

The Infant Socialist

Mean societies produce mean people

Babies haven't changed much for millennia. Give or take a few enzymes this perfectly designed little bundle of desires and interests has not needed to evolve. Of all primates, the human is the most immature at birth, after which brain growth accelerates and is 'wired' according to the kinds of experience the infant has. Provided there are a few familiar and affectionate people there to care continuously for him or her, baby will be fine. If not, evolution has taken care of that too. You live in a cruel world and treat him roughly? He will develop into a compulsively self-reliant and ruthless individual with little concern for others. Mean societies produce mean people. Through attentive care in the early years we may hope to produce thoughtful, curious and confident young people¹ but our social arrangements are essentially hostile and competitive. Having a baby is regarded as an expensive undertaking rather than as a contribution to the future of society.

Encouraged by successive governments our world is geared to markets. "It's the economy, stupid" means you can't do anything without considering the immediate cost. The more this idea takes hold the stupider we become. The current government's dedication to continuous welfare cuts² hits children disproportionately. Neoliberalism is the enemy of children.

Evolutionary imperatives

This is not the environment in which humans evolved. An infant in a hunter-gatherer band – the way we all lived for 99% of our time on the planet – would have spent many hours being held, and not only by the mother³. "Infants with several attachment figures grow up better able to integrate multiple mental perspectives"⁴. We are programmed from the start to seek out third positions, to acquire the "capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves."⁵

Systematic comparisons between sedentary foraging and farming people living now in neighbouring parts of the Congo basin show how much more egalitarian the foragers are^{6, 7}. Men and women see themselves as equal. They hold and converse with their tiny children more intensively, they let the baby decide when to wean and teach them to share from an early age. Violence is rare, though teasing is common. Such children are more socialised than in the west and at the same time protected from catastrophe in the event of the mother's death. Amongst the farmers, in contrast, "corporal punishment is not an uncommon response for young children who do not listen to or respect their parents or older siblings"⁴.

In the modern world little public money is available for perinatal services⁸, parental leave – in spite of the fact that, when paid, it *saves lives*⁹ – for quality child care and universal education, affordable and secure homes, healthy food, subsidised transport and energy, sports fields, swimming pools, libraries, parks and playgrounds that make rearing children and adolescents more manageable and more successful. Tax, like children, is seen as a 'burden'. So governments of all parties sign up to reducing it, yet still find money for bank bailouts and unsustainable wars. Whether local or national, tax should be a contribution to the common good, an instrument of social justice. It is collected from citizens, for citizens. In the current climate this equation is neither acknowledged nor understood.

Elegant research shows how already by a few months old babies are engaged in triadic relationships; and they are affected by tensions between the adults caring for them. When caregivers are uncooperative infants may be “enlisted to serve the parents’ problematic relationship rather than to develop their own social competence”¹⁰. Children will more likely thrive if caregivers – parents and grandparents, childminders, daycare staff, nursery teachers – get on with one another, like a good team. “Communication between parents and care providers is crucial to the quality of care.”^{11, 12}

Inequality undermines trust

A collaborative partnership between caregivers does not cost money, but is undermined by social disintegration, the most poisonous source of which is rising inequality. In Britain this has reached levels not seen since the 1920s. The much maligned 1970s was actually the most egalitarian in our history. Consider this: one index of social health is the number of boys born in comparison to girls. Because the male fetus is more vulnerable¹³ to maternal stress, women produce fewer boys when times are hard. (For example there is a fall in the ratio of boys to girls a few months after disasters such as massive floods or earthquakes, or the terrorist attack on 9/11¹⁴). In England and Wales the highest ratio of boys to girls occurred in 1975.¹⁵ In terms of contented mothers it was the best of times.

Inequality creates stress in parents who can’t keep up, and anxiety in the better off who fear sliding down. No one is comfortable on a steep slope¹⁶. It makes all of us less trusting and more averse to communal commitments, such as respecting our neighbours and paying tax. Infant mortality, mental illness, drug abuse, dropping out of education, rates of imprisonment, obesity, teenage births and violence are all higher in unequal countries like ours.¹⁷ Yet something has been understood that was not clear before. There is a greater recognition that early intervention is a good idea: “the brain can be sculpted by experience”^{18,19}; the sooner the better²⁰.

Though often disappointed, our ancient baby is born to expect some kind – a rather conservative kind – of socialism. What will today’s infants be talking about in 2050? If they know any history they will regret lost opportunities; our collective loss of vision that led to wasted generations. The success of the post war consensus was due in part to the fact that it lasted longer than one or two parliamentary terms, so that children could grow up, get educated and housed, find partners, get work and free healthcare without overwhelming instability or despair²¹. The needs of a baby born today are precisely what they were for one born in the 1950s, or 50,000 years ago. New knowledge of infant development is catching up with evolved wisdom, yet we continue to ignore both, and build bigger obstacles to secure attachments.

Dr Sebastian Kraemer
Honorary Consultant Tavistock Clinic
sebastiankraemer.com
2017

- ¹ Music, G. (2017). *Nurturing Natures: Attachment and Children's Emotional, Social and Brain Development (Second Edition)* Routledge.
- ² "UK was the only rich EU country to cut welfare spending as a proportion of GDP between 2011 and 2014." Guardian 21.12.16 <http://bit.ly/2pC5iXo>
- ³ yet it is always she who will take the child when inconsolable. Tronick E. (2007) Multiple caretaking in the context of human evolution: Why don't the Efé know the Western prescription for child care? In E. Tronick, *The Neurobehavioral and Socio-Emotional Development of Infants and Children*, Norton, p102-22
- ⁴ Hrdy, S. B. (2016) Development plus social selection in the evolution of "emotionally modern" humans. In (eds.) C. L. Meehan & A. N. Crittenden. *Childhood: Origins, Evolution, and Implications*. Albuquerque NM: University of New Mexico Press, pp11-44, p25
- ⁵ Britton, R. (1989) The missing link; parental sexuality in the Oedipus complex. In: R. Britton, M. Feldman, & E. O'Shaughnessy (Eds.) *The Oedipus Complex Today: Clinical Implications* (pp. 83-101). London: Karnac, p 87
- ⁶ Hewlett BS, Fouts HN, Boyette AH, Hewlett BL. (2011) Social learning among Congo Basin hunter-gatherers. *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society B* 366: 1168-1178. doi: 10.1098/rstb.2010.0373
- ⁷ Egalitarianism is necessary for survival in hunting-gathering bands, not an ideological choice. It involves active ostracism and suppression of aspiring alpha males. Boehm C. (2012) Ancestral hierarchy and conflict. *Science* 336; 6083: 844-847 doi:10.1126/science.1219961
- ⁸ The pioneering parent infant service in Redbridge and Waltham Forest could be replicated in all areas with dramatic effect. The current marketised view of health means no preventive services are safe. <http://www.nelft.nhs.uk/services-bdhvrbwf-ppimhs> All-round perinatal care will identify families in need of both mental and physical health care¹⁷.
- ⁹ "A ten week extension in paid leave is predicted to decrease post neonatal mortality rates by 4.1%" Tanaka S. (2005) Parental Leave and child health across OECD countries *The Economic Journal* 115 (501) F7-F28 doi: 10.1111/j.0013-0133.2005.00970.x This remarkable finding represents just the tip of an iceberg of developmental damage and pathology, which could be modified by intensive early support for families.
- ¹⁰ Fivaz-Depeursinge E, Cairo S, Scaiola CL, & Favez N. (2012) Nine-month-olds' triangular interactive strategies with their parents' couple in low-coordination families: A descriptive study, *Infant Mental Health Journal* 33 (1): 10-21. doi:10.1002/imhj.20314
- ¹¹ Leach P. (2009) *Child Care Today, What We Know and What We Need to Know*, Polity Press, p294
- ¹² Owen MT, Ware AM, Barfoot B. (2000) Caregiver-Mother Partnership Behavior and the Quality of Caregiver-Child and Mother-Child Interactions. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 15(3): 413-28
- ¹³ Kraemer S. (2000) The fragile male, *British Medical Journal* 321:1609-12. doi: 10.1136/bmj.321.7276.1609
- ¹⁴ Catalano R, Bruckner T, Marks AR, Eskenazi B. (2006) Exogenous shocks to the human sex ratio: the case of September 11, 2001 in New York City, *Human Reproduction* 21:3127-3131
- ¹⁵ *Sex ratio of live births, England and Wales 1838-1998* www.radstats.org.uk/no074/article4a.htm
- ¹⁶ *The Divide* film 2016 <http://thedividedocumentary.com/>
- ¹⁷ see Wilkinson R, Pickett K. (2010) *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is better for everyone*, Penguin. https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/SpiritLevel-jpg_0.pdf
- Dorling D, (2016) *A Better Politics*. London Publishing Partnership. www.dannydorling.org/books/betterpolitics
- ¹⁸ Marmot M. (2015) *The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World*, Bloomsbury, p134
- ¹⁹ Teicher MH, Samson JA. (2016) Annual Research Review: Enduring neurobiological effects of childhood abuse and neglect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 57: 241-266. doi: 10.1111/jcpp.12507
- ²⁰ Early intervention to reduce depression and type 2 diabetes/obesity/metabolic syndrome must be integrated. Kraemer S. (2015) Mental health: needs go beyond RCTs. *Lancet* 385: 1831-1832. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)60922-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60922-9)
- ²¹ The consensus was forged in war time, when social cohesion was at its strongest; the enemy was elsewhere. Even the King had a ration book. Yet in this supposed golden age there were endemic abuses of power over children, women, and any people regarded as deviant or socially inferior. Until the 1960s it was not a good time to be a male homosexual, suicidal, or in need of an abortion (all illegal if acted on), a single mother, black or other ethnic minority, in a hopeless marriage, mentally ill, disabled, or a female employee (who is still in the twenty first century paid just under 10% less the male doing the same work <http://www.equalpayportal.co.uk/statistics/>)