

# Excursions

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Cover photo: Students in Bangladesh protest 7.5 per cent VAT on their tuition fees, 10 September 2015.  
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Ana Carolina Minozzo, 'Review of *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy*, 2017, by Lynne Segal'

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## Reviews

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*Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy*,  
2017, Lynne Segal  
London: Verso.

For centuries we have been flooded with formulas and secrets for how to be *really happy*. Lynne Segal notices in her latest book *Radical Happiness*, published by Verso, that what is particular to the past three decades or so is the alignment of such discourses and the neoliberal agenda that crosses the life of all living beings in our peculiar times in the West. Control, productivity and surplus-value guide the various public policies, medication adverts and ‘ground-breaking’ measuring tools of happiness that pop up daily in newspapers, but, far from making us happier, the neoliberal conception of

being-happy increases feelings of inadequacy, failure and gloom. If anything, Segal writes, in light of the monetization, financialization and overall ‘calculation’ of this allusive affect, ‘the ironic bottom line is clearly that the happiness economists do actually fear that we now live in an era of mounting disquiet and foreboding’ (Segal, 2017, p.14). Yet, they may be only focusing on one kind of happiness.

In the first section of the book, tracing parallels of the discourses around happiness and the mechanisms of capitalism from the perspectives of governmentality and Big Pharma, Segal is able to disclose her succinct yet chilling take on the current psychosphere: ‘My fear, then, is that people have overall actually become more miserable in recent decades, but the pressure is on to us to disavow this knowledge’ (Segal, 2017, p.55). This passage summarises, to me at least, as her student and feminist admirer, looking for reassurance and motivation in my teacher’s words, the driving force of *Radical Happiness*, after which Segal moves on to develop her powerful stance on the problems of the privatisation of emotions under capitalism. She argues that, if feelings are ‘private property’ they stop being collective, and when no longer shared, they lose their political power. Her book rests on this deceptively simple premise. *Radical Happiness*, thus, is not necessarily about *happiness* but, rather, it is about *another kind of happiness*, the shareable and potent quality that Segal calls *joy*.

In order to provide the groundwork for a conversation on joy, the first chapter of the book establishes, *What’s Wrong with Happiness?*, and covers what other titles focus on as their sole topic: the increased misery and social exclusion generated by the ‘happiness turn’. Covering the perversities of Richard Layard, a former Blair administration advisor and advocate of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy in the NHS, to the critiques of Sara Ahmed, Will Davies and Cederström and Spicer, Segal’s argument slowly builds a contrast to what we all, by now, are familiar with in the social sciences and humanities: the happiness demanded by the ‘system’ is only making us

unhappy. Books on the enterprise of happiness, wellbeing and wellness have been published in abundance since the late 00s. However compelling this critical stance may be – let’s not forget Ahmed’s brilliant chapter on ‘feminist killjoys’ in *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed, 2010) – such pieces usually work at the level of pointing to the illegitimacy of the life of ‘smiles’ by any means necessary. Segal, instead, keeps this conversation as short as it needs to in order to offer context, before swiftly proceeding to her beautiful, personal and philosophical meditation on what has motivated her decades of activism: joy with other people.

## Where is Joy?

This focus, on the seeming simplicity of ‘joy’ takes Segal to a different direction when it comes to radical thinking. It is too easy, as well as too dangerous to remain within the sphere of critical cynicism. *Radical Happiness* does not stop at uncovering the psychic-depths of the happiness industry; it compellingly indicates a ‘way out’ of the artificial happiness trap. Segal writes:

While I suggest how much lies buried in mainstream measurements of and debates surrounding happiness, we need to guard against such suspicions hurling us into troughs of cynical pessimism. For without our own sources of optimism, we inevitably give up on the search for sharing possibilities for the enjoyment of life, however fleeting these possibilities might prove to be.  
(Segal, 2017, p.xiii)

It is worth noting that cynicism is different to critical suspicion. While the latter is necessary to drive political change, cynicism can be paralysing and isolating; it can be a part of what Naomi Klein has called a ‘shock doctrine’ in her 2007 bestseller, the calculation of exhaustion and helplessness with regard to political activity. Segal, however, does not embark on the

controversial post-critique debate; rather, she makes the critique of fabricated happiness an integral part of her quest for a politically potent joy.

The thread that links such unlikely companions as *radical* and *happiness* is the realisation that isolation is a presupposition of happiness under neoliberalism. And indeed ‘being happy’ has been so emptied of its meaning and potency, so transformed into a coercive and controlling counterpart under the label of ‘wellness’, that re-connecting with its power is no easy task. Segal writes:

It is partly the culturally orchestrated ideology of individual happiness, however, accompanying the ubiquitous commercial incitements to pleasure, which makes it harder to know how to write about joy in our times. (Segal, 2017, p.23)

## Living Differently

How to think about joy? How to live through it as a fuel for radical politics? This is what the largest part of the book is concerned with. Its reflective and investigative tone, never a directional ‘handbook of joy’, meant that for me the pages turned one after the other at a dynamic pace; bringing into view a felt realm of joy. If happiness has been privatised and emptied of content, Segal’s joy is excessive, over spilling and connective:

The desire to move outside and beyond oneself, the search for some sort of shared laughter or joy, one with another, that “we-mode” is certainly one way of overcoming the gloom that can threaten to engulf us. (Segal, 2017, p.25)

For those familiar with her other books, in particular *Making Trouble: Life in Politics*, reissued in 2017 also by Verso, the style of *Radical Happiness* will not surprise: Segal characteristically thinks the political via the personal in the best tradition of feminism. Memories of a life brimming with collectivity and togetherness drive the book, which envisages, from where I read it, hope:

This is why, from the shakiest of foundations, although with plentiful memories of the joys I have shared with others, I want to reclaim more of those moments and those spaces in public life where collective energy binds us together in ways that transcend our personal worries. Furthermore, things we have helped create in the past can provide blueprints for their possible recurrence – never exactly as they arose before, but rather in new forms shaped by the dynamics of the present. (Segal, 2017, p.25)

Traditional party-politics also criss-crosses the book; Lynne is a loud Corbyn supporter. Forms of organising, however utopic, are discussed as ways of changing reality that can offer precisely what we seem to be missing so much of in our contemporary moment: time and space for being together. From new languages in Feminist protesting à la Slut Walk, to collective budget spending decisions in the Porto Alegre – my Brazilian hometown – of the late 90s, Lynne Segal discusses in a mix of well-informed journalistic writing and theoretical analysis, the cracks allowing light to shine through the capitalism system.

To me, what is most striking in *Radical Happiness* is her call for the hard work of reviving or giving birth to spaces where, without being crossed by capital, we share in and are ultimately able to experience joy. For ‘joy is most often associated with experiences that take us altogether outside ourselves’ (Segal, 2017, p.xii) and, indeed, these spaces seem to be scarce, especially in London, even in contrast with cities such as São Paulo or Berlin. Ten years ago, when I arrived in the UK, squats and social centres were the base of my social, political and emotional life. Without them, I could not have stayed for even six months. From Whitechapel’s RampArts to Dalston’s Queer Squat, they have closed down and familiar faces have been substituted with city workers and (typically) wealthy art students or graphic designers. Being ‘part of something’ that is not based on consumption and productivity but on a shared political commitment is certainly my most cherished and remarkable life experience. However, my contemporaries and I are nostalgic for a political and collective youth, full of joy that cannot be realised by

moving from rental to rental and job-to-job. To make things better, we take Vitamin D and go to Yoga, victims of the very discourse on privatised happiness and wellbeing that we are so critical of. Lynne Segal is persuasive when she writes that ‘as the world becomes an even lonelier place, it is sustaining relationships, in whatever form they take, which must become ever more important. An act of defiance, even’ (Segal, 2017, p.ix). She provides a much-needed wealth of examples in which being together is unfolding in the contemporary, leaving her reader to wonder whether the collective home or squatted social may not be the place where collective joy will find its future form ... or, then again, perhaps it will be exactly in such places that joy will bloom in the decades to come.

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