

(GEI 2009 Alderson)

Green economics as if younger generations matter.

Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Green Economics Institute Conference, part 1, 1st August 2009, University of Oxford, pp20-22.

Priscilla Alderson

Children and young people are increasingly excluded from everyday life. Their contributions and competencies are often unrecognised and under-estimated. They are being abstracted from their real contexts in two main ways.

First there is the highly specialised expert adult-centred debate on many topics related to green economics: the ‘credit crunch’, housing, trade, debt, war and peace, labour relations, climate change and genetics. Little is said about how these matters might affect children as much if not more than adults, both now and also over their potential lifetimes. Whiter, richer and older populations wage wars mainly in areas where the populations are non-white, poorer and also younger. In many war-torn areas, over 60 per cent of local people are aged under 22 years. But youth is far less analysed than ethnicity, gender, class or religion. It is said that women are ‘half the world and do 70% of the work’. However, this calculation ignores half the people in the world. Women are one quarter. Children and young people count for one half. Everyday they do countless hours of work in homes, gardens and farms, streets, shops and factories – and in schools, although much of what they do very competently to benefit their family, community and society is not counted as ‘work’ but simply as learning or practising. Adult-centred expertise and policy are limited and distorted when they attend seriously to only half the people in the world.

Second, the literature and debate that are ‘child-centred’ tend to be limited in being chiefly informed by psychology and social science supposed expertise about children, their needs and services, but in isolation from the above ‘adult’ specialists. For example, unlike ‘adult’ human rights, the child rights literature is seldom grounded in centuries of legal, philosophical and political debate, but tends to be about welfare and ‘participation’. Children are valued in many ways and services for them have expanded greatly, but this can mask how children and adults often increasingly lead separate lives. They can no longer roam freely and the government expects them to stay, from their early months up to age 14, in extended schools, open 8.00am–6.00pm, five days a week, 48 weeks a year, to support full parental paid work. In policy and the mass media, children tend to be seen in negative terms, as costs, burdens, dependents, victims, threats or nuisances, the final social group who can be denigrated by the media with impunity (‘yob’, ‘brat’). Wealth has shifted to people aged over 50 years. World wide, the extremely high poverty, mortality and morbidity (disease, injury) rates among billions of children and young people, bereft of land, clean safe water and sanitation, indicate what amounts to a war against them. The arms trade lobbies governments to sow the seeds of war and conflict instead of peace, with very long-lasting dire effects.

Although, women and children and their respective capacities and status can differ very greatly, the gradual emancipation of women and other minority groups can set precedents for the greater inclusion of children. Feminism initially involved awakening societies’ recognition and acknowledgment that there were any problems, and not simply advantages for all, in sheltering and excluding women from many areas of public, academic and policy concern. Another step was to identify the problems of ‘sexism’ and to construct a language beyond the generic ‘he’. The problems of simply conflating or concealing children’s interests within adults’ interests, of ‘childism’, and the generic ‘we’ that denotes only adults, are still seldom recognised.

There needs to be more analysis about how childhoods are excluded from, and could be more included within, four main usually ‘adult’ contexts, and how this could affect the wellbeing of children, adults and child-adult relations. These are central and urgent questions for green economics, for social science and for society, on how to promote present and future social justice and stability. Justice can involve fair shares today, and also sharing of opportunities and resources

across time and generations. Yet for decades richer societies have consumed more than their share of finite resources, instead of investing for the future or at least leaving the planet as habitable as when they inherited it. When thinking across time, social scientists are rightly wary of speculating about the future, although some foresight is vital to help to avoid and prevent future disasters, and to establish realistic grounds for predictions and reasonable precautions. Politicians tend to favour scientific and technological solutions to growing environmental problems, whereas social responses are also advocated, as in the opening quotations, to promote more sustainable societies. Ageing populations will increasingly rely on solidarity between generations, and on the fewer younger people to provide their services and pensions, while finite resources dwindle and costs rise. We need to discover more about children's relative exclusion now, and about how their greater inclusion could benefit child-adult relations in the present and future.

This paper raises some questions across four interacting contexts: ethics, evolution, ecology and economics (the four 'Es'). Can an inter-generation analysis offer broader understandings of child-adult relations with regard, for example, to policies of justice, equity, evolving societies, ecological change and youth-age economics? How are children involved across the four contexts? Beyond acknowledging them as a valued, but separate, group how can their greater inclusion be promoted?

The four 'Es' can usefully be understood in relation to one or more of the others, rather than in isolation, as green economics amply demonstrates. In mainstream literature, the Stern Report (2006) has shown the importance of explaining ecology in economic terms to alert political concern. Natural scientists find that their isolated discrete areas of research can be misleading when they underestimate the rate of climate change. However, synthesising cross-disciplinary work enables scientists to study numerous interacting triggers and multiple effects, showing exponential rather than linear change. The Green Economics Institute shows how the humanities and social sciences can contribute to policy understanding and interpretations of natural science research findings.

Gender studies analyse how sexism affects relations between men and women. Generation studies analyse power in child-adult relations. Concepts, metaphors and symbols, for example, of redemptive childhood may reflect, inform and reinforce one another. They can shape the evolving present and potential future childhoods, as well as ecological and economic policies: 'the next generation will solve our problems, repay our debts as well as paying for all their own needs, invent the technical scientific fixes to solve ecological threats, and bring a brighter future.'

These often implicit assumptions underlie many of today's policies. For example, most of our new schools and hospitals are being built, and leased to the public, by private companies through PFIs - Private Finance Initiatives. These involve the public paying several times over for the cost of the present buildings during the next 30, 40 or even 60 years, when the buildings will still belong to the companies, not the state. There are incentives to put up cheap, eco-unfriendly, energy-wasteful buildings, and to charge very high costs for running them, with stories of fees of £1,000 to replace a broken doorknob. In one hospital where I researched, the fridge where mothers stored breast milk for their premature babies did not close properly. The nurses had to keep throwing the milk away – and to keep on and on asking for the fridge to be mended. Parents disliked staying in the parents' bedrooms, which they said were very noisy and stuffy, smelling strongly of cleaning fluids. The windows would not open and looked inwards onto the atrium entrance, not to the outdoors. These details may seem trivial but they hugely affected the families concerned. Meanwhile, as the repayments for today's buildings with the running and repair costs mount over the decades, the next generations will also have to pay for tomorrow's buildings. We are loading them with debts as if we imagine it will be cheaper and easier for them to pay for buildings in the future. Yet growing populations, and the growing burden of dependent older generations and their pensions, together with global competition over dwindling resources, mean that in future basic living costs are likely to be far far higher, not lower as PFI implies.

So I suggest that we urgently need to look across the four 'Es' at rights and reciprocal responsibilities in child-adult relations.

In ethics, can we analyse how childhoods relate to traditionally adult-centred concepts of justice, equity, virtue, peace, rights and rationality? Respect for persons and their autonomy tends to be conceived in adult terms, as are fulfilled wellbeing and Sen's capability theory. So too is 'the good' as 'the difficult-to-grasp connection between happiness and justice' in life forms, histories, identities and societies' (Habermas, J. 1987 *The theory of communicative action, vol 2*. Polity, p110), as the partial paradox of 'freedom, trust and solidarity' (Bhaskar, R. 2008 *Dialectic: the pulse of freedom*. Routledge.), and as the ethical basis for the next three contexts.

The questions on evolution could trace how the often influential popular misconceptions of Darwin's theories pose problems in their crude concepts of 'stone-age' human nature and relationships, of competitive 'survival of the fittest' and the 'selfish gene'. These concepts favour rivalry over cooperation and are used to explain, excuse and even validate excessive market competition, as well as war, plunder, ecological damage and generally amoral behaviour. Although overtly absent, children are covertly included in public debates in negative damaging ways when extreme adult selfishness and violence are seen as 'childish' and separate from 'real' adulthood. From countless examples, the most risk taking city traders were repeatedly called 'juvenile'; MPs who worried that scandals about their expenses would lose them votes in the June 2009 elections told voters to be 'grown up' in their choice of candidates. In evolutionary terms, development and progress are seen as reproductive success - biological and financial - accumulation, greater reliance on science and technology, mistrust of nature and the therefore of the 'primitive child'. There are concepts of 'undeveloped' states evolving into the 'developed' ones, which consume and waste most. Universal mindless human biological adaptation and evolved skills are analysed rather than complex moral agency and social considerations. In inter-generation relations, biological reproduction of the genes and species are emphasised instead of social nurturing and reciprocal interdependence between generations. Children are mainly perceived as physically dependent and pre-sexually immature, and this can reduce respect for children as persons with human rights. Darwin-influenced debates about child development, IQ and normality, panics about parenting, nature and nurture, human genetic selection and enhancement, and 'designer babies' mirror assumptions about market investment and competition and international development.

Different economies, governments and markets have varying effects on childhoods, with the global political economy of minority (richer) world consumption and majority world child labour; increasing debt and inequality with transfers of wealth to older age groups; economists treating childhoods as investments or externalities; and finance-dominated interpretations of growth and development, wellbeing, the good life, and rational cost-benefit choice and decision making.

Ecology research could review how children are affected by current evidence about climate change, human population growth, ageing, and dwindling resources of minerals, habitable and fertile land, safe water and biodiversity. How might beliefs either about vague impersonal futures or else about personal generational ties ('my grandchildren') affect attitudes about the planet and the future? How might they affect motives and agency that either accelerate ecological changes or attempt to reduce them?

These analyses might help to answer the main questions:

How does the current general hostility or indifference from older towards younger people prepare us for the future of many more people competing for fewer resources?

How will younger generations want to care in future for the older people who are currently creating immense problems and doing so little to alleviate them?

How can we include children more in the currently 'adults-only' contexts?

How can we promote inter-generational solidarity, justice and peace in public debate, policy and action?

1996 words