In his book *Bliss*, former NPR foreign correspondent and self-labeled grump Eric Weiner takes his readers on an adventure spanning the globe in search of paradise, or at least a close approximation. We are swept away to almost a dozen different locations: from dark, frigid northern European societies to deeply spiritual Asian countries and just about everything in between. Each stop on his tour confronts readers with a different recipe for success and invariably a conflicting message as well. We discover the Dutch to be tolerant and permissive, yet we are cautiously reminded that physical pleasure alone is eventually an empty, hollow experience. The Swiss, meanwhile, lack anything resembling a sense of humor: They offer instead a very orderly, efficient, yet depressingly sterile take on joy. In the tiny Himalayan nation of Bhutan, happiness is not just a worthy ideal, it’s a legislated government policy. However, Bhutan’s unique National Happiness Index notwithstanding, pervasive poverty is a grim reality within its borders. Again we are left with more questions than answers. This is the maze that *Bliss* navigates. Weiner’s book is an entertaining read. As Maria Popova of the popular online blog Brain Pickings finds: Weiner manages to balance a clever, subtle humor and charming self-derision with some very appealing empirical and philosophical concepts. *Bliss* purports to focus on geography in direct relation to happiness. Where do happy folk live? Not surprisingly, geographical features never play a very dominant role in Weiner’s narrative, and for good reason. Weiner himself admits “It’s not climate or topography...at work here, but national
culture” (“Finding”). If you discount internal factors, as well as the sorts of tragic realities that make achieving anything approaching happiness impossible (extreme poverty, oppression, and state sponsored violence all come to mind), what you are left with is culture. A nation’s culture, in many ways, dictates how people treat each other. What could have a greater impact on happiness than this? It’s not the real estate that matters: it’s the people.

A large portion of Weiner’s travels take him to western-style democracies. The Netherlands, Switzerland, and Iceland in particular offer us a portrait of the European happiness model. These are examples of very democratic, staunchly secular, and for the most part, very homogeneous territories. Modern societies place a great deal of importance on diversity, but many of the most peaceful, stable societies on Earth do not have much of it (Weiner, Bliss 16). What they may lack in diversity, they make up for in personal freedoms and an emphasis on individuality. If happiness is about your own pursuit, striving for your own ambitions, chances are you were born, raised, and came of age in a historically democratic society. Another trait shared among strong, stable democracies are trustworthy governments, and a fair justice system. You don’t concern yourself much with vacuous pleasantries if you can't sleep at night. Corrupt officials, cronyism, nepotism, and a lack of due process: these are the calling cards of dictatorships and oppressive regimes, as Weiner himself discovers in his woeful journey to the post-Soviet nightmare that is Moldova, which according to the research he relies on to guide him, is just about the most unhappy place on Earth (Bliss 186). Happiness is difficult to come by when you are powerless to affect your own personal outcome in any meaningful way. A country, and a culture, that places a high value on personal freedom, and goes out of its way to protect it, has already given you many of the tools you will need to find happiness. An emphasis on education is also a prominent feature of developed first world democracies, a facet of happiness
that is given rather short shrift in Weiner’s account. We are informed rather perfunctorily that college graduates are happier than those without a bachelor’s degree (Weiner, Bliss 14), but the subject hardly ever comes up again. I would argue that I am never happier than when I am in the depths of learning experiences, and a highly educated populace is a hallmark of a free democratic society.

How about money? Culture aside, aren’t the richest and most powerful countries the happiest? Weiner, in a departure from his stated goal, takes a detour at one point and pays a visit to the recently wealthy, if not particularly overjoyed, nation of Qatar. Here we are reminded how important a role culture plays in our lives, for Qatar, according to Weiner, is a nation completely lacking in a viable culture or history (Bliss 117), and in spite of the wealth that a bounty of mineral resources has bestowed upon its people, there is obviously something wrong. We are introduced to a coddled and spoiled citizenry, who regardless of an abundance of creature comforts are nevertheless far from happy as a whole: “What happens to a person’s soul when he or she indulges in excessive...amounts of craven luxury?” (Weiner, Bliss 100). The importance of having our basic needs, and perhaps a little more besides, taken care of can never be overestimated. Money facilitates our quest for happiness in ways few other things can. Having exponentially more money than you could ever possibly need, coupled with an excessively lavish lifestyle, a lack of culture, and the warped unnatural social relationships that will inevitably result, only highlights the importance of one’s culture. You cannot buy your way out of a missing or poor culture.

Bliss also takes us to spiritually rich nations such as Bhutan and India. Here you will find people who place more importance on their faith, family, and community bonds than on the individual. It’s a different form of happiness than that achieved through personal ambition and
drive: an Eastern as opposed to a Western ideal. It’s a joy that comes from a strong sense of belonging to a whole, even if it’s often at the direct expense of the individual. These nations tend to be poorer and less developed technologically, but they do tap into a deep sense in most of us that humans are, at their core, a social creature. You may be poor, and your conditions rough, but in India, or Bhutan, and any of a number of other third world nations, it’s usually the case that you will be surrounded by family and strengthened by your beliefs. Could it be that increased personal despair, depression, and the overall malaise that has slowly started to seep into some first world nations such as the United States stems at least in part on a loss of this feeling of togetherness? Weiner makes this case, and I would agree.

I have come to a predictable conclusion: that there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for a happy nation or a happy people. The Bhutanese formula would fail miserably in the United States. We are not Bhutanese. Swiss chocolate may be delicious, their streets devoid of litter, and their trains always on time, but I value a little messiness, a little humor, a little unpredictability in my life. We are a product of our culture as much as our culture is a reflection of its inhabitants. I would also venture that quantifying happiness, whether it be a database in The Netherlands or an economic index fashioned by creative politicians in the Himalayas, while certainly an entertaining exercise, is as futile an endeavor as it sounds. (1252 words)
Works Cited


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