

## Active happiness

Did you hear about the activist who was filled with such a sense of fun and excitement that everyone loved being around her and who, with her laugh and a zany manner, could win over critics? Well, you probably didn't. There aren't many like that.

Activists have a reputation for being a gloomy lot. They keep talking about how terrible things are in the world, and lecturing people about what needs to be done. Some activists are terribly serious, with a missionary zeal that would wipe a smile off anyone's face. Who wants to be around folk who are driven by feelings of anger, guilt and general pessimism about the fate of the earth?



Perhaps there's another model: activists who build happiness into their methods and goals.

To start, activists can be happy themselves. That might attract more participants to group actions. Happy people are more fun to be around and seem to keep energy levels high.

The point of activism is to make a better world — one where people will be happier. When possible, it makes sense to build the goal into the methods. That means being happy now, rather than postponing it until "after the revolution."

### Some facts about happiness

Surprisingly, activists haven't written or talked much about happiness. Neither have psychologists, who spend most of their time trying to make very unhappy people — such as those with depression — a bit less unhappy. But in recent years, there's been an upsurge of interest in positive psychology: making ordinary people happier. Martin Seligman's book *Authentic Happiness* is a key expression of this newer work. Here are a few key points.

Believe it or not, it seems that circumstances don't have much effect on happiness. Money has little effect (unless you're living in poverty) — as more commentators are recognising. Neither does age, health, education, ethnicity or climate.

We are quick to adjust to new circumstances and readjust our expectations. After a salary rise or moving into a big new house, happiness levels are soon about the same as before. Likewise, after a disabling injury, most folk soon return to about the same level of happiness.

People don't realise what makes them happy, according to research. For example, we falsely believe that more money will make us happier. And we don't spend much effort seeking out new friends, which *will* make us happier.

Seligman divides happiness into two types: pleasure, such as from eating an ice cream, and satisfaction, such as what you feel after helping someone. Satisfaction is a more reliable road to happiness.

The exciting part of the story of happiness is that it's possible to increase our average level of happiness by changing our ways of thinking and behaving, for example when we dispute our own negative beliefs, foster gratitude, and exercise our strengths and virtues.

So what he's saying is that happiness can be learned. No wonder some people get together in laughter clubs to help the process.

Although Seligman doesn't talk about social action, it's easy to make a connection between happiness and inspiring people to be socially active.

### Implications for social action

For promoting happiness, social action has a lot going for it. When positive changes are achieved, social action offers a sense of satisfaction. Participation in social action can give a sense of power —

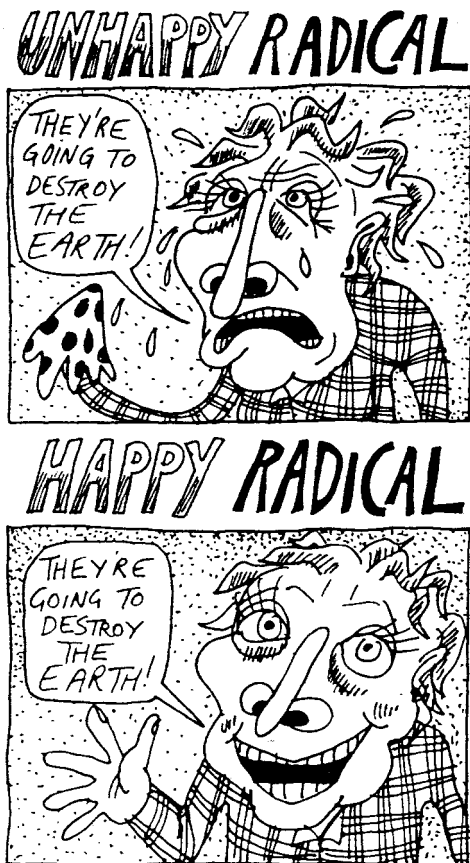
both individual and collective empowerment — and this can increase happiness.

A focus on happiness has some radical implications. The entire economic system is based on the false assumption that ever-increasing affluence will make people happier. If, instead, the economy was based around fostering things that actually make people happier, then there would be more attention devoted to building community, eliminating poverty, reducing materialism, making work more satisfying and helping people find meaning in their lives. It's quite subversive to make people better aware of what actually makes them happy!

A focus on happiness also has implications for activist practice. Rather than being a duty, activism becomes a joy in itself, something that people want to do. This would reduce burn-out and disillusionment.

Then there are the regular problems due to internal conflict. Humour can be a potent means to help deal with such problems.

Humour also can be effective in direct action. Norwegian peace activists wanted to publicise the plight of “total resisters” who were in jail for refusing conscription, including refusing alternative service. The activists broke *into* the jail holding the resisters, demanding to be imprisoned themselves. This action caused amusement around the country, put the issue of total resistance on the agenda and led to a new law.



By focussing on happiness — right now, not in the far distant future — we as activists can become more positive, less reactive to the agendas of others, and more innovative. Humour and absurdity can help break through conceptual barriers and move activism from tired old methods to engaging new ones.

To extend a famous saying from Gramsci, “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will ... and have a good time.”

#### Activist self-test

1. How many activist jokes and humorous slogans do you know? (Example: “Land rights for gay whales.”)
2. In your group, do you talk about happiness — ever?
3. What activities in your group give you the most satisfaction?
4. When was the last time your group spent time expressing gratitude to each other?
5. Name three times when everyone laughed until they cried.
6. Do you regularly celebrate the good things going on in the world?

#### References

- Jørgen Johansen, “Humor as a political force, or how to open the eyes of ordinary people in social democratic countries,” *Philosophy and Social Action*, July-December 1991, pp. 23-29: [http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/91\\_psa\\_Johansen.rtf](http://www.uow.edu.au/arts/sts/bmartin/pubs/91_psa_Johansen.rtf)
- Robert E Lane, *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
- Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

*Schweik Action Wollongong* is a collective fostering awareness of nonviolent alternatives to oppressive systems. The group is named after the fictional character Schweik (or Svejik), a soldier who created havoc in the Austrian army during World War I by pretending to be extremely stupid. Read the novel by Jaroslav Hasek, *The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War* (Penguin, 1974).

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This version July 2005. Cartoons taken from *Australian Society*, December 1984.