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Constructing a governmental vision of happiness: Insights from Greece

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Philipp Katsinas 

The Open University, UK

Dimitris Soudias 

University of Kassel, Germany

Abstract

This paper analyzes how governments instrumentalize the concept of happiness for political ends. It argues that while happiness is primarily employed as an externally-oriented policy and discourse to attract tourists and desirable migrants, it is equally aimed at changing the expectations of the local population, including brain-drainers. We argue that in the case of Greece, happiness forms a governmental vision to brand the country anew after years of moralizing discourses of guilt, blame, and debt surrounding the financial crisis. First, we outline how the Greek government construes happiness as a commodified experience that the Greek population ought to generate for tourists and desirable migrants ('live like a local'), but importantly also for itself ('live like a tourist'). Second, this happiness vision seeks to both encourage the Greek population (in that we want to be happy), but also to discipline it (in that we need to be happy). Thirdly, to justify this vision, its key promoters conceive of a future that requires sanitizing the country's past and present, camouflage its unpleasant and contentious aspects, and re-narrate it in positive terms. Curiously, however, this is less about envisioning a better future after years of crisis, than about asking the Greek population to be satisfied with the status quo. This way, the happiness vision is an attempt to substitute the unfulfilled promises of the capitalist imaginary vis-à-vis opportunity, upward social mobility, and overabundance, where happiness arises not by overcoming the precarizing realities of inequality, but from having a positive attitude in navigating them.

Keywords

Happiness, place branding, live like a tourist, positive psychology, capitalist imaginary

Corresponding author:

Philipp Katsinas, School of Social Sciences & Global Studies, The Open University, Walton Hall, Kents Hill, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, UK.

Email: philipp.katsinas@open.ac.uk

Introduction

“The future of the country lies in the production of happiness.” (Kalyvas, 2020: 186)

The concept of happiness has been widely used by state actors at different scales as a place-branding strategy for attracting desirable populations, including tourists (Urry and Larsen, 2011), work tourists (Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021), and lifestyle migrants (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). The case of Greece is analytically fruitful in this regard, as happiness has been a frequent subject of recent governmental proclamations in the attempt to brand the country anew after years of austerity neoliberalism following the financial crisis. This rebranding strategy signals a departure from the moralizing discourses of guilt, blame, and debt in the 2010s (Boletsi, 2016), when Greece's “nation-brand faced regular and dramatic assault by international media” (Lagos et al., 2020: 288). Today, marketing campaigns are again focusing on “the combined feeling of freedom, happiness and contact with nature” (Marketing Greece, 2020) that Greece supposedly provides, capitalizing on its physical landscape, antique culture, healthy cuisine, allegedly laid-back way of life, and crisis-chic aesthetics, which are fused into consumable experiences.

Less focus has been put on the conceivable effects of such a strategy on local populations and how political elites construct, narrate, and justify happiness in governmental discourses as both a desirable and imperative rationality for disciplining populations. In this article, we address this gap, by exploring how key actors within and close to the Greek government construct and mobilize a discourse of happiness to appeal to the local population. We argue that what is novel in Greece is that happiness is not so much used to justify certain policies, but that it forms the very governmental vision for the country itself. Here, happiness is construed as a commodified experience that the Greek population ought to generate for tourists and desirable migrants, but importantly also for itself. In doing so, this vision arguably inverts the tourist gaze of ‘live like a local’ in order to appeal to the local population and brain-gainers through what we may call ‘live like a tourist’. Locals are to service (work) tourists, but they are rewarded with the stereotypes of a joyous Greek way of life. The Greek case therefore sheds novel light on the finding that branding strategies are means for constructing and reinforcing local identity and identification with a place (Kavaratzis, 2004), in that such strategies are also meant to manipulate the perceptions and expectations of local populations.

While there are numerous works that scrutinize the emancipatory qualities of happiness (e.g. Segal, 2018), our article is more concerned with the cooptation of happiness by governments for the purpose of disciplining their population. This is because, analogous to literature in positive psychology (e.g. Seligman, 2006), happiness in the Greek government's conception arises not by improving material living conditions or overcoming inequality, but primarily from having a positive attitude in navigating them. The happiness vision is therefore not so much a set of policies as mostly rhetoric that calls on the local population to be happy by changing its perception of and expectation towards the status quo: appreciate Greece, just like tourists do.

In effect, the happiness vision invisibilizes inequalities and the failures and contradictions of capitalism. This is because it is a governmental attempt to substitute the unfulfilled promises of the capitalist imaginary vis-à-vis opportunity, upward social mobility, and overabundance. By producing a future that is biased towards being ‘mindful’ of and embracing the status quo of austerity neoliberalism, the happiness vision does not require making any promises for a future with better living conditions. This vision seeks to absolve the government from its responsibilities to improve livelihoods. First, by devolving these responsibilities to the individual. Second, by imprinting onto the individual an appreciation of the present that diminishes expectation of a better future, thereby softening the blow of disappointment from hoping for improving living conditions.

To investigate our claims, we follow Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis for unpacking a text (textual analysis), interpreting it (process analysis), and looking at the wider conditions in which the discourses take place (social analysis). Our analysis revolves around the proclamations of three individuals our research identifies as being central for the discursive construction and proliferation of the happiness vision: (i) the Greek prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, as the key promoter of this vision; (ii) Steve Vranakis, a Greek-Canadian former Google executive, who was appointed as Greece's first Chief Creative Officer by Mitsotakis between 2019 and 2021, with the goal to rebrand the country; and (iii) Stathis Kalyvas, a professor of government at the University of Oxford, who has been providing the happiness vision with epistemic authority, acting as an advisor to Mitsotakis. Our data consists of a total of 36 sources, including government press releases, interviews, media articles, tweets, and public talks and discussions with these individuals. Data analysis consisted of two rounds (exploratory and focused) of software-assisted line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006). The purpose of exploratory coding is to open up all possible conceptual directions vis-à-vis *what* is being talked about; and to interpret *how* something is being talked about. We produced 41 codes pertaining to attributes of happiness, such as 'pride' or 'hope', and codes indicating how these can be achieved, e.g. by 'redefining the past', or 'writing on a blank page'. Interpreting how this link is being constructed discursively within the wider socio-historical conditions of Greece allowed us to render the discourse of happiness theoretical through the Science of Happiness (SoH) literature, particularly positive psychology, and their ideological consequences "in terms of their effects on power relations" (Fairclough, 2013: 9). In the focused coding phase, we clustered the most significant and frequent earlier codes to categorize our data and route our analytical direction (Charmaz, 2006: 46), thereby producing the structure of this article as follows:

First, we discuss the field of SoH in psychology and economics and its critiques, in conjunction with place-branding literature in geography. The purpose is to link how place-branding strategies pertaining to happiness are used by governments not only to attract tourists and desirable migrants, but also to discipline their own populations. Second, we sketch out the contours of the happiness vision in Greece in the face of austerity neoliberalism, and show how this vision is less about policy-intervention than about rhetoric: what key promoters refer to as 'proof points', which render the happiness vision meaningful. Third, we explore how the Greek government justifies this vision and renders it attainable: on the one hand, this occurs through a governmental rationality that encourages the Greek population (in that we want to be happy), but also disciplines it (in that we need to be happy). On the other hand, this occurs through manipulating temporality, where key promoters of the happiness vision conceive of a future that requires the sanitization of Greece's past and present, invisibilizes history's unpleasant and contentious aspects, and re-narrates it in positive terms.

Happiness from positive psychology to governmentality

Happiness has attracted vast interest in psychology, economics, and self-help literature in the past decades, leading to the formation of SoH (Diener, 2000). Martin Seligman (2004), self-help guru and one of the founders of the 'positive psychology' movement, argues that psychology has for too long been preoccupied with pathologies, dysfunctions, and disorders of human behavior. Instead, psychologists should shift their focus to the creative and productive potential of individuals (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and, ultimately, to the analysis of what makes people happy (Seligman, 2006).

Building on the utilitarian thinking of Jeremy Bentham, Seligman and his peers imply that happiness can be understood as the result of a positivist equation between pleasure and pain (Schueller and Seligman, 2010). By investigating individuals' self-evaluations of their quality of life, SoH has a twofold agenda: first, it endeavors the abstractionist ontological task of rendering the

subjective, positioned, and metaphysical questions around happiness as objective, measurable, and clinically verifiable (Seligman et al., 2005). Second, SoH provides normative guidance on *how to be* happy and *how to maximize* happiness (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2007). We can all have a pleasant, good, and meaningful life (Seligman et al., 2004), if we learn how to be healthy, positive, optimistic, satisfied, mindful, and resilient (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

These behaviorist insights, and their inherently efficiency-maximizing logic, have led to the discovery of happiness and ‘positive’ externalities in the field of economics (Kahneman and Deaton, 2010; Rayo and Becker, 2007). Economists have attended to the utility of happiness for economic growth (Frey and Stutzer, 2002), claiming that a positive perception of competition increases life satisfaction (Grasseni and Origo, 2018) and that entrepreneurship has positive effects on happiness (Benz and Frey, 2008), which—rather tautologically—induces more entrepreneurial activities (Naudé et al., 2014) and increases productivity (Oswald et al., 2015).

Economic geographers have focused on the role that space, location and the built environment play in influencing individual happiness: Leyden et al. (2011) argue that in addition to standard predictors of happiness (health, wealth, social connectedness), the design of cities, including access to cultural and leisure amenities, foster happiness. Frey (2008) claims that the availability and consumption of arts and culture has a positive relationship with happiness, privileging cities with an extensive offer. Florida et al. (2013) suggest that, in addition to higher incomes, human capital and post-industrial structures and values play an important role in individual happiness. They identify these factors as higher levels of education, creative class occupational structures, and ‘tolerance,’ reflecting Florida’s previous work on creative cities (Florida, 2004).

Since the 2008 financial crisis, policy-makers have grown increasingly interested in SoH for governing their citizens. This is because 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 these packages necessary (Mirowski, 2014). SoH works to this end, because it allows for a reading of the reasons of economic crises as stemming from individual behaviors, rather than systemic failures, requiring behavioral changes (e.g. Gärling et al., 2009). In this light, scholars have introduced frameworks for national happiness indexes and assisted governments with the establishment of ‘nudge units’ that encourage governments to alter, or trick, the behaviors of those they govern towards more active, resilient, and efficient lifestyles (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). The focus of policy-makers has shifted towards e.g. offering positive encouragement for people to pursue entrepreneurial activities (Zhao et al., 2020), and to monitor their happiness to model health policy (Graham, 2008). The Minister of State for Happiness in the UAE, the ‘nudge unit’ in the UK, or the Gross National Happiness Index in Bhutan are all governmental attempts to measure and optimize happiness, in the hopes of increasing productivity and national competitiveness.

Despite the fact that SoH links happiness to economic productivity, relatively little is known about how governments mobilize happiness for their economic growth discourses vis-à-vis attracting desirable populations. Turning to the happiness-adjacent field of creativity is analytically insightful here, because governments have touched upon the appeal of ‘creative minds’ in place-branding discourses. Florida (2004) argues that creativity has become the most important factor of economic growth and production, and that the assemblage of creative individuals in a specific locality constitutes a competitive advantage for drawing high-technological and specialized activities to a region. Therefore, cities, regions and countries ought to compete for the attraction of individuals who comprise the creative class. Florida’s ideas have been successful in influencing the economic strategies of places around the world and have been interpreted by policymakers as practical guides (Peck, 2007). As we will show, analogous to the creative class blueprint, governments construct happiness as a mobile concept which travels, mutates, and is adapted to different socio-spatial contexts (McCann, 2011). It is used as an “intellectual technology” (Ponzini and Rossi, 2010) aiming at justifying certain agendas.

In addition to being entrepreneurial development policies, place-branding strategies have been conceptualized as constructing and reinforcing local identity and identification with a place (Kavaratzis, 2004), being aimed primarily at domestic political legitimization (Desatova, 2018). Scholars have criticized SoH on this ground, as it instrumentalizes happiness for political ends. This is because appealing to happiness becomes the best way of subjecting individuals into line with agendas that they have no say over (Davies, 2015). Here, the governmental focus on measuring happiness reinforces the authority of indicators representing inner feelings, while rendering that which cannot be measured and maximized as invisible and (economically) invaluable. From the perspective of Foucaultian governmentality (2008), the measurement of happiness constructs a quantified reality, which can then be controlled. This has led scholars to underline SoH's entrenchment within neoliberal rationalities vis-à-vis self-responsibility and self-optimization (De La Fabián and Stecher, 2017). For Sam Binkley (2014), happiness is reduced to an economic asset "cultivated by a solitary, psychologically truncated subject, for whom emotional self-manipulation is a simple technique." Happiness functions without an intersectionally positioned moral referent, and is reduced to "a biological potential of the individual that makes no recourse to psychic interiority, biography, or social relationships" (p. 2). In doing so, SoH reproduces the Cartesian dualism between a rational mind, which needs to control an unruly body, assuming that happiness emanates from 'within us', rather than from relations between us. Promoters of SoH demonize unhappiness and negative judgment (Ehrenreich, 2009), thus reducing structural critique to self-critique, thereby strengthening neoliberal rationalities. This positivity bias has given rise to what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism', signifying a yearning and desire for a way of life, such as the American Dream, that betrays the very promises and attachments that are brought to them. As structural constraints are rendered virtually absent in SoH, individuals are to take full responsibility for happiness in their life-course (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). While scholars have attended to how individuals internalize the rationalities of SoH to govern themselves as neoliberal beings, less is known about the specific ways in which political elites construct, narrate, and justify happiness as a governmental vision for not only attracting tourists and desirable migrants, but also for encouraging and disciplining their populace. In what follows, we address these gaps by attending to the governmental discourses of happiness in Greece.

The contours of the happiness vision

In the 2010s, Greece was constructed as the epicenter and main culprit of the crisis in the Eurozone (Blyth, 2013), which discursively, materially and politically implicated the country. In the blame game that ensued, narratives of the Greek state's self-imposed sovereign debt crisis through failed government policies, the structural deficiencies and incapacities of its political system, and the intellectual and moral failures of its population, became dominant in public discourse (Boletsi, 2016). These narratives justified the implementation of austerity measures, including extensive cuts in welfare, pensions and public services, and the large-scale privatization of public assets. The resulting socioeconomic impacts, such as mass impoverishment and unemployment, disproportionately hit women and migrants (Daskalaki et al., 2021), and contributed to brain drain through the emigration of over half a million Greek citizens, including highly skilled young professionals (Pratsinakis, 2022). The growing resentment and pauperization of a significant part of the population was partially captured by nationalist and racist sentiments, but mainly by the rising influence of anti-neoliberal and anti-austerity ideas tied with hope for a better future. The anti-austerity party Syriza captured state power, but the Greek state's creditors defeated Syriza's strategy of confrontation, resulting in the continuous dominance of neoliberalisation as the only way to Greece's belonging to the Eurozone and economic growth. Austerity neoliberalism continues to inform policy-making in Greece to this day under the New Democracy party.

As a result, during the ‘Greek crisis’ perceptions of subjective happiness and well-being declined drastically (Ballas and Thanis, 2022), while the country’s ‘nation brand’ received a significant blow (Lagos et al., 2020). Historically, the Greek population had internalized the tourist gaze at happiness as a signifier of Greekness (Tzanelli and Korstanje, 2016). Here, Greeks embodied and performed a sociality marked by informal socialization, the value of the family, but also picturesque nature and authentic culture, with reference to antiquity and modernity. The economic crisis challenged the stereotypical “pop and even ‘kitsch’ imaginaries of happiness” (ibid.: 299) that had been formed for tourists, but also for Greeks, by the media and tourism industries for decades.

When Greece nominally exited the troika’s custody with the completion of the third economic adjustment programme in 2019, the newly elected conservative government of Kyriakos Mitsotakis set off to rebrand and reposition Greece. This endeavor was built on the rebooting of Greece’s tourism branding strategy, relying on tropes from Greek mythology, like ‘live your myth in Greece’ (González-Vaquerizo, 2017) and the commodification of stereotypes surrounding ‘Greek summer’ (Belavilas, 2017), with the concept of happiness being center stage. Reopening to tourists in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mitsotakis announced the contours of the government’s happiness vision at a press conference on the picturesque island of Santorini:

The Greek summer ... is a state of mind ... a feeling of happiness, of freedom, of tranquility and nothing can take that ever away. And these feelings ... 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)

Although the vision of happiness heavily focuses on tourism-led growth, it equally addresses those people who already live in Greece and the brain-drainers who left the country during the crisis. Mitsotakis made this clear a few months later, when he argued:

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)

For Mitsotakis, Stathis Kalyvas serves as an informal advisor and provides the happiness vision with epistemic authority. In Kalyvas’ writings (2017), happiness “is a valuable and therefore sought-after commodity, the demand for which is growing rapidly.” Greece’s “natural and historical environment” will produce “enormous added value” (Kalyvas, 2020: 171), by capitalizing and fusing the country’s philosophical tradition, antique culture, healthy cuisine, laid-back way of life, overall raw beauty and climate, and crisis-chic aesthetics into a singular vision for the country.

Steve Vranakis, in turn, was tasked by Mitsotakis with delivering the branding to the country’s vision, heading a team of experts in psychology, economics, and history, amongst others (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Vranakis advocated for a positive country vision that radically departs from the crisis image of failure, guilt and shame, because change is “happening right now, and it remains largely unacknowledged, because we’re still in survival mode” (Vranakis, 2019b). On the one hand, Vranakis’ strategy is to attract from abroad individuals “of higher value” who “share our values” and want to “leave a positive impact” (as cited in Tsiros, 2020). On the other hand, “the goal is to make something that people [in Greece] will get behind, something that will boost morale, confidence and the general mood. It will show people that things are moving, and that will have an immediate effect on the economy” (ibid.). To do so, what is required is “to underpin that big promise of what Greece is going to be ... with a series of what we call proof points” (Vranakis, 2020b).

This strategy has included websites to attract digital nomads to work remotely like ‘Work from Greece’ and ‘Work from Crete.’ These work tourists are lured with stereotypical views about climate, way of life, cost of living, food, and internet speed. Brain-drainers are encouraged to return to the country through tax incentives; specifically a 50% exemption from income tax for 7 years. For those already living in Greece, the government has created incentives for young individuals and couples to stay put. These remainers are lured with economic growth and wage increases relative to the crisis years, housing rental benefits and subsidies for mortgages, in addition to the benefits of staying in the country. Overall, targeting those abroad does not require considerable investment by the government and is not accompanied by any further measures. Meanwhile, policies for locals, which are based on one-off financing programs until the exhaustion of limited funds, are not adequate to deal with ongoing polycrises around housing and work (Siatitsa, 2024).

In sum, the happiness vision can be viewed as a low-cost governmental agenda because it is mostly based on rhetoric, rather than meaningful policy-intervention, and those material and social “proof points” that already exist in Greece: nature, the climate, culture, and a particular kind of sociality, with little need for investing in infrastructures or, as we will show in the next section, promising a future with better living conditions.

Happiness between desire and discipline

For the government’s supporters, what is novel about the happiness vision is that it “goes beyond the familiar norms of politics. It is not an arbitrary invention. This is a vision that can well become a driving force, a key strategic goal. After all, the great role of politics as well as its justification is the planning and prediction of the future” (Pantagias, 2021). Indeed, albeit in different ways, conceptualizations such as ‘vision’ (Merleau-Ponty et al., 2007), ‘imaginary’ (Castoriadis, 2005), or collective ‘phantasy’ and ‘dream’ (Murphy, 2017) point precisely to the epistemic entanglements between the affective, the cognitive-imaginative, and the discursive that render the Greek government’s happiness agenda singular, meaningful, resonant, and seductive. To this regard, Vranakis (2019b) remarks that “you tell the story and you help create a narrative for the people.”

What is novel in the case of Greece is that happiness is not used merely to justify certain policies, but that it (a) forms the very governmental vision of the country’s future itself, and (b) addresses desirable visitors and migrants, and those living in Greece alike. These claims are grounded in the fact that Mitsotakis (2021) himself assumes that “a large part of the comparative advantage of the country, in the third century of its life, is the ability to offer *Greeks and foreigners* unique experiences” (emphasis added). To render this vision intelligible and justified, and to subject those living in Greece to this new vision, happiness is addressed in two mutually constitutive ways: firstly as a governmental rationality, and secondly in terms of its temporality.

Firstly, the governmental vision appeals to the encouraging and coercive capacities of happiness. Regarding the former, happiness economist and UK government advisor Richard Layard (2005: 113) remarks, “happiness is that ultimate goal because, unlike all other goals, it is self-evidently good. If we are asked why happiness matters, we can give no further, external reason. It just obviously does matter.” This commonsensical understanding of happiness has allowed governments to justify a broad range of actions (De Prycker, 2010). To this regard, Kalyvas (2017) tellingly proclaims that “in the current context of misery and pessimism, it sounds strange, naive or even crazy: inevitably, however, the Greece of the near future will prosper by exporting happiness.” Arguably, the happiness vision in Greece can be framed as an attempt to mold a new governmental rationality that structures “the potential field of action of others” (Foucault as cited in Dardot and Laval, 2017: 169) by *acting at a distance*: “not through the threat of violence or constraint, but by way of the persuasion inherent in its truths, the anxieties stimulated by its norms, and the attraction exercised by the images of life and self ...” (Rose, 1999: 10). The encouraging and coercive

capacities of happiness are promoted through the assertion that Greece provides happiness for people. “The future of the country lies in the production of happiness,” Kalyvas (2020: 186) states in his book ‘The Greek Dream’. And as Mitsotakis (2021) adds, “the comparative advantage of the country is not only the natural beauty, the biodiversity and its clean beaches. It is also the so-called man-made environment. Its people, with whom everyone has a good time.” The happiness vision capitalizes on the fact that Greeks learnt to partly understand themselves and their own authenticity through the tourist gaze, in that they reproduce the stereotypes of dancing, drinking, singing, and laid-back sociality that is expected of them (Tzanelli and Korstanje, 2016). Such embodied performances remain central for understandings of happiness in Greece. Yet because they are enacted to stage authenticity towards visitors, they also indicate the coercive capacities of happiness. As Kalyvas (2020: 172) argues, those “young people” in Greece that “have culture and kindness” and know “the parameters of life elsewhere” are to take on a servicing role: they are to create desirable experiences for visitors, by “translating the Greek peculiarity.” Indeed, tourists and work tourists aspire to ‘live like a local’ (Füller and Michel, 2014), seek “a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life” (Urry and Larsen, 2011: 3) and choose places because of the pleasure and happiness they are expected to provide. Digital nomads often relocate to places that offer natural and cultural endowments, appropriate infrastructure, and the presence of like-minded people (Woldoff and Litchfield, 2021).

Producing happiness and servicing visitors is to provide a competitive advantage to Greece. But servicing visitors is also presented as conducive to happiness (Kalyvas, 2020: 171-172). Somewhat apologetically, Kalyvas (2020: 168) remarks that “human happiness is not so much a function of professional or financial success but rather of sociality, our constant contact with other people.” Greeks can be and ought to be happy, because they live in an environment and in social relations that are sought by visitors. Material living conditions in Greece are being acknowledged, but play a secondary role. For Mitsotakis,

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. (Mitsotakis, 2022a)

This statement remains mostly rhetoric without meaningful economic reforms that would support this claim. While the vision of happiness addresses tourists and work tourists with the allure of ‘living like a local’, in practice, it appeals to those already living in Greece with its inversion: to ‘live like a tourist’.

Secondly, in turn, the governmental vision addresses the temporality of happiness. Positive psychologists claim that nurturing positive emotions about the past (satisfaction, pride, fulfillment), the present (joy, pleasure, mindfulness) and the future (faith, optimism, trust, confidence) builds efficiency, productivity, creativity and “resilience by ‘undoing’ the effects of negative emotions” (Seligman and Rashid 2018: 18). Steve Vranakis, for example, stresses the importance of building “confidence” for the future, which “will happen after we start to feel a certain way about ourselves and the things that we are capable of doing” (as cited in Krinis, 2019). Analogous to Viktor Turner’s (1986: 36) work, “it is structurally unimportant whether the past is ‘real’ or ‘mythical,’ ‘moral’ or ‘amoral.’” What matters is the shaping of a compelling narrative that provides meaningful guidelines for the future. Arguably, achieving a future of happiness requires providing ‘proof points’ through a radical retelling of Greece’s past and present in more positive terms.

The past: From disaster to triumph

Regarding the past, Stathis Kalyvas took the bicentennial anniversary of Greek independence as an opportunity to proclaim that

We must tell our story to ourselves in new terms that meet both the progress of historical research and the challenges of our time. In the process we will automatically leave aside some myths that used to play an important role but no longer have the power they had If we do, we will find that we can approach our past in a much simpler and more meaningful way. (Kalyvas, 2021a)

In a revisionist and latently utilitarian fashion, Kalyvas assumes the need to sanitize and modernize history through those aspects of Greece's past that are *useful* for addressing current problems. As shown elsewhere in his writings, Kalyvas' claim is based on an alleged "shift of the historical model that has taken place over the last 15 years, from a dominant narrative ... that wanted Greece to be permanently backward and dependent, towards an interpretation that recognizes the significant successes in the historical course of the country" (Kalyvas, 2021b). Mobilizing the orientalist marker of 'backwardness' arguably seeks to justify a retelling of history that seemingly frees the country from the negative shackles of the past. Overall, for Kalyvas "the history of Greece is a history of disasters and triumphs," yet "the disasters never come to the point of destroying the legacy of previous triumphs. Historically, Greece signifies a path of success despite disasters" (as cited in Velidakis, 2021). This positive retelling of history resonates with the Benthamite assumptions in motivation research that claim "yes, generally speaking, success brings pleasure and failure brings pain" (Higgins, 2011: 301). Reducing history to usefulness and the Manichean binary of disasters and triumphs arguably serves to invisibilize the complexities and contradictions of the past and simplify its conflicts. The emphasis on success is to instill those living in Greece with pride for the past, mindfulness about its present, and optimism for the future. To naturalize this link, Kalyvas expounds an exceptionalist reading of Greek culture, claiming that what differentiates the people of Greece from others is the

'virtue of Odysseus', because it is based on elements such as intelligence (*ενοψία*), extroversion, the propensity for adventure and risk, together with a significant dose of adventurism (*τυχοδιωκτισμός*). Its essence is success, despite the lack of power. The narrative of a human hero (and therefore a collective as it is the nation) with special intelligence, who eventually manages to achieve much more than the means at his disposal allowed, I find much more useful than the narrative of the wronged, betrayed and defeated hero. (Kalyvas, 2020: 22)

In this statement, Kalyvas mythologizes the people of Greece as historically entrepreneurial beings. Here, we can observe both the Kirznerian (1973: 40) conception of the entrepreneur who "starts out without any means whatsoever," and the Schumpeterian (2004) figure of the heroic and creative individual with natural talents and skills. As mentioned earlier, it is not important whether this retelling of Greek history is factually 'true', but whether it is 'useful' for re-signifying the past through achievement and pride—despite immense difficulty.

The present: A blank page

The positive resignification of the past allows for rereading the present. Kalyvas (2020: 17) claims that if "we consider [the present] more or less to be trash, as it happened during the crisis, we will easily conclude that we have failed in relation to the objectives and the expectations of our ancestors" The task is, as Steve Vranakis remarks, to "rebrand" and "reposition" today's Greece, so as to

be able to “move the nation forward” (as cited in [Tsiros, 2020](#)). In an address at the Delphi Economic Forum, he argued “I don’t want to sound like a marketing guy but we talked a lot about taking something that is perceived as a negative, which is rock-bottom, and turning it into a virtue. And turning it into a virtue which I call the blank page” ([Vranakis, 2019a](#)). Further contextualizing this metaphor at a large marketing event, [Vranakis \(2020a\)](#) explains the

conversation that I had with the prime minister in July [2019] when I made the decision to come [to Greece]. Which is ... we really need to think about this blank sheet of paper that we’ve been handed. And that’s the way I look at it. And I’m not trying to be romantic but I think you can either say we’ve reached rock-bottom, or we have a blank sheet of paper. And if you have a blank sheet of paper, you can write things the way you want to write them.

In signifying the present not as the nadir, but as an opportunity for the future, Vranakis’ proclamation overlaps with positive psychologists’ conceptualizations of ‘thriving’ and ‘positive development’ ([Lerner et al., 2010](#)), which advocate for “turning the negative into positive, not as a denial but in the spirit of improvement.” Here, “the end objective is promoting the optimal functioning of individuals and societies ...” ([Freire and Caldwell, 2013: 222](#)). Importantly, while Vranakis’ metaphorical use of ‘blank page’ is to promote the possibility of a fresh start based on individual agency, it effectively invisibilizes the (historical) structural inequalities which have formed the precarious qualities of the present in the form of austerity neoliberalism. Analogous to [Duschinsky’s \(2012\)](#) work on the ‘blank slate’ and human nature, we claim that it is not so much that a blank page has been ‘handed’ to proponents of the happiness vision. Instead the blank page metaphor much more adequately signifies the erasure of text, so as to be able to reinscribe it. On the one hand, Vranakis’ statement overlaps with the Foucaultian ([1977](#)) assumption that governmentality is marked by how it ‘inscribes’ or ‘imprints’ its disciplining and encouraging governmental discourses onto the subject’s body. On the other hand, Vranakis’ use of the metaphor overlaps with self-help literature about happiness that assumes that ‘you can write your own life’ ([Myles, 2016](#)). In this way, the blank page camouflages the intersectional inequalities emanating from governmental subjectification and the precarizing effects of crises, in that the possibility of a better future is presented solely as the result of individual agency and willpower, rather than structural constraints.

The Future: Embracing the Status Quo

Having resignified the Greek past as a story of triumph despite difficulties, and the present as a moment of unconstrained opportunity, the happiness vision mobilizes these resignifications to narrate a story of hope for the country’s future. In the words of Vranakis,

We need optimism, we need confidence ... I don’t want to sound arrogant but I’ve always been ... rooting for the challenger, and we are in the challenger position right now. There are many people who’ve written us off ... but we have the opportunity to ... come out swinging ... we have that opportunity, if we believe in what we’re capable of doing We’ve been doing it for thousands of years, we’re doing it right now and just a little change in how we think about things ... will have a fundamental effect on this country, this economy, the perceptions of how we’re thought of globally. All eyes are on us right now. ([Vranakis, 2019a](#))

Literature in brand management informs us that using the heroic figure of the underdog in brand storytelling is an effective way to engender sympathetic emotional reactions in consumers and a sense of attachment, by highlighting the underdog’s “competitive disadvantage,” but also its

“indomitable will, determination, hopes and dreams of defeating the odds” (Delgado-Ballester, 2021: 627). In doing so, the happiness vision tries to appeal to the Greek population, particularly within what orientalist accounts have dubbed the ‘underdog culture’ (Diamandouros, 1994): those segments of the Greek population that allegedly view themselves as the victims of a struggle between the powerless and the powerful. By demanding optimism and confidence, and centering the underdog story around a ‘change in thinking,’ the happiness vision effectively devolves the responsibility for the success of the country’s future onto the individual. Indeed, the notion that you can at will ‘change your thoughts and change your world’ (Peale as cited in Hasson, 2017: 185) or ‘start thinking happy thoughts and start being happy’ (Byrne as cited in Binkley, 2014: 127) is at the heart of self-help literature on positive thinking, which assumes that happiness emanates not from critiquing and challenging the precarizing realities of inequality, but from having a positive attitude in navigating them. As Mitsotakis (2022b) poignantly remarks, “I think we need to ... look again at the glass as half full. The country is changing, I believe for the better. There is again a wind of optimism and self-confidence which blows through our country.”

In effect, the happiness vision for the future is about a change in perception and expectation; one that, curiously, embraces what is positive about the present. Indeed, positive psychology methodologies such as the ‘satisfaction with life scale’ (Diener et al., 1985) and the technique of ‘mindfulness’ are biased towards appreciating the status quo. Mindfulness means “paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994: 4). Savoring the moment serves to justify the absence of improving material conditions. The advocates of the happiness vision camouflage this absence as anti-consumerist critique:

... continuous and ever-increasing consumption is ultimately a dead-end. Once one secures a good basic standard of living, one can become happier only through different experiences, with the main element here being the emphasis on human relationships and not on the accumulation of material goods. There are a number of studies that show that depression is mainly fuelled by loneliness and the poor quality of human relationships. In this area, then, we have a great advantage, the ability to create the conditions for more spontaneous human contact, and this allows people to get closer to the sense of happiness. (Kalyvas 2021a)

On the one hand, Kalyvas’ statement overlaps with SoH research that claims that “strongly desiring large amounts of money appears likely to hinder our chances for high [subjective well-being]” (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002: 161). On the other hand, connecting happiness to anti-consumerism is to encourage a frugal, austere, and ascetic lifestyle that is seductive precisely because it mimics an ethical and critical stance towards capitalist exploitation. This ‘lifestyle minimalist’ connection (Meissner, 2019) is a source of identity that has a twofold effect: it absolves the government from its responsibility (from betraying previous promises of the capitalist imaginary) and it diminishes the expectations of individuals (thus lessening the disappointment from ever hoping for improving living conditions). This reiterates the bias of SoH towards accepting the status quo of the present, in that happiness is assumed to require “realistic levels of expectations” (Diener, 2000: 41), adaptations to new circumstances and a change of goals. The relativization of expectations and the change of perspective is also visible in the Greek prime minister’s claims, who argues Greece

can offer an exceptional quality of life in a world where these issues are becoming increasingly important. Where the goal is no longer just how much money I will make, this is very important, but it is not the only motivation, to make more and more money, but to look at our lives ... a little more holistically Greece can offer good jobs, good earnings, family, friends and an excellent environment where one

can work, but also live. And I think that is very important for young people who have left and are willing to come back. (Mitsotakis, 2022b)

In disengaging happiness from income and appealing to sociality vis-à-vis family, friends, and human relations, both Kalyvas' and Mitsotakis' statements construct and justify a trade-off between sociality and decent work. This trade-off is arguably intended to relativize the quality of working conditions as just one aspect in an enumeration of factors constituting happiness, and to diminish the fact that Greece is significantly below average in wage levels and job security, as well as overall life satisfaction, as indicated in the OECD's (2022) better life index. By appealing to factors other than money, and actively challenging monetary incentives, these statements invisibilize the inequalities inherent to income disparities, while also furthering the notions of shame, deprivation and fear that are associated with talking about money (Bohls, 2017). In this conception, happiness makes itself "useful as an apology for the crueler aspects of the market economy" (Ehrenreich, 2009: 9).

Critique as Miserabilism

In effect, the coercive and encouraging qualities of the happiness vision serve to foreclose any form of critique from the outset. As Kalyvas (2021a) poignantly proclaims in an interview:

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.

This interview is placed prominently on the official website of the bicentenary of the Greek Revolution, thereby highlighting the discursive importance of Kalyvas. His analysis is very much in line with promoters of positive thinking that, as Barbara Ehrenreich (2009: 9) tells us, emphasize how "to be disappointed, resentful, or downcast is to be a 'victim' and a 'whiner,'" and feminist literature that assumes anger about structural forms of (gender) inequality is often signified as "getting in the way of the happiness of others, because of her own unhappiness" (Ahmed, 2017: 37). For Kalyvas, "the psychology of those people" who critique the vision of happiness is pathological: "possibly miserable and unhappy themselves, how can they not reproduce a permanent misery for everything? It is therefore not at all paradoxical that words like success, excellence or happiness irritate them – almost cause them mental anguish ... societies want to look ahead and hope for the best, not swim in permanent and dead-end misery" (Kalyvas, 2021b). Arguably, miserabilism serves a disciplining function in that it banalizes suffering and undercuts precisely those 'negative' levers, such as unhappiness, anger or anguish, that can lead to political contestation and the search for alternatives to the status quo. By reducing happiness to individual attitude and by pathologizing critique as miserabilism, the advocates of the happiness vision seek to enclose any understanding of happiness that departs from their own; one that may be rooted in solidarity, equality, collective responsibility and mutual care, precisely because this would require them to take responsibility for the country's future and, potentially, the vision's failure. Speaking about the country narrative, Vranakis remarks "I'm hoping it will be very well received. On the other hand, as a creative person who takes every job personally, I like to joke and say that the day after we present it, I'll leave the country!" (as cited in Tsiros, 2020).

Conclusion

In this paper we argued that happiness is instrumentalized in place-branding discourses to refashion state-citizen relationships. Overlapping with positive psychology, and in view of the moralizing discourses of guilt, blame, and debt surrounding the crisis of the 2010s, the governmental discourse of happiness can be seen as an attempt to substitute the unfulfilled promises of the capitalist imaginary vis-à-vis opportunity, upward social mobility, and overabundance, with a new vision for the future. This happiness vision does not require making any such promises, as it is inherently autotelic—an end in and of itself, serving to camouflage the failures and immanent contradictions of the capitalist imaginary.

The relevance and application of the happiness vision is beyond the Greek case, especially for economies specializing in tourism with limited employment perspectives outside the tourism sector. While affluent migrants, work migrants and tourists are attracted with the promise of happiness and desirable experiences, for those already living in a country, there is an *imperative* to be happy, which places responsibility for one's life course firmly on the individual, rather than on structural constraints. People can either choose to be happy (and consequently successful) or choose to be miserable (and suffer the consequences). 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 is altogether dismissed as miserabilism and if critique is to occur at all, it can only arise as self-critique.

The inversion of the logic of branding campaigns of 'living like a local' in order to target the local population with the stimulus to 'live like a tourist' indicates how such campaigns exploit and proliferate embodied understandings of happiness. Happiness, here, is structured by the tourist gaze, and simultaneously structuring it. Conceivably, to live like a tourist allows for resignifying the local population not so much as citizens with rights and political agency, but as guest-consumers in their own country, in that they are addressed by the government as having to be thankful and happy for what a country currently offers, because they live in an environment that tourists and work tourists dream of.

In Greece, the happiness vision continues to be present in governmental discourses, and its serial repetition and reproduction has arguably contributed to popular perceptions of positive change. But such optimism will be called into question by the climate emergency and the resulting disasters (such as wildfires and floods). For now, proponents of the happiness vision attempt to provide a positive spin, arguing for instance that "climate change is an opportunity to expand the tourism season" (Mitsotakis, 2023), but in the medium term different visions may be required to uphold the (self)image of places.

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ORCID iDs

Philipp Katsinas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3586-0989>

Dimitris Soudias  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0568-2560>

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Philipp Katsinas is postdoctoral research associate at the REDEFINE project at The Open University.

Dimitris Soudias is Walter Benjamin Fellow at the department of political science, University of Kassel, and an affiliated researcher in the Chair Group European Culture and Literature, University of Groningen. His recent book is titled *Paradoxes of Emancipation: Radical Imagination and Space in Neoliberal Greece* (Syracuse University Press, 2023).