

Radcliff, Benjamin. *The Political Economy of Human Happiness: How Voters' Choices Determine the Quality of Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 210 pp. \$29.99 (paper).

**Reviewed by:** Patrick Flavin, *Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA*  
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Perhaps the most relevant question a social scientist can ask is: What conditions lead to greater human happiness? While psychologists have investigated for some time what individual factors cause some people to be happier than others, Benjamin Radcliff's book is one of the first to examine how social, political, and economic factors can influence subjective well-being. The book begins with an insightful historical analysis of the development of liberal democracy, free market economic systems, the welfare state, and organized labor and discusses how each relates to human happiness both within the United States and internationally. He then skillfully lays out the competing logics for what remains one of the central political debates of our time: Do humans live happier lives under a relatively unregulated free market economy or under an economy where market forces are significantly restrained by government (i.e., democratic) intervention?

Most scholarship on this question ends with no resolution to the debate. What makes Radcliff's book so valuable is that the author sets out to empirically answer the question. This task is possible thanks to a burgeoning academic literature that attempts to scientifically measure subjective well-being through the use of survey data. Drawing on surveys that ask respondents how satisfying they find their lives, he gathers an impressive array of data on government intervention and economic regulation and finds robust evidence that people are happier when they live in countries or in states that regulate the market economy, attempt to insulate citizens from the difficulties that arise from unemployment and poverty, and treat workers less like interchangeable commodities and more like humans. To summarize the central empirical conclusion of the book: "big government" promotes greater human happiness.

Radcliff also uncovers evidence that labor unions affect human happiness. Analyzing data from advanced industrialized democracies, he finds that (after accounting for a host of alternative explanations) people who are members of a labor union are, on average, happier than those who are not members. Moreover, the boost in happiness that comes with being a union member occurs among all members of society—rich and poor, highly educated and those with little formal education. Perhaps most importantly, Radcliff also finds that labor unions have "spill-over" effects in that citizens who are not union members report higher levels of life satisfaction when they live in countries with higher union membership rates. In short, careful empirical analysis reveals that labor unions positively contribute to the well-being of everyone in society.

The unanswered questions Radcliff's analysis generates are just as intriguing as the questions Radcliff does answer. To provide just one example: What is the precise mechanism that explains why union members report higher levels of life satisfaction? Is it because of less psychological stress due to an assurance that they will be protected from arbitrarily losing their jobs? Is it because of the social benefits that arise from the

fraternal nature of union membership? For labor studies researchers, the book could serve as fruitful ground for questions that beg for further investigation. For labor studies educators, the book could serve as a constructive jumping-off point for student discussions about the societal effects of labor unions.

Amid declining union membership rates in the United States and ongoing attacks from ideological opponents, this book provides a useful resource for supporters of organized labor when making the case for why labor unions should continue to play an important role in the American economy. To go along with philosophical arguments about the value of labor unions and economic data that show union members earn higher wages and receive more generous benefits than workers who are not in unions, Radcliff's book adds fresh evidence in support of the proposition that humans are paid better, are treated more justly, and are ultimately more satisfied with their lives because of the work of labor unions.

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Wolff, Richard. *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2012. 201 pp. \$15.00 (paper).

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There really are two books in this slim volume. The first (Parts I and II, pp. 17-115) offers a firm and lucid analysis of the contradiction faced by both capitalist and socialist economies around the creation and distribution of surplus value. A labor educator trying to unpack Marxist economic principles in order that her students may better understand actually existing capitalism and socialism will relish the keen clarity and logic of Wolff's approach. However, the second section (Part III, pp. 155-85), ostensibly deriving its theoretical purpose from the first and intending to offer a cure for that contradiction, is much too dreamy for the task it takes on.

Even for those readers who share Wolff's sturdily grounded critique of surplus value extraction, the leap to a world where "the disappearances of slaves and masters and lords and serfs would now be replicated by the disappearance of capitalists and workers" by virtue of voluntarily established "workers' self-directed enterprises" or WSDEs (p. 12) is dizzying. Some readers may be exhilarated by his vision, but many will be unconvinced that the voluntary transition to a democratic, egalitarian, and environmentally judicious economy he posits is sufficiently grounded in historical experience or current political realities.

One such current political reality that Wolff *does* invoke seems inarguable: that ever-larger numbers of people are "seeking very different solutions to the economic and political morass engulfing the United States and beyond" (p. 12). Through detailing the collapse of capitalist and former socialist nations to meet the basic needs of their citizens for employment, security, social well-being, and equality, and the cor-

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