Editorial

Austerity Parenting: new economies of parent-citizenship

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This Special Issue of Studies in the Maternal on the theme of 'Austerity Parenting' examines the central positioning of parents within public narratives of "austerity". Focusing on analyses of political, policy, and news media accounts of economic crises, austerity is explored through this issue as a discourse which produces accounts of waste and inefficiencies, moral conduct and lifestyle, work, worth and labour, around temporalities of the past and future within which parents are imagined as key actors of both blame (feckless parents as scapegoats for moral and economic decline) and change (good parenting as the solution to the social impact of welfare rollback and stagnant class mobility). Austerity is examined in this Special Issue in terms of the new requirement for parents to become 'austere', to do more with less, for the sake of the future that their children and grandchildren will inherit. We explore the ways in which austerity is invoked as a solution to debt and the condition of indebtedness, whereby we must learn to do without, to wait for what we want, and to put scarce resources to better use. We detail how austerity is spoken through romances of the past: how it re-animates fantasies of resilience and independence which are seen to have atrophied in the context of rampant consumerism and greed in the Global North. We ask how austerity – as a cultural object, as a set of economic practices, as a subject-making discourse, as a web of socio-historical fantasies – is reconfiguring our sense of public, mutual and collective sensibilities. In particular we consider the ways in which the moral discourses of parenting are central to public narratives of austerity.

Context

In the globalised world of the twenty-first century, economic polarisation has reached unparalleled depths both in terms of the deepening inequalities within post-industrial nation states and in terms of the staggering inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. In countries like Britain, which have ostensibly been the beneficiaries of the epochal shift from industrial to neoliberal modes of capitalism in the 1970s, neoliberal modes of governmentality have been unleashing caustic inequalities for some time – something Danny Dorling revealed in his startling statement that '[i]n Britain today chances in life are now more determined by where (and to whom) they were born as compared to any other date in the last 651 years' (Dorling, 2007, p.5).
As we write in 2012, the effects of the 2008 global financial market crash and subsequent global recession are still reverberating. In response to these events, many European economies have imposed (or have had imposed upon them by the International Monetary Fund) 'emergency measures', in the form of reduced public spending budgets and abridged future spending projects. Fiscal discipline has been positioned as the 'solution' to the current crisis of capitalism, whereby the correct response to the precarious future is to shrink the state, to compact and condense public spending, to become lean, pursue 'efficiency' and to eliminate 'waste'. The post-war social contract – the commitment by the state to support its citizens from cradle-to-grave via the provision of welfare in times of need – has, according to some, become too costly to continue fund publicly. In Europe the policies of austerity have taken the form of reduced minimum wage levels, 'liberalisation' of public sector employment (meaning it is easier for employers to fire employees), reduced benefits and higher consumer taxes. In Britain, for example, a large-scale movement is underway to replace significant parts of the welfare state with forms of volunteerism and private enterprise. In the public narratives offered by austerity architects, the welfare state has been imagined as a negative form of 'big government', which has created a 'welfare culture' and a sense of entitlement it is now necessary to purge. The seeds of this now-dominant austerity narrative – that blames poverty, decreasing levels of social mobility, economic inequalities and many social ills and disadvantage on 'cultures of welfare dependence' – emerged in less economically austere times, but since the financial crash of 2008 this austerity narrative has become more powerfully anchored across policy, popular culture and media commentary. Significantly for this Special Issue, this narrative coalesces around the institution of the family and parenting perhaps more substantively and intensively than any other site.

**Poor Parenting and Broken Britain**

Parents have long been a significant economic category for policymakers, governments, employers, social workers and public health officials, requiring answers to difficult questions around value, labour, care and responsibility. In Britain it was under the New Labour Government (1997–2010) that the particular kinds of moral narratives about 'poor parenting' which dominate public culture today first emerged. New Labour introduced punitive policies deployed to manage 'failed citizen-parents' by limiting financial and/or material aid in order to make citizens 'take responsibility' for their own welfare by finding work and 'being more aspirational' for their children. As Valerie Gillies has detailed, the White Paper, *Respect & Responsibility – Taking a Stand Against Anti-Social Behaviour* (2003), contained some of the most severe proposals, 'including benefit cuts for errant families, the removal of persistent young offenders from their families for placement in foster homes, and the committal of parents to residential homes for "re-training"' (Gillies 2005, p.840). These disciplinary policies were premised on two myths. The first of these was that deprived people didn't work or didn't want to work (see MacDonald et al., 2010). The second was that full employment was possible or indeed desirable in a fully marketised neoliberal economy (see Theodore 2007). During the 1990s neoliberal economics had transformed waged work, making a large sector of the labour market, but particularly low-paid work, precarious, fragile and often short-term. As MacDonald and Shildrick, et al. claim it is precisely the kinds of work available to people at the losing end of the class system that had trapped many people within 'churning low-pay, no-pay careers at the bottom of the labour market' (MacDonald and Shildrick et al. 2010, p.7). As they argue, '[c]ontrary to the widely held view that 'employment is the best route out of poverty', the sorts of [low paid] work available to our interviewees kept them in poverty rather than lifting them out of it' (MacDonald and Shildrick et al. 2010, p. 5). Nevertheless, within the space of a decade the idea that *a poverty of aspiration and the failure of parents* to make the 'right choices' were to blame for welfare dependence had become established as potent national myths.
Let's Cut Benefits for Those Who Refuse Work

In 2008 Conservative Leader, and now Prime Minster, David Cameron shamelessly plagiarized from New Labour as he launched his campaign for what he called 'a new morality' to fix 'Broken Britain' (Cameron 2008, see Figure 1). Speaking from under a crucifix at a community centre at St. Jude's Church in Barlanark in the deprived East End of Glasgow, in the run-up to a by-election, Cameron told the gathered congregation of journalists that 'our mission is to repair our broken society – to heal the wounds of poverty, crime, social disorder and deprivation that are steadily making this country a grim and joyless place to live for far too many people' (Cameron 2008).

We talk about people being "at risk of obesity" instead of talking about people who eat too much and take too little exercise. We talk about people being at risk of poverty, or social exclusion: it’s as if these things – obesity, alcohol abuse, drug addiction – are purely external events like a plague or bad weather. Of course, circumstances – where you are born, your neighbourhood, your school, and the choices your parents make – have a huge impact. But social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make (Cameron 2008, our emphasis).

Within this discourse of individualism and choice acknowledgement of the deeply entrenched structural inequalities and systems of privilege which are foundational to contemporary social (im)mobility are supplanted with moral rhetorics about conduct and behaviour. 'Bad parenting' and the 'problem families' it is attached to are increasingly blamed for social and economic ills. At the same time, 'good parenting' is increasingly positioned as the solution to an ever-broadening range of social and economic inequalities, and heralded as having the capacity to compensate for economic disadvantages.

In the current radical restructuring of welfare systems, reducing public services, condensed public sector workforces, rising unemployment and so on, emerging evidence finds that it will be mothers that are set to lose out disproportionately as these changes are implemented. Some government ministers have even suggested that 'austerity economics' might represent a chance for parents to reconnect with their parenting, with profound future social benefit.

These are the interpellations of impossibility that we seek to address in this Special Issue: to be at once held more responsible than ever before for the future successes (and failures) of your children and yet at the same time to be increasingly vulnerable (through the retreat of state support, public services and welfare benefits) to the conditionalities and precarities of late capitalism. In this context, the promotion of 'good parenting' is being newly envisioned as an economic opportunity, through which the current public `squandering` of resources on families can be transformed into an invitation that asks 'parent–citizens' to effect social and economic renewal for themselves. We are interested in interrogating the double-bind of the new economies of parenting, whereby being a parent makes one more vulnerable to economic austerity, whilst at the same time parents are being held more accountable than ever for the social (im)mobility of themselves and their children.

The papers included here speak to the conditions, representations and imagined futures which emerge when austerity is stitched to parenting in these ways. In so doing, the articles in this Issue ask, is there a new landscape of parent–citizen responsibility – and how does this relate to the disbanding and dissolution of various public services? What
will be the social and economic impact of these shifts to volunteerism and private enterprise on family life? What 'counts' and is valued in the new economy of parent-citizenship? Should parenting be publicly recognized as 'work'? What are the state's economic obligations to parents? How might policy respond to the gender pay gap, which is principally experienced by mothers? Why are we witnessing an intensification of parent governance, and parent-blame, in neoliberal times?

These are urgent questions. In the current economic recession, the idea that 'feckless parents' are responsible for the economic and moral decline of the nation – and conversely that 'good parenting' is the solution to problems as diverse as social fragmentation, stagnant social mobility and unemployment – have been re-vitalised as powerful political narratives. The austerity architects argue that by reducing, dismantling and privatizing the welfare programmes which support those in need, that national economies will be able to grow again. Austerity might have considerable moral appeal (Sen 2012) however the remedy (punishing the poor for corporate greed and the failures of economic globalisation) appears to not be working, with many economies moving into, or having already moved into, second stages of recession.

In 'Tough Love in Tough Times', Tracey Jensen examines the emerging romances of austerity in Britain, articulated in the current cultural visibility and celebration of practices of 'new thrift' – as diverse as growing your own food, recycling and repurposing goods, craft practices – and examines how these work to aestheticize austerity. Connecting these emerging cultural aesthetics, which saturate thrift practices with retro-kitsch appeal, with older discourses of the 'undeserving poor' and its contemporary cousins of over-consumption, waste, indebtedness and dependence, Jensen argues that 'new thrift' culture has powerful affective outcomes. The affects of new thrift attach particularly around figures of happy gendered restraint such as the happy housewife, producing a classed Other against whom austerity is positioned as painful but necessary.

Cliona Barnes and Martin Power examine the potency with which moral categories such as deserving and undeserving poor have been reanimated within the current crisis. In their article 'Voices From the Field', they draw on ethnographic research in an Irish community to argue that such moral categories are not only bequeathed upon the dispossessed and disadvantaged, but are also actively circulated and exchanged by those at the sharp end of austerity economics themselves. In their fieldwork with community representatives and community members as part of a local community safety consultation project, Barnes and Power found that various 'underclass' stereotypes are frequently exchanged amongst the communities most impacted by austerity economics. Their article powerfully documents the overlapping exchanges of discourses around 'problem families', between state practitioners, local representatives and community members, and argues that such local divisions are actively cultivated in media and policy debates.

Exploring new directions (and old tensions) in the complex relationships between parenting, citizenship, social policy and cultural and economic value, Esther Dermott in her article 'Poverty vs Parenting' disentangles the current policy fix on 'parenting' from a broader concern on poverty and parenting. Dermott focuses on two recent UK government-commissioned reports *The Foundation Years* (2010) and *Early Intervention* (2011) to examine the unhelpful dichotomies that are produced in policy and public debate around whether it is parenting or poverty that creates poor outcomes for children. Drawing on more nuanced empirical research, she argues that the relationship between the two is far more complex than these debates disclose, and voices the urgent need for researchers to attend to these complexities.

Examining the relationships between gender, family and employment in the current recession and its aftermath, Kim Akass examines the media narratives around the recession and the ways it has been differently gendered in the US and the UK. Akass argues that in the US a powerful explanatory logic is emerging which connects recession to masculine employment only: the narrative of 'he-cession'. Meanwhile in the UK, evidence which suggests that the recession is disproportionately affecting mothers is obscured by a counter-narrative that the maternal retreat from
paid employment reflects a positive choice by women to return to the home. Taking her cue from Susan Faludi’s groundbreaking work on feminist advances and political backlashes, Akass argues that this gendering of recession is preventing a more rigorous public examination of the disproportionate impacts on women workers, who are more likely to have caring responsibilities.

We are also interested in how narratives of lifestyle and moral conduct erupt at points of political crisis and civil unrest, and how these narratives work to connect parenting practices and lives with the requirements of austerity. To that end, we include here two articles which take the English riots of 2011 as a key connective moment and moral flashpoint around austerity and parenting. In the first, 'Placed Parenthood, locating unrest', Kim Allen and Yvette Taylor adopt an intersectional approach and examine the profound significance of 'placed parenthood', a set of discourses which tasks parents with the responsibility of becoming self-optimising and entrepreneurial. Allen and Taylor disentangle how and where placed parenthood served as an intersectional interpellation during the riots and its cultural aftermath, attaching explanations of specific riotous subjects – the troubled mother, the repenting riot-girl – not to socioeconomic injustice but rather to individual failure to embrace the requirement to be future-oriented and self-regulating. In the second, 'Feral Parents', Sara de Benedictus, traces the emergence of the 'feral parent' in the period following the English riots of August 2011. As de Benedictus shows in her analysis, the fantasy figure of the feral parent gained political traction immediately after the three days of urban unrest and through repetitions in media coverage and commentary, this figure was stitched to a particular kind of problematic parent: namely unmarried single mothers in receipt of welfare benefits. This paper provides a cultural analysis of the contemporary construction of parenting under the coalition government and considers how this construction is put to work in the continued vilification of single mothers.

In bringing together this ambitious range of scholarly work, this Special Issue aims to orient Maternal Studies towards the austerity zeitgeist as it manifests in policy, media, culture and the everyday. We aim to interrogate and challenge the emerging chronicles of austerity as they pertain to parents and parenting, and specifically to mothers, and in doing so to bring the longstanding concerns of this journal – political activism and ethics, cultural representations and experiences of the maternal, social reproduction and care, mobility across and between generations – into provocative and productive dialogue.

References


Tracey Jensen is a Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University. Her research has examined the politics of (mis)representation and processes of cultural interpellation in parenting culture, particularly in terms of how parenting culture congeals upon categories of gender, social class and social mobility, and produces new forms of social and symbolic value. Her doctoral research critically examined the persuasive powers and reach of parent pedagogy – learning how to be 'a good parent' – and where this pedagogy manifests in popular representational forms such as makeover television, in public commentary and debates, and across a broad spectrum of government policies. This research has been published in a number of international journals, including Subjectivities, Studies in the Maternal, Radical Psychology and Feminism and Psychology. She contributed to the edited collection Standing Up To Supernanny (2009) and Being Cultural (2012), and is currently writing a book on parental pedagogy and austerity regimes. Her current work critically connects austerity culture and 'thrift' with gender, social class and the emerging science of happiness.

Imogen Tyler is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Lancaster University. She has written extensively about the ways in which media representations shape perceptions and experiences of motherhood, most recently in two book chapters 'Pramfaced Girls: the class politics of "Maternal TV"' (2011) in Reality Television and Class and 'Pregnant Beauty: maternal femininities under neoliberalism' (2011) in New femininities: postfeminism, neoliberalism and identity. Her most recent research is concerned with 'political aesthetics' and in particular with processes and practices of mediation (new media, social media, television, journalism) as they impact upon, shape and effect inequalities (of race and ethnicity, class and gender). For example, her book Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain (2013) is concerned with detailing how publics are formed through mediation – and in particular how public consent for governmental policies – such as neoliberal economic policies or border control policies – are procured through forms of mediation. Revolting Subjects focuses on practices of scapegoating – the constitution and circulation of 'figures of consent' (such as 'the welfare scrounger') by the communication arms of government, the public relations industry, the global corporate networks of the mass media and everyday communication systems (including social media forms). In relation to this work, Imogen also researches counter-political and counter-cultural, artist and activist interventions within and resistance to mainstream media representations.

A government austerity program may be imposed when its debt reaches unsustainable levels and the government can't even service that debt – meaning pay interest on what it owes – without borrowing or printing more money and thus causing inflation. In addition to government debt are its operational expenses: salaries, pensions, healthcare costs, defense and military spending, infrastructure repair and maintenance, and all the many other commitments of government. What Is An Austerity Program? At its simplest, an austerity program, usually enacted by legislation, may include one or more of t