

Children are unhappy because their parents are too

Despite the best efforts of politicians, the growth agenda does not apply to our personal wellbeing



Deborah Orr

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A Unicef report warns that children are being starved of parental time. Photograph: Fuse/Getty Images/Fuse

If the global market had an emperor, he wouldn't be wearing any clothes. It is astounding that so much evidence can be staring so many people in the face, yet failing to inspire even a lull in an international conversation that peddles "rebalancing", "a return to growth" or, at its most downbeat, "10 years of pain" before the "sunny uplands" of prosperity are regained.

In the eurozone, surely, the drama that is being played out is merely a microcosm of the drama that is occurring worldwide, and at the same time a macrocosm of that which is occurring within countries, within regions, within cities. Put simply, vast economic disparities make human needs and wants too diverse to leave a great deal of room for the universal, cohesive desires that make societies stick together.

Unicef has this week published another report that warns of ailing childhoods. Children, starved of time by busy, working parents, are lavished with material possessions instead, which don't make them happy. Actually, working five days a week, finding some time to do the labour of running a home, then being too tired and short of time to develop hobbies beyond shopping, isn't a recipe for adult contentment either. Maybe it's not the demands of the rat-race, or the vacuity of consumer culture, that is making children unhappy, per se. Maybe it's a great deal more simple than that. Maybe children are unhappy because their parents are unhappy. Indeed, how could it be otherwise?

Even though the left is generally receptive, of course, to reports that suggest that materialism is a Bad Thing, some people will be suspicious of theories that seem designed to make women guilty. But there is no need for this. The problem is that life should be more family and community-friendly, in general. A longstanding problem with feminism is that it was hijacked by capitalism, and the advances that women have made over the last 40 years have often been advances that suited the "growth" agenda and not the human satisfaction agenda. It doesn't have to be that way.

The funny thing is that currently the Conservatives talk this talk, more than Labour does. David Cameron is well known to believe that "happiness growth" is every bit as important as economic growth. He is well known too, for his yearning for "a big society" in which we all chip in to help each other, instead of relying on the state. The way to achieve such lovely, nurturing lifestyles is perfectly obvious. Working less in paid work will offer people time to develop other skills – skills that they can then use to help and engage other people – within their families and outside them. Such purposeful and rewarding activity will in turn quench that addictive desire to acquire that keeps people buying more things to fill up the empty spaces in their lives.

But what's the problem here? All that unpaid activity doesn't grow the economy. It's doing paid work that grows the economy, and then buying things and services with the money that you have earned. All of those unhappy parents, with their unhappy children, are being good citizens, perfect citizens, in a world that fetishises, idolises, and always gives precedence, even in the most unpromising of circumstances, to growth.

Like a human body, like any living thing, once an economy stops growing, it starts dying. Or so we are told. Except that the economy is not a living thing. It's a constructed thing, a thing that can be deconstructed too. The unwillingness to recognise this is perilous, because it means that economies are being left to deconstruct in a chaotic fashion, with repeated interventions to shore them up in the short term. It's not going to work, in the world, in Europe, in Manchester ... anywhere. Just as economic conditions are too different in different countries for a unified currency to work, economic conditions are too different in different households for shared values to hold our society together at any level.

The obvious thing to do would be the thing that started happening organically when the recession first started to bite: moving towards a shorter working week, of three days or four. Actually, since there are seven days in a week, that would be fine. It could make businesses more efficient, because they could operate right through the week, instead of leaving expensive buildings empty, and expensive equipment idle, over every weekend. It would also offer a pleasing antidote to rush-hour madness, which costs time and money in itself.

But there are two problems here – the haves and the have-nots. The problem for the have-nots is obvious. Even with unemployment figures back above the 2.5 million mark, many people are working part-time when they want to work full-time – for the money they need to pay the bills (bills that often grow in line with growth). But the poor old haves, let's offer them some pity as well, for they are so addicted to making money, then spending it on stuff that will make them more money, that trying to stop them is like trying to persuade an addict to hand in his crack. Sometimes, of course, the people addicted to money are addicted to crack as well.

Their money does not make them happy. Research has shown that once a person earns £50,000 a year, further cash makes little difference to their levels of contentment. The driven wealthy, scuttling around a world they don't call home, looking for places where their wealth will grow with the least interference from the revenue, really are like drug addicts, trying to recapture the hit that they got from the first big deal. Poor sods. They are no more happy than children lavished with, and craving, material things, but starved of time to relax and enjoy being part of a human project that is bigger than themselves. Great relative poverty and great relative wealth – both are bad for humans. What a shame that no one seems able to get those two groups of wretched souls together and persuade them to work out some outlandish kind of socio-political philosophy that could assuage the misery of both, eh?

Maybe it's silly to be upset about a single public garden, in a time of austerity, and one that is visited by only 2,500 people each year. But the walled garden on the Scottish Island of Jura is a beautiful and magical place, made no less special because it's such a wonderful surprise to find it there. Or it used to be, anyway.

The garden was open to the public for many years. But when the Ardfin Estate, of which it is part, was bought by the Australian hedge-fund manager, Greg Coffey, the garden was closed "until further notice". It is apparently being "refurbished". But I was last there a couple of years ago, and no refurbishment was needed then, far from it.

Only about 210 people live on Jura, and the garden is part of the island's fragile tourist trade. Coffey has not visited the island since he bought the estate, in November 2010. Perhaps his investment in the island will eventually turn out to have been a great thing – he is worth £200 million, so he can certainly afford to lavish love and attention on his 12,000 acres. But what ring in my head are the words F Scott Fitzgerald wrote about his wealthy, empty creations, Tom and Daisy: " ... they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness." How awful, to own such a beautiful place, and never visit it. How awful that no one else can visit and enjoy it any more either.