

**UNIVERSITY OF  
FORWARD  
THINKING  
WESTMINSTER** 

**WestminsterResearch**

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**'What about the children?' Re-engineering citizens of the future**  
**Gillies, V.**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Psychological Governance and Public Policy on 28th October 2016, available online:

<https://www.routledge.com/9781138930735>

---

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

---

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail [repository@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:repository@westminster.ac.uk)

## **‘What about the children?’ Re-engineering citizens of the future**

*Val Gillies and Ros Edwards*

Debates in policy and practice are often oblivious to the replication of similar themes and solutions through the centuries. The idea that deprivation is transmitted through the generations via the mind of the child is particularly influential. The belief that early childhood experiences profoundly shape the personality, behaviour and destiny of individuals has exerted a potent allure across time, mutating and adapting to fit the political and cultural contours of the day (Kagan 1998). Current incarnations of infant determinism are conveyed through the language of cutting edge brain science, with emphasis placed on new discoveries and the transformative potential unlocked by such knowledge (Edwards et al 2015). Morally infused prescriptions for family relationships have followed, inspiring legislative change and institutional coercion.

In this chapter we will explore the history of ideas about intervention in family, highlighting attempts to (re)engineer children’s upbringing for the sake of the nation’s future. We consider the relationship between programs and activities designed to address social dis-ease (poverty, crime, and disorder) and understandings of the role of parents in the context of shifting emphases of political systems across time. We detail how 19th century concerns about children’s moral development gave way to a preoccupation with their physical health and genetic heredity which then transmuted into anxieties about their psychological development, and more latterly the quality of infant neurological architecture. While the theorising shifts a conviction remains that optimally formed minds and bodies can prosper within a capitalist system.

### *Saving the children*

Familial accountability for the welfare and moral profile of offspring have long been assumed. But specific targeting of children and families for intervention can be traced back to 19<sup>th</sup> century efforts to address the human suffering and social costs associated with laissez faire liberal capitalism. Earnest conviction that that free trade and the pursuit of self-interest upheld the best interests of all led the powerful and privileged to seek explanations for the misery and dysfunction that surrounded them. Deprivation and destitution were acute while crime and social disorder remained a constant threat, particularly in London where many of the wealthy elite resided. Victorian efforts at social reform were funnelled

through the dominant conceptual framework of classical liberalism, implicating the dubious moral character of those struggling to survive. Hardship and privation were viewed as temporary wrinkles in an otherwise benevolent system that could be ironed out through strengthening the moral fibre of the nation (Rooffe 1972). Reflecting the tenets of liberalism, the state was to play a minimal role in managing those who were not managing themselves. Bolstered by the growing influence of evangelism, philanthropy took on a new significance as a way for the Victorian rich to understand and control the unwashed masses, through the issuing of relief alongside moral surveillance and counsel (Stedman Jones 2013). Poverty was approached as symptomatic of a lack of drive, resilience and self-respect, but pauperism and reliance on the state poor law marked a shameful lack of foresight and self-control.

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an unprecedented proliferation of private charities and relief agencies, and significantly the singling out of children as the focus for moral ministry. Commonly represented by their benefactors as innocents who could be saved from the bad character, degradation and degeneracy that had befallen their parents, children began to feature prominently in a range of social and religious associations. Many contemporary children's charities including Barnardos, Action for Children and The Children's Society have their roots in what became known as the British child rescue movement. Propelled by a heady romantic vision of childhood and an imperialist concern with purifying the race and strengthening the nation, these organisations succeeded in extending legal protection to children, but crucially through the depiction of an abusive debauched residuum routinely exploiting or abandoning their offspring. The broader social and structural context framing childhood and family experiences of deprivation and risk were overlooked for a sensationalist focus on the sins of the parents. Children of the poor were depicted as little barbarians; victims of their cruel, depraved parents and in need of assimilation into the ranks of respectable British society.

Thomas Barnardo is amongst the best known of the child rescuers, having set up the first of his homes for 'waifs and strays' at Stepney East London in 1870. Combining a flamboyant celebrity image with evangelical self-righteousness Barnardo did considerably more than simply provide for orphans. He actively constructed the children of the poor as a category apart, embodying the savagery of the degenerate classes but also the potential for deliverance. As Lydia Murdoch (2006) outlines, Barnardo skilfully developed the equivalent of missionary

conversion parables, drawing on popular melodramatic tropes to raise money and justify the removal of children from their families. At the Stepney institution a photographic studio was installed in 1874 with images of 55,000 of Barnardo's charges captured. Striking 'before and after' publicity shots were produced from there as well as other fund raising material. To ensure the children looked convincingly neglected many had their shoes removed, clothes deliberately torn, hair tangled and dirt smeared on their faces. The post 'rescue' photographs showed the children transformed by Christian education and honest toil, depicted as tidy, shiny faced 'little workers' holding a broom or engaged in a useful trade.

Reflecting the imperialist sensibilities characterising Victorian Britain, child rescue was viewed through a distinctly racialized lens. The children of the poor were identified as a risk to the hereditary superiority of British stock but also as a malleable resource born with a kernel of racial superiority that could be nurtured or left to degenerate (Boucher 2014). Child rescue narratives commonly drew on explicitly racialized imagery, describing missions to civilise little 'street Arabs', 'urban savages' or 'raggamuffin tribes', depicting them as 'specimens' with darkened skin and exaggerated facial features. According to Barnardo, this physiognomy could undergo complete 'metamorphosis' under the auspices of his training, marking the child's newfound purity and religious salvation (cited in Murdoch 2012). The notion that the British character of the young poor could be developed to shore up world supremacy was not confined to the high profile philanthropists of the day. Deep faith in the reformatory power of British children eventually drove a systematic migration programme, resulting in tens of thousands of the rescued 'waifs' being sent to underpopulated settler colonies in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa.

The philanthropist Maria Rye was among the first to send regular parties of 'gutter children' to Canada to work as indentured servants, estimating that the 'expense of taking a child out of the gutters in London, and placing it in Canada .... may be roughly reckoned at £15 per head'<sup>1</sup>. This practice of finding and transporting suitable child migrants was legislated for and part funded by the British state right up until the 1950s. The investment was regarded as mutually beneficial, delivering the children from wretchedness, demoralisation and temptation, while extending the reach and strength of the British Empire. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century over 50

---

<sup>1</sup> Maritime Archive and Library Information Sheet 10 - Child Emigration  
<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/archive/sheet/10>

charitable organisations were regularly dispatching poor children abroad including The Church of England Waifs and Strays Society and National Children's Homes. However, the substantial numbers of children shipped out of the country were dwarfed by the numbers institutionalised ultimately because their families lacked the resources to care adequately for them.

Thomas Barnardo was by far the most enthusiastic and prolific perpetrator of what he termed 'philanthropic abduction'. This phrase hints at the harsh reality lying behind this systematic program of salvation and the severing of familial and community ties it entailed. His campaign literature was filled with lurid accounts of violent tussles with drunken, bestial mothers determined to keep their neglected urchins as exploitable property. But while the philanthropists were at pains to represent their targets as abandoned, abused and unloved, most institutionalised children had been embedded in family networks. As Murdoch (2012) has demonstrated, parents often made considerable efforts to stay in touch with their children and monitor their welfare. Destitute relatives often temporarily placed children in charitable institutions while they got back on their feet, subsequently returning to find they had been sent away without any warning or notification.

The practice of isolating poor institutionalised children from the perceived bad influence of their family, was vigorously defended by the child centric philanthropists, often in court custody battles with their relatives. Parents were portrayed as wicked, immoral and brutal, and their children as suffering 'worse than orphans' (Barnardo 1885). Yet ideals of home, family and hearth continued to exert great influence over Victorian consciousness (Behlmer 1998). Many competing philanthropists, regarded 'the family' as a sacred wellspring of personal responsibility and British character, focusing their efforts on re-moralising poor families as a whole through strengthening their character and resilience. This family centred approach to poverty was to eventually evolve into statutory social work practice.

In line with the cultural sensibilities of the day, the child rescuers also expressed great faith in the redemptive power of family love, but instead privileged an artificial operational framework of domesticity over any blood or community relations. For example, Barnardos established substitute family settings styled as 'family cottages'. Administered by 'foster mothers' and housing between 20 and 40 children, these 'cottages' and 'village homes' were located away from urban squalor and the corrupting influence of the adult poor. While a distinct contrast from the regimental conditions of the workhouse or state orphanage the ideal

of family promoted was largely reduced down to training in British character and moral citizenship (Swaine 2011)

*The science of reform: strengthening British stock*

By turn of the 20th century the fervour and conviction powering the 'philanthropic abduction' of poor children was waning. Severe and prolonged economic instability and the rise of socialist ideals saw the foundations for the welfare state laid, while the tenets of classical liberalism came under prolonged attack. A key catalyst for this reformist agenda was the unexpected struggle British forces faced in winning the Boer war (Kuchta 2010). The conflict was expected to quickly establish the might of the British Empire, but it dragged on for years provoking fears over 'national efficiency'. The appalling physical condition of young men in the army recruitment pool was quickly established, triggering panic about Britain's imperialist supremacy. Laissez faire principles fell from favour as the state began to link the health of its children with national competitiveness.

The organisations established by the child rescuers continued running residential children homes but within a context that saw increasing involvement of the state in overseeing child welfare. As part of the liberal Government reforms medical inspections of children in schools were introduced and free school meals were provided for the poor. Classes in 'mothercraft' were also founded to encourage the raising of fitter children, through providing advice on feeding and physical care. By this point the general consensus positioned children as raw material to be shaped in the interests of the nation. This moved beyond the introduction of welfare reforms and a compulsory education system as attention began to converge around new scientific accounts of human development. In 1907 the Child Study Society was set up followed by the medically orientated Childhood Society. The proponents of these organisations were informed by a range of circulating theories and ideas about childhood, not least influential debates about the social consequences of inheritance and bad breeding.

Conceptions of heredity, and the laws of biology found particular resonance with the Social Darwinist instincts of the elite, inspiring a new generation of philanthropists and social reformers to rally around eugenic reasoning. Founded in 1909 The Eugenics Education Society sought to inform the public about the principles of selective breeding while lobbying the Government for controls on fertility. The new 'science' of eugenics had wide and broad appeal across the political spectrum of the establishment, but proved particularly attractive to those on the left,

including the Fabian founders of the Labour Party and those who considered themselves radical reformers (including feminists and Marxists). As Dikötter (1998) notes between the two world wars eugenics belonged to the political vocabulary of virtually every significant modernising force in the Western world. In comparison with the US and Scandinavia, Britain was among the more cautious adopters of eugenic legislation, but support for the prevention of in-breeding through segregation of 'defectives', 'inebriates' and those with venereal disease was passionately discussed in Parliament. In 1913, the 'Mental Deficiency Act' was passed with relatively little opposition, allowing the compulsory detention of those deemed 'unfit' despite them never having committed a crime or been certified.

The early advancement of British child psychology was grounded within this eugenic paradigm, under the auspices of Cyril Burt and his associates. Particular emphasis was placed on the development of intelligence testing and the ranking and sorting of children. Indeed, after the passing of the Mental Deficiency Act, Burt was appointed by the London County Council as their official education psychologist, with the aim of classifying children and weeding out the 'feeble minded' for admission to schools for the mentally defective (Stewart 2013). But this period also marked a more general interest in defining and policing the parameters of normal child development. Sensitised to any manifestations of abnormality, officials and charity agencies increasingly began to refer children to the new psychiatric professions. As concern shifted from the moral development of children to their physical health and then to the organically inscribed workings of their minds, the Maudsley psychiatric hospital in London was forced to set up a separate children's department to deal with the rapid growth in numbers of children being treated during the interwar years (Evans et al. 2008). Most of these referrals concerned children living in deprived conditions, with many suffering from malnutrition and general poor health. Details collected about the child's physiology, habits, personality and family relationships were used to form diagnoses, primarily of physical or neurological abnormalities, 'moral disorder' or mental deficiency.

The psychological models drawn on to categorise and treat children grew in sophistication through cross fertilisation with the new behaviourist and psychoanalytic models, and more specifically the emergence of the child guidance movement in the US. This precipitated the expansion of psychological horizons beyond the constraints of abnormality and deficit to encompass the risk of 'maladjustment' faced by otherwise normal children. As John Stewart (2013) outlines, child

guidance proponents came to emphasise the preventative function in promoting emotional and psychological development through 'the dangerous age of childhood' (14). Efforts were to be focused on early indicators of disturbance which included a broad range of behaviour such as bedwetting, misconduct, shyness and other manifestations of non-conformity. These were viewed as symptoms of deeper dysfunctions rooted in the child's family relationships, ensuring normal development became imbued with a sense of fragility (Rose 1989). But crucially children were regarded as uniquely mouldable and responsive to treatment administered via advisory council to parents.

Again, philanthropy played a formative role in establishing child guidance clinics on both sides of the Atlantic. In the US, large philanthropic donations from amongst others, Rockefeller and the Commonwealth Fund helped establish a network across the States to pursue the study, treatment and prevention of juvenile psychological disorders. Reflecting a more general post war secularisation of philanthropic activity away from religious informed principles toward ideals of science, donors placed their faith in the power of therapy to uplift the human condition (Rosenberg 2002). As Alice Smuts (2008) documents, the generosity of the philanthropists was underpinned by their conviction that shaping the mental, physical and moral development of the child was a way of controlling and directing their future, and that of the nation. This imaginary was widespread and shared by many in positions of Government. In 1930 President Edger Hoover convened a Whitehouse conference with over 3000 in attendance to discuss the issue of child health and wellbeing, declaring 'if we could have one generation of properly born, trained, educated and healthy children a thousand other problems of Government would vanish' (cited in Smuts 2008: 4).

American philanthropy was similarly instrumental in sponsoring the child guidance movement abroad. Following requests from British advocates, the Commonwealth Fund extended finance to support exchange observations visits and the setting up of clinics, supplementing the smaller scale investments of British philanthropists committed to further developing child mental health services (Stewart 2013). After the Second World War the child guidance system was expanded and institutionalised as part of the post-war reconstruction effort. Concern over the traumatic impact of the Blitz and evacuation on the psychological wellbeing of children led to demands for an integrated service that was to be administered through local education authorities. This was in a context where a vision of 'the family' was broadly



promoted as an essential mechanism of reconciliation and order after an extended period of chaos and uncertainty (REF – Stewart too?).

During this period psychoanalytic accounts of child mental health rose to ascendancy, propelled by the psychiatrist John Bowlby's theorising around maternal deprivation and attachment. While working at the London Child Guidance Clinic during the war, Bowlby came to believe that the key to normal development was located in the warmth and consistency of mother—child relationships. Drawing on examples of clinic cases he attributed the development of deviant personalities to maternal separation or poor quality relational bonding. Attachment theory found great resonance among those who positioned the traditional family as the essential civilising force driving the evolution of social democracy. Mounting anxiety about increasing divorce rates in the aftermath of the war and the incidence of child neurosis was offset by a broader optimistic conviction that state intervention had the capacity to solve all social problems (Shapira 2015). As such, the emotional and well as the physical welfare of children became incorporated into the post war settlement shaping the development of Keynesian social and economic policy.

As Thomson (2013) argues Bowlby's attachment theory was pivotal to the development of a limited welfare state that depended on the caring labour of women in the context of full male employment. Thomson also describes how in the process a new 'landscape of the child' was carved out reconfiguring the parameters of the state, the home and urban space. Development of the young was to be fostered through a state maintained framework of education, medicine, social services and economic policy, a nurturing infant centred home and the provision of specially designed protective spaces (such as playgrounds and children's TV) away from risky adult environments. However, this new cradle of social citizenship was predicated on a so-called 'Golden Age' of industrial economy that by the early 1970s was lurching toward crisis. The manifest gender hierarchy and oppression underpinning embedded liberal ideals of the nuclear family also came under systematic attack from second wave feminists who exposed the darker side of family as a common site of abuse and violence against children.

By the 1980s the New Right was railing against the impact of welfare benefits and the 'nanny state', invoking amongst other things the negative impact on children's moral development. Marking the activation of what Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell (2002) characterise as first phase 'roll back' neoliberalism, Keynesian models of social security were

attacked as dysfunctional and encouraging a growing underclass dependent on state handouts. A proliferating 'rabble' of crime prone sons and promiscuous daughters were predicted unless state handouts were diminished (Murray 1994). Instead, it was argued, the family should be recognised as the bedrock of civilisation and left to fulfil its social responsibilities. The then Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher was among the more notable advocates of this view, as she articulated in a speech in 1988:

The family is the building block of society. It's a nursery, a school, a hospital, a leisure place, a place of refuge and a place of rest. It encompasses the whole of society. It fashions beliefs. It's the preparation for the rest of our life and women run it<sup>2</sup>.

But this traditional model of the dutiful family fitted neither the changing cultural attitudes of the day nor the transformative economic and social order Thatcher was to usher in. Deregulation, free marketeering, privatization and a diminished state were promoted through a championing of ideals of freedom and liberation that cut across old, expectations and obligations. As Nancy Fraser (2009) argues feminist emancipatory ideals, including critiques of 'the family', were appropriated and made mainstream through a centring of the self-determining, networked individual, liberated from gendered and classed expectations and ties.

Through the 1990s the discrediting of Keynesian welfarism metamorphosed into phase two 'roll out neoliberalism' encompassing a new logic of state interventionism (Peck and Tickell 2002). By the time the New Labour Government came to power in 1997 children were firmly positioned at the centre of a new neoliberal inspired paradigm of social investment. Rather than supporting families to raise 'normal' minds and bodies, children became viewed as future assets which could be maximised for the good of all (Jenson 2004). The state's role was no longer to act as an agent of social security, but instead to enable personal responsibility, and crucially to manage and prevent the social risks that might undermine children's future life chances. In the process, conceptualisations of family shifted away from the 'essential building block' metaphor toward a more contingent designation as, at one and the same time, a strength and a risk factor to be monitored and regulated.

---

<sup>2</sup> Speech to the Conservative Women's Conference, May, 1988  
<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107248>

Economic theorising around human capital was particularly influential in shifting the axis of concern away from a protective embedding of well-adjusted social citizenship, toward the management of children as investment portfolios. Gary Becker (1981) for example, conceived of families as small factories, held together not by obligation or sentiment but by mutual interest in the human commodities they produce. Children came to assume a much greater significance within this market based ethic as raw material requiring extensive investment to secure their futures as self-serving and self-producing subjects. And increasingly social problems, like poverty and inequality, became framed in terms of lack of human capital, attributable to poor parenting. Amidst rising rates of divorce, cohabitation, birth outside of marriage and same sex parenting, definitions of family became more flexible and inclusive but crucially through a centring of childrearing as the primary moral concern. The replacement of male breadwinner models of family with norms around dual earning households was promoted as the progressive solution to gender injustice, while the female dominated practice of childcare was redrawn as a motor of meritocracy.

Cognitive development was the core component of dominant conceptualisations of human capital at the beginning of the twentyfirst century. Intensively parented children, it was argued, would be better able to navigate and capitalise on post-industrial opportunities. But the job of cultivating competent minds, fit to compete in the global knowledge economy was regarded as too important to be left to untrained parents. The New Labour years were characterised by a massive expansion of state sponsored and third sector initiatives directly targeting families under the rubric of 'parenting support' (Edwards and Gillies 2004). A new interventionist policy ethos began explicitly to position a family life as a public rather than a private concern through the linking of parenting practices to broader narratives of social justice. As the minutiae of everyday relations with children came to be seen as directly determining their future outcomes good parenting was made synonymous with maximising a child's cognitive potential and inculcating aspirational neoliberal values. Family households were rebranded as home learning environments, child care became early education and political consensus converged around the notion that parenting was the key to increasing social mobility.

Policy makers were particularly impressed by the theorising of the US Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman. Arguing that human capital is cumulative rather than fixed, Heckman and colleagues proposed a formula summed up in the phrase 'skills beget skills and abilities beget

abilities' (Cunha and Heckman, 2007). This economic reasoning, known as the 'Heckman equation', asserted that return on human capital was very high in the early years of life and diminished rapidly thereafter. In developing this model, Heckman and colleagues produced a graph that was to have huge influence in social policy making circles. Showing projected 'rates of return on investment in human capital by age', the image was widely reproduced as if it were proof in itself of the Heckman contentions (Howard-Jones et al. 2012). Referencing Heckman directly, the New Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair concluded in 2006 that 'more than anything else, early intervention is crucial if we are to tackle social exclusion<sup>3</sup>'. The subsequent policy focus on early childhood reflected the broader shift away from welfare state principles of shared responsibility and universal protection towards a preoccupation with identifying and managing individual risk factors (Featherstone et al. 2014). More coercive policy approaches began to explicitly target disadvantaged mothers, positioning them as the essential mediators of their children's high risk profile. Intensive family support initiatives were introduced promising to tackle recalcitrant parents and force them to parent 'effectively' (ref).

Beyond the economic theorising there was little concrete evidence to support claims that altering parenting practices and maximising childhood investment could reverse structurally engrained inequality, or even address educational attainment gaps. Longitudinal evaluations of interventions produced disappointing results (Wastal and White forthcoming), while cohort studies continued to highlight the significance of income and maternal education above and beyond parenting styles (Dickerson and Popli 2012, Hartas 2011, Hartas 2012). But this lack of empirical verification was overtaken by a new interest in psychologically inflected economic theorising, and more specifically models that grounded human behaviour in an emotional and social nexus (Jones et al. 2013). Children's emotional development acquired renewed significance within this paradigm as the essential foundation for cognitive skills.

Emotion regulation, resilience and empathetic connection were positioned as fundamental precursors to learning. Disadvantaged parents were accused not simply of insufficient cultivation of human capital, but of failing to equip children with a rational mind set capable of learning. Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programs were introduced in primary and secondary schools in an effort to

---

<sup>3</sup> See Our Nation's Future - Social Exclusion  
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20040105034004/http://number10.gov.uk/page10037>

address this perceived deficit, with the aim of encouraging personal control, motivation and 'empathy skills'. Simultaneously, the policy focus on parenting intensified through new conceptualisation of emotional impoverishment (McVarish 2015). A re-animated version of attachment theory readily explained this perceived emotional and intellectual impairment in terms of insensitive early years parenting (Thornton 2011). More significantly, attachment as a process began to be articulated as an observably biological process, engraved into the structures of the developing brain.

### *Rescuing the infant brain*

While parenting support was being developed as a key plank of New Labour's policy reforms in the 1990s, social investment spending in the US was coming under increasing attack. Evaluations of longstanding programs like Head Start (the model for Sure Start) was shown to have little impact on measurable outcomes for children and many on the political right were dismissing the model as waste of money. Advocates for childhood investment countered that interventions must begin at an earlier stage of development in order for them to be effective.

Philanthropic organisations, such as the Carnegie Corporation and the Rob Reiner Foundation, made this argument by drawing on the language and imagery of neuroscience to suggest too much brain development had taken place by the age most interventions kicked in.

As John Bruer (1999) documents this pseudoscientific explanation captured the public and political imagination, inspiring a 'common sense' attribution of social problems to deficiencies in infant brain development. Neuro rhetoric dovetailed with a broader cultural fascination with the brain and was to drive a remarkably effective public relations campaign, attracting more wealthy philanthropists, charitable foundations, and high profile public figures. Another White House conference was convened in 1997, this time by the the US President, Bill Clinton, and First Lady, Hillary Clinton, to discuss early childhood development and the brain. In her opening address to the conference Hillary Clinton stressed the importance of new insights into the contingent biological influence of the early years noting:

That the song a father sings to his child in the morning or the story a child reads to her child before bed, help lay the foundation for a child's life, in turn for our nation's future....These experiences can determine whether a child will grow up to be peaceful or violent citizens, focused or undisciplined workers attentive or detached parents themselves' (cited in Bruer 1999 p4-5)

Largely disconnected from a rapidly developing academic discipline of neuroscience, US child advocacy groups sprang up claiming to 'synthesise' and make accessible the latest biological research to highlight the unique potential and risks of the first three years of life. Sensitive mothering within this window of opportunity was promoted as making or breaking a child's future, 'hardwiring' them for success or failure.

By the mid-2000s references to infant brain development were beginning to creep into UK policy documents, often lifted wholesale from the US advocacy groups (McVarish 2015). Such claims supplemented an already thriving policy consensus around the social and economic significance of parenting yet their apparent grounding in science carried its own momentum, proving irresistibly appealing to a variety of UK based philanthropists, politicians and public figures. Camila Batmanghelidjh, founder of the ill-fated charity Kids Company, was inspired to spend millions of the organisation's funds on brain scan research after receiving a 'sheaf of papers' from Prince Charles suggesting that childhood neglect changed brain structure<sup>4</sup>. Her aim was to prove that the deprived young people who used Kids Company were psychologically damaged by their parents and requiring of specialist therapeutic help. She was vocal and passionate in her promotion of this theory and lack of evidence from her scanning studies did little to dent her conviction.

Also captivated were the Conservative MP (and soon to be Work and Pensions Minister) Iain Duncan Smith and the Labour MP Graham Allen. Sharing Batmanghelidjh's belief in an organically damaged underclass both politicians found accounts of infant brain science compelling. As the first rumblings of the global financial crisis were being felt Duncan Smith and Allen were brought together by the Wave Trust, a philanthrocapitalist organisation, to co-produce a paper attributing violence, low intelligence and poverty to the brain stunting consequences of poor 'maternal attunement' (Duncan Smith and Allen 2008). As instigators and ghost authors of this publication the Wave Trust began an unobtrusive but highly effective campaign to promote and spread this biologised cycle of deprivation narrative. Founded by business strategists with a self-proclaimed mission to apply the same

---

<sup>4</sup> See Alan White, 6<sup>th</sup> July, Questions Raised Over Kids Company Spending And Research BuzzFeed News <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/questions-raised-over-kids-company-spending-and-research#.qu3P90Kvv>

approaches that turn loss making companies profitable to social problems they urged that 'root causes' of social disorder rather than its symptoms be tackled. The Wave Trust campaigned within the higher echelons of power, reproducing the brain claims from the US child advocacy groups almost word for word and embroidering them with eye popping return on investment projections. Ministers, civil servants, leading NGOs and like-minded philanthropists were lobbied to embrace a seductive scientific and financial logic promising that saving the brains of disadvantaged infants would slash costs the public purse (Wave Trust 2005).

### *Austerity and early intervention*

In the wake of the financial crisis and under the auspices of a new Conservative led Coalition Government, economic theories became further psychologised and embedded within policy making, reflecting mounting disillusionment with rational economic actor models (Davies 2012). New attempts were made to envisage and requisition the social and emotional as underpinning 'judicious' choices that sustain the political equilibrium. More specifically, educational initiatives to embed emotional and social skills in the school curriculum morphed into a Victorian flavoured preoccupation with the development of 'character' as a slippery inchoate vision of purposeful determination, self-direction and restraint, with a 'military ethos', most often projected on to white, public schools boys<sup>5</sup>. At a broader level public policy experimented with psychologised techniques of 'soft paternalism', for example through the commissioning of a 'Behavioural Insights Team', widely known as the 'nudge unit' (Jones et al. 2013).

But in the realm of family policy 'nudge' became shove as an ideological narrative of austerity drove brutal cuts to New Labour's social investment spending (Edwards and Gillies 2016). Efforts to regulate the minds and brains of children became more assertive and explicitly targeted at disadvantaged mothers of under two year olds. As funding for children's centres and other universal services was slashed, creative appropriations of neuroscience were systematically worked into key Coalition child and family policy documents, justifying a narrowing down and intensification of intervention (eg. see Allen 2011a & b, Tickell 2011, Munro 2011, Field 2010). Envisaged in terms of an inoculation against irrationality and personal pathology, early intervention was firmly directed at those viewed as most likely to raise problem children.

---

<sup>5</sup> See the Department for Education press release, 'Measures to help schools instil character in pupils announced', 8.12.14: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/measures-to-help-schools-instil-character-in-pupils-announced>.

A Government commission review on 'Child Poverty and Life Chances' concluded 'the development of a baby's brain is affected by the attachment to their parents' and that brain growth is 'significantly reduced' in inadequately parenting children (Field 2010; 41). Similarly, the highly influential Allen review into early intervention called for urgent Government action on the basis that 'brain architecture' is set during the first years, inside and outside the womb, with the 'wrong type' of parenting profoundly affecting children's 'emotional wiring' (Allen 2011: xii). After the English riots of 2011 were diagnosed by the Government as a 'crisis in parenting skills', a 'Troubled Families Unit' was established with the aim of 'gripping' and 'turning around' parents identified as the wellspring of social disorder (mainly the sick, poor and disabled). In addition the Family Nurse Partnership program (FNP), tasked with breaking intergenerational cycles of deprivation, was massively expanded. FNP practitioners identify 'at risk' pregnant women and visit them until the child's second birthday. Targeted mothers are trained to parent 'sensitively' for the sake of their children's neural development and cautioned about the brain corroding effects of stress (Edwards et al 2015).

These and other simplistic misappropriations of neuroscience, rooted in the strategically developed claims of the US child advocacy groups, rapidly acquired the status of unchallenged fact in political, policy, practitioner circles. In 2013, an All Party Parliamentary Group 'From Conception to Age 2' was founded with support from all the major political organisations (co-chaired by Caroline Lucas from the Green Party). The Wave Trust acted as the group secretariat, producing a cross party manifesto that called for 'every baby to receive sensitive and responsive care from their main caregivers in the first years of life' (1001 Critical Days, 2013: 8). Their recommendations essentially amounted to greater monitoring of new mothers and intervention for those deemed insufficiently 'attuned'. Without these safeguards, the group warned there would be 'another generation of disadvantage, inequality and dysfunction<sup>6</sup>'. The manifesto included a foreword from Sally Davies, the Chief Medical Officer, decrying the 'cycle of harm' and declaring that 'science is helping us to understand how love and nurture by caring adults is hard wired into the brains of children'.

Infant brain determinism calcified into policy orthodoxy, impervious to the dubious provenance and misleading nature of the 'science' in question

---

<sup>6</sup> See Invest in the first 1001 days say experts <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-31607711>



(McVarish 2015, 2014; Wastell and White 2013, 2012; Edwards et al 2015; Bruer 1999). Risk, as opposed to need became the key justification for family services, with the defence of children's future prospects driving increasingly fervent and uncompromising forms of action. As Brid Featherstone and colleagues (2014) outline, an 'unholy alliance' formed between early intervention and child protection, shored up by neuroscientifically embellished narratives of 'now or never'. Chiming with broader austerity inspired caricatures of the feckless poor, children from disadvantaged families increasingly became subject to a morally charged level of state surveillance. Concern that poor parents might wreak permanent damage on their children has since been reinforced through legislative changes criminalising an ill-defined category of 'emotional neglect', and the introduction of timescales to speed up care proceedings (REFS). Following these changes and several high profile child abuse cases, a steep incline began in the numbers of children taken from their families and placed into state care, with official statistics reaching new records year on year (DfE 2015).

Meanwhile, Government ministers have pursued a strategy designed to accelerate and escalate the numbers of children made available for adoption. New guidance and funding promoting the swift removal of 'at risk' children and their resettlement with a new family was issued to local authorities in 2011. Michael Gove, the then Conservative Education Minister in the Coalition government responsible for crafting legislative reforms on the issue, emphasised the need for 'social workers to feel empowered to use robust measures with those parents who won't shape up'. Hailing the transformative powers of adoption he pledged to address the 'cruel rationing of human love for those most in need' (REF). A new 'foster to adopt clause' was enshrined in the 2014 Children and Families Act requiring looked-after-children to be placed with prospective new families before the onset of legal procedures.

Rates of adoption initially rose to record levels, only to fall back sharply when the Court of Appeal issued a stern judgement rebuking inattention to human rights<sup>7</sup>. As Brid Featherstone and Paul Bywaters (2014) point out, an ideological commitment to adoption is being pursued alongside unprecedented cuts to family support that have left many parents without adequate resources to care for their children. Particular criticism has been directed at the UK from the European Council for removing children from mothers who had experienced domestic violence and depression. Nevertheless, the subsequent dip in numbers was widely

---

<sup>7</sup> See Court of Appeal gives important guidance on adoption applications, Family Law Week, 22/9/13 <http://www.familylawweek.co.uk/site.aspx?i=ed117222>

described as a 'crisis' by the media, and as a 'tragedy' by the Prime Minister, David Cameron<sup>8</sup> who promised new measures in the forthcoming Education and Adoption Bill allowing Government to intervene directly to speed up local authority adoption services. In the context of austerity, adoption is promoted as financially prudent, morally right and transformative for the children concerned (Narey 2011).

### *Back to the future? From risk to resilience*

As the neoliberal paradigm is buffeted by global economic crises, children have been increasingly targeted as a core resource through which market based rationality can be anchored. This has played out through a revival of Victorian themes about the importance of nurturing personal traits of determination and resilience, alongside a renewed mission to rescue poor children from their irredeemable parents. This represents more than a harking back to another age. Possessive individualism has been reworked to reflect a different political agenda as well as more contemporary sensibilities and concerns around the psychological development of the young, the prevention of permanent harm and the responsibility of parents and the state. The positioning of children as national capital has rendered them public property, justifying the policing of parents in the name of early intervention. As such the state is mobilised on behalf of the market to secure the production of clear thinking, flexible, self-directed brains able to withstand the pressures of a global competitive system.

More significantly, advanced neoliberalism has become entirely detached from the classical liberal belief that market based logic is rooted in human nature and realisable only when free from the distortions of the state (Soss 2011). Instead market behaviour is perceived as learnt rather than natural, requiring the firm hand of Government to secure the future through childhood intervention. Evaluations of personhood that were once essentially moral have since been psychologised and re-presented in terms of emotional and cognitive capabilities. Traditional understandings of 'character' conveyed strong notions of moral virtue, whereas contemporary invocations denote personal competence and wellbeing. Meanwhile the process of psychological development itself has become deeply moralised as an aspirational goal rather than an end in itself. As Kathryn Ecclestone (2012) notes the imperative has shifted to the process of acquiring traits defined as character, with the onus placed on the development of appropriate capabilities. Morality then is no longer assumed to inhere in

---

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/nov/02/david-cameron-urges-faster-adoptions-doubling-number-of-early-placements?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/nov/02/david-cameron-urges-faster-adoptions-doubling-number-of-early-placements?CMP=share_btn_tw)

any trait, capability or personality, but rather in the very act of transferring value to the self. Laissez faire optimism that poverty and destitution would be eradicated through a strengthening of moral fibre has been replaced by a more pessimistic drive to equip developing minds and brains with the psychological tools to endure uncertainty, hardship and distress.

This reconfiguration and redeployment of Victorian morality in relation to children has followed through into old style practices of child rescue. Tussles are now over brains rather than souls but the impassioned justifications for action remain remarkably similar in tone if not content. Legislative efforts to increase adoption have been widely described as a 'crusade', with a 'loving home' offered by a white middle class family uncritically presented best for the child (Barn 2013). Leading the call for greater numbers of children to be taken from their unsatisfactory parents was Martin Narey, a Chief Executive of Barnardo's until he retired to become the Government's 'adoption tsar' in 2011. Unlike his forebear Thomas Barnardo, Narey's mission is pre-emptive rather than rehabilitative, aimed at increasing the removal of babies at birth to prevent them being damaged beyond repair by inadequate parents. This reflects the particular significance accorded to time and risk within asset building rationales of human capital. Concern is projected on to what children will become in the future rather than what they are experiencing in the here and now. While child centric, Victorian reformers expressed moral repugnance at the suffering of vulnerable children, contemporary child savers denounce the negative effects deprivation will have on their later life chances. Narey is explicit about this in his 'blueprint' for adoption reform published in the Times Newspaper in 2011.

I have intentionally talked about productivity even though I'm aware that many practitioners object to the application of such a term to an issue as sensitive as a child's future. But this is very much about productivity because delay is so damaging to children<sup>9</sup>

As this chapter has demonstrated children's development has been targeted as raw potential since the late 19th century, with varying political and economic models driving frameworks of intervention. Consistent across time has been the notion that family relationships can be re-engineered, optimised or replaced to tackle social and structural problems. Wealthy philanthropists and social reformers in particular have been instrumental in championing simple solutions that promise to

---

<sup>9</sup> See The Narey Report: A blueprint for the nation's lost children  
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article3083832.ece>

breed out poverty and crime at the level of the family without recourse to redistributive solutions. Theorising around degenerate character, physical weakness, genetic inferiority and psychological maladjustment represent efforts to tackle the shortcomings of capitalism by nurturing stronger more resilient subjects. The contemporary policy preoccupation with sub-optimal infant brains is merely the latest incarnation of a longstanding conviction held by the rich and powerful. Specifically, that there must be something inherently wrong with the minds, bodies and souls of those failing to thrive in an unfettered free market economy.

## References

- Allen G (2011a) *Early Intervention: The Next Steps. An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Allen G and Duncan Smith I (2008) *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens*. London: Centre for Social Justice and Smith Institute.
- Barn, R. (2013) Race' and Adoption Crusades in 21st Century Britain, Huffington Post [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/professor-ravinder-barn/race-and-adoption-michael-gove\\_b\\_2657383.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/professor-ravinder-barn/race-and-adoption-michael-gove_b_2657383.html)
- Barnardo, T. (1885) *Worse Than Orphans: How I Stole Two Girls and Fought for a Boy*, London: J.F. Shaw & Company
- Becker, G. (1981) *Treatise on the Family*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Behlmer, G.K. (1998) *Friends of the Family: The English Home and It's Guardians, 1850-1940*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Boucher E. (2014) *Empire's Children: Child Emigration, Welfare, and the Decline of the British World, 1869-1967*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Bruer JT (1999) *The Myth of the First Three Years: A New Understanding of Early Brain Development and Lifelong Learning*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Cunha, F., Heckman, J., 2007. The technology of skill formation. *American Economic Review* 97 (2), 31–47
- Department for Education (2015) Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2015 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/464756/SFR34\\_2015\\_Text.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/464756/SFR34_2015_Text.pdf)
- Davies, W. (2012) The Emerging Neocommunitarianism, *Political Quarterly*, 83 (4) 767–776,

- Dikötter, F. (1998) Race culture: recent perspectives on the history of eugenics, *The American Historical Review* 103 (2), 467-478
- Edwards, R., Gillies, V. and Horsley, N. (2015) Brain science and early years policy: Hopeful ethos or 'cruel optimism'? *Critical Social Policy* 35 (2) 167-187
- Edwards, R. and Gillies, V. (2016) 'Family policy: the Mods and Rockers', in H. Bochel and M. Powell (eds) *The Coalition Government and Social Policy*, Bristol: Policy Press.
- Edwards, R. and Gillies, V. (2004) 'Support in parenting: values and consensus concerning who to turn to', *Journal of Social Policy*, 33(4): 623-43
- Evans, B., Rahman, S. and Jones, E. (2008) Managing the 'unmanageable': interwar child psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital, <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-dangerous-age-of-childhood-child-guidance-in-britain-c.1918-1955>
- Featherstone, B. and Bywaters, P. (2014) An ideological approach to adoption figures means we are missing important trends Community Care <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2014/10/07/ideological-approach-adoption-figures-means-missing-important-trends/>
- Featherstone, Brid; Morris, Kate and White, Sue (2014). A marriage made in hell: early intervention meets child protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44 (7) pp. 1735–1749.
- Field F (2010) *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults. The Report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Fraser, N. (2009) 'Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history', *New Left Review*, 56: 97-117.
- Hartas, D. (2012) Inequality and the home learning environment: predictions about seven-year olds' language and literacy, *British Educational Research Journal* 38 (5) 859-879
- Hartas, D. (2011) Families' social backgrounds matter: socio-economic factors, home learning and young children's language, literacy and social outcomes, *British Educational Research Journal* 37 (6)
- Howard-Jones, P. A., Washbrook, E. V., & Meadows, S. (2012). The timing of educational investment: a neuroscientific perspective. *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience*, 2, 18-29.
- Jones, R., Pykett, J. and Whitehead, M. (2013) *Changing Behaviours: On the Rise of the Psychological State*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Kagan, J. (1998) *Three Seductive Ideas*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kuchta, T. (2010) *Semi-detached Empire. Suburbia and the Colonization of Britain 1880 to Today*, Charlottesville: Virginia University Press.

- Jenson, T. and Tyler, I. (2015) Benefits broods': The cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense, *Critical Social Policy*, 35(4) 1–22.
- McVarish, J., Lee, E. and Lowe, P. (2015) Neuroscience and family policy: What becomes of the parent? *Critical Social Policy* 35 (2) 248-269
- Murdoch, L. (2006) *Imagined Orphans. Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London*, New Brunswick: Rutgers
- Peck, J. and Tickell, A. (2002) Neoliberalizing Space, *Antipode*, 34 (3) 380-404.
- Rooff, M. (1972) *A Hundred Years of Family Welfare*, London: Michael Joseph.
- Rosenberg, E. (2002) Missions to the World: Philanthropy Abroad In L.J Freedman and M.D. McGarvie (Eds) *Charity, philanthropy, and civility in American history*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shapira, M. (2015) *The War Inside Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smuts, A. (2008) *Science in the Service of Children, 1893-1935*, Yale University Press.
- Soss, J., Fording, R. and Schram S. (2011) *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Stedman-Jones (2012) *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society*, London: Verso.
- Stewart, J. (2013) *Child Guidance in Britain, 1918–1955: The Dangerous Age of Childhood*, Abingdon: Routledge.
- Swain, S. (2011) Failing families: echoes of nineteenth century discourse in contemporary debates around child protection, In Lohlke, M.L. and Gutleben, C. (eds) *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*, Amsterdam:Rodopi.
- Thomson, M. (2013) *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- D.J. Thornton (2011) 'Neuroscience, affect and the entrepreneurialisation of motherhood', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 8(4): 399-424.
- Tickell, Dame C. (2011) *The Early Years Foundation Stage: Review Report on the Evidence*, London: Department for Education.
- Wastell, D. and White, S. (2013) 'Blinded by neuroscience: social policy, the family and the infant brain, in D. Wastell, S. White and A. Lorek, *The Child's Timeframe – A Neuro Scientific Perspective*, London: 14 Grays Inn Square.

Wastell, D. and White, S. (2012) Blinded by neuroscience: social policy, the family and the infant brain, *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 1 (3), 397-415.

Wave Trust (2005) Violence and what to do about it, Wave Trust Report <http://www.wavetrust.org/sites/default/files/reports/migrate-wave-report-2005-full-report.pdf>