

Economic alternatives and childhood poverty

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Abstract

Current national and international economic policies are exerting ever more direct pressures on children's lives and futures. This paper reviews key concerns and contradictions in neo-liberal economic policies' effects on childhood. Alternative feminist and green economics and critical theory critiques of neo-liberalism are summarised and their implications for childhood poverty are considered. In conclusion there are suggestions about sustainable green economics for childhood to take account of the problems of advocating perpetual economic growth in a finite planet.

Keywords:

Well-being, ecology, social capital, development, sustainable policies

This paper reviews dominant and alternative economic theories and policies, and then their relevance to childhood, before considering what a sustainable green economics for childhood might be like. It is vital to emphasise that this paper is mainly not about absolute poverty as destitution, hunger and unremitting debt. This paper does not aim to romanticise poverty but to be realistic about it. The paper concentrates on Britain and wealthier societies in the minority 17% of the world population. However, it does also review how economic policies apply to children in the poorer majority world, and what we might learn from them about original meanings of "economical" living.

The English Labour Government¹ in power from 1997 particularly aimed "to end child poverty". Yet certain child poverty rates in England have continued to rise, and other government economic policies "for children" also raise puzzling contradictions and effects. Some of these are reviewed in the first section of this paper, on currently dominant neo-liberal economics.

The next sections consider three approaches to explaining such contradictions, selected for their different and illuminating alternative perspectives: feminist economics, green economics, and critical theory. Feminist economists deplore the concentration of wealth in the two "top" levels of societies, the commercial sector and the state funded and organised sector. Economies are run, they observe, mainly for and by powerful men. Feminists such as Henderson (1993), Mies (1999) and Mellor (2006) question the dominant notion that the commercial sector funds and supports all other levels of society. They argue that the reverse occurs: commerce relies on and feeds off all the other levels, including unpaid work largely done by women.

As papers in this Journal demonstrate, green economists extend feminist concerns about commerce's destructive exploitation of natural and human resources. They assert that this exploitation is guided and rationalised by the false accounting of neo-liberal economics, which refuses to acknowledge the real human and ecological costs concealed in its profits and misleading predictions. Green economics proposes sustainable alternatives (Kennett and Heinemann 2005).

Critical theory also explores contradictions within neo-liberal economics. This paper refers to Scambler's consideration of the invisible reality of socio-political movements that are found below the surface of their effects. Scambler (2002) argues that the deeper movements are "real" (Bhaskar, 1989) in that they obtain across numerous

examples and contexts and he criticises social researchers for spending too much time on collecting and reporting surface appearances and associations (such as poor housing, poor education and low wages linked to teenage pregnancy or crime), and too little time on searching for deeper realities and explanations. Scambler analyses Habermas's (1987) concepts of the System (government, law and profit economy), which colonises the Lifeworld (personal and civic life), in order to explain the continuing and increasing inequalities in terms of class, gender and ethnicity.

This paper considers how feminist and green economics and critical theory all tend to be adult-centric, to ignore childhood and, apart from green economics, to overlook conflicts of interests between generations and age groupings. The conclusion speculates on what form economic theories and policies for childhood might take.

Neo-liberal economics

In figure 1 "Differing economic calculations", neo-liberal economics confines itself to column 2. The profit motive drives production and consumption, and discounts everything outside column 2 as externalities. The aim is to obtain land, labour and natural resources, space, air, water, fuel and minerals as freely or cheaply as possible from the input column, and discard or disclaim them when they are unprofitable (when workers become ill or old, when effluents pollute local rivers) in column 3.

Insert here, figure 1. Differing economic calculations

Neo-liberal economics appears to be ever more directly influencing childhood. Analyses, advice and directives from international governance that target systems affecting children and young people include those from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organisation, European Economic Community, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, United Nations Children's Fund and US Agency for International Development. There are also the countless governmental and non-governmental organisations concerned with the economics of services, trade and aid. Another powerful influence is the many commercial pressures on Western children to conform to fashion and consume prodigiously, and (in the UK) "pester" or (in the US) "nag" their parents to spend lavishly, frequently on items produced by children in the poorer majority world.

In England, the Treasury (Finance Department) now dominates government policies regarding children and young people. For example, government policy is set out in *Every Child Matters* (Treasury, 2003), and the Childcare Bill (Treasury, Department for Education and Skills [employable workers], Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Trade and Industry, November 2005). The "Children's Agenda" aims to establish 3,500 children's centres based in schools by 2010 for children aged from the early months to 14 years, and to prescribe inspections for all paid services for children from birth onwards. Extended schools open almost throughout the year, from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm, 50 hours a week and longer than European working hours for adults, because the "childcare market" must meet all local needs for fully employable parents. Most of the related government funding (Treasury, 2003; Treasury at al., 2005) will support the rebuilding and structures, and over 25 formal layers of planning and regulation, management and inspection, led by a Treasury Taskforce "to raise quality and ensure value for money". Additionally, the market in training and employing people to do "child work" is set to expand enormously. A new Children's Workforce Development Council is one response to concerns that England has far too few skilled qualified childcare and education staff.

Child poverty increased sharply during the Thatcher/Conservative years 1979-1997 (Piachaud, 2001). Since its election in 1997, the Labour government has lifted

around 600,000 children out of poverty, but there has been almost no progress with the remaining ones since 2000 (National Statistics, 2006). In inner London, by 2004, 700,000 children, 54%, lived in poverty, and 70,000 of them were in temporary accommodation for homeless families (ECP and ALG, 2005). The government aims to reduce child poverty by increasing some benefits, but primarily through “welfare to work” policies aiming at fewer “workless” households and more employed parents.

The primary aim of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (chief finance minister) is to promote enterprise by two key means: to increase numbers of employed adults, and to enable all children to “reach their full potential”, which means to become highly qualified, high earning adults able to compete in global economies. This aim sees childhood less as a valuable time in itself than as a time for investment in order to increase profits and reduce costs during future adulthood.

Current neo-liberal economics assumes that lightly regulated markets increase the national wealth and allow wealth to “trickle down” throughout society. Instead, Britain is the least equal society in the European Union (ESRC, 2005). In 2006, New York had 34 billionaires and London came second with 23. London also has over 100,000 multi-millionaires who have tax advantages because they are mainly domiciled abroad (Maidment, 2006). By 2007, London had higher unemployment rates than in 1979. It had a 23% increase in its billionaire residents in the year up to April 2005. The top 1,000 richest people in Britain in 2005 owned £249 billion, whereas in 1997 they owned £98.99 billion. The share of the national wealth for the poorest 50% of British people was 10% in 1986 and fell to 5% by 2002. Meanwhile, the cost of buying a home in London (usually the highest proportional cost of all for young families just starting their mortgage) doubled between 1996 and 2001 (Ingram, 2004) and has continued to multiply. The “prudent” government relies on private companies to build and run the services in new and refurbished schools and hospitals in buy-now pay-later Public Private Partnership (PPP) contracts. The real costs do not appear in today’s budgets, and taxpayers pay for the building costs and services with interest over 30, 40 or 60 years. This policy encourages firms to provide cheaper-to-build and expensive-to-run as well as less ecological buildings (Pollock, 2004). PPP binds younger and future generations into paying for our present costs and interest, as well as for their own buildings, services and other needs. PPPs imply that it will be easier for future generations to pay for our costs, whereas dwindling oil and other mineral supplies alone are likely vastly to increase the cost of living. Young families also carry decades of debts and interest on student loans for higher education that was free for older people in Britain. British working parents are expected to pay for childcare until children are 14 years old. However, in some Nordic countries, the costs are far lower when children can look after themselves after school hours from around 8 years of age. In Germany, 10 year olds attend school in the morning only and can spend from around 1.00-7.00 pm playing out with friends, often unsupervised by adults (Zeihner, 2003).

In Britain, researchers, voluntary organisations and local government call for increased benefits for families. They deplore the high costs of childcare and the very low salaries that many parents earn (Bradbury et al., 2001; Hirsch and Millar, 2004; Duncan et al., 2004; Millar and Gardiner, 2004; Bradshaw, 2005). Many of them debate the complications of defining poverty beyond income (DWP, 2003) and of assessing poverty, as well as the vaguer concepts of social capital and social exclusion (Fine 2001; Morrow, 2004; Pantazis et al., 2006). There is analysis of historical political unconcern for child poverty (O’Neill, 1994; Hendrick 2003; Platt, 2005), and of the commodification of children (Qvortrup et al., 1994; Wintersberger, 2005). However, there is a broad tendency to support neo-liberal governments’ economics: to assume that increasing parental employment is the major solution to child poverty (ECP-ALG, 2005), and to confine economics into terms of wealth and poverty, earning power or potential and income. Researchers’ questions and data generally confirm government beliefs about the adverse outcomes of poverty in terms

of teenage pregnancy, “workless” households, and “lone” parenting (Mayhew et al., 2005). Wide-ranging research findings, from babies’ diet, stimulation or brain development (Young, 1998), to how early education may affect later criminal tendencies (IADB, 1999) are filtered into monetary profit-loss terms of cost-effective policies (see for example, Penn’s (2005) critical review). British education policy, which assumes that parents are the consumers, implicitly treats children as the objects and products of the system. Children are perceived in terms of inputs and outputs, or units of human and economic capital if they are not invisible and ignored in economic policies (O’Neil, 1994; Qvortrup et al., 1994).

There are increasing warnings of the dangers of neo-liberal economics for humanity generally, when all personal and public life is reduced into financial terms. Bakan (2005), for example, traces the growth of the corporation over the past 150 years from relative obscurity to world dominance. He shows how laws require corporations to be psychopathically competitive, greedy, wasteful and destructive. Any appearance of altruism is only legitimate if it serves the corporation’s interests and profits. Bakan suggests that individuals and societies are being recast in the image of the corporation, as if true human nature is greedy self-interest, and the show of altruism can only be either hypocritical or foolish. Chua (2003) reviews the rapid enforced spread of free markets and “democratic” elections as “setting the world on fire” with ethnic hatred when, in many countries, the very few wealthy people belong to ethnic minorities. During elections, candidates canvass for votes by promising to evict the wealthy few and to redistribute wealth. The effects of rising hatred of immigrants generally and not only of the few billionaires tend to be far more powerful and lasting than any efforts at redistribution. The next sections consider alternative economic approaches and their views of neo-liberal economics.

Feminist economics

Feminist economists advocate proper respect and rewards for women’s work through radical restructuring of neo-liberal economic theories and policies, which they portray in a system of economic layers, figure 2. Maria Mies (1999, 2007) proposes an iceberg model of neo-liberal economics with only layers 1 and 2 being visible and formally paid and regulated. All the other submerged layers are informally paid, or unpaid, with little or no protection for workers, particularly those from the majority poorer world, or even recognition that many people – mothers, housewives, carers - are workers and contributors, as feminists have long demonstrated (Mitchell and Oakley, 1976). Hazel Henderson (1993, 2007) sees the layers as a cake, and calls layer 1 “icing”, as if it is an optional decoration and not an essential part of the substantial cake. Layer 4 she calls “filling”.

Insert here Figure 2. Feminist concepts of economic layers (adapted from Mies 1999 and Henderson 1993)

Feminist economics questions the neo-liberal belief that commerce generates all other wealth and thereby supports the whole of society. They argue instead that commerce feeds off and depends on other parts of society, the essential layers. For example, in figure 1, far from “labour” arriving into industry and commerce ready trained, people have had years of childcare and education (column 1), and continue to be “maintained” at home and other care settings during and after (column 3) their working life, mainly by women’s work, unpaid and therefore excluded from column 2. The system is not sustainable when the “top” layers (figure 2), protected by law and policy, extract resources from the vast “lower” layers, locally and globally, through violence and exploitation that go unrecognised in neo-liberal economics.

One feminist response is to demand equal pay and rights between men and women workers in layers 1-3. Another is to campaign for economic recognition for “women’s work”, such as wages for housework, in effect to push most work up into layers 1 and 2. A third response is to advocate a radical new green economics.

Green economics²

As Green economics is discussed so extensively in the first two volumes of this Journal (for example, Kennett and Heinemann’s 2005 review; this section will simply summarise some of its key characteristics:

- * The view that that the ecosystem is priceless and should be respected and preserved for future generations in principle;
- * Acknowledgement of the true value of columns 1 and 3 in figure 1, on which the life, health and well-being of all species depend;
- * Endorsement of the growing consensus of scientists that human-caused effects on global warming are seriously harming life on earth and threatening its survival (Monbiot, 2006; Lynam, 2006);
- * Criticism of neo-liberal policies of globalised trade and perpetual growth with their immense destruction and waste of a fragile finite planet (Lohmann, 2006);
- * Urgent advocacy of alternative policies (Anderson, 1999, 2005; Scott Cato and Kennett, 1999; Stiglitz, 2002; Hamilton, 2003; Woodin and Lucas, 2004; Kennett and Heinemann, 2005; Wall, 2005). These warnings were made decades and even centuries ago (Hodson, 1972; Tawney, 1982).
- * Challenge to the claims that neo-liberal economics is a “hard” mathematical “value-free” science, driven by the inevitable demands of growth and monetary measures, and is not socially constructed, misleading and destructive, assuming a false psychology of human greed.

Green economists see money, not as the measure of all things, but as a volatile unreliable indicator and predictor of priceless natural and human resources and well-being, for which there are far more salient measures than money. They aim to reintroduce original holistic meaning of economics as the management of all aspects of the whole household.

Further problems in neo-liberal economics are raised by Green and other critics. Gross Domestic Products (GDPs) measure economic growth and success in goods and also “bads”, including the costs of crime, prisons, illness, disasters, accidents, advertising, waste, packaging and commuting. A United States annual Index of Social Health of 16 measures includes infant mortality, child abuse and poverty, teenage suicides, drug use, mental illness and high-school drop-out rates. The Index shows how during 1977-1994 (the latest available records for the report in Douthwaite’s 1999 paper), the GDP steadily rose, and so too did the reported incidence of these problems. Statistics in other wealthy countries tend to confirm this. Ironically, the more costly the “bads” become, the healthier the GDP appears to be. A report comparing child well-being in 21 rich countries (UNICEF, 2007) took six main measures: material well-being; health and safety; educational well-being; family and peer relations (trust, “just talking with parents”, “kind and helpful peers”); health and risk behaviours; violence; subjective well-being (health, liking school, personal satisfaction). Despite being the wealthiest economies, the UK and the US have the worst results (figure 3).

Insert here figure 3, A report comparing child well-being in 21 rich countries

Alternative proposals from Green economic, based on holistic respect for the interconnectedness of all things and a psychology of social solidarity with moral and

aesthetic values, include: favouring simple, peaceful, harmonious ways of living rather than stressful competitive and violent ways; creating rather than consuming; promoting sustainable local trade instead of exploitative, wasteful global trade and food industries. This third aim gained new public support when its value for children's health and education was shown in the 2005 British television series about healthy school meals, suggesting that the public is ready to understand and support green policies when these are clearly explained in practical contexts.

Mies (1999; 2007) researched with majority world "subsistence" workers on how their life-styles can accord more with the good and rewarding life than affluence and conspicuous consumption can (also Hamilton, 2003; Wall, 2005). There need to be clearer distinctions between types of poverty, between destitution (to be prevented and relieved urgently) and the frugal thrift in which people in most times and places have lived. After a few decades of Western affluence, the concepts "thrift", "frugality" and "subsistence" can seem irrelevant and even abhorrent. Sooner or later, argue the Greens, we will all be forced to re-adopt them, and social justice now demands more equal sharing of global resources, such as through contraction and convergence and standard carbon cards for all adults, working towards a sustainable equitable level for all (Mayer, 2000; Hillman and Fawcett, 2004).

Critical theory

Why do inequalities increase in Britain despite neo-liberal claims to promote equality and opportunity? Sociologists and epidemiologists report how the effects of inequalities on ill health are constantly reproduced through numerous aspects of personal life-style and social structures despite public policies and interventions aimed to reduce and prevent them (Marmot and Wilkinson, 1999). Critical theorists, however, assert that much research records, but does not explain the processes of inequalities, and they explore inherent underlying contradictions in global capitalism (O'Neill, 1998; Brown and Lauder, 2001; Fine, 2001). Scambler and Higgs (1999) cite Wilkinson's (1996) evidence that among countries with over about US \$5,000 GDP per capita, people on a higher income in grossly unequal societies are less healthy than people on a lower income who live in more equal societies. They propose that beyond such "surface data" statistics, explanations are needed. These do not merely record the "webs of causation" and risk factors for inequalities, but also search for the active powerful "spider" spinning the webs (Krieger, 1994:899 cited in Scambler, 2001:108). Bhaskar's (1989) critical realism is helpful in showing the reality of "beneath the surface" objects, such as class relations. These objects are observed in their surface effects, and are "real", like laws of gravity for example, because they obtain over many examples and contexts. They reveal how inequalities are shaped by the power elite (government, policy makers), "informed and harried by the capitalist elite" (commerce, industry) (Scambler, 2001:108). In green and feminist terms this is the enormous power of column 2 in figure 1, and of levels 1 and 2 in figure 2. (Yet there are complications in over-identifying commerce with government, such as when laws protect human beings and their rights.)

Bhaskar's concepts of dynamic class relations can also inform explanations about continuing inequalities. Rather than seeing class relations as fixed entities, these are theorised as dynamic interacting layers of factors and influences and divisions between those who control the means of production and those who do not. The effects on childhood will be reviewed later. When sociologists move beyond positivist collection of surface data and invariant empirical regularities, they can generate and test theories about "the how as well as the why of inequalities". These may be understood as "indirect (and largely unintended) consequences of the behaviours of members of the power elite informed by the capitalist executive" (Scambler 2001:113-4).

Inequalities are less categories or structures than historical phenomena that happen in human relations. To explore this, Scambler draws on Habermas's (1987) concepts of the System (government, law, the formal economy, the top 2 layers of figure 2) and the Lifeworld (private and civic life, the other layers in figure 2). Habermas (1996) distinguishes spontaneous voluntary associations in civic society from the System of the market and the law. Among many mechanisms, the elite control the means of production and profit and, as the System, they colonise the Lifeworld, by absorbing it into the formal political/economic system, and turning social and political issues (such as childcare and education) into technical ones for "experts" to control (Habermas, 1987). Neo-liberalism involves disorganised deregulated global capitalism, and the withdrawal of practical support for citizens by the welfare state. Yet the drawing back of material help is accompanied by moving the state and economic power forward to invade and control both public and private life through the kind of Children's Agenda mentioned earlier. People are treated less as active determining citizens, than as passive clients of state services and consumers guided by the mass media. When the System colonises the Lifeworld, Habermas considers, there are fewer shared meanings and understandings and social bonds, but more social disintegration, and feelings of helplessness, alienation and demoralisation. Habermas's theories offer extensive means of analysing childhood poverty and social exclusion.

Implications for childhood of the different economic theories

Neo-liberal economics tends to ignore children's views, situating them in adult-centred families and schools, and is ambivalent about children's work. Depending on when child labour serves adults' convenience and profits, or threatens these, children are included or edged out of labour markets, employed as workers or confined into schools (Qvortrup, 1999). Zelizer (1985) analyses how when Western children gradually left the labour market during the past 150 years, their economic contribution fell and their sentimental value rose. Their work has become the very difficult, demanding and dependent task of emotional labour, the role of "expensive nuisance, slave and super pet" (Holt, 1975). Their often stressful schoolwork is not recognised or valued as essential work now, on which society's future depends, although it is increasingly regarded as investment in human capital that will yield future profits when children become adults.

Capitalism, child development and international development economics share deep common beliefs, which may partly explain their powerful influence over policy despite their weak and contested supportive evidence (Penn, 2005). All three areas concern present investment and tight control to promote future profit, and all rely on growth and improvement: of financial value, of children, and of "developing" countries. Economics and child development claim to be value-free sciences, which collect and measure facts and statistics according to given indicators (money, physical growth and IQ, health and education outcomes) to produce detached impersonal expertise that has universal relevance and authority. The obsessions with growth and the future seem to have a quasi-mythic, religious, psycho-analytic power in, for example, faith in the redemptive child or future nation, who will achieve a better and more prosperous future than is available now. The disciplines tend to advance abstracted standardised goals, for children or countries, and emphasise rational calculation and competitive pursuit of success, with winners gaining over losers educationally and economically (Callinicos, 2003). Policies may attempt to remould children and countries into prescribed "norms" while ignoring and discrediting the children's/nations' views and knowledge as naïve.

There is much compassionate "child-centred" social and economic research concerned with social justice. This includes surveys and studies of children's own needs and experiences, to help to understand, relieve and prevent their diverse

immediate problems (Roker, 1998; Ridge, 2002). The suffering and sense of exclusion of millions of children and young people in wealthier countries is intensely real, if they do not have fashionable clothes, mobile phones, transport, and money to spend on shared shopping trips with friends.

The English word “poor” means low income and also pitiable. Poor people still tend to be questioned as disabled people used to be, mainly about their difference, isolation, and deficits in their lives and in themselves. They are seldom asked about their views of their authentic identity, values and ways of life, enjoyment and solidarity in their friendships and communities. One exception is the study by Seaman et al. (2006). Researchers deplore how the children go without items deemed “essential” (Gordon et al., 2000), and are learning to be poor, and are “beginning to experience the reality of their ‘differentness’ at an early age” (Middleton et al., 1994:150), as if children’s realistic awareness were entirely negative. “Workless households” (a phrase that denies all the vital work performed at home) are associated with more stress and crime, lower aspirations and fewer social contacts (Micklewright and Stewart, 2000), although when parents work for long hours and low pay the household income may not increase, and with less time together the welfare of the family may deteriorate. Strong adverse statistical associations are also drawn between lower family income and recorded ill health, accidents, negligence, teenage pregnancy, smoking, and lower educational achievement (Bradshaw, 2005). The researchers tend to share the neo-liberal abhorrence of poverty, and the hope that raising family incomes through parental employment will reduce all the above problems, although they also refer to data from more equal societies, where state benefits and services help to prevent much child poverty (Micklewright and Stewart, 2000; Ridge, 2002; Mayhew, et al., 2005).

However, the nature and origins of the connections between relative poverty and poorer social and health outcomes are unclear, and the following questions then arise. Does it help all families under a certain income level to include them under the humiliating stigmatising label of poverty, when some of them feel quite well off? At present, half of all British school leavers are not qualified to enter higher education and higher paid work. Will better schools and ending child poverty produce more highly qualified and paid adults? And if so, who will do the essential and valuable low paid work in health and other local services, call centres, construction, recycling, catering and childcare? To blame these workers for misusing educational opportunities and “choosing” their lowly lot unfairly seems to transfer responsibility for their low pay on to the workers and away from employers and tax payers. In this climate of blame, do researchers who report links between child poverty, poor outcomes, bullying and crime, risk inadvertently contributing to poor children’s anxieties, to mass media visions of “feral” children, and to policies of “zero tolerance”, curfews and “cracking down” on young offenders?

“Poverty” research raises other questions. Confusion begins when income or money is generalised into “poverty”, which is then taken as a reliable indicator and measure. The result is that “poverty” is socially constructed in research, policy and public opinion when it is conflated with many negative outcomes, which poor children often do not experience (Ginsburg, 1972; Seaman et al., 2006). Another question is whether or not it helps poor people and societies to assume that raising lower incomes is the primary solution to poverty. And for poor families in affluent countries is relative poverty really the main problem? This question will be reviewed later.

Feminist economics offers theories and methods that can be applied to the study of the economics of childhood. Women are often the first to defend children’s interests. However, public debate tends to be dominated by successful working women, who necessarily spend less time at home with children and who advance their own needs for childcare and long school hours. They seldom acknowledge children’s frequently reported preferences for enough unstructured time, freedom to play outside and to be

with friends away from the adult gaze (Edwards and Alldred, 1999; Morrow, 2001; Katz, 2004, 2005). Some feminists imply that children are mainly burdens and obstacles to women's health (Doyal, 1995), and to their opportunities, income, equal rights with men, and freedom to live their "own" lives. Common phrases ignore children. Feminists' mention of women as "half the human race" ignores how over half the people in the world are children and young people,³ and how feminist analysis can be as limited as patriarchal analysis. "Women's work" is also performed by countless children in and around the home. "Lone" parents may be single, but they are not lone when they live with their children, and the phrase "lone parenting" denies that parenting is a relationship. When "childcare" is mainly theorised as labour, children are theorised as work objects instead of persons, and the meaning of care as love within intimate inter-dependence, central to the Lifeworld, risks becoming obscured, which opens adults' and children's lives to invasion by the System. State-regulated childcare and extended schools push children's lives further into the System, figure 2 levels 1 and 2, a movement that some mothers resist (Duncan et al., 2004). It involves spiralling fuller employment of parents to pay for rising costs of childcare and domestic help, besides gifts and treats for children to compensate for lack of time with them, and a battery of devices to maintain virtual contact such as mobile phones and nannycams (Katz, 2005). Although driven by neo-liberal governments, the policies are also influenced by feminist politicians, journalists and voters.

Critical and green theories can analyse how the hope of relative wealth draws children and adults into ever-rising moral expectations about what a good parent should provide, leading to higher consumption, longer working hours, higher debts, and ever-rising levels of comparative wealth. There are always richer children to catch up with, though whether they are happier is seldom investigated. Researchers can be drawn into victim-rescuer psycho-dynamic, as with the example of a boy who felt bullied because of his clothes, saying that when he became a parent he would earn enough to ensure that his children were well-dressed (Ridge, 2002). It is important to respect the boy's courage and determination and positive response, and also to note how complicated his relationship with his parents might be, with their implied responsibility and guilt, inadequacy or negligence, and his possible blame and anger. Distress over clothing can cruelly alienate and socially exclude people from themselves and from other people, and sustain a false sense of the self and the world and how to relate to it. Yet it is also vital to look at the context of billions of dollars worth of advertising, promoting "brand loyalty" and fast-changing fashions, in order to incite this very envy, anxiety, distress, with the faith that spending more money is the solution, besides the ambition to do so (Williams, 2006).

How valid or helpful is it to children if researchers endorse neo-liberal faith that consumerism produces happiness, and that friendship and respect can be bought along with a new self-image? Is social research adequate (valid, insightful, accurate, informative) if it stops at the personal level of distress over clothing? An alternative analysis would respect children's views as reasonable responses within that context, while questioning the context. Faith in consumerism could be seen as a key part of all the related personal and political problems. Wealth and poverty are less fixed entities, categories or structures than dynamic interacting layers of factors, influences, divisions and relationships between the more or less wealthy groups (Bhaskar, 1989). The experience of relative poverty may be more psychological and relational than material. Some childhood researchers would consider that childhood itself is a state of social exclusion and relative poverty because of numerous adult-child inequalities occurring through macro and micro intergenerational processes (Qvortrup et al., 1994; Alanen and Mayall, 2002; Mayall and Zeiher, 2003).

Green theorists question children's and adults' searching, illustrated in the above boy's response, for real identity, relationships and belonging, and for escape from

anxiety, through craving commodities. They argue that consumerism becomes an addiction that increases dissatisfaction and longing, while one projects a series of superficial life styles and identities on to an admiring and preferably envious world. This is hardly the free choice that neo-liberalists claim, when driven by so many commercial, political and social pressures and illusions. Green philosophy considers that relationships and extrinsic approval are vital for well-being, but so too are self-understanding, an intrinsic sense of authentic personal integrity, contentment, some sense of control over and meaning in daily life, and creative ways to achieve one's potential. These qualities can nurture warm trusting relationships and resistance to cultural pressures to consume and conform in ways that deny personal values.

At times, children being researched about their poverty hint at these ideas. When asked in Ridge's study what they would change in their lives (they were not asked about political changes to society), not all the young people living on benefits "could think of things ". Some mentioned other people: "be nearer my friends", or wishing that a mother could have more money (Ridge, 2002: 107). One girl replied, "being poor has made me learn", though we are not told what she learnt. The researcher commented "of greatest concern must be the children who are excluding themselves from school trips [when they feel there is] no point in asking" their parents for fares. Yet the arrangements and not the children create the exclusion, and being realistic, responsible and loyal to their parents by not asking might be respected as maturity.

Replies during interviews on partly taboo topics such as poverty or disability can be particularly complicated by interviewees' and researchers' self-defence, self-presentation and repairing or covering over signs of distress or pity. Similarly, the mothers who provided the lists of "essential items" for the survey by Gordon et al. (2000) are likely to have wanted to present themselves as caring competent mothers aware of current fashions. And the items can hardly be "essential" if many children lack them. Analyses of all surveys and interviews on poverty and disability need reflexively to take account of these complications. Critical theory examines how poverty is not just something people do to each other, but a system of self-understanding embedded in neo-liberal economics and creating the instability and alienation (Habermas, 1987), including during research interviews.

Detailed studies of children living in villages in India (Gupta, 2005) and the Sudan (Katz, 2004) show how they find meaning, pleasure and value in their daily lives and in sustainable life-styles. They combine work with play and education, as when working children aged 6 – 14 years organise their own Parliament and night schools (John, 2003). Research with British children who experience adversity and exclusion, for example disabled children (Alderson, 1993; Alderson and Goodey, 1998; Alderson et al., 2006), shows how many of them gain insight and the courage to look or behave differently, and to believe that people and society should adapt to accept them for themselves, instead of expecting them to accommodate other people's prejudices. The children's insights suggest that they are capable of knowing "that seeking the truth is not about matching up our ideas with the reality they purport to represent, but about letting our ideas call attention to aspects of what appears, aspects that we are likely otherwise to overlook. [Then] perhaps we can see 'theories' not as solving problems but as 'indicators of salience' " (Edwards, 2006, p. 60, paraphrasing Heidegger). Their hard experiences appear to have led many children to find new salience, new authenticity, in their body and self, and to face the Socratic questions about the good life: What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of community do I want to belong to? Future green economic policies depend on researchers and policy makers distinguishing between Durkheim's concept of *anomie* (the sense of being alienated from society and the longing to fit in to any current context) and Marx's concept of *alienation* (the sense of being alienated from one's true self). The former is liable to promote infinite wealth and "development"; the latter raises questions about what individuals, societies and ecologies really need if they are to flourish. This would involve learning to live economically, with justice and

equity across the global community among present and future generations, which are so threatened by excessive wealth, greed and waste in the minority richer world. Quarles van Ufford and Giri (2003) propose that researchers everywhere should concentrate not on “other” people in poverty, but on

“consumptions and lifestyles. How are valued [including frugal] life-styles reproduced? What and how do people consume? What are the social and environmental effects? [Then] the driving forces of high consumption in “the West” [are] considered in the same frame as “poverty” (2003:24).

The way forward may therefore be to aim to promote global equity, rather than to end poverty: by seeing pathology in conspicuous consumption instead of in relative poverty; by contracting surplus incomes instead of vainly trying indefinitely to increase relatively lower incomes; by seeing that gross inequities between richer and poorer groups may be even more obvious between generation than between class, gender or ethnicity divides, although compounded by them. Inter-generation analysis would clarify the massive public and personal debts and potential disasters, economic and ecological, that older generations are transferring onto young and future generations in future centuries. There are also the unresolved international injustices and violent conflicts that risk leaving legacies of further war and enforced migration and costs, which neo-liberal economics does not calculate. Since “social institutions are the visible expression of the scale of moral values which rules the minds of individuals, and it is impossible to alter institutions without altering that valuation” (Tawney, 1982:10), it is necessary to begin by questioning the moral values basic to economics.

Conclusion: an economics for childhood

A central difficulty in research about welfare and poverty is the definition of happiness and well-being. Efforts to define them in quality of life research pose many problems (Eiser and Morse, 2001). The point of this paper is not necessarily to say that poorer children or children in poorer countries are happier than richer children and enjoy more solidarity. The first point is to question the assumption that richer children are happier, and that higher income can buy happiness, respect and social inclusion. The second point is to consider how researchers can take more realistic account of the costs of relative wealth, including the accumulating economic and environmental debts being bequeathed to younger and future generations. This paper ends with a proposed broad Green outline of research questions about economic theories and policies for childhood.

Which theories, methods and policies help to explore and respect the value of children’s present lives as much as their future lives and those of future generations? And what will be the varied effects on children, their identity, welfare, morality, families and communities of moving education and childhood more completely into the System, (figure 2 layers 1 and 2) and away from the Lifeforce layers?

How can the numerous single issue concerns and studies about childhood be illuminated by connecting them into coherent generation theories? Can they be contextualised within holistic concepts of an economy that encompass all the columns in figure 1 and layers in figure 2? Can restorative theories be developed for examining economic and ecological inequities between older, younger and future generations?

How can wealth be scrutinised as critically as the varied meanings of poverty? Can need be distinguished from want in different contexts? Can values and structures of solidarity, interdependence, obligation, sharing and equity be compared with those of competition, personal success, individualism and acquisition?

How can research about economics genuinely involve children and young people as participants? Beyond asking them what they want and like, this could mean reviewing with them the Socratic questions: What kind of person do I want to be? And what kind of community do I want to live in, now and in the future? "Community" today includes global and ecological meanings. "Participation" would involve children and young people setting questions, critically discussing conflicting interests, beliefs, structures and influences, forming conclusions and policies, and working politically with adults towards implementing these, as children in Indian and African villages show that they can do.

Endnotes

1. "English" refers to law and policy in England and, on non-devolved matters, to Wales. Since devolution in the late 1990s, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have different law and policies. They have Children's Rights Commissioners, for example, whereas England has only a Children's Commissioner. British politicians' advocacy to "end" global child poverty is too complex to review here although it amplifies many points in this paper. The impact of global neo-liberal policies is shown in the increase during the 1990s of 100 million more people living in poverty (Stiglitz, 2002:5), and by the plight of the world's children (UNICEF 2005).
2. There are varied green approaches (Wall, 2005), and this paper gives a broad general view.
3. Many societies recognise that people aged from around 12 years are young men and women, although they also count as children is being denied certain adult rights, such as the vote, and in being covered up to 18 years by the UN 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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Figure 1. Differing economic calculations (Anderson 2005)

1	2	3
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Inputs + costs	Produce + consume	Outputs + costs
Environment	Land	Environment
People	Labour	People
Natural resources	Capital	Resources
Technology	Enterprise	Technology
Health + welfare	Profit	Health + welfare

Figure 2. **Feminist concepts of economic layers** (adapted from Mies and Henderson)

Formal regulated economy
1. Private commercial sector
2. Public tax-funded sector, state services
Unregulated economy
3. Homeworking, informal sector, poor majority world workers
4. Underground economy
Unpaid and uncosted layers
5. Housework, subsistence work and communal reciprocity.
6. Nature

Figure 3. UNICEF (2007) *An overview of child well-being in rich countries.* (Higher figures denote more adverse results.)

Netherlands	4.2	Canada	11.8
Sweden	5.0	Greece	11.8
Denmark	7.2	Poland	12.3
Finland	7.5	Czech rep.	12.5
Spain	8.0	France	13.0
Switzerland	8.3	Portugal	13.7
Norway	8.7	Austria	13.8
Italy	10.0	Hungary	14.5
Ireland	10.2	US	18.0
Belgium	10.7	UK	18.2
Germany	11.2		