

Comment & Debate



Pat Kane

By putting a price on unhappiness we can understand the need for a gentler response to the economic crisis

The wellbeing agenda isn't navel-gazing, it's innovation and survival

If you were looking for economic hard-noses among our European national leaders, you wouldn't have to look much further than Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron. Sarkozy telling an abject Greece there are macroeconomic "rules that have to be respected"; Cameron unrelenting on his deficit and debt agenda, in the face of the tyranny of the bond markets. Homo economicus, in full pomp.

Yet after the last crash - in Cameron's case, before - both men were talking a different language of the market. Sarkozy launched a commission in 2009, chaired by the now-sainted Joseph Stiglitz, to explore alternatives to GDP as the primary measure of social progress.

Cameron's stab at a "GWB" (general wellbeing), first essayed in the blithe and creditworthy days of 2005, has quietly proceeded through the machinery of coalition government. At the start of November, the Office for National Statistics announced its "10 indicators of wellbeing", which will be used to guide attitudinal surveys in the future.

Snorts of derision over your rye-bread, no doubt, as job creation stalls, unemployment rolls rise and political parties sharpen their claws (and clauses) for contest. Yet, as I've found in helping to organise a conference on creative approaches to wellbeing, we should try to take a step or two back from the grim financial determinism of the moment.

Democracy only functions healthily if we believe we can imagine conditions other than they are. And wellbeing is an open enough concept, firmly at the heart of government, to allow our policy-brains to stop pressing the panic button.

One of our speakers, William Davies, wonders whether the UK government's commitment to measuring, and then making policy on, the nation's wellbeing is one of the biggest own-goals ever perpetrated by the administrative classes.

Take a method called "income-compensation technique" - derived from wellbeing studies and psychological damage assessments in legal cases. Using data on the correlation between happiness and wages, it claims to identify the amount of money it would take to compensate a person for losing access to a free public good (for example, arts events or sporting facilities). A Department of Culture, Media and Sport report in 2010 estimated that the psychological satisfaction derived from a person attending concerts regularly was worth £9,000 of extra income.

This method - putting a price on unhappiness - can be extended to other

areas. A Young Foundation report calculated that the psychological injury of being made unemployed would require a compensatory income of £23,000 per month. If the wellbeing mandarins are serious about calculating the "psycho-economic return" on investment, they might be forced to admit that the best returns come from public spending and occupational security, not private spending and labour-market turbulence. As Davies quips, in a Marxian way, "a spectre is haunting liberal economics".

So wellbeing indicators, taken seriously at government level, could justify a gentler, more Keynesian response to the national deficit and global economic crisis. But in these systemically shaky times, the charge of irrelevance and navel-gazing is easily raised.

Rather than angsting about general ill-being, shouldn't we be firing up the raging energies of "mathletic" entrepreneurs - coding, designing and splicing new markets into being? In the face of Asia and South America, implacably ascending their development curves to

middle-class prosperity, don't we need more edgy dissatisfaction and nervy, competitive ambition on these islands - and indeed, this continent - not less?

For figures such as historian Niall Ferguson, the wellbeing agenda is an example of Europeans as "the idlers of the world". We've wrapped ourselves in a wet blanket of psycho-socio-babble, recoiling from the creative destruction and disruptive innovation required to lift us out of a static economy.

Yet when you gather together the tribes of wellbeing, you hardly discover a lack of enterprise or innovation. The question is the nature of the "new" that's being sought. The other spectre that haunts liberal economics - other than the lingering unhappiness that its happy-clappy consumerism generates - is the broaching of planetary boundaries for survival. This was forcibly restated in last week's report from the International Energy Agency, which referred to the extreme climatic urgency of decarbonising our industries and economies.

Yes, let's fund primary science to

keep open the possibility of radical innovation around energy and efficiency. Let's retain a Victorian-style ambition about constructing grand new infrastructures to answer our needs for mobility, housing, communication.

But what also needs to happen is precisely the kind of innovation around lifestyles, cultures and values pursued by those at the eco-minded end of the wellbeing agenda - seeing a low-carbon society as an opportunity for social excitement and behavioural novelty. For who else will build the mindsets, and communally forge the habits, that prepare us to cope with radical change - both the changes we invite, and the changes we'll have to endure?

And in terms of leading people out of their consumerist echo-chambers and into engagement with these prospects, play's the thing. Take architect Indy Johar, who founded HubWestminster in cavernous empty office space behind the Institute of Directors. It's a new incarnation of the Institute for Contemporary Arts 1947 slogan, "a playground for the mind". Go there any evening if you want to sample the nexus between Occupy St Paul's and the "big society".

In this milieu, people with ideas are driven to create new practices, not just deliver papers. Writer Marek Kohn is a partner in the Sunshine Bank, which hopes to turn the desire for mutual recognition into an alternative currency system for communities and companies. Alice Taylor, ex-head of games at Channel 4, is building a new platform for toys that combines virtual play and local manufacture, aimed at fomenting craft values and ideas of non-disposability among kids. Tech entrepreneur Dougald Hine has a sideline deploying local bohemia to revive moribund retail outlets, such as the revitalised Brixton Arcade.

At our conference, we also have Buddhist neuroscientists, radical artists and improvisers - people who have always found a way (mostly internally) to maintain their mental and social resilience in the face of endemic change. The point is that a real diversity of input is essential to thinking and feeling our way beyond the cyclical hysterics of capitalism.

Wellbeing is the kerchief in the top-pocket of the suited men striding through the current economic drama. We should give it a good tug, and see what comes out.

Pat Kane hosts www.playsthething.org.uk, Nov 22-23, at Toynbee Rooms, London

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The military v the people



Ahdaf Soueif

Alaa Abd El Fattah's jailing by the army is an attack on the very spirit of Egypt's revolution

The Egyptian revolution of 25 January had no leaders. But in the months since, a number of people have emerged who are pushing it forward, advocating for it and articulating its principles. Alaa Abd El Fattah, the activist and blogger (and my nephew) who has been jailed by the military prosecutor in Cairo pending trial, is one of those. And in his character and the role he's adopted, he embodies some of the core aspects of the Egyptian revolution.

Alaa is a techie, a programmer of note. He and Manal, his wife and colleague, work in developing open-source software platforms and in linguistic exchange. They flew home to join the revolution. In Tahrir he moved between groups; listening, facilitating, making peace when necessary, defending the square physically when he had to.

He started the TweetNadwa series - the corporeal meetings of the Twitter community. In one of those, in Tahrir, I understood the remarkable role he played. We sat on the ground, a screen displaying rolling tweets, discussing the restructuring of Mubarak's brutal security apparatus. Comments and questions could only use two minutes. If you liked what you heard you fluttered your raised hand. Passersby stopped and, intrigued, they stayed and contributed.

The numbers grew to over a thousand from every background: enabled, together, working out ways forward, and Alaa in the middle, facilitating, directing, articulating, engaged, and passionate. I thought: this is leadership.

As arguments raged around who should write the new constitution, Alaa started a project to get "the people" to describe their dream Egypt. In June he wrote in the well-respected Egyptian daily, Shorouk: "What is the value of a constitution formulated without the real participation of the people? The proposals coming from our coalition of elites are catastrophic. They propose ... that the constitution should appoint the army [as] protector of the civil nature of the state; that is to allow an institution with wide repressive powers and a history of interfering in government to be free of any supervision by any elected body."

In a May blog he'd questioned the legitimacy of conscription if conscripts were used as a workforce for commercial ventures rather than to defend the country. But he was to enter a major confrontation with the military when, on 9 October, a peaceful (mainly Coptic) protest was attacked by the army and, worried, Alaa went looking for his friend, the activist Mina Daniel. He found him in the Coptic hospital, among the dead.

Alaa and his friends then did something remarkable; from the morgue they

took on the entire system. In the face of the hospital issuing death certificates from "natural causes" they persuaded the stricken families to demand autopsies. Activist lawyers pressured the public prosecutor to order them. They fetched the coroner and his staff and persuaded them to carry out the autopsies in the presence of physicians whom they trusted. And then they sat them individually with the families to explain the reports to them.

The hospital morgue only had three drawers, so all the while they treated the bodies of their comrades with ice and fans, and they treated the anger, grief and suspicion of the families with tears and embraces and explanations. Thus they foiled the attempt to cause sectarian violence, and to get rid of the evidence of the bodies, and they mobilised the families to demand an investigation.

On 20 October, Alaa described the experience in Shorouk; the spirits of the murdered in the morgue, he wrote, "fought against the authority of the priests and sheikhs of the ruler who suggest that if you seek justice in this world you renounce it in the next, they fought against the Mubarak sectarianism that made the poor find enemies in the poor rather than in those who steal the bread from the poor." Within 48 hours Alaa had been summoned to the military prosecutor. The army has, since February, court martialled 11,697 civilians. In

February, Mona Seif founded and has since led the No Military Trials for Civilians campaign; Alaa is her brother.

Alaa has refused to be tried by a military court. He argues that he should not be held on remand; he was abroad and returned and presented himself to the court. Manal is due to deliver their first baby in a few days. He clearly intends to stay, in Cairo, at home. But the prosecutor jailed him for 15 days, and extended this for another 15 yesterday.

The campaigners are working for every person jailed - but there's a sense that the military have now upped the stakes. No one believes that the military believe the charges they've levelled against Alaa; in attacking this central, charismatic figure they appear to be openly mounting an attack on the very spirit of the revolution. It is because of the seriousness of this message that the protests in Egypt and in - so far - 23 cities across the world have been so immediate and so intense. And that Alaa's mother, my sister, Laila Soueif, is on a hunger strike, which others are joining.

The implications of the jail extension - for human rights and the safety of Egypt's young people - are enormous. But the depth and strength of the reaction against this also shows that the revolution could receive a kickstart once again.

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