Ute Frevert

Hans in Luck or The Moral Economy of Happiness in the Modern Age

Until the present, the fairy tale *Hans im Glück* (Hans in Luck), published by the Grimm brothers in the early nineteenth century, has been a part of people's collective memory, forged by bedside readings and the continuous popularity of the Grimm collection, despite an ever-growing corpus of children's literature. Translated into many languages, the tales still find ardent fans and followers, although they seem to have less and less to do with the realities of modern life.[1]

At first glance, this also pertains to *Hans im Glück*, a tale which can be read as a late document of a traditional society on the verge of disappearance. This was a society organized in temporal cycles and structured by processes of economic exchange that were basically non-monetary. The bartering of goods and services followed principles of individual utility that, in certain cases, might diverge greatly from 'real' material worth. This is how it plays out with Hans, a young man who has served seven years as the apprentice and helping hand of a master in an unknown trade. He has the choice to stay on, since the master is highly satisfied with his work and conduct. But Hans longs to go home and be with his mother whom he has not seen for a long time. When he leaves his job, his master pays him a huge amount of gold, enough to make his fortune. Tiring on his journey, however, Hans soon exchanges the gold with a horse. He then becomes dissatisfied with the horse and trades it for a cow. This continues until Hans is left with nothing but a "light and merry heart".

Hans indeed feels happy and vividly expresses it: "'How happy am I!' cried he: 'no mortal was ever so lucky as I am.'" His various desires have all been satisfied, and, although what he desired possessed less and less material value, every single wish was fulfilled and gave him pleasure. Such pleasure cannot last, to be sure. Nevertheless, Hans is convinced that he has made a profitable deal and got the best out of it.

Happy Hans and lucky Hans

In the tale's 1823 English translation, happy Hans was turned into lucky Hans, or *Hans in Luck*. This might be interpreted as a deliberate critique and revision of the original. The translator obviously did not believe that Hans was happy but chose to present his adventures as a series of lucky incidents, in the sense of *fortuna*. This was not altogether a misrepresentation of the tale. Hans indeed considers himself lucky to have met all those seemingly generous men who have talked him into trading valuable for less valuable goods. At the same time, however, they have all contributed to his growing happiness, which reaches its peak after he, accidentally, drops his last possession, a grindstone, into a deep river, thus thwarting any chance of starting his "golden trade" and financially securing his happiness. As a person Hans experiences happiness more than luck. He is even driven by the

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Specialising in Modern social, political and cultural history, Ute Frevert is one of the most influential historians of our time. She is Managing Director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development where she is leading the Center for the History of Emotions. In 1998 she was awarded the Leibniz-Preis, the most important award for scientists and academics in Germany. This is a shortened version of the article "Hans in Luck or The Moral Economy of Happiness in the Modern Age", which we reprint with kind permission of the author. You can find the complete article on our homepage as well as in: History of European Ideas 45 (2019), 3, S. 363-376, DOI: 10.1080/01916599.2018.1534448.

search for happiness and *Seelenfreude*, joy of mind, as the Grimm brothers phrase it. While accident and luck do play a role in making him cross paths with the owners of the horse, the cow, the pig, the goose, and the grindstone, he feels utterly happy about these exchanges. Each transaction greatly enhances his subjective happiness.

This was clearly at odds with conventional opinion around 1800. Even in a pre-capitalist economy, in which most people hardly achieved more than subsistence, Hans' choices would have aroused irritation. One could, of course, choose poverty over riches, as did Franciscan monks, who traditionally enjoyed a high social reputation. One could also give money to the poor, in obedience to both religious and secular norms of charity. But it was hardly possible to find any virtue or positive morality in Hans' transactions. They served the greed of those who tricked him and were based on fraud and delusion. Furthermore, they left him where he had started seven years earlier: without any means to support himself and his aging mother, and without any savings to set up his own household and family.

Such a judgement, however, fails to take into account what the tale is all about: happiness, rather than luck. The story leaves us in no doubt that Hans' subjective feelings go beyond economic concerns. His happiness is not based on abstract material values but reflects the pleasure he receives from concrete consumption: riding a horse instead of going on foot, expecting milk and cheese from a cow, bacon and ham from a pig. In the long run, these purchases leave him empty-handed; in the short run, they make him happy, and this is what he desires most. In this regard, he both embodies and opposes the credo of the modern world. He is never content with what he possesses but wants to increase his happiness, thus acting in line with Thomas Hobbes' definition of felicity as the "continuall successe in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth, that is to say, continuall prospering".[2] On the other hand, Hans' continuous prospering takes place only in his imagination and emotional experience, since each successive purchase has less and less material value.

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Hans is clearly not yet a citizen of the modern world who pursues the capitalist ideal of accumulating more and more riches with every investment. The goods that he desires are not selected according to their exchange value, but their subjective utility, which Hans defines on the spot, without long-term reflection and calculation. Yet his decisions to sell and buy are not wholly spontaneous and hedonistic; they do serve an ultimate goal

which goes beyond selfish concerns: What matters most to Hans is that he reaches home as fast as possible to embrace his mother, which will make both happy.

The circular economy in *Hans im Glück*

Such behaviour seems more in keeping with a premodern, pre-capitalist order that knows and cares little about individual advancement and social mobility. Instead, its moral economy is organized in a circular and reciprocal way that takes into account different kinds of utilities and leaves room for moral commitments to God and kin. In such an economy, material possessions are not all that counts, and their value might diminish quickly, depending on unforeseen and unforeseeable circumstances. Considering the contingencies of the environment, it might even be rational to forego any riches and rely on what is of real value: personal relations, and the obligation of a son to take care of his mother. Material wealth might help but cannot be relied upon. Even without gold or grindstone, Hans, as a young and healthy man, could start anew and make his fortune, while at the same time showering his mother with filial love and comfort. Calculating and planning the future might be futile anyway, since the future cannot be foreseen, planned or commanded. It seems far better and more sensible to insist on present-day happiness and to try to sustain it, by maintaining optimism and trust in God. Hans is free to choose optimism over pessimism, hope over fear, trust over distrust. He uses his freedom to achieve happiness.

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Reception

How did children and adults read this fairy tale? Did they take Hans to be a simpleton whose actions were to be ridiculed and ignored? Or did they envy him because finally, after seven years of strenuous work and dependence, he indulged his temporary freedom to take his life into his own hands and decide what was good for him and made him happy? Did they see Hans as a radical dropout, an "antihero" and "archetypical fool"?[3] Did they appreciate his wish to return to his mother as soon as possible and give up everything he once owned? How did they think his mother reacted when her son returned, happy but empty-handed? Did Hans strike them as the antipode of modern possessive individualism and an inhabitant of an older, quickly disappearing

world, organized by altogether different moral economies?

Unfortunately, we know next to nothing about how the tale was received. What seems clear, however, is that it was not part of traditional folk wisdom. *Hans im Glück* was first published in a journal in 1818 by the young classicist August Eduard Wernicke who pretended, however, that it came "aus dem Munde des Volkes" (out of the mouth of the people). Wernicke framed the story as a moral lesson, placing great emphasis on the connection between Hans' lack of calculation and his ensuing poverty. When a year later, Wilhelm Grimm included the tale in the later famous collection of fairy tales, he did not fully endorse such criticism. Instead, he painted Hans in much lighter colours, as an amiable fellow, who, without harming anybody, somewhat naively and spontaneously chooses to follow his own desires. In this version, Hans in Luck came to rank among the dozen favourite Grimm's tales and was reprinted time and again, either as part of the Grimm's collection or on its own. It was also published with various illustrations, the first by George Cruikshank in 1823. In these illustrations, Hans is usually depicted as a happy person whose body language and gestures clearly demonstrate the joy he feels bartering his riches.[4]

Such visual representations invite an analysis of Hans' search for *Seelenfreude* as an early comment on the general history of happiness as it evolved during the modern era – one that both reflects and relativizes conventional values and lifestyles. It can be perceived partly as an affirmation of middle-class mores and practices, but also as subversive criticism.

Happiness was in the air

For Hans' contemporaries, his obsession with happiness would not have come as a surprise. Happiness was in the air; already during the eighteenth century a huge number of books, articles, songs, and plays focused on this very theme. In German-speaking countries, the quest for *Glückseligkeit* reached its peak between 1780 and 1810, with moral lectures, sermons, comedies, and advice manuals suggesting the best and most successful ways of being happy. Even catechisms for children changed their traditional structure and, instead of starting with a list of commands and prohibitions, they addressed their young readers' feelings and experiences of felicity.[5] In France, Voltaire and Diderot declared that being happy was the first and foremost need and the only human duty. The American Declaration of Independence proclaimed people's inalienable right not only to life and liberty but also to the "pursuit of Happiness"[6]. This was very much in line with the general trend to emphasize the individual person and his (rather than her) quest for subjective and objective well-being. In the eyes of the Founding Fathers it was clearly not sufficient to promise and grant people personal safety and the freedom to acquire, possess, and use property. They should also be able to pursue happiness, whatever that meant for them. Nobody could ensure, of course, that happiness would ever be achieved. What mattered was that the road to happiness was open for anyone to take, as it was for Hans. All formal obstacles were to be removed – which meant, above all, that the state should refrain from interfering in people's lives.

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What is also striking is that both French philosophers and American Founding Fathers firmly located happiness in the individual man and citizen. He alone was the one who decided on which kind of happiness to pursue, and there was no suggestion that these decisions had to be morally framed or restricted. A person should seek happiness for his or her own sake, independent of social institutions. What mattered most was his or her subjective feelings, his or her own state of mind and *Seelenfreude*. Such radical individualization of happiness was not only consistent with the Enlightenment stress on man's ability to think and reason by himself, without being brainwashed by religion, superstition, or politics. It also went hand in hand with the new interest in, and praise for, feelings and sensibility.

Happiness and the state

The pursuit of happiness came with two political options. For proponents of enlightened absolutist rule, like Christian Wolff, an influential professor at Halle University in the early eighteenth century, the state was responsible for actively creating the conditions that would enable its subjects to become and remain happy. Government should thus conform to the model of a well-ordered police state. The absolutist states of eighteenth century Germany aimed to secure their subjects' safety and welfare by means of, among other things, health policies, insurance schemes, and a great many legal regulations and formal prescriptions. At the same time, such regulations introduced normative ideas of how people should run their lives and care about their future happiness – ideas that clearly clashed with the emphasis on individual autonomy that began to gain momentum during the late eighteenth century.

Around 1800, such paternalistic state activity became less and less accepted. Instead, there was mounting pressure on the government to restrict itself to a few crucial functions: ensuring the rule of law, guaranteeing the security of individual property, and monopolising violence, both internally and in protecting the state's external borders. *Glückseligkeit*, so the argument went, could and should not figure as a legitimate state purpose. Instead, the state was to ensure that people were not prevented from seeking it wherever they wanted to find it.[7] Such liberal concepts came close to what American revolutionaries had envisaged in the 1770s. They also shared the idea of happiness as a dynamic object of striving that defied any binding definition. What mattered was the pursuit of a goal that each person identified for themselves, in freedom and autonomy. A generally accepted definition of happiness of

religious or political provenance was thus off the table – happiness meant whatever each individual understood by it.

Happiness from within

This dynamic conception was also central to the thought of a German founding father, Immanuel Kant, the central figure of modern philosophy, who also pre-formulated the principles of a liberal constitutional state. Vehemently disagreeing with both Wolff's ideas on state responsibility and Bentham's utility concept, Kant dismissed happiness as a moral benchmark altogether. Happiness, he argued, was not a notion on which everyone could agree. One person's happiness could be another's misery. Taking the idea of individual autonomy seriously meant rejecting happiness, logically and empirically, as the common object of people's goals and actions. Under no circumstances could it ever serve as the foundation of universal morality. Freed from this heavy baggage, happiness could still figure as a personal wish, dream, and desire. What mattered, however, was happiness as movement rather than as an actual state and status. Here as everywhere, Kant emphasized the moment of individual self-determination and creative power: happiness did not come from the outside, randomly, as divine pardon or as the gift of a well-run state administration. It came from within, from people who strove for self-improvement and self-perfection.[8] ◆

1 Hans-Jörg Uther, "Hans im Glück (KHM 83): Zur Entstehung, Verbreitung und bildlichen Darstellung eines populären Märchens," in: Morten Nøjgaard et al. (Eds), *The Telling of Stories: Approaches to a Traditional Craft*, Odense, Odense University Press, 1990, p. 119-164.

2 *Hobbes's Leviathan*. Reprint from the edition of 1651, with an essay by the late W.G. Pogson Smith, Oxford, Clarendon, 1962, p. 48.

3 Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 100f.

4 Uther, "Hans im Glück," a.a.O., p. 126ff.

5 Cornel Zwierlein, "Das Glück des Bürgers. Der aufklärerische Eudämonismus als Formationselement von Bürgerlichkeit und seine Charakteristika," in: Hans-Edwin Friedrich et al. (Eds.), *Bürgerlichkeit im 18. Jahrhundert*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 2006, p. 71-113, esp. 99, 105.

6 André Hoffmann, "Glück als Verfassungsauftrag," p. 16–19 in this issue.

7 Cornel Zwierlein, "Glück und Sicherheit in der Politik der Aufklärung und in der Gegenwart," in: André Holenstein et al. (Eds), *Glück*, Berne, Haupt, 2011, p. 53-81, esp. 61f.

8 Wolfgang Freising, *Kritische Philosophie und Glückseligkeit: Kants Auseinandersetzung mit dem Eudämonismus seiner Zeit,* Lüneburg, Schmidt-Neubauer, 1983.