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“(...) the Greek summer, as many of you know, is much more than the shimmering sea and the stunning sunset. It is a state of mind, as our recent [tourism] campaign states; a feeling of happiness, of freedom, of tranquility and nothing can take that ever away. And these feelings, these emotions are probably even more necessary today for us to experience as we are coming out of the first wave of the pandemic. This is why I am so proud to be standing here tonight knowing that Greece is very much open for business.” (Mitsotakis, 2020, June 13)

“What is at stake for the next 100 years? When I asked Stathis Kalyvas, he replied ‘happiness’. I agree. It is happiness as a concept that is connected to the way we work and the way we live our daily lives, combining everything we are entitled to as citizens and as individuals and unique personalities. And Greece can claim this ‘happiness’ of the future.” (Mitsotakis, 2021, March 21)

In these two quotes, the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis refers to happiness as a feeling and experience that Greece can generate for both tourists and its citizens. The notion of happiness has been a frequent subject of recent governmental proclamations, signaling a departure from the moralizing discourses of guilt, blame, and debt surrounding the crisis of the past decade. While tourism in the crisis-years thrived and became the growth engine of the Greek economy, unemployment rates skyrocketed, and the country experienced a significant wave of out-migration (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis, 2016). In this context, speaking of ‘happiness’ appears somewhat curious at first glance. But at a closer look, as we will show, it serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, happiness is used by the Mitsotakis government to radically re-brand Greece after a decade of austerity to attract ‘human capital’ (and foreign investments), desirable migrants (especially ‘digital nomads’) and visitors. On the other hand, happiness is to discipline the Greek population.



The ‘Science of Happiness’

The concept of happiness has attracted vast interest in the fields of psychology, economics, and self-help literature in the past decade. Martin Seligman (2004), eminent psychology professor, self-help guru and one of the founders of the ‘positive psychology’ movement, argues that psychologists have focused for too long on the pathologies, dysfunctions, and disorders of the human behaviour. Instead, he claims, we should shift our focus to the creative and productive potential of individuals, and, ultimately, examine what makes people happy. Building on utilitarian thinking, Seligman implies that happiness can be thought of as the result of an equation between ‘pleasure and pain’ -- as philosopher Jeremy Bentham would have it. Importantly, Seligman’s critique is not restrained to merely measuring and analysing happiness, which he claims we can do primarily by observing individuals’ subjective self-evaluations of their quality of life. Instead, he goes one step further and argues that the ‘science of happiness’ can teach people how to have a pleasant, good, and meaningful life. We can all be happy, if we learn how to be healthy, positive, optimistic, satisfied, mindful, and resilient - to name a few techniques that are implied to maximize happiness.

Faced with the consequences of the global financial crisis, many governments were looking for ways to justify the massive bailout packages they were putting together, without having to radically challenge the system that made the bailout packages necessary in the first place. The science of happiness works to this end, in that it allows for a reading of the reasons of the crisis as stemming from individual behaviours, rather than systemic failures, which can be corrected with ‘nudges’ -- tricks to alter our behaviours to pursue more active and resilient lifestyles.

This is because, as Will Davies (2015) informs us, appealing to happiness becomes the best way of subjecting individuals into line with agendas that they have no say over. The Minister of State for Happiness in the UAE, the infamous ‘nudge unit’ in the UK, or the Gross National Happiness Index in Bhutan are all examples of how to measure and optimize ‘happiness, ‘satisfaction’, and ‘well-being’, in the hopes of increasing productivity and national competitiveness. Happiness - and its virtues of comfort, joy, pleasure, or hope - is instrumentalized for political and economic ends.

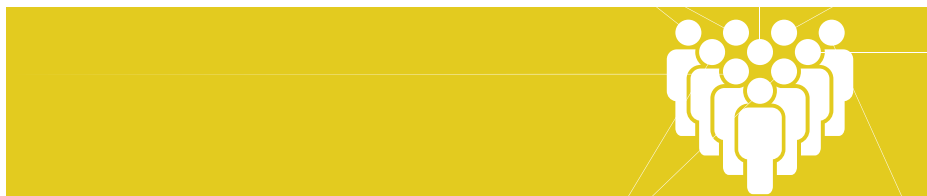


How can a country generate growth?

In Greece, we witness the slow, but steady, proliferation of these logics in governmental and public discourse, which are not reduced to the proclamations of the prime minister. Prominent figureheads that shape and transport the happiness discourse are former Chief Creative Officer of Greece Steve Vranakis (in office in 2019-2020 and now voluntary advisor to Mitsotakis), as well as Oxford Professor Stathis Kalyvas. Whereas the former drew from his business experience with Google to “reposition Greece” towards an affectively stimulating image and brand identity with pilot project such as ‘Grentry’ (attracting foreign investment in real estate and financial markets), “Work from Greece” (attracting ‘digital nomads’ to work remotely), or “GreeceFromHome” (a now defunct digital platform with Greek celebrities promoting Greece); the latter provides Mitsotakis happiness agenda with epistemic authority in a manner that is reminiscent of Anthony Giddens’ role for Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’ politics, or Nikiforos Diamandouros’ role for Kostas Simitis’ ‘Modernization’ project.

In his instructive book, aptly titled ‘The Greek Dream’, Kalyvas argues that “the future of the country lies in the production of happiness” (Kalyvas, 2020: 186). In his thinking, Greece’s “natural and historical environment” (Ibid.: 171) will produce “enormous added value” (Ibid.: 171), by fetishizing and fusing its raw beauty, philosophical tradition, antique culture, healthy cuisine, laid-back way of life, and crisis-chic aesthetics into authentic, yet consumable, experiences. “Access to such experiences,” Kalyvas recognizes, “is a valuable and therefore sought-after commodity, the demand for which is growing rapidly” (Ibid.: 172). For a country with little industry and growth sectors beyond tourism, Kalyvas’ vision of producing happiness is a cheap policy that requires little infrastructural intervention and costs. The task is mostly, as Steve Vranakis (2019, December 13) would have it, “to tell the story” and “tie it all up”, by shining “a light across all of these incredible things happening that will make Greece this destination beyond just vacationing.”

Albeit still in its infancy, Kalyvas vision is already being adopted by the Greek government (primeminister.gr, 2021), providing policymakers with blueprints and epistemic authority to produce and circulate positive imaginations of experience, to attract tourists, and desirable (‘lifestyle’) migrants, such as creative



professionals and digital nomads, but also Greek ‘brain-drainers’. Mitsotakis (2022, February 3) recently addressed the latter by tweeting that “Greece is a country with an amazing quality of life. If it can offer good work and good salaries, for someone who is Greek, the return is almost a one-way road. That is why we have given a series of tax incentives for the returns of young people from abroad.” There is a certain irony about Mitsotakis’ ‘one-way road’ in light of his government’s recent abolition of the eight-hour workday, at a time when Northern European countries are experimenting with 4-day work weeks and reduced hours, while maintaining pay levels. Importantly, his wooing of diaspora Greeks with tax breaks begs the question: how is his vision of happiness meant to relate to those already living in Greece?

Hierarchs of ‘Miserabilism’

For those “young people” of Greece that “have culture and kindness” and know “the parameters of life elsewhere” (Kalyvas, 2020: 172), Kalyvas foresees a servicing role vis-a-vis happiness: They are to create desirable experiences for visitors, by “translating the Greek peculiarity” (Ibid. 172). Somewhat apologetically, he adds that “human happiness is not so much a function of professional or financial success but rather of sociability, our constant contact with other people” (Ibid. 168). Much in line with positive psychology, happiness in this conception makes itself “useful as an apology for the crueler aspects of the market economy”, as Barbara Ehrenreich (2010: 9) informs us. Asked whether Greece needs to first produce happiness for “Greeks themselves”, before exporting it to others, Kalyvas remarks as follows:

I have the feeling that in our country there is a pervasive “miserabilism” that is reproduced by habit and routine and that ignores very important elements of our daily lives. This means that we too must rediscover our country and appreciate the unique quality of life it offers generously. Of course, this does not mean that we cannot improve the (many) aspects of Greek everyday life that are dysfunctional. But we will certainly not achieve this with the constant whining and misfortune that prevails in public discourse.



It is telling that this interview is placed prominently on the official website of the bicentenary of the Greek Revolution. Kalyvas' analysis is very much in line with promoters of positive thinking that, as Barbara Ehrenreich tells us emphasize how "to be disappointed, resentful, or downcast is to be a 'victim' and a 'whiner' (2010: 9).

In this sense, Kalyvas happiness vision serves the purpose of refashioning the relationship between the Greek state and its citizens. For those Greeks already living in Greece, there is an imperative to be happy, which places responsibility for one's life course firmly on the individual, rather than on structural constraints. We can either choose to be happy (and consequently successful) or choose to be miserable (and suffer the consequences). Importantly, Kalyvas 'miserabilism', is a way of discrediting radical modes of structural critique about Greece's state of affairs. Happiness arises not by challenging and overcoming the precarizing qualities of state-market-citizen relations, but by having a positive attitude in navigating them. Structural critique, here, is reduced to self-critique. Kalyvas, therefore, champions happiness, by pathologizing critique as miserabilism.

In a sense, the dichotomy between happiness and misery reinvigorates, but also radically modifies, Nikiforos Diamandouros' (1994) cultural dualism between an 'underdog' and a modern culture. While the former is seen as a static and introverted culture, rooted in Greece's Byzantine-Ottoman history, that favours clientelism and corruption, the latter is grounded in antiquity, and strives for liberal democracy and a free market economy. Here, modernizers claim that the 'underdog' culture did not allow the country to overcome its structural 'peculiarities' and thus catch up with the modernised West. Happiness overlaps with modernization, in that any form of critique against it is thwarted of as miserabilism by those who have always complained, will continue to do so, and cannot be happy. But happiness departs from modernization, in that it legitimates the needs for change by co-opting and recuperating the static and exotic: whereas modernization is marked by perpetual change in an effort to become something else, the vision of happiness is essentialist in nature - a "state of mind", as Mitsotakis (2020, June 13) recently proclaimed regarding Greek summer, a "feeling of happiness, tranquillity, of calmness, and nothing can ever take that away."



A New Capitalist Imaginary in the Making?

The precise meanings and purposes of the happiness agenda in Greece are still in the making, and much remains to be seen as the Mitsotakis government, and its intellectual supporters, further shape their vision. But there are a few preliminary conclusions we can draw together, and outline what is at stake. As the promise of the capitalist imaginary (the ability to compete for middle-class belonging and relative economic security, by getting a good education and working hard) has effectively collapsed for the majority of people living in Greece, its legitimacy is under threat. Capitalism, it appears, now operates without the liberal values of ‘fairness’ and ‘opportunity’ that once justified capitalism’s competition and inequality.

What we observe in Greece, therefore, may well be that the government’s happiness vision is an effort to substitute the previous promises of capitalism with a new imaginary of happiness. Here, the affective appeal of happiness is not only coercive (in that we need to be happy, as the government suggests), but also encouraging (in that we want to be happy). Happiness is not a means to another end, like competition and hard work are a means to the end of ‘making it’ to relative wealth, buying a house, a car, and a dog – like in the ‘American Dream’. Happiness does not require making such promises. In Kalyvas ‘Greek Dream’, happiness is inherently autotelic – an end in and of itself. Happiness in this conception camouflages the failures of the capitalist imaginary and substitutes it: redescribing the country by means of “sanitising, obscuring or alternatively emphasising chosen aspects of reality” (Johansson, 2012: 3613).

It remains to be seen whether and how the emerging crises, such as the war in Ukraine, or climate breakdown, will impact the configuration and proliferation of the political imaginary of happiness in Greece. But judging from the fact that this imaginary has been presented as a lesson from, and answer to, the financial crisis and the pandemic, happiness may arguably remain at the horizon of its intellectual supporters in the same way in which modernization was for modernizers in the past. What is at stake, then, is that the imaginary of happiness in Greece is not a Fata Morgana, but rather the fusion of fact with fiction in order to remake Greece: the orientation and functions of its institutions, ideas of tradition and modernity, how we define needs and desires, justice and equality, and, ultimately, our imagination of what is worth striving for.



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