



Misery Never Felt This Good

By Daniel Thwaites

February 8, 2015

A few years ago, the New Economics Foundation ranked Jamaica very highly for comparative happiness. All things considered, I thought that appropriate.

However, just now, the 2014 World Misery Index, published by the Cato Institute, has rated Jamaica the ninth most miserable country. For that study, economist Steven Hanke of Johns Hopkins University used information about inflation, lending rates, unemployment, and GDP to arrive at the stunning conclusion. Obviously, both conclusions can't be right.

The first thing to acknowledge is that there are some things causing widespread unhappiness. Having dealt with the inhospitable conditions at University Hospital recently, I'm certain the health service is driving misery.

There are other things: Bureaucratic time wasting is always big. Kaci's loss. Aggressive taxi men. Kingston's city 'planners' (to abuse the term). The linguistic disease of using the word 'persons' instead of 'people', or just 'you', 'I', or 'we'. All of these induce small jolts of unease and can add up to a quota of misery.

More than all that, there is poverty in this land, and that is a cause of unhappiness. But even more than just poverty, there is inequality, and there is nothing that makes the pangs of poverty sharper than the knowledge that the people (sorry, 'persons') up the road have a full table.

In fact, even if not hungry, the crawfish that I used to enjoy can be spoiled by knowledge that the man up the road is enjoying shrimp, just as his shrimp is bitter because further up the road a man is eating lobster. We are always comparing. But with all that put to one side, the fact is real: Poverty sucks!

I find it endlessly interesting that once people achieve the basics, the law of diminishing returns sets in pretty quickly. In other words, when you don't have any food and you get some, it feels fantastic, and the move from hunger to some chicken and rice and peas is phenomenal.

However, once the basics are in place, there isn't all that much joy in that third piece of chicken, that additional pair of shoes, or that extra yard space nobody uses.

Gross domestic product is NOT gross domestic happiness, and even though the two are linked, the linkage is by no means straightforward or obvious. And when it comes down to it, which one matters more?

TALKING RUBBISH

My view is that any fair-minded, reasonably informed person will immediately deduce that Hanke is talking rubbish. Or at any rate, the conclusion can't be taken too seriously. Most obviously, if you want to find out how happy people are, you have to ask them. If I say I am not miserable, truly believe I am not miserable, behave as if I am not miserable, and subjectively feel as if I'm not miserable, on what basis can someone tell me that I'm miserable? By looking at interest rates? No way.

Plus, if you're ranking countries, you're talking about comparison. And if you compare, you will see why Jamaica has no place in the ranks of the really unhappy.

Let's start with a favourite: Singapore. How often have we heard that Jamaica should be like it? The part they don't mention is Singaporeans are miserable. The famed pollsters at Gallup asked Singaporeans about their experience of positive emotion. What they learned was a litany of misery: stress, long work hours, high income inequality, and uncommonly high uncertainty about the future.

Singaporeans are not only the least emotional nation, but the comparatively little emotion is mostly negative. What does it say when Singaporeans are more bummed out than Iraqis, Afghans, and Haitians?

Consider Moldova, which sounds like a mould-ridden backwater of Europe. Apparently it is. Writer Eric Weiner, in his hilarious book *The Geography of Bliss*, notes that Moldovans lack "an abiding faith or culture on which to rely" and consequently have a world view "free-floating, anchored to nothing but the cloud of pessimism that hovers over this sad land". Landlocked between Romania and the Ukraine, neither of which jumps out as happy places, it's been Russia's plaything for the last two centuries. Before that it was an Ottoman Empire vassal.

FORGETTING TO MAKE BABIES

How about South Korea, where students excel in school so long as they're not committing suicide? It has a whopping suicide rate of 33.3 per 100,000. On top of that, birth rates are crashing, which stands to reason. If you're killing yourself or thinking about it, chances are you don't want to reproduce. Or you're so unhappy you forget to make babies.

In Syria, people are cutting each other to pieces on a mind-boggling scale. Our government slaughtered a lot of civilians in 2010, but it didn't end up gassing whole cities like Assad did. In Iran, you might find yourself in a forced marriage or in forced prostitution.

Haiti, God bless her, is like a geographic magnet for hurricane, flood, and earthquake, all the while changing governments like dirty linen. In Cambodia, almost 40 per cent of children are malnourished. In Madagascar, 75 per cent of the population lives in poverty.

Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, Turkmenistan, Djibouti. Misery. And if you're heading to Russia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, stock up on the vodka because you will need it. If you're heading to Lithuania, which on paper is quite wealthy, you will find the alcohol there being consumed at a faster rate than anywhere else in the world. It also has one of the highest suicide rates.

One rule of thumb: Avoid any place with a name ending in 'stan' because it's likely that it is pure misery. Or if you must go, carry pills. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan? Avoid. Azerbaijan: oil-rich and at war. Belarus: 2011 inflation was 53.2 per cent; 2012 was 59.2 per cent. A disaster. Chad: a Stone Age life expectancy of 49 years.

And notice I haven't even hit the parts of the world where if you're a woman, they cut off your private parts to keep you chaste. Ask yourself the following: Has Mr Hanke been to Jamaica and seen when gyal pickney bruk out pon riddim? No. Well, any country that has that tradition, much less the originator of that wonderful wildness, can NEVER be among the most miserable places on Earth. Because that's one of the greatest causes of happiness ever invented. That's irrefutable.

Oh, by the way, the least miserable country, according to that Cato study, is Brunei, where people live under an Islamic Shari'a regime. It's under martial law (since 1962!) and has a national anthem titled 'God Bless the Sultan'. Please!