

## **Paper from Kate Soper to Sustainable Development Commission Meeting on 'Living well (within limits) - exploring the relationship between growth and wellbeing'**

Sustainable development is best promoted, I believe, by challenging the widespread presumption that the lifestyle changes essential to secure it will detract from satisfaction rather than enhance it. It is not the self-restraint but the pleasure of breaking with the growth-driven, shopping mall culture that needs to be emphasised. And rather than get bogged down in academic arguments about exactly what constitutes 'happiness' or 'well-being', it may be more sensible for sustainable policy makers to focus on emergent signs of disaffection with 'consumerist' lifestyles and explore their underlying motives and future potential (including their potential for ultimately mandating a greener and more regulated economic order).

If we are now seeing the beginnings of a more sceptical response to consumerism, this may be not only for environmental reasons, but also because other conceptions of the 'good life' are gaining more of a hold. The affluent lifestyle is increasingly now seen as both *compromised* by its negative by-products (the stress, pollution, congestion, noise, ill health, loss of community and personal forms of contact it entails) and as *pre-emptive* of other enjoyments. Not only are previously unquestioned forms of gratification such as driving, or air flight, or eating certain foods, or using certain materials becoming tainted by their side-effects, there is also an overall sense that too much in the way of joy and relaxation is being sacrificed to the competitive spiral of the 'work and spend' economy. This may find explicit expression in nostalgias for certain kinds of objects or practices or forms of human interaction that no longer figure in everyday life as they once did; or it may be felt only as a vague unease: a fatigue with the clutter and waste of modern life or sense of priorities skewed through the constant unquestioned focus on producing and acquiring. In either case it indicates an interest in what I have termed 'alternative hedonist' ways of living and a growing suspicion that even if consumerism were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being, or not beyond a point that we have probably already past (Soper 2007a; Soper and Thomas, 2007; cf. Schor, 1999; Levett, 2003; Bunting, 2004; Hodgkinson, 2004; Purdy, 2005; Shah, 2005).

Admittedly, these are minority reactions, and often involve ambivalence rather than outright rejection. Yet they support theorists who have analysed 'consumerism' as a compensation for various forms of existential deprivation (of security or control or self-esteem) rather than as intrinsically fulfilling (for references see Soper and Thomas, 2007: 20-21), and they are now backed by a growing array of empirical studies indicating that increases in economic growth and the forms of consumption which it prioritises (and upon which it depends), do not bring increased personal happiness or well-being. (One can cite here the recent NEF's 'Happy Planet' Index, the 'happiness economics' of Layard and others (Layard, 2005; cf. Purdy, 2005; Easterlin, 2001; Schor, J.(1999); Durning, 1992) and the researches noted by Tim Kasser in his 'Visions of Prosperity' paper to an earlier seminar).

Directing attention to this new ambivalence not only shifts the policymaking focus away from problematic *a priori* definitions of 'happiness', but also removes the taint of patronage associated with expert 'knowingness' about well-being and what is 'really' needed. In other words, because this new 'structure of feeling'<sup>1</sup> is rooted in people's actual experience of dissatisfaction it provides a needed measure of democratic legitimacy for policy interventions. Conversely, since this remains at the present time a marginal and under-developed response, it requires encouragement and reinforcement from the side of government, and cannot be expected to flourish or expand without it. Those wanting to go by bike will need their cycle tracks provided (and trains that help rather than hinder cycle travel). Those hankering after a different 'work/life balance' (an antithetical coupling that encapsulates the problems of the modern work world) will need to be allowed to work less or in more life-enhancing ways. Public support for new forms of 'policing' of consumption (and associated growth driven forms of productivity) can be enhanced if government also provides for the 'alternative hedonist' experience. Congestion charging, for example, was able to appeal for its legitimacy to dissatisfactions already experienced by the public; through being implemented it has offered provision and experience of a kind that has extended the support for it.<sup>2</sup> (It would be even greater, one presumes, were there a campaign against death and ill-health caused by driving to match those against smoking or binge-drinking.)

### **Rethinking the 'work/life balance'**

What has to be challenged, above all, by anyone serious about a sustainable future for the planet is our general subordination to a time economy and work ethic which sees free time as a threat to prosperity rather than a form in which it can be realised. For the work-centred society does grave damage not only to the environment but also to human well-being. An unprecedented productivity that might have allowed for a more sustainable expansion of leisure, has been swallowed up in an ever expanding provision of commodities. Dramatic illustration of the opportunities missed in the US has been provided by Juliet Schor, who has argued that if Americans had settled for a 1948 standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services), every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work – with pay.

Instead, free time fell by nearly 40 % post-1973 so although the average American by 1990 owned and consumed more than twice as much as he or she did in 1948, they also had considerably less leisure (Schor, 1991: 2). Similar trends are evident in the UK, where two-fifths of the workforce are now working harder than in the 1980s. In the average UK household (where at least one adult is employed), partly as a result of increased hours on the job and partly as a result of fewer holidays being taken, 7.6 weeks more a year was spent in paid work in 1998 than in 1981 (Bunting, 2004: 18-19). The tendency, moreover, has been for the more 'workaholic' elements to set the pace for everyone else, with the threat of loss of work or promotion opportunities being used as a constant discipline against resistance to longer hours.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams's referred through the concept of 'structure of feeling' to emergent or pre-emergent responses or qualitative changes of affect that 'do not have to await definition or rationalisation before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and action' (1977: 132).

<sup>2</sup> The congestion charge has been an interesting experiment in this respect. Whereas Londoners, with the 'wisdom' of the actual experience of the changes it introduced, voted in favour of the extension of congestion charging, the vote in Edinburgh, which had yet to experience the benefit of any change, went against its introduction. (cf. Soper, 2007a:218-221)

The stress and anxieties resulting from the demands of a de-regulated economy on the labour force and its increasingly 'flexible' contracts have further added to the already very exacting pressures of the work-dominated society. Self-reported stress caused or made worse by work more than doubled between 1990 and 2001/2 (Bunting (2004: 180). Low paid women are often particularly vulnerable (Huws, 2003: 77-84). Even in areas where job satisfaction in the past has to some extent compensated for relative lack of earnings, stress and insecurity have now begun to take their toll. A recent study has found an increase in depression, strain, sleep loss and unhappiness during the 1990s among Britain's six million public service workers, whose job satisfaction has now fallen dramatically. It is also those with university degrees who now report the lowest levels of job satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that those who spend most time on the job are often already high earners, driven, it might seem, more by ambition or addiction to work than by interest in more money. But even if personal distinction rather than money is the incentive, these people are caught up in a work culture that is scarcely very gratifying or socially enhancing in other respects.<sup>4</sup> The 60-70 hours week necessarily distrains on time available for other activities and forms of relating, makes for extensive reliance on impersonal forms of care provision, and does little to encourage co-parenting (it can easily reinforce the traditional gendered division of labour). The emergence of speed dating and Wife Selecting agencies are symptomatic of the loss of priorities that goes together with job addiction. So, too, is the service industry supplying round the clock childcare to those who can no longer spare the time for it themselves. So, too, are the enticements of the 'luxury' holiday providers. (As one of them puts it, 'For those of us with huge overdrafts at the Bank of Hours-in-The-Day, the real luxury is time...It's me-time. Family time. The elusive holy grail of modern life.') But the less well off can suffer even more, and among them the overworked society is now responsible for encouraging some quite dispiriting routines and practices: couples, for example, so busy they scarcely see each other all week; parents doing back to back shifts because childcare is simply proving too expensive.<sup>6</sup>

A reduction in the working week or daily workloads, together with provision for more secure part-time employment, would significantly relieve the stress on both nature and ourselves. It would free up time for the arts of living and personal relating that are being sacrificed in the 'work and spend' economy. It would allow everyone to reap the benefits of co-parenting, and open up new ideas about personal well-being and success. A less work-intensive, post-materialist culture would also reduce the speed at which people, goods and information had to be delivered or transmitted thus having hugely beneficial effects on resource attrition and carbon emissions. People would commute less and enjoy healthier modes of travel, such as walking, cycling, boating. These moves would make roads safer, transform city and rural living and offer experiences of landscape unavailable to those in cars or planes. It would also bring a

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<sup>3</sup> Study from Andrew Oswald and Jonathan Gardner reported in *The Guardian* March 22 2001 'Job Satisfaction falls for Public Workers'.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the responses to the BBC programme 'Do We Work Too Hard?'. [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking\\_point/626333.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/626333.stm)

<sup>5</sup> 'Coastline' brochure, 2008. ([www.coastline.co.uk](http://www.coastline.co.uk))

<sup>6</sup> A survey by Dr Roger Henderson for the At Home Society, 2005 covering 1,074 working and co-habiting adults over the age of 18, found that more than a fifth of couples were so busy they could go for a week without seeing each other, often with serious impact on their relationship ('All work and no play makes love drift away' in *The Independent*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2005.)

return of high street retailers in place of supermarket shopping, boost local economies, help reduce crime, and foster new forms of street conviviality.

There are, of course, huge problems confronting any attempt to 'slow down' along these lines because of the integration of national economies in a pace of life determined by the dynamics of globalisation. But we now desperately need another model of development and a beginning has to be made somewhere. The affluent societies of Europe are well-placed to spearhead a new order and to catalyse the political will for change, and were they to take a global lead on this, they could promote an alternative model of prosperity through which the less 'developed' countries might critically reconsider the conventions and goals of 'progress' itself - and thereby better understand the worst consequences of north-west 'over-development' and how to avoid them.

Sceptics may question whether people could settle for a steady-state economy or are capable of benefiting from more free time. But their doubts have not been put to the test, since we have never initiated a socio-economic project (of a kind developed in the argument of Andre Gorz and others), in which both work and income would be more equally distributed, part-time work would be the norm, and everyone would have access to a reasonable level of 'Basic' or 'Citizen's' income (Gorz, 1985, 1989, 1999; cf. Purdy, 2005, 2007; Raventos, 2007).<sup>7</sup> In every industrialised society such as our own, with ample leeway for the provision of more free time, recreation itself has always hitherto been commodified and thus regarded as a source of further economic growth. In a culture where being in work is associated so closely with personal success, and those without work usually lack the funds, amenities and forms of education needed either for the carefree enjoyment of idleness or for the more concentrated and passionate pursuit of private hobbies or cultural or sporting activities, it is hardly surprising if 'free time' is seen as a problem rather than a source of fulfilment. But we cannot be sure how people would react to less work were it no longer so closely associated with the stigmata of idleness, unemployment and reduced citizenship.

All this requires a break with the hegemonic cultural and educational priorities associated with the neo-liberal market dynamic, and, at present, everything is stacked against that. Deeply averse to the promotion of non-commodified conceptions of human gratification, companies devote mammoth budgets to ensuring that we continue to associate happiness with buying more, and increasingly now to 'grooming' young children for a life of consuming. Being dependent on the revenue from commercials, the media - despite widespread unease about the commercialisation of childhood - do little to check such advertising. And despite their claims to be concerned for the environment, mainstream politicians continue to stress the importance of expanding markets and boosting high street sales to the exclusion of other ways of thinking about the 'good life'.

That there is massive denial and contradiction in all this is becoming increasingly obvious to many people, and it causes considerable cynicism about the official political commitment to controlling climate change. It is becoming ever clearer that technical fixes and changing the light bulbs will not in themselves do the trick, and that more radical changes are needed to meet any of the targets that have been set on carbon emissions, waste management and environmental regulation. More honesty on the part of government about the need to curb the growth dynamic, and to revise conceptions of the 'good life' and the role of work within it, might well meet with greater respect on the part of the electorate than the current forms of

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<sup>7</sup> A Citizen's Income is a tax-financed social transfer payable to every member of the political community, with no means test and no work requirement (cf. Purdy, 2007).

evasion – all the more so if it were accompanied by serious and imaginative depiction of the fulfilments of living differently.

An alternative cultural 'political imaginary' along these lines would involve a profound shift of values foreshadowing the ousting of monetary greed from its central place in our culture, until it came, as Keynes hoped it would, to be regarded as pathological rather than healthy.<sup>8</sup> Aesthetically, it implies a fundamental revisioning of the perceived attractions of material culture, a shift of optic and hedonist perception. I have compared this to the 'consciousness raising' brought about through feminism and its gradual but profound impact on our way of life. As individuals became alerted to the role of gender in their being, and to its social construction and hence mutability, so they entered into complex - and often painful - processes of self-change. Such 'reconstructions' can involve dramatic changes in affective response: epiphanies through which the attractions and repulsions of the world of lived experience undergo a kind of gestalt switch. A green economic and cultural renaissance working upon consumer sensibilities over coming years would result in some similar revisioning of self-interest and aesthetic response: in shifts whereby a lifestyle once seen as compelling comes to seem confining, and previously sought after commodities come to be viewed as cumbersome and ugly through association with unsustainable resource use, noise, toxicity or their legacy of un-recyclable waste. (Soper, 2007b)

This would require a break with current orthodoxy about the role and purposes of education. In school and university, young people are encouraged to develop an altruistic and citizenly ethics, and to reflect on social ends and values, at the same time as they are prepared for a work-world where competitive self-interest and an uncritical commitment to profit win the highest esteem and reward. Insofar as education is now increasingly subject to purely vocational policy frameworks, this only inhibits the development of precisely those more varied cultural interests that would help to promote satisfaction and self-realisation in a less work-driven society (Ryle and Soper, 2002: 181-187). Education for sustainability must be seen as an intrinsically valuable preparation for life rather than merely as an adjunct of industry. The State pastoral care of the body needs to be matched by a concern about what goes into the mind, and its cultural well-being. We also need to recognize that the drive towards increased labour mobility and the production of non-durable articles has not only led to job insecurity, but also undermined social and material continuity and thus discouraged the provision of the kind of human and environmental goods associated with civic responsibility, inter-generational solidarity and commitment to those who are not yet born (cf. O'Neill, 2007: 185-190).

These arguments may seem utopian. But the fantasies of those who can think only in terms of ever increased GDP and the fostering of the entrepreneurial spirit are fairly unrealistic. How can we believe that here in the overdeveloped 'west' we can continue with current rates of expansion of production, work and material consumption over the coming decades, let alone into the more distant future? Indeed, the longer we persist with the neo-liberal agenda, the more intense the competition for habitable spaces and dwindling resources will become, and the more uncivil the methods that affluent societies are likely to use to defend their relative advantage. We could in the near future be asked to tolerate or support measures that most of us today would regard as deeply repugnant, measures that would spell an end to humanitarian morality as we know it: the quite blatant and cynical manipulation of poverty, disease and famine to control global population; the coercion of Third World economies into an almost

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Adam Phillips' discussion of 'money madness' in his *Going Sane* (2005:187-214), where he cites (p.187) Maynard Keynes as looking forward in his *Essays in Persuasion* of 1932 to a future when love of money as a possession would have come to seem one of those '...semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease.'

exclusive servicing of First World needs for bio-fuels and other energy substitutes; ever more restrictive policies on immigration in privileged regions such as the EU to check the flow of eco-refugees from the more devastated areas of the globe. All these are moves likely to encourage rather than deter terrorist activity and other forms of aggression. In short, if it sees no significant shift in the global economic order, the future looks extremely bleak, both socially and environmentally.

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