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Misery merchants

Janet Albrechtsen | August 13, 2008

IT'S called the happiness industry. But one gets the feeling that the aim is to make you feel unhappy. Very unhappy. After all, without unhappiness, there would be no need for a happiness industry and doyens of the trade such as Clive Hamilton would be out of a job. The author of books such as *Affluenza* and *The Growth Fetish* is touring Australia, sprinkling a little misery wherever he goes to promote his new book, *The Freedom Paradox*. Last week his publishers approached this newspaper to see if *The Australian* would like to interview Hamilton about his new book. The editor of *The Weekend Australian* wrote back, suggesting I interview Hamilton. No thanks, came the answer. Hamilton was adamant that it would need to be someone else, probably anyone else except me.

He said: "She may have an agenda." He's right. I do have an agenda to probe Hamilton's argument that we are so unhappy with our wealth that a new political and moral order is required to save us.

You don't need to interview Hamilton to do that, of course. His books have a repetitive theme, bemoaning the empty consumerism of modern society where people are depicted as drones, buying larger houses "filled with furnishings, appliances, carpets and curtains", a big car in the driveway and a "super barbecue" on the lawn as a symbol of our vacuous lives. "Is this what civilisation in Australia has come to?" he asks. Rhetorically, of course.

For happiness gurus, economic growth is bad: the higher wages delivered by a surging economy apparently make us unhappy. Now it's true that surveys of national wellbeing reveal that, past a certain point, more money does not equate with greater happiness. It seems that people adapt to their wealth, often taking for granted their new, more affluent lifestyles. But here's an idea. Try taking away higher wages and bigger houses from people. Perhaps then you will find unhappiness.

In any case, Hamilton's "woe is you" message is not supported by the evidence. Drawing on the Gallup World Poll and other surveys, research by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers earlier this year found that countries with the greatest economic growth recorded the highest levels of life satisfaction. In other words, it's no fun living in Tanzania.

Hamilton, however, is intent on telling people they don't know what's good for them. "We do not know what is in our interests," he proclaims like a new secular priest. We who aspire to bigger houses, a barbecue that can "roast, smoke, bake and grill" and other nice stuff are the victims of what he calls the "new form of coercion". We are settling for a "life of consumer conformity", unable to make free choices, buying possessions under the evil influence of corporations and spivvy advertisers.

"It is probably more accurate to say that the modern consumer goes to the market a needy mass of confused and neurotic urges looking for a salve," he writes in his latest lament.

The answer set out in *The Freedom Paradox* is neither new nor accurate.

It is to impose a far more conformist model on people, where we reject the market and material possessions and search out what Hamilton regards as the path to spiritual happiness.

His latest treatise reads like a long-winded version of John Lennon's song *Imagine*:

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world.

The predictable solution from happiness experts such as Hamilton is to forge a new, exhilarating philosophy that says a certain class of elites - in his case, of the book-writing kind - know better than you what will deliver you true happiness. In this modern utopia, Clive - the Great Leader - decrees that we down-shift to life in utilitarian-style communes, where working hours are limited, stiff tax laws ensure no one earns much more than others, where advertising is largely banned to avoid weak people being drawn into consumer hell, with plenty of free time to navel-gaze about what he calls the noumenon, living close to one's nature.

"Only by turning our backs on the market ... can we give expression to our true preferences," he concludes. That may be Clive's true preference, but where does he get off imagining that it is mine? Or yours?

At the heart of the happiness philosophy is a disdain for, and distrust of, people. Old-fashioned paternalism lies at the core of Hamilton's obsession with the "hedonic treadmill". He fails to imagine that people can simultaneously enjoy material possessions and pursue ambitious careers - living what he derides as "the pleasant life" - while also pursuing loving and caring relationships that give our lives meaning.

For Hamilton, "the meaningful life" is impossible without rejecting pleasure and pursuing his new politics based on "a need for a redistribution of outcomes".

Pare back the academic prose and it's clear that Hamilton is merely repackaging a distinctly old-style communism into new age, 21st-century language. You get the impression Hamilton would be happier if we were all living somewhere north of the 38th parallel.

That Hamilton is deeply unhappy living in Australia should come as no great surprise. Research confirms that those on the Left side of politics are far less happy than those who have conservative political beliefs. And I'm willing to wager my electronic multi-spark, six-burner barbecue on this: the further left one travels, the more unhappiness you find.

The happiness gap between conservatives and progressives, which has been around for decades, was researched most recently in June this year by Jaime Napier and John Jost from New York University. Adjusting for income, marital status and other demographic variables, they found that "right-wingers report greater happiness and satisfaction than left-wingers around the world" because those with a conservative belief in the power of a meritocracy and the ability of men and women to succeed in life treat inequality as inevitable rather than evil.

By contrast, Hamilton - the poster boy of unhappy left-wingers - is a walking, talking, book-writing explanation of why those on the Left are less happy. They have little faith in the ability of individuals to rise above their circumstances. For them, meritocracy is not the goal. The holy grail is equality of outcomes. Hence the existence of inequality is viewed as an inherent evil and a cause of deep dissatisfaction with society.

But, heck, you don't need research to conclude that, for so long as we live in a prosperous free market economy that allows individuals to decide and pursue for themselves what makes them happy, Hamilton will be unhappy. That is his right. If only he'd stick to his own personal journey for salvation and stop assuming the rest of us are just like him.

janeta@bigpond.net.au

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