

REVIEW/ RESENHA/REVISIÓN



“OUT OF TUNE WITH THE HAPPY PEOPLE CHOIR”: THE BIOPOLITICAL USE
OF THE DISCOURSE OF HAPPINESS “

“DESAFINAR DO CORO DOS CONTENTES”: O USO BIOPOLÍTICO DO DISCURSO DE FELICIDADE

“DESAFINADO DEL CORO DE LOS FELICES”: EL USO BIOPOLÍTICO DEL DISCURSO DE LA FELICIDAD

CABANAS, E.; ILLOUZ, E. *Happycracia: fabricando cidadãos felizes*. Tradução Humberto do Amaral. São Paulo: Ubu Editora, 2022. 288p. (Coleção Exit)

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Happycracia is a work by Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz. Edgar Cabanas is a psychologist, specialist in basic psychology, emotional and social psychology and history of psychology. He holds a PhD in psychology from Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, and is currently a Professor at Universidad Camilo José Cela. Ela Illouz is a sociologist and holds a PhD in literature and communication. She currently teaches sociology at Universidad Hebraica de Jerusalem and at the Paris School of Advanced Studies in Social Science.

The said work addresses happiness from a sociological, psychological, and economic perspective, in which discourse plays a central role throughout the discussion taken forward by the authors. Differently from what we are used to observing on the shelves of bookstores, in self-help sections, the book discussed throughout this review problematizes a discourse disguised as science¹, which has become a huge industry, and aims at establishing and maintaining an order of discourse by means of a global neoliberal logic of economy in contemporary biopolitics.

In the *Introduction*, the authors point the presence of an ideal of happiness in our cultural imaginary — that crosses different means of communication, aesthetics, health, education and (digital) technologies. From this ideal, we realize that a discourse has been produced and calcified to make us believe that happiness is a matter of choice and the result of training and discipline — reflecting the model of citizen demanded by neoliberalism in contemporaneity. Behind this constant search, the authors present a powerful industry in which different social actors participate in the construction and diffusion of this discourse of happiness: writers, politicians, psychologists, entrepreneurs, and *coaches*, among other professionals. That signals the tactical poly-valence of discourse (FOUCAULT, 2020), that is, discourses on a same theme emanate from different fields, and operate the construction of a “truth” that will be the ground for the massive production of a subjectivity which is necessary to biopolitical governance in the present time. According to the authors of the reviewed work, the American culture was the cradle of this cultural imaginary that permeates especially advanced capitalist societies.

The authors point out that after a few years of mysticism from one side, and skepticisms from another regarding happiness, in 1998 a science of happiness was finally institutionalized. According to them, this science, named as positive psychology, brought scientific “truths”, and any type of skepticism seen in previous years was gradually diluting, since a science was grounding all of these discussions on happiness.

We share the same arguments as the authors, according to whom the condition that enabled the discourse of happiness comes from the fluxes of contemporary global neoliberalism, which demand positive subjects, because in this way they cannot realize how this economic model makes their lives precarious, and believe that if they program their minds to be positive, they will find the ideal of happiness (literally) sold by the social configuration in force. Thus, drawing from Foucault’s concept of biopolitics (2010), we argue that the maintenance of healthy, “happy” and productive bodies is a *sine qua non* condition for the “well-being” of a nation inserted in this historical time.

The authors defend that there is the production of self-responsibility as well as of guilt by the subjects who do not fit nor achieve the ideal of contemporary happiness. When it comes to happiness, an antagonistic relationship between normal and pathological emerges from this new “truth” established. Regarding this ideal of happiness, legitimated as normal, there is an expectation that it is possible to guarantee a life without suffering or illness, in which the maximization of productive bodies has become a moral responsibility (CAPONI, 2014). While pathological is a synonym of monstrous, normal is constantly demanded in our societies (CAPONI, 2001).

In the first chapter, titled *Experts on your well-being*, the authors discuss the creation of positive psychology. According to them, the psychologist Martin Seligman had an epiphany and felt facing the mission of creating a completely innovative psychological perspective, in which the keys to human happiness were easily unveiled. They affirm that in view of his first manifesto, *Positive Psychology*, the psychologist and coauthor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi presented a new “scientific entrepreneurship” with mixed, confused, and ill-arranged concepts, despite promising all the truth that this scientific discourse allegedly encompasses. In sequence,

¹ Throughout the text, when we refer to the discourse of happiness, we will be talking about positive psychology. The authors argue that once produced, the discourse of happiness was covered as science and, thus, acquired the status of truth, as well as became much more accepted and widespread, including in academia.

as discussed by the work reviewed, the discourse of happiness began to incite the curiosity and interest of big corporations and to move this enormous industry, financed by millionaires and sustained by academics through the dissemination of research published by scientific journals in the field.

We agree with the authors that the success of the discourse of happiness reaches a variety of audiences, including, poor, lonely, sick people, and “losers”. If we resort to the concept of biopolitics (FOUCAULT, 2010), we observe that there is an ongoing effort to “make live”, in which normalizing and saving people, many of them from marginalizing groups, work as strategies for neoliberal societies that need to extract the workforce from people. Thus, we realize that the protagonists of the discourse of happiness are easily seen as the propagators of “wellness”, while their discourse is merely associated to economic interests. It is possible to see that the discourse of happiness is strategically used in the production of subjectivities that is useful to the neoliberal enterprise, and that is precisely what the authors seek to foreground. They argue that “positive psychology is a little more than ideology recycled in the form of charts, tables and number-filled diagrams; an easily marketable pop psychology touted by scientists in white coats.” (CABANAS; ILLOUZ, 2022, p. 50, our translation), a psychology that creates digital identities and behavioral patterns in both public and private spheres, namely it produces consumers of goods and dreams, which are linked to the ideal of happiness, and this production creates a feeling of collective positivity that tactically camouflages social inequality. Here we argue that there is a use of knowledge for a purpose of power. In that sense, “Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can be different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form among opposing strategy.” (FOUCAULT, 2020, p. 111, our translation). The strategy is the production of positive subjects, in which the authors name happy citizens. Producing this subjectivity is of vital importance for maintaining the current social configuration. Nevertheless, there are always those out of tune with the happy people choir. Resistance that arises in the constant agonistic of collisions of forces, from which the discourse of happiness emerges and operates tactically, in order to make live. And not just to make live, but to make live “happily”, to increase the workforce in favor of neoliberalism. In such a way, “It is necessary to admit a complex and unstable game, in which discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power” (FOUCAULT, 2020, p. 110, our translation)

In the second chapter, titled *Rekindling individualism*, the authors discuss the discourse of happiness and neoliberalism — that stands out for the individualization of subjects who must become entrepreneurs of themselves, what Foucault (2010) has termed as *homo oeconomicus*. That is, subjects must make themselves their own capital, acting upon themselves to mold their subjectivity to neoliberal demands. From this perspective, everyone is responsible for their own happiness, and those who are not happy, are not self-regulating for this. Similarly to what occurs in the meritocratic discourse, it is possible to realize that the discourse of happiness dislocates the responsibility of being happy to people, while collective and social aspects are constantly left aside, as though they did not interfere in the process. On that matter, the authors write that:

Happiness should not be seen as an innocuous, well-meant abstraction for wellness and satisfaction. Nor should it be conceived as an empty concept devoid of profound cultural, moral and anthropological biases and assumptions. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand why happiness and not any other value – e.g., justice, prudence, solidarity or loyalty – has come to play such a prominent role in advanced capitalist societies [...]. Instead, we argue that one of the reasons accounting for why happiness has become so prominent in neoliberal societies is that happiness is saturated with individualist values – defining the individual self as a paramount value, conceiving of groups and societies as an aggregate of separate and autonomous wills. (CABANAS; ILLOUZ, 2022, p.83, our translation).

The authority and persuasiveness of the discourse of happiness are also issues raised by the authors. They argue that, due to its apparent accuracy, this type of discourse, when made scientific, starts to offer “unquestionable truths” through a simplistic objectivity to the detriment of collective critical thinking and of structural factors. Furthermore, they affirm that the different techniques and proposals offered by the discourse of happiness can lead to a limited understanding of social structure as they represent that which is merely individual. During the reading, we realize that the discourse in question produces subjectivities — that can be biopolitically governed — in different fields, such as education and work, for instance. This discourse fixates an ideal of happiness and creates a “right way to be happy”, which not coincidentally is of interest to neoliberalism.

In the third chapter *Positivity at work*, the authors discuss the essential assets and psychological constructs expected at the world of labor, classifying the worker as good, productive, and therefore interesting to hire. It is pointed that this discourse creates (and maintains) a series of identities marked by characteristics such as: autonomy, flexibility, adaptability, resilience, self-control, among others. Not by chance, these are the characteristics of the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* (FOUCAULT, 2010). As the authors point out, it is important to highlight, however, that this discourse — widespread within companies, especially big corporations — causes a series of insecurities and instabilities, permeating the dissolution of stability and work contracts through the emphasis on individualization. Moreover, they highlight that even though the discourse of happiness promises a “fulfilling life” inside neoliberal corporations, what we see are workers ideologically molded to identify themselves with the principles, values and goals of such organizations. Hence, we argue that, differently from the well-being promised by the companies, there are strategies to create an economically, politically, socially and psychologically standard subject who will facilitate the biopolitical government of population behavior, increasing their economic strengths while reducing their political strengths. That is, “happy” subjects will produce much more and resist much less. Happy subjects will be docile and useful (FOUCAULT, 2007).

In the fourth chapter, *Happy selves on the market's shelves*, the authors discuss the application of the discourse of happiness using “success” stories combined with moral and ethical values in the search for “better” citizens. According to them, from the vantage point of the discourse of happiness, we are responsible for becoming bad or good citizens, and the latter is connected to the idea of happiness. Therefore if we are happy, we are good, otherwise we are bad. That reveals a dualistic moral background (good-evil) on which this discourse of happiness rests and which must be problematized, because the notions of good and evil are not unquestionable truths, but cultural constructs historically dated (NIETZSCHE, 2017) that have strategic uses in biopolitical configurations.

We agree with the authors that social networks are a huge industry of “happy selves” — where looking happy is a constant obligation and any type of contrary feeling is silenced, stigmatized and even ridiculed. They argue that young people are the main victims of this industry, which demands social adjustment and “perfection” — in which standards of beauty, happiness, normality, relationships, health, and success play the role of protagonists — triggering dangerous frustrations that make them feel ill, abnormal, and dysfunctional, because such standards, in all their spheres, will never be reached. We emphasize that here lies the subtlety of the strategy — this standard of happiness, even though unreachable, works to keep everybody in movement, chasing it, and thus the forces are channeled in favor of neoliberal interests. This relentless search for positivity, aimed at increasing efficiency, produces body fatigue, as well argued by Han (2017).

In the fifth and last chapter, *Happy is the new normal*, the authors discuss the normalization of being happy in any circumstances. They assert that the discourse of happiness is part of an individualistic, objective enterprise, and promises to be available to anyone. In that logic, we observe that the subjects who seek happiness can easily achieve it and are considered normal, since they become productive, resilient, healthy, with solid relationships, and, in this way, they contribute to the good progress of an entire society. It is important to stress that the opposite can happen too, and people who do not feel happy (at least not all the time) or cannot access the “flourishing” offered by the discourse of happiness are considered abnormal, and because happiness is treated as a matter of choice, they are held accountable, judged, and condemned because they resist and do not facilitate their own well-being nor the well-being of others.

Hence, we understand that the work reviewed approaches the emergency of a discourse that fixates truths on what it is like to be happy in contemporaneity. The said discourse, linked to the interests of neoliberalism, was strategically coated with science, giving rise to the so-called positive psychology, which moves millions and acts in the manufacture of happy subjectivities. We share the same arguments as the authors that the discourse of happiness transfers the responsibility of being happy to people, deliberately disregarding the situation of social vulnerability in which many live and that sometimes is the basis of their unhappiness.

Beyond that, throughout the book, we perceive that the discourse of happiness neglects particularities that involve deep psychosocial issues and permeate the vulnerability of human existence. Aligned to the ideology of advanced capitalist societies, we agree with the authors that the discourse of happiness aims at maintaining old unequal power relations and social structures. It is an indispensable work, which we recommend, because it discusses the establishment and maintenance of an order of discourse — in which “truths”

are established and begin to produce effects of power over the governed bodies. Nevertheless, “where there is power, there is resistance” (FOUCAULT, 2020, p.104, our translation) that does not cease to introduce lines of escape. Dissonant voices, which constantly emerge, join the discursive polyphony and are out of tune with the happy people choir. The work reviewed is a fine example of that. An example of the poly-valence of the discourse that marks resistance. In this case, the authors use the discourse of happiness, produced by positive psychology, against itself. They invert the strategy, as Foucault (2020) points out, to signal its nefarious effects of power.

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