

MINIGRANT APPLICATION FORM

Title of Proposal:

Happiness and British Working-Class Autobiography

Principal Investigator:

Jamie Bronstein

Department:

History

Proposed Project Period:

Total Minigrant Request:

\$1,230.00

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Start Date:

April 1, 2013

Total Cost Sharing:

\$ 965.00

End Date:

July 31, 2013

Total Project Cost:

\$2,195.00

Abstract of Proposal (a maximum of 100 words and underline key words):

This project will help to **contextualize happiness historically** by examining a series of **unpublished British working-class autobiographies** for evidence of **positive affect** and **life satisfaction** and assess the extent to which economic well-being may have differed from "happiness."

Proposed Research (a maximum of 1,500 words):

Although philosophers have attempted to define human well-being since the era of Socrates and Plato, the concept that individuals are meant to pursue happiness during the period of their earthly lives--or, in fact, that they might have a right to the pursuit of happiness--dates from the Enlightenment. Nineteenth-century Britain was a particularly active node of happiness studies. With a nod to the developing discipline of statistics, Jeremy Bentham proposed that the utility of any experience --its ratio of pleasure to pain--could be calculated. He argued that individual utility could be generalized into a larger societal happiness; and that the goal of social policy should be to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number. John Stuart Mill refined Bentham's notions, claiming that the "higher pleasures" of art, education, and culture were superior to the "lower pleasures" of satiating animal desires. Neither Bentham nor Mill proposed that happiness necessarily varied directly with standard of living.

Historians attempting to assess the well-being of the working classes in nineteenth-century Britain, in the midst of urbanization and industrial change, have implicitly followed Karl Marx rather than Mill and Bentham, by using standard of living as a proxy for working-class well-being. On the contrary, modern sociological and philosophical research suggests that, while economic well-being influences happiness, it is not a proxy for it; once a certain, rather low level of comfort has been reached, "hedonic treadmill" effects interfere. So much for the developed world in the twenty-first century; but are the same effects detectable at the dawn of the industrial age? If happiness were completely correlated with standard of living historically, we should expect to see little evidence of happiness among

the nineteenth-century working-classes, and steadily increasing levels of professed happiness moving up the social and economic pyramid.

This essay, part of a larger project historically contextualizing happiness as experienced in the past, will mine first-hand narratives to explore happiness in 19th-century working-class lives. Grounded in wide, interdisciplinary secondary-source research in psychology, philosophy, and economics, my project will deploy two common contemporary measures of happiness, “positive affect” and “life satisfaction,” to qualitatively assess British working-class autobiographies. I plan to answer a series of questions: To what extent was “happiness” an acceptable expectation? Did working people distinguish between or equate happiness and economic well-being, or did they identify other factors as promoting happiness? How were expressions of emotion displayed or muffled, encouraged or suppressed? Is there enough commonality in the narratives of working people for historians to identify an “emotional community,” or are other variables apparently more important than class?

If granted a minigrant, I plan to use the funds to travel to Rutgers University, which is one of the few universities in the United States that holds the research collection called "A People's History." This is a collection of 18 microfilm reels filled with autobiographies written by members of the British working classes between 1780 and 1880 (the original sources are housed at the British Library in London). Although two weeks in the archive will only allow me to scratch the surface of the large collection, it should be enough time to gather research materials for the next step of my research plan. I plan to present a paper on the working-class and happiness in historical context topic at the Western Conference on British Studies in October of 2013; to turn the conference into an article to be published in 2014; and to use the research I do this summer to generate a National Endowment for the Humanities grant proposal for the larger project described above. I would like to use National Endowment for the Humanities funds to purchase the microfilm collection "A People's History" for the NMSU library, since the collection would be an excellent research resource for our undergraduates in history. The cost of the research collection itself, at \$2700, is more than the minigrant funds available.

Representative Partial Bibliography:

Calvo, Rocco, and Yuhul Zheng, Santhosh Kumar, Analia Olgiati, and Lisa Berkman, "Well-being and social capital on Planet Earth: Cross-National Evidence from 142 Countries," *Plos One* vol. 7 no. 8 (August 2012): 1-10.

Chase-Levinson, Karen. "Happiness is not a potato: The Victorian Cultivation of Happiness," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* vol. 33 no. 2 (May 2011): 161-9.

Dragulic, Aleksandra Mindoljevic, "A Phenomenological Perspective on Subjective Well-Being: From Myth to Science," *Psychiatria Danubina* vol. 24 no. 1 (2012): 31-37.

Easterlin, Richard A. "Explaining Happiness." *PNAS* vol. 100 no. 19 (2003): 11176-83.

Feldman, Fred. *What is this Thing Called Happiness?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Frey, Bruno S. *Happiness: A Revolution in Economics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010.

Gagnier, Regina. *Subjectivities: A Brief History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1991.

Hackett, Nan. *Nineteenth-Century British Working-Class Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: AMS Press, 1985.

Macmahon, Darrin. *Happiness: A History*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006.

Plamper, Jan. "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns." *History and Theory* vol. 49 (May 2010): 237-65.

White, Nicholas. *A Brief History of Happiness*. Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2006.

Please list your previous minigrant awards with titles and year of award:

1998: Caught in the Machinery: Workplace Accidents and Injured Workers in 19th-Century Britain and the United States (became an NEH grant in 1999 and the book *_Caught in the Machinery_* in 2008).

2012: "Sowing Discontent: The 1921 New Mexico Alien Land Law": the research was written up in the summer of 2012 and the article has been accepted for publication by the *Pacific Historical Review*.

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Title: **The People's History [microform] : working class autobiographies. Series one. Working class autobiographies from the British Library, London.**

Publication info: **Brighton, Susses [i.e. Sussex], England : Harvester Press Microform Publications, 1986-**

Physical descrip: **microfilm reels ; 4 in., 35 mm.**

Incomplete contents: **pt. 1. 1792-1889 -- pt.2. 1890-1920.**

Subject: **Working class--Great Britain--Biography.**

Subject: **Great Britain--Social life and customs.**

Subject: **Great Britain--Biography.**

Added author: **British Library.**

Added title: **Working class autobiographies from the British Library, London.**

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