

THE STONE

A Revolution in Happiness

The founding fathers weren't talking about personal wellness.

By **Adriana Cavarero**

Ms. Cavarero is an Italian philosopher.

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Everybody wants to be happy. This claim goes as far back as Socrates, if not further, and in the more than two thousand years since he made it, it has acquired the rare status of something like a universal truth.

Today, evidence of its truth is all around us, in the booming self-help industry, the culture of mood-altering pharmaceutical drugs and even in higher education. A 2018 New York Times article reported that more than a thousand students enrolled in a course at Yale called “Psychology and the Good Life,” aimed at teaching students to lead happier, more satisfying lives. In 2014, an enormous online “Science of Happiness” course debuted at the University of California, Berkeley. It continues to thrive.

Books, articles and podcasts dedicated to happiness — especially on *how to be happy* — abound. Explicitly addressed to individuals rather than groups, they focus on personal happiness, to be enjoyed in the private sphere. Let each and every one be happy!

The topic of what Hannah Arendt called “public happiness” is, by contrast, largely ignored by those who think and write about contemporary culture. Apparently, politics and happiness don't go together any more. Collective happiness — as Socrates intended it, as a shared political experience — is largely out of the picture.

But I ask this question: Could we be happy together, not simply as the sum of individual happiness but because the very experience of being and acting together makes us happy? Arendt's answer is yes, and she has in mind a historical event that gave birth to the United States: the American Revolution.

Arendt's speculation on the issue is complex. Her main thesis is that the experience of public freedom, discovered by the ancient Greeks but then forgotten by a civilization that came to understand power as domination, had to wait until the 18th century and the American Revolution to resurface. Arendt claimed that the founding fathers were compelled to speak of public happiness precisely because they were experiencing public freedom — an experience of acting in concert that makes happiness, as she points out, “not an inner realm into which men escape at will from the pressure of the world,” but something inherent in the “public space or marketplace which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and become visible to all.”

This leaves a crucial trace, according to Arendt, in the famous “‘pursuit of happiness’ which the Declaration of Independence asserted to be one of the inalienable human rights.”

Arendt makes it clear, however, that the revolutionary spirit connected with the rediscovery of public happiness goes far beyond the American Revolution. That spirit becomes instead a precious legacy of the modern era, a sort of template for the exercise and pursuit of political freedom that Arendt witnessed and wrote about during her lifetime — in the participatory politics of the Polish Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg; in the rise of workers' councils; in the Hungarian Revolution, the Prague Spring and other movements. Arendt argued that the experience of public happiness can be found wherever people participate in the opening of a political space where freedom appears as a worldly reality.

Understanding Arendt's view should allow us to recognize the revolutionary spirit in current movements and political action — examples of radical democracy, which continually seek to extend the reach of freedom and equality in society. These could include the Women's March in January 2017, when millions of women gathered in Washington and hundreds of cities around the world, in energetic and joyful demonstrations of political resistance; the March for Our Lives in 2018 in Florida and elsewhere, where young people from diverse backgrounds gathered to use their right of free speech to protest gun violence; and in the many movements resisting the authoritarian, exclusionary rhetoric and policies spreading throughout Europe and the United States.

In a recently discovered lecture Arendt composed in the 1960s, included in the collection “Thinking Without a Bannister,” she wrote that, for those involved in the American Revolution, the “experience of being free coincided, or rather was intimately interwoven, with beginning something new ... and obviously, this mysterious human gift, the ability to start something new, has something to do with the fact that every one of us came into the world as a newcomer through birth. In other words, we can begin something because we *are* beginnings and hence beginners.” Because birth “is the ontological condition sine qua non of all politics,” Arendt claims, “the meaning of revolution is the actualization of one of the greatest and most elementary human potentialities, the unequalled experience of *being* free to make a new beginning.”

Public happiness is something that happens when we, in public, create something new. Yet we know too well that public happiness is not permanent and definite. In spite of this fragility, acting together gives a tangible experience of happiness unlike any that we can enjoy in private. Public happiness is discovered whenever and wherever people perform for the sake of freedom — and so taste the “birth” of their action.

At the time Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were experiencing public happiness in revolutionary America, Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher in England, was elaborating his famous axiom that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” is the measure of right and wrong that should guide governments. The idea has been adopted by various utilitarian and liberal thinkers who conceive of happiness as social well-being — the sum of individuals who achieve health, wealth and security — that the state is called on to produce, increase and protect.

Today, with too few exceptions, our politicians seem to be fixated on defining and regulating the amount of well-being individual people are supposed to desire. We need to rethink the almost obsessive concern with individual happiness that pervades our culture. As Americans celebrate the revolution that gave birth to their nation, we should turn toward rediscovering the joyful emotions of birth through collective action.

Yes, let us be happy — but publicly, politically, together.

Adriana Cavarero is a political philosopher, an honorary professor at the University of Verona in Italy and the author, most recently, of “Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude.”

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