How the Right Is Wrong About Happiness

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Today's op-ed page of the Wall Street Journal sheds more light on how conservative elites thoroughly misunderstand and misrepresent the role of government in a decent society. Arthur C. Brooks, president of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, makes an empirical claim that government social spending lowers happiness of the recipients by making them "dependent on unearned resources." This claim is false, and easily shown to be so, yet it is also interesting for what it shows about the confused opinions of the Republican elite.

The claim is false because the countries that have the highest spending on social programs are far and away the happiest. We looked at this earlier this year in the World Happiness Report, which collected the best cross-country data on this very question. People are asked to report on their life satisfaction or what is sometimes called "subjective wellbeing." There are two kinds of questions. The first asks people to place their lives on the rungs of a ladder, from the lowest rung (0) to the top rung (10). The second asks people how satisfied they are with their life "as a whole these days," again on a scale from 0 to 10 in the case of the Gallup World Poll.

So who comes out on top: the countries with the lowest "dependency" on social programs? Just the opposite! The social democracies are far and away the happiest places on the planet. In the Gallup World Poll ladder question (Table 2.3), the happiest countries are Denmark, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands. The United States ranks 11th. In Gallup's "life satisfaction" question, the leaders are Costa Rica, Denmark, Iceland and Norway. The U.S. comes in 10th. In the World Value Survey on life happiness, the leaders are Iceland, New Zealand, Denmark and the Netherlands. The U.S. comes in 23rd.

The leading countries do the very opposite of what Brooks and his conservative colleagues advocate. The leading countries tax heavily to provide social outlays, for pre-school, health care, education, family support, school-to-work programs, elderly care, and more. They end up with economic prosperity that is broadly shared, very low poverty, low unemployment, social fairness, lower health care costs than in the United States, longer vacation times, guaranteed maternity and paternity leave, better pre-school and many more benefits that make people happy, and help them to raise happier and healthier children. In short, happier places are happier because they combine economic prosperity with social trust, a sense of equality, leisure as well as work, and good and honest governance.

It's not entirely surprising that Brooks gets things so wrong. His whole reasoning is based on two premises that are so bizarre as to be almost unbelievable. First, Brooks says that lottery winners are less happy because they did not work to earn their windfall. He then equates social spending with winning the lottery, and since they are both "unearned" in his view, he claims they are therefore both destructive of human happiness.

Brooks is right to shine a light on all of the sad cases of people who have won tens of millions of dollars in lotteries only to see their lives fall apart. This perverse outcome is indeed sociologically interesting. It tells us that contrary to the conservative mania to help the rich, being super-rich is no sure path to happiness, and huge life-changing windfalls from a lottery are probably even less sure, since one's whole life and social context are turned upside down. Yet it tells us nothing reliable about government programs for jobs, disability, health care, social security, education, or any other social program. To equate these programs with Powerball is daft if not worse.

Brooks reports that going on the welfare rolls is correlated with feeling "inconsolably sad over the past month." Well, duh. Perhaps, Mr. Brooks, their life has taken a hard turn. If the sadness were merely the result of inscribing in a welfare program, they wouldn't do it. The true sadness is that "welfare" support as an object of Brooks' concern is passé. America has almost no welfare system. The total spending on the Temporary Aid for Needy Families is 0.2 of 1% of GDP.

Second, Brooks terms social programs as unearned income. That's a pretty grotesque generalization and denigrates people who draw on these programs and their moral value. In what moral sense is Social Security, or Medicare, or unemployment insurance, "unearned"? Social security recipients have worked throughout their lives and been making payroll contributions; the same with Medicare recipients. Unemployed workers collecting UI have been on the job during a "base period," and their employers have been making contributions into the unemployment insurance system, which indirectly are a levy on wages. Whether these systems are actuarially balanced is a real issue for fiscal policy. To deem these programs to be "unearned income" is nasty, false, and demeaning.

If we were to do a serious look at whose income is unearned, we would surely start at the top, not at the bottom. CEO salaries, Wall
Street bonuses, lobbyists perks, are all examples of a broken ethical system, at times little different from organized crime. Indeed, every day brings news of more crimes on Wall Street. Yet the top brass has taken home tens of billions of dollars of undeserved and ill-gotten gain. On this I'm with Brooks. Let's take this unearned income away from the super-rich through proper taxation and regulation, and to follow Brooks' logic, help make the rich happier as we close the budget deficit as well.

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Being a "welfare" recipient myself, I'll tell you *exactly* why we feel unhappy about receiving benefits. It's because we're treated as lesser people. We're showed *extremely* degrading videos that state things along the lines that once we get a job and basically stop leeching off the system, our children will just be so damned proud of us that we're no longer receiving free handouts and we...

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In reply to: poisonalice
I hear you. Not that it does either of us any good.

But I don't understand why the politicians don't care. They don't do anything to keep jobs in the US. All they have to do is restrict sales of products that don't create jobs in the US. We would suddenly have lots more jobs than people. Everyone would have a job, and the pay would be good because the demand for labor would be high.

Add in some free education, and our biggest problem would be figuring out how to spend all money we make.

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In reply to: poisonalice
F&F....I have worked 4 part time jobs in order to just barely survive and made .59 cents too much to qualify for food stamps...I kid you not.

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Gor Bismori Become a fan
I don't think the Right itself believes any of its crap, but it has to have an argument (in Brooks's case, a "scientific" one like the "Bell Curve" argument of old), to prove why welfare IS wrong. (The tax subsidies the rich has been receiving since the time of Bush is a gift, too, and unlike social security, unquestionably unearned. Of course, the rich is happy.)

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if "unearned income" makes people so sad, then brooks should call for a really big raise in the inheritance tax. especially on the biggest estates. the more free money those unfortunate heirs get, the sadder they will be.

In reply to: somewhatodd

Excellent point! Right wingers run like frightened rabbits from that. F and F

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In reply to: Jay Daterman

Inheritance tax: "No, you can't start at a higher standard of living than your parents and grandparents did. You don't get that choice. You have to begin at the bottom like everybody else."

This "Conservative" viewpoint is just the 21st Century version of Calvinism dressed up as "deep thought" and pushed by the Plutocracy for their own benefit.

"Work is it's own reward."
"Idle hands are the Devils playthings."
"Pull yourself up by your bootstraps."
"Borrow $20K from your parents and start a company."

All of these are just rhetorical jujitsu for their condescending (and self-serving) "Get a Job you lazy bum" pejorative as they walk by the homeless veteran and his family living on the street on their way into their limousine to the corporate jet flying them and their family to the Caymans for Christmas.

Who would Jesus comfort?
believers to advance crude self interest seems accurate. Any better idea than calling on another ideology? I'm at a loss other than submission or violence.

Super User · 115 Fans · translator
In reply to: KHAAANNN
I would agree with you 100%, if not for the "dressed up as deep thought" comment. It's everything you say, but not deep thought.

Government spending makes defense contractors happy.

586 Fans · Let us dare to read, think, speak and write.

I wonder how many wealthy Republicans avoid having life, home, car, and medical insurance, just to spare themselves the misery and unhappiness of receiving 'unearned resources' when tragedy strikes.

725 Fans · The GOP: Peddling Hate Since '68
In reply to: blueshield
You might be surprised to find that beneficiaries of life insurance 'unearned resource' don't find the money makes them the least bit unhappy.

I think he is confusing the wealthy who mostly inherited their unearned resources. They seem like an unhappy lot just as often.

326 Fans
In reply to: FoundersFan
I think he is confusing the wealthy who mostly inherited their unearned resources. They seem like an unhappy lot just as often.
Nothing in the history of Man has ever been as inherently evil as is government.

Both left and right arguments are red herrings. The left focuses on providing assistance without regard to its misuse while the right condemns it without regard to the genuine recipients. The focus should be on reducing misuse not ping-ponging between extreme views.

Class warfare at its finest. Convince one side that the other side is evil and must be controlled. Then those that can profit the most. There is greed in most men's heart and also some compassion. Sad that there is little reason.

Election Day should be moved to April 16th. When your citizens get tons of freebies and "entitlements" from their government, of course they're going to be pleased with their leaders and that form of government, no matter where the money that paid for them came from. It almost sounds like they're being bribed by their politicians: which one offers more "free stuff?"

How is it 'giving freebies' when people work together to maintain a society, and share together in its prosperity? It's an unbalanced society where only the lucky few at the top are 'entitled' to not just the cream, but all the milk too, and everybody else gets to fight over the dregs. Popular conservative mythology aside, these countries do not consist of a few people who contribute while...
Election Day should be moved to April 16th.

In reply to: Dee Sorceress

A society does not require a government in order to "share prosperity." And income inequality is "not" the problem; "freedom" inequality is the foundational issue.

"The poor" are employed by, you guessed it, "the rich." When you tax "the rich" higher, you only serve to scare them away from cities and states. When they leave, they take their offered employment, and their potential tax revenue, with them. It does not sound very "sound" to you because it's essentially "catering to the rich." But look past your initial emotional reaction and consider the consequences of such for a couple minutes and maybe you'll see the logic that I've attempted to show you.

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