

The Elementary Forms of Happiness

Rémy PAWIN

How do you recognize a happy person? A team of ethnologists recently tried to answer this question, in a volume that considers topics ranging from neo-rural communities in southern France to desert marathon-runners. The results are mixed, but the study manages to lay the groundwork for an ethological approach to happiness as a social experience.

Reviewed : Salomé Berthon, Sabine Châtelain, Marie-Noëlle Ottavi, Olivier Wathelet (dir.), *Ethnologie des gens heureux*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2009, 206 pp.

After abandoning the shores of Melanesia for communities in Brittany that modernity left behind (see André Burguière's *Bretons de Plozevet*), ethnologists have begun to consider another tribe dwelling in our hemisphere: happy folk. One cannot, of course, reproach them for this interest, which brings ethnology in line with a broader interest in the humanities and the social sciences in the phenomenon of happiness. The authors readily admit their desire to join this interdisciplinary concert. They acknowledge they are climbing aboard a bandwagon, and this goal, which crops up frequently in *L'Ethnologie des gens heureux*, is the book's foremost *raison d'être*. The volume originated in a 2006 conference organized by a group of young researchers affiliated with an anthropology center at the University of Nice—Sophia Antipolis, called Memory, Identity, and Social Cognition. They subsequently created a research group on the anthropology of happiness (Groupe de recherche pour une anthropologie du Bonheur, or GRAB) and, in 2008, published their findings with the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

When Ethnology Takes on Happiness

Bringing ethnology's distinct disciplinary perspective to the study of happiness is undoubtedly an admirable goal. If the social sciences have generally focused on misery and

conflict, happiness' heuristic importance is now widely recognized. Moreover, ethnological description would appear to be a particularly fruitful means of collecting reliable data on happiness: instead of quantitative questionnaires, which pose serious interpretive problems for sociologists, ethnologists might, through qualitative studies conducted over long periods, learn to decode their informants' verbal and non-verbal signs. When we read that the authors' aim is to identify the "elementary forms of happiness" and to bring to light its "ordinary expressions," we are delighted: the study promises, it would seem, a cartography of happy moments—a painstaking account of happy experiences, the objective conditions that make them possible, and the subjective judgments that make them transmissible.

But upon reading the volume's thirteen essays (grouped into two parts), the reader is left hungry for more. While the first part is mostly coherent, the second is jumbled and confused: it consists of two programmatic statements lacking empirical evidence, a foray into philosophy, a smattering of cognitive science, and a study of the Papuans (ethnological tradition *oblige*). An article on the happiness of wine amateurs could have been fascinating. But the empirical evidence, confined to guides for amateurs, proves little, while the wine drinker's pleasure and his experiences over the initiation process are not addressed. The volume thus suffers from a lack of uniformity in its object of study and approach. In seeking to grapple with happiness as a totality, it overlooks its discipline's distinct perspective: careful observation and the identification of traits that are invisible to other social sciences. The authors would have been well-advised to focus on specific aspects of happiness they could explore in depth. This lack of calibration is, moreover, problematic, as it precludes comparative or synthetic conclusions. To emphasize the book's programmatic nature, the authors might have placed the word "for" at the beginning of its title (i.e., *For an Ethnology of Happy People*). In their defense, however, this is fairly typical of this kind of study.

Shards of Happiness

Yet the collection's weaknesses are also its strengths. It blazes the trail of an emerging field of research. The careful reader will find a few gems. One of them is Cyril Isnard's article on the neo-rural community in Roudoule (in the Maritime Alps). Through solid research in the field, the author examines the construction of happiness and brings out one of the specificities of the members' biographies: the centrality of a negative belief—namely, that city life is hell—which serves them as a foil and embellishes their own experiences. The notion of an urban-rural binary allows them to fashion themselves as happy, despite the

challenges of daily life. Isnard's piece is consonant with the following article, which examines vacations, which most people consider to be happy moments. Pierre Périèr, too, emphasizes the importance of beliefs, but in this case, positive ones: the conviction that vacations are linked to happiness increases the potential for happy experiences, in addition to improving vacation-related happiness. Yet because there are no significant empirical studies of accounts of happy vacations, the author is unable to distinguish between adherence to a norm (i.e., to say that one's vacations were unhappy is to admit to failure) and genuine satisfaction.

Similarly, the article on desert marathons, in which endurance runners cross the desert in extreme conditions, is highly stimulating: starting with a topic that might be deemed only of anecdotal interest, Aude Mottiaux considers the stories of these unusual runners and manages to shed light on a number of processes that, when connected to other studies, have interesting theoretical implications. For instance, the article implies a relationship between happiness and physical pain, which the runners transform into its opposite—pleasure—making it an essential ingredient of their happy life-stories. The article also suggests that desert runners take pleasure in their singular identity, constructed through a sport which, for the participants, is quasi-sacred, defines who they are, and continues to fill them with joy in everyday moments of their ordinary lives. This article thus enters religious territory and begs for further development and a more comparative approach. In what degree are pleasure and pain integrated in constructions of happiness? By which actors? How does identity construction shape these processes?

The volume is, in short, a mixed bag. On the one hand, researchers are right to welcome ethnologists into the fold of happiness studies. On the other, the reader's expectations—understandably high, given the topic—are somewhat disappointed by the studies themselves. At last, since researchers managed to gather the whole range of French happiness ethnological works, should one see this disparate collection of essays as evidence of an emerging research field? If so, the work at least allows us to measure the distance that remains to be travelled. Between this step and a genuine ethnology of happy people, the road is long.

First published in **Laviedesidees.fr**. Translated from French by **Michael Behrent** with the support of the **Institut français**.

Published in Booksandideas.net, 16 December 2011.

