



Book Review: Happiness and Place: Why Life is Better Outside of the City by Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn



In Happiness and Place: Why Life is Better Outside of the City, Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn challenges the assumption that urban life is most conducive to happiness and wellbeing, arguing that cities are stressful, dissatisfying and inhibit connection with other humans and nature. While William B. Meyer praises this book as a useful and lively challenge to social science orthodoxy that tends to vaunts the urban, he suggests that its thesis, largely centred on the US case, requires further evidence to be fully persuasive.

Happiness and Place: Why Life is Better Outside of the City. Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn. Palgrave Macmillan. 2015.

Once upon a time, most social scientists regarded cities with fear and loathing, and warned that if the world ever became mostly urban, the results would not be pleasant. How things can change! Just as the **United Nations announced a majority-urban world in 2007**, a new orthodoxy was coalescing that regarded the shift as in every way a cause for celebration. It received its fullest statement from the Harvard economist Edward Glaeser in his 2011 book, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention*



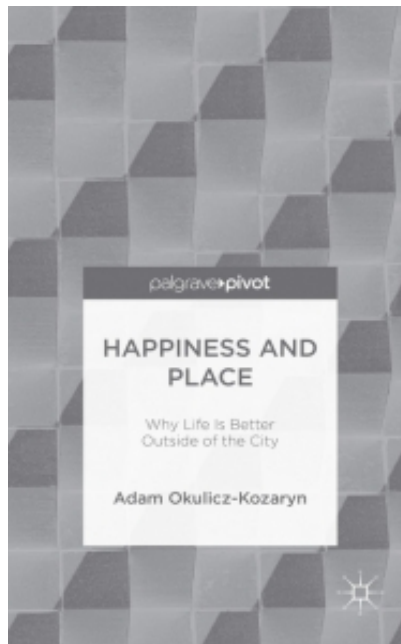
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In *Happiness and Place: Why Life is Better Outside of the City*, half-monograph and half-manifesto, Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn challenges not the new consensus in toto, but rather one important part of it: the one stated in the last word of Glaeser's subtitle. Okulicz-Kozaryn neither disputes the economic advantages of large and dense

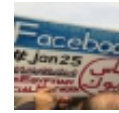


cities, nor their environmental benefits. He argues, however, that they make people not more happy, but less. Life in cities, he asserts – especially in ones of 250,000 or more inhabitants – is stressful, unsatisfying and foreign to human beings' deepest needs, particularly those of connecting to other people and to nature. He is frank about his own preferences: 'I do not like cities, I never liked them. I do not like suburbs either, especially those city-like' (12). But these preferences, he believes, are not merely his own, but those of people in general.

Okulicz-Kozaryn supports that claim with something old and something new. He resurrects a good deal of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anti-urban social theory, notably Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* distinction. He complements this with quantitative evidence from the emerging field of happiness studies, whose beguiling premise is that human wellbeing is best measured by 'the ultimate goal of interest: happiness' (5). In much of the less-developed world, he grants, expressed levels of happiness are highest in cities, and most especially in large cities: something he attributes to the extreme poverty of infrastructure, services and opportunity outside of them. In affluent countries, though, such things are more on a level. There, he asserts, the pattern is reversed. Happiness declines as settlement size and density increase.

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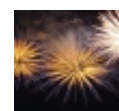
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Why, then, do so many people choose to live in cities? Okulicz-Kozaryn acknowledges the attractions of greater freedom, cultural amenities and economic opportunity – or, at least, the illusions thereof – but he also emphasises irrational factors. People, he maintains (as does much of the contemporary literature on human cognition), are not very good at judging their own best interests. They fail to see that in urbanising, they are sacrificing a greater good for lesser ones. ‘Cities, like capitalism which they embody, lure us by exploiting our passions. Cities promise or even provide momentary enjoyment and pleasure (just like shopping), but not life satisfaction or happiness’ (32). He also posits a ‘size fetish’: we see larger cities or larger countries, and those who live or work in them, as more successful than the rest:

Even with this book, the big city mattered. I had heard previously about Palgrave, nevertheless, what reassured me in an email from the editor was “175 5th Avenue, New York, NY 10010”. I thought to myself, well, if it is 5th Avenue, it must be great. I wouldn’t think that way if they were located in Beeville, TX. I even recall myself talking to my family that I have a book contract with a New York based publisher – some people may not know what Palgrave is, but everyone knows what New York is (30).

As this quotation suggests, for a work of academic social science *Happiness and Place* makes entirely painless reading. Okulicz-Kozaryn’s English is erratic, but never opaque and always lively. The extensive endnotes are as enjoyable and stimulating as the

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main text. (But reader beware: my copy, at least, contains numerous references to figures, but not the figures themselves.)

Okulicz-Kozaryn effectively dismantles the evidence and arguments that Glaeser, in particular, has used to argue for greater happiness in cities. His own case, however, is not without its weaknesses. His way of dismissing the counterevidence from the Global South, though it makes a plausible hypothesis, is no more than that until further tested and substantiated. He misses the chance to connect his argument to some other relevant concepts: urban bias in development studies, for example, and that of 'urbanormativity' in rural sociology. The book does not engage in depth with the widely-made criticism of happiness as a criterion privileging John Stuart Mill's satisfied pigs over his dissatisfied philosophers. Okulicz-Kozaryn's denial that the 'fake nature' that cities provide in bits, and suburbs in greater quantities, can substitute for the real thing is undercut by the evidence he cites that just such fake nature has beneficial effects on hospitalised patients. And his assertion that more sustainable, lower-consumption lifestyles are as possible in the larger spaces of small towns and rural areas as in dense cities did not persuade me that they will actually be adopted there.

Most problematically, far too much of the evidence he presents is drawn from the United States, and a disproportionate amount of that from the especially depressed and depressing zone of the US Rustbelt where he works. But US culture has a longstanding anti-urban slant. The cities that have resulted are, for the most part, the sort one would expect. Other developed countries in which urban life has been held in higher esteem would make much more telling test cases.

In summary, *Happiness and Place* does not prove its thesis, but it accomplishes something nonetheless. It convincingly shows that the opposite thesis – a widely accepted one regarding the capacity of cities to engender happiness – has not been proven either. To say that it leaves readers knowing less than they did before must sound, at first, like disparagement. But it is true, and no disparagement, but rather the reverse.

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William B. Meyer is Associate Professor of Geography at Colgate University in the USA and author, most recently, of *Americans and Their Weather: A History* (updated edition, 2014).



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