, political, and social structures.


\textsuperscript{11} Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2012.

\textsuperscript{12} Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2012.

and hence, human agency. But the Easterlin paradox is not unanimously accepted by happiness researchers, and the complex relation between income, wealth, and happiness as delineated in the *World Happiness Report* remains at the core of contest in contemporary happiness research.\(^{14}\)  

Taking this observation as its point of departure, this chapter analyzes the ‘return’ of happiness in public debate, looking at the tension between happiness as an (il)legitimate goal of politics and happiness as an (ir)relevant study object of science. It first looks at how happiness was marginalized as a political and scientific category in Western public discourse after the Second World War. It then analyzes its initially slow return from the 1970s and onwards to today’s dramatically rising interest in happiness rankings by international organizations and national governments alike.

While there is an emerging literature on the business appropriation of happiness, its scientific-cum-political utilization has not yet been analyzed in any greater detail. With a few exceptions, most studies have been primarily been concerned with the quality of the scientific evidence presented in support of the claims to measure what scholars call ‘subjective well-being’ (SWB).\(^{15}\)

By contrast, this chapter does not discuss the methods and results of these rankings, most of which are easily accessible and subject to lively debate among social statisticians.\(^{16}\) Instead, it asks why these rankings are being produced to begin with and what they may entail for public policy.


Scepticism towards happiness

While the recent concern with well-being has generated high-profile initiatives of governments and international organizations alike, scientific interest in measuring happiness is not new. Early and largely theoretical efforts to quantify happiness were made by enlightenment philosophers and utilitarian liberals, perhaps most notably evidenced by Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the ‘felicific calculus’.17

Nevertheless, in bringing the explicit concept of happiness back into the scope of global governance, the World Happiness Report marks a new departure from a long tradition of scepticism towards happiness in the social sciences. Western social sciences have largely viewed happiness as emotional, personal, and highly subjective.18 Hence, social scientists tended to regard it as either irrelevant or found alternative ways of conceptualizing it. When used – although sparingly, as noted by Easterlin19 – it was most often as a vague analogy to ‘welfare’ in welfare economics, primarily in theoretical discussions of the difference between ‘wealth’ and ‘welfare’.20

Yet, the subject matter of happiness – the match between needs and human satisfaction – never ceased to be of interest to social scientists. But that interest had to be channelled through proxy concepts such as well-being, satisfaction with life, and quality of life. Partly, this purging seems to have been the result of the success and influence of American behaviourism on modern psychology and social science. With its insistence upon only researching those phenomena which can be empirically observed – i.e. actions and behaviour of humans and conditions of environment and heredity – behaviourism had by the mid-1950s established a firm consensus on social ‘cause and effect’ and psychological ‘stimulus and response’ as the preferred paradigm of Western social science.

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In so doing, behaviourism also bypassed the problem of subjectivity of (dis)satisfaction by deploying an objective standard of (dis)satisfaction through the concept of ‘needs’, e.g. Abraham Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ with physiological needs at the bottom, followed by needs for safety, love, esteem, and ‘self-actualization’ on the top. Since happiness could not be tied to any particular set of cause and effect or stimulus and response it could neither be empirically connected with the fulfilment of concrete needs nor be observed experimentally. Thus, the category of happiness thus remained something of a ‘blind spot’ for modern social science until methods for public opinion polling were being more widely applied by social psychologists in the 1960s.

In an early effort to address the scientific blindness vis-à-vis human happiness, American public opinion scholar Hadley Cantril collected data in 1957–1963 from 14 countries – both capitalist and communist societies, rich and poor – asking open-ended questions about what people want out of life and what they would need for their lives to be completely happy.21 Despite the vast socio-economic and cultural disparities among the countries, people’s responses were strikingly similar, ranking level of living, happy family life, personal and family health, work, emotional stability, personal worth, and self-discipline as the most important factors, in that order. According to Cantril’s findings, factors such as war, civil rights, political liberties, and social equality, mattered less, but this did not mean that respondents valued these factors less. It only meant that the interviewees tended to regard these factors as largely exogenous.22

Another example of explicit social science interest in happiness dates from a collaborative Nordic sociological project in the early 1970s, where subjective happiness was directly connected with material welfare and included in the questionnaires used for sampling perceptions of welfare in

21 The 14 nations included in the original study cover Brazil, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Egypt, India, Israel, Japan, Nigeria, the Philippines, Panama, Poland, the United States, West Germany, and Yugoslavia. The study employed a ‘Self-Anchoring Striving Scale’, asking the respondent to define hopes and fears for self and the nation. Cantril, Hadley (1965) *The Pattern of Human Concerns*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.

the Nordic countries. Yet, the study used the abstract, existential, and hence rather depersonalized question of whether the respondent finds that ‘Life is happy’, the answer to which need not necessarily tell the researcher much about the actual SWB of the respondent.23

Despite these early attempts at approaching explicit notions of happiness scientifically, ‘satisfaction with life’ proved the most popular analytical category throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Part of its appeal rested in its connection to then current theories on ‘development’, largely understood as the fulfilment of material needs, commensurate with ‘objective well-being’ (OWB) and often treated as synonymous with ‘standard of living’.24

However, as standard of living gradually evolved into a rhetorical weapon in the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism, alternative and supposedly more neutral concepts such as ‘quality of life’ had to be developed. Quality of life proved politically attractive, as most clearly indicated by US President Richard Nixon’s state of the union address in January 1970 and the Quality of Life review process as established in October 1971. The political appropriation of this concept clearly reflected the shift from ‘materialist’ to ‘post-materialist’ values which could be registered throughout the politically tumultuous and economically insecure 1970s.25

Rankings of happiness

Over the past decade, however, the explicit concept of ‘happiness’ has begun to reappear more frequently in scholarly literature and university textbooks across a number of disciplines, alongside the expanding and progressively more inclusive concept of ‘well-being’.26 While academic interest in developing statistical methods for conducting surveys and rankings of SWB found a platform in the journal Social Indicators Research, founded in 1974, The Journal of Happiness Studies has since 2000 catered for the more specific

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interest in the subject matter of happiness. Today, ‘happiness research’ has been established as an independent field of multidisciplinary academic research, including economics, psychology, sociology, and management studies.27

Alongside the development of the academic discipline, one of the most high-level initiatives has been undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) from the beginning of the 2000s. Using substantive analysis and surveys, the OECD has sought to address the limits of official statistics in measuring the progress of societies’ material living conditions, quality of life and sustainability. In 2001, the OECD launched its so-called Better Life Initiative to this end.28 In 2011, the Better Life Initiative released a report entitled How’s Life? Measuring Well-being as part of its ongoing work to promote ‘Better Policies for Better Lives’.29

Together with the launching of the so-called ‘Your Better Life Index’, the release of the report has been widely noted in the media as a step towards going ‘beyond GNP’ by measuring and valuing ‘happiness’ as an independent social objective alongside the more traditional economic measures according to which societies are usually ranked.30 In a related undertaking, the OECD-sponsored Global Project on ‘Measuring the Progress of Societies’ seeks to develop progress indicators as well as to create a community working together to determine how to measure the well-being of societies. To ensure legitimacy and authority, it includes representatives of NGOs, governments, and researchers worldwide. The OECD World Forum in Istanbul in June 2007 made the ‘Measuring and Fostering the Progress of Societies’ its core topic:

Is life getting better? Are our societies making progress? Indeed, what does ‘progress’ mean to the world’s citizens? For a good portion of the 20th century there was an implicit assumption that economic growth was synonymous with progress: an assumption that a growing GDP meant life must be getting better. But we now recognise that it isn’t quite as simple as that. Access to accurate information is vital when we come to judge our politicians and hold them accountable. But access to a comprehensive and intelligible portrait of that most important of questions – whether or not life has got and is likely to get better – is lacking in many societies.31

At the World Forum, the Istanbul Declaration was signed by representatives of the European Commission, the OECD, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, the United Nations, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. The Declaration states that:

A culture of evidence-based decision making has to be promoted at all levels, to increase the welfare of societies. And in the ‘information age’, welfare depends in part on transparent and accountable public policy making. The availability of statistical indicators of economic, social, and environmental outcomes and their dissemination to citizens can contribute to promoting good governance and the improvement of democratic processes. It can strengthen citizens’ capacity to influence the goals of the societies they live in through debate and consensus building, and increase the accountability of public policies.32

Noting that ‘[o]fficial statistics are a key “public good” that foster the progress of societies’, the Declaration ‘urge[s] statistical offices, public and private organizations, and academic experts to work alongside representatives of their communities to produce high-quality, facts-based information.

that can be used by all of society to form a shared view of societal well-being and its evolution over time.\textsuperscript{33}

In November 2007, this largely OECD-driven quest for ‘a shared view of societal well-being’ resulted in a conference in the European Parliament in Brussels on the topic ‘Beyond GDP – Measuring progress, true wealth, and the well-being of nations’, jointly organized by the European Commission, European Parliament, Club of Rome, WWF and OECD.\textsuperscript{34} The conference sought to initiate the selection and inclusion of various new indexes purporting to measure happiness and well-being in official statistics, providing a ‘Virtual Indicator Exhibition’ where some 20 complementing and competing indexes were presented. In gathering the authors of these indexes, it also provided a platform for a general discussion on the political applicability of these measures, i.e. for making and shaping policy initiatives.

At the conference, a basic dividing line emerged between those who view these new measures as a complement to GDP and those who argue that these measures should also contribute to a shift in (inter)national policy objectives, away from promoting free market liberalism in favour of global equality, justice, and welfare. Neither side turns openly against the order of priority held by the other. Instead, the debate is focused on the degree to which ‘societal well-being’ or ‘happiness’ can at all be measured with any accuracy. While the policy implications remain rather underdeveloped in these discussions, the evidence presented by both sides appear to support a link between happiness and welfare policies, as long as the latter are adequately provided for.\textsuperscript{35}

Through evaluation of policy outcomes and peer pressure, the OECD has been instrumental in promoting policy diffusion and norm entreprene-

\textsuperscript{33} Istanbul Declaration 2007.
neurship in a wide variety of different policy areas. Since 2008 and onwards, its advocacy for including happiness in official statistics appears to win ground internationally. In the USA, for example, similar ideas have been expressed by advisers of President Barack Obama’s administration. In their 2008 book *Nudge: How to Improve Decisions About Wealth, Health, and Happiness*, economist Richard H. Thaler and lawyer Cass R. Sunstein (until August 2012 head of the US Government’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, OIRA) argue that individuals are frequently led astray from making the decisions which would improve their SWB by following the wrong cues. A measure of ‘libertarian paternalism’ – which is distinct from paternalism according to Thaler and Sunstein in that it does not prohibit, but rather attempt to ‘nudge’ people’s decisions in certain, presumably favourable directions – can, the authors suggest, improve general levels of happiness by reframing the ‘choice architecture’ of a given society.

In December 2011, a panel of experts in psychology and economics – including Daniel Kahneman, psychologist and Nobel laureate in economics and prolific writer on the topic of well-being and ‘hedonic psychology’ – began convening in Washington D.C. to try to define reliable measures of SWB. The panel enjoys the explicit support of President Obama’s chief economic adviser and chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, Alan B. Krueger, who has previously proposed a method for generating a national statistic covering ‘the flow of emotional experience during daily activities’.

Mainly funded by the US Department of Health and Human Services and organized by the non-profit National Academies, the panel has been

36 Recent examples where the OECD has influenced member state policies include anti-corruption, educational policy, investment policy, labour market policy, and tax policy.


promoting the message that a more accurate measure of happiness is a helpful tool for evaluating the success or failure of a range of government policies. As such, it could help analyze citizen preferences and government policy priorities with regard to trade-offs between health benefits, education, employment, and higher income levels, besides probing the complex and changing relationships between these human needs and policy goals. It might also detect extremes of inequality or imbalances in how people divide their time between work and leisure. If deemed reliable, the measures under development by the panel could become part of official US statistics, including that of the US Census Bureau and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. If so, the USA would become ‘the latest country to clamber aboard a happiness bandwagon’, as noted by The Economist.⁴⁰

The happiness discourse is by no means reserved by ‘progressive’ actors such as the current US administration. Conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic, have also been keen to appropriate the happiness discourse. In 2008, former French President Nicholas Sarkozy convened a commission, consisting of Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, stating that ‘time is ripe for our measurement system to shift emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people’s well-being’. The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress – also known as the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission – concluded in September 2009 that a broad range of measures and indicators about people’s well-being and societal progress should be used alongside more standard economic measures such as GDP.⁴¹ In 2009, the French government started publishing its own happiness indicator, in line with OECD recommendations.

In 2011, also the British Coalition Government began surveys, asking respondents ‘Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?’ and ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?’ More specifically, the connection

between happiness and sustainability has been underlined by a UK government initiative entitled the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC). In cooperation with Earthscan, the SDC proposed ways in which to refocus public policy in line with the principle of ‘prosperity without growth’. This interpretation could favour an increased attention to sustainability and an emphasis upon ‘downshifting’ or ‘descaling’ the economy.\footnote{Jackson, Tim (2009) \textit{Prosperity without Growth. Economics for a Finite Planet.} London: Earthscan.} The SDC was set up by the Labour Government in June 2000 as a non-departmental public body responsible for advising the government on sustainable development and related issues. The SDC was closed by the Coalition Government in March 2011, but its reports have since been cited favourably by British Prime Minister David Cameron, noting ‘it’s time we focused not just on GDP but on GWB – general well-being’. Along similar lines, British economist Richard Layard has argued that General National Happiness (GNH) could positively complement GDP.\footnote{The modern formulation of the idea of GNH finds its origin in a conservative context, having first been proposed by the King of Bhutan in 1972, see Ura, Karma & Galay, Karma (eds) (2004) \textit{Gross National Happiness and Development.} Thimphu: The Centre for Bhutan Studies; Layard 2005.}

In addition to these governmental initiatives, there have also been numerous attempts at measuring SWB launched by universities, research institutions, think tanks, and NGOs. While these rankings usually either pool together variables which are already measured by traditional indexes or rely upon interviews and surveys where the informants state their own perception of their SWB, they are often represented in the media as claiming to chart happiness. As such, they signal a new type of interest in SWB which goes a long way towards ‘rehabilitating’ the concept of happiness in public debate. For example, the reference objects of these rankings have recently shifted from various qualified and limited notions ‘perceived’ quality of life or ‘self-reported’ or ‘avowed’ happiness to make direct and explicit references to happiness.

**Paradoxes of happiness**

While these rankings all factor in non-material concerns, the authors of these indexes usually do not claim that these new measures should replace
the traditional economical measures which have dominated the assessment of societies. Instead, the addition of social factors through the notion of SWB should simply prevent it from becoming solely deducible from economic and material factors. But how much importance should be give to the one or the other? Is it possible to weigh these factors against one another in an accurate manner? And are they really distinct from one another, after all? A number of different paradoxes or tensions emerge when the concept of happiness is introduced as a parameter for assessing socio-economic conditions as well as policy outcomes.

Progressives highlight that the societies which tend to register the highest levels of SWB are characterized by a high level of economic equality and social security, as exemplified by the Nordic countries. Indeed, several surveys report the Danes as being the most satisfied. Several studies have suggested that the universalistic welfare state has been a decisive factor for the high levels of SWB and public trust recorded in the Nordic countries. This would apparently favour a universalistic welfare state of the Nordic model which combines economic growth with social redistribution, in addition to placing a strong focus upon democracy and sustainability.

These interpretations have troubled self-designated neoliberal observers for a variety of reasons. First, there is scepticism regarding the inclusion of rankings of SWB in the work of various international organizations. Second, there has been a neoliberally-slanted criticism which claims that the notion of legitimate needs could imply a limiting of free choice in consumption and


46 Greve 2010.

production and hence an infringement upon the free market forces. Third, there is a tendency to question the link between the welfare state and happiness on the one hand and the link between sustainability and happiness on the other.

The criticism has unfolded in two different directions in response to the progressive challenge posed by the new happiness discourse to free market liberalism. One direction has actually ‘joined the choir’. Legatum Institute, for example, a think tank based in Washington D.C., has pointed out that the contemporary policies of the Nordic welfare states which generate favourable ratings for the Nordics are just as liberal and economy-oriented as the policies of those societies which score worse. The difference lies in the determination and skill by which Nordic governments have implemented necessary reforms in the welfare systems, thus saving the welfare state while reframing the ‘Nordic model’ of the past into a new ‘Nordic Way’ of the future which has recently won the praise of liberal newspaper *The Economist*.48

Another concern has been the accuracy of the measures. Neoliberal critics frequently criticize the evidence provided by happiness researchers. In 2007, the same year as the OECD launched its ‘Beyond GNP’ conference, researchers associated with the Cato Institute, another Washington-based think tank, argued that the data provided by happiness researchers show that ‘neither higher rates of government redistribution nor lower levels of income inequality make us happier, whereas high levels of economic freedom and high average incomes are among the strongest correlates of SWB’.49

The problem rests with the diverging interpretation of the causal mechanisms behind the weak correlations that the rankings point to: Not only is happiness research troubled by competing methodologies and conflicting research objectives, neoliberal critics and other sceptics argue. Happiness itself does not appear as ‘a simple empirical phenomenon but a cultural and

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historical moving target’, defined differently by different individuals at different points in life – indeed, a central argument of liberal critics of the welfare state for a long time.

Politics or rhetorics of happiness?
Happiness research has this far failed to establish a singular ‘shared view of societal well-being’ as called for by the OECD. The question is whether the rather natural and seemingly neutral quest for such a shared view could translate from rhetorics into politics, and what kind of politics that would be.

The differences between different factors in explaining happiness and SWB appear marginal in most rankings. This observation has lead social psychologists to launch the ‘set-point theory’ according to which most people have a stable level of SWB, to which they return after various positive as well as negative experiences. This individual set-point is supposedly more determined by personality than income, wealth, health, or equality. If SWB is mostly determined by factors beyond the reach of politics or even human agency, it would follow that public policy with the aim of improving happiness would carry little hope of actually increasing SWB, just as the so-called ‘bell curve paradox’ would rule out the aggregated effects of education on overall levels of intelligence in a given society. A set-point theory of happiness would thus rather support a neoliberal interpretation than a welfare state interpretation of public policy.50

But if we accept the correlation between happiness and the welfare state as evidenced by the high rankings for the Nordic societies, the possibility of a politics of happiness would seem clear enough: It would simply be a question of providing for the basic social goods (education, employment, empowerment, and environmental protection) on a universal basis through the means of public participation to secure the possibility for as many as possible to independently pursue their own ideas of how to achieve happi-

ness.\textsuperscript{51} It would then be a rather basic and very practical question of setting up systems of social care which as far as possible address social conditions which are known to correlate with unhappiness and deteriorating mental health, rather than some utopian attempt at downscaling the economy or to ‘maximize happiness’ for all through some ambitious scheme of ‘social engineering’.

However, it must also be observed that the universalism of the welfare state may produce potential tensions, too. The principle of universalism secures some measure of equality which translates into public trust and SWB as well as legitimacy of the welfare state. To be able to afford this universalism, however, the welfare state requires a rather high level of productivity to allow for a comparatively high level of both private and public consumption. This means that a substantial source of stress and dissatisfaction will likely remain inbuilt into the system.\textsuperscript{52}

The levels of stress among the employed, well-integrated, and more or less well-paid middle classes are reportedly on the rise, not only in the West generally, but in the Nordic countries, too. This generates growing demands for mental health care and crowding out scarce resources for those who already suffer from unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, and/or mental problems – whose well-being in turn is imperilled by the rising requirements for employability.\textsuperscript{53} If the happiness discourse would be embraced by the universalistic welfare state, the latter would also need to accommodate the rather different needs of both these groups. Medical definitions would become even more important than they are today. Where do we draw the line between the happiness which should be the concern of the individual and the unhappiness which should be the concern of society as a whole?

This issue is complicated by the suggestion that the welfare state – in the Nordic countries as well as elsewhere – is undergoing a transformation

\textsuperscript{51} See discussion in European Communities (2009); Frey & Stutzer 2007.
towards a more neoliberal mode of governance by gradually and piece by piece abandoning the principle of universalism, so that it becomes a question of interpretation whether the eventual success of the Nordic welfare model is rather the result of whatever traditional welfare state is left or follows from the competition state reforms, which, according to some, may spell the end of traditional welfare policies.54

The increasing attention to the immaterial factors for happiness and SWB unfold in parallel with the current economic recession. The ‘softer’ measures of economic and social performance of societies do indeed seem to reflect some of the post-materialist values which have become more widely accepted during the last decades, in Western Europe, the USA, and increasingly also in Southeast Asia. It would be politically sound for both conservative and progressive politicians to rhetorically embrace more post-materialist values in a time of crisis, while retaining a focus upon traditional economic policy goals in actual policies, just as Nixon once sought to channel counter-culture sentiments in the USA during the high-tide of radicalism in the early 1970s while conducting relatively traditional economic policies.

Assuming that the Easterlin paradox holds some truth, governmental interest in SWB may then increase when economic figures point downward or when income disparity is on the rise. Similar rhetorics have, for example, been utilized by various South East Asian governments, notably by the Chinese Government invoking the concept of xiaokang ['basic well-being'] during the rapid growth of the 1990s or by the Thai Government in the wake of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, as citizens were encouraged to focus on ‘sufficiency economy’ and to moderate their consumption rather than to expect increased governmental relief or press for an expansion of welfare programmes in times of need.55

The inclusion of happiness and SWB by conservative governments and traditionally free-trade-oriented international organizations can also channel public criticism away from economic failure, rising income disparity, and welfare state retrenchment. So it has been suggested that former French President Sarkozy’s embracing of the new happiness agenda was designated to compensate for criticism in the context of the lowering of the French credit rating in 2011. In any case, the conservative appropriation of the happiness discourse is not very likely to herald massively increased government spending on public goods.

Conclusion
The new rankings of happiness have had some political impact, as witnessed by the high-level interest from the UN and the OECD as well as national governments. The close relationship between political agency and scientific knowledge production, especially the political function of statistics is well-known: Numbers, rankings, and scientific verifiable knowledge have long been considered a precondition for the turning of various social problems into targets of evidence-based policy making (EBP). But, as of yet, this interest remains on the level of political rhetoric. Even if the social statisticians working with official statistics may perceive an increased pressure from governments and international organizations to conform to the new norms, a pressure which can be said to be ‘political’, the happiness discourse appears rather ‘under-politicized’ for now.

Yet, the popular reception of rankings and measures has actualized an essentially political struggle between different interpretations of happiness rankings and research. Through its vague and non-committal character, the happiness discourse can be bent for different political purposes. For some, the happiness discourse can be used as an argument for the expansion of the welfare state to also include more qualitative social services with more ambitious aims in terms of health and happiness. For others, it can be used

to drive home the point that we are all individually responsible for our own happiness. Still others may use the happiness discourse to promote an environmentalist agenda of descaling, downsizing, redistribution, and extended regulation of the financial markets in the interest of sustainability.

It may perhaps seem paradoxical that happiness returns as a political concern at a point in time when politics is widely thought to have been replaced by the market and public policy-making is supposedly supplanted by ‘post-political regulation’. The idea that individual happiness can be measured is strangely familiar with the idea that individual happiness could, for all of its complexity, be made into a political objective in its own right – indeed, a most utopian idea in itself. This would appear even more puzzling, since utopian or visionary ideas are supposedly in short supply today, both on the left as well as on the right.

Proponents argue that there is a demand for better measurements due to the rather natural interest in ascertaining a better balance between OWB and SWB – between economical and social concerns – when evaluating policy effects and designing new policy measures. At the same time, the causality between various policies and the reported SWB in a particular society remains elusive at best, national social statisticians warn, beyond the subjective character of happiness to begin with. Yet, the way in which the goal of individual happiness is articulated ties in with societal well-being is an important issue if we are interested in how the limits of politics are being changed and re-negotiated under conditions of globalization, post-modern values, and post-political regulation.

For now, it remains a question for debate whether the rising interest in

happiness will be politicized and, if so, to what degree and with what consequences. A first political implication is that these rankings do not only answer to a perceived need for knowledge, but also contribute to sustain and expand this need. This need will either be filled by ‘pseudo-science’ marginalizing official statistics, or official statistics will have to adapt to the demand, even if official social statisticians may be wary and skeptical of political pressure to expand the scope of their discipline.

Indeed, identifying, measuring, and ranking performance is not only a way of generating better knowledge about social conditions and policy outcomes with a view of improving both. It is also a means of communicating a message to the electorate and to shape public opinion. Rankings, even if they do not necessarily herald a new start for welfare state policies, do signal at least a symbolic response on the part of international and national policy-making elites to widespread popular concerns with life satisfaction, health, and environment beyond the scope of individual economy.

Second, it may today simply not be possible for politicians to focus singularly on economic growth as the primary policy objective, despite the current crisis. Cynics may remark that this would be rather fitting, since market performance is more volatile and appears less susceptible to political control now than in the past. It would hence be unwise for politicians to make themselves too dependent upon economical performance as the single most important parameter of policy evaluation. Novel concerns with ‘soft issues’ can be used to offset growing dissatisfaction with faltering economic policies and demonstrable weakness of politics. Nordic countries, for example, rank nicely in the statistics, while social inequalities are on the rise, indicating that overall performance may be good even if the least privileged members of society fare ill or do not share the benefits of stability and growth.

A third political implication, or rather symptom, is that the concern with rankings corresponds to the ‘evacuation of politics’ in evidence in contemporary governance in a multitude of policy fields, such as care, education, and unemployment policies. Overarching social conflicts and party po-

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Political contests are reduced as economic and social problems are isolated into targets for specialized policy administration. In the ‘political void’ that is left, global non-political organizations increasingly take up the role of visionaries, norm-entrepreneurs, and policy promoters, exactly through producing and disseminating new knowledge, new standards, and new best practices in a general movement towards post-political regulation. For all of its concern with accountability and transparency, it is of interest to note how post-political governance is tasking itself with yet more complex policy goals, identifying categories that, strictly speaking, cannot be as accurately and unambiguously quantified, compared, and evaluated as the traditional policy goals of work, security, justice, growth, and equality.

This raises the question whether contemporary discourses on happiness will serve to expand the duties of public policy to include more immaterial notions of welfare or to limit the reach of politics, further pointing to the responsibility of the individual for her own happiness. Due to this tension in the recent attention to happiness, the primary political importance of the recent rankings of SWB does not seem to concern their eventual ability to actually measure happiness but rather to rhetorically challenge the primacy of economy as the single most important basis for public policy and to underscore the social component of economic performance.

As such, it answers to a utopian drive in an era of utopian exhaustion. It is paradoxical, as the increased political and scientific interest in the vague and causally under-determined phenomenon of happiness can go in two directions: It may either divert attention away from the economy in order to further strengthen its grips on our public policies, or – quite on the contrary – further emphasize the need for alternative, non-monetary yardsticks by which to assess the well-being in the contemporary welfare state.

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References

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