

# Mean societies produce mean people. Often disappointed a baby is born to expect a rather conservative socialism

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## The Infant Citizen.

### Mean societies produce mean people.

Though often disappointed a baby is born to expect some kind – a rather conservative kind – of socialism.

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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 people<sup>1</sup> 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 cuts<sup>2</sup> 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 mother (yet it is always she who will take the child

when inconsolable<sup>3</sup>.) "Infants with several attachment figures grow up better able to integrate multiple mental perspectives"<sup>4</sup>. 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<sup>5, 6</sup>. 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"<sup>4</sup>

In the modern world little public money is available for perinatal services<sup>7</sup>, parental leave – in spite of the fact that, when paid, it saves lives<sup>8</sup> – 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.<sup>2</sup>

Elegant research shows how already by a few months old babies are affected by tensions between the adults around them. When caregivers are uncooperative infants are "enlisted to serve the parents' problematic relationship rather than to develop their own social competence" <sup>9</sup>. 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."<sup>10, 11</sup>

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 vulnerable<sup>12</sup> 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 9/11<sup>13</sup>). In England and Wales the highest ratio of boys to girls occurred in 1975. <sup>14</sup> 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 slope<sup>15</sup>. 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.<sup>16</sup> 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"<sup>17, 18</sup>; the sooner the better<sup>19</sup>.

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 despair<sup>20</sup>. 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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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 care

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20 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 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 significantly behind the male doing the same work <http://www.equalpayportal.co.uk/statistics/>)