

The Infant Socialist

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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, trusted 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, if he survives, 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 resilient, 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 minimal welfare 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 mother². "Infants with several attachment figures grow up better able to integrate multiple mental perspectives"³. We are programmed from early on to monitor the quality of relationships *between* the people who look after us. Elegant research shows how already by a few months old babies 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"⁴. They become couple therapists to their parents! Children will more likely thrive if caregivers – parents and grandparents, childminders, health visitors, children's centre staff, nursery nurses and teachers – can work with each others' necessary differences, like a good team; "communication between parents and care providers is crucial to the quality of care"^{5,6} This is not a matter of politeness; it requires emotional effort.

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^{7,8}. Men and women see themselves as more 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, with several attachments, protected from catastrophe in the event of the mother's death, a far from rare event. 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"⁷.

In the modern world little public money is available for integrated health and social perinatal services (where parental anxieties could be attended to right away⁹), paid parental leave (which saves infant lives)¹⁰, for universal well-staffed children's centres (which replicate our evolutionary environment and promote lasting resilience in the most needy)¹¹,

¹ Music, G. (2017). *Nurturing Natures: Attachment and Children's Emotional, Social and Brain Development (Second Edition)* Routledge.

² 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

³ 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

⁴ 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

⁵ Leach P. (2009) *Child Care Today, What We Know and What We Need to Know*, Polity Press, p294

⁶ 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

⁷ 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

⁸ 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

⁹ Kraemer S. (2015) Mental health: needs go beyond RCTs *Lancet* 385: 1831-1832.

<http://www.sebastiankraemer.com/docs/Kraemer%20integrated%20perinatal%20care.pdf>

¹⁰ "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.

¹¹ Too late to protect the centres from widespread closures, Sure Start has recently been shown to have protected many of the most vulnerable children from hospital admission, well into their adolescence; socially promoted self-regulation. [The health impacts of Sure Start](#) (2021)

quality child care and universal education, affordable and secure homes, healthy food, subsidised transport and energy, sports fields, swimming pools, opportunities to play music, libraries, parks and playgrounds all of which make rearing children and adolescents more manageable and more successful. Tax, like children, is seen as a 'burden'. So governments sign up to reducing it, yet still find money for unsustainable wars, bank bailouts (and, at least since the 2020s, for their friends). 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.

No one is comfortable on a steep slope

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 were 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 vulnerable¹² to maternal stress women produce fewer boys when times are hard; (eg after disasters – such as massive floods or earthquakes and the terrorist attack on 9/11 – there is a fall in the newborn ratio of boys to girls¹³). In contrast when there is social confidence more boys are born. In England and Wales the highest ratio of boys to girls occurred in 1976¹⁴ when income inequality was at its lowest ever level in UK history. In terms of contented mothers it was the best of times. (We do not need more boys, but do need more social cohesion!)

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 slope. 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 ours¹⁵. Yet something has been understood that was less clear before. There is a greater recognition that early intervention is a good idea^{16, 17} 'The strongest instruments to break the vicious circles of disadvantage lie at the start of life'.¹⁸

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 the 2050s? This is the generation most likely to be forced to reverse half a century of negligence in the face of global heating due to the dominance of fossil interests¹⁹. 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 insecurity or despair. But it also depended on social cohesion supported by confidence in continued economic growth and by the idea of an enemy behind the iron curtain, ('the enemy without'). At the same time, crushing social conformity was maintained until the 1960s by an unreconstructed class system and the oppression of women and of all minorities²⁰.

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.

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¹² Kraemer S. (2000) [The fragile male](#), *British Medical Journal* 321:1609-12. doi: 10.1136/bmj.321.7276.1609

¹³ 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

¹⁴ [Birth Ratios in England and Wales: a report on gender ratios at birth](#) Dept Health, London

¹⁵ Wilkinson R, Pickett K. (2019) *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-being*, Penguin

¹⁶ Skouteris, H., et al. (2022). Nurturing children's development through healthy eating and active living: Time for policies to support effective interventions in the context of responsive emotional support and early learning. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 30, e6719– e6729. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.14106>

¹⁷ [In Brief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development](#), Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2020

¹⁸ World Health Organisation Europe (2013). *Review of Social Determinants and the Health Divide in the WHO European Region: Final Report*. Copenhagen, Denmark: WHO Regional Office for Europe.

¹⁹ Skovgaard, J, van Asselt, H. The politics of fossil fuel subsidies and their reform: Implications for climate change mitigation. *WIREs Clim Change*. 2019; 10:e581. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.581>

²⁰ The consensus was forged in war time, when social cohesion was at its strongest (and, by 1945, the male/female ratio at birth at its equal highest). While still Emperor of India even King George VI 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, a woman in a hopeless marriage, mentally ill, disabled, or a female employee (who is still in the twenty first century paid 15.4% less the male doing the same work ([Office for National Statistics](#), 2021)