

# The Administrative State and the Symbolic (Re-)construction of the Troubled Family



*Hartley Dean*

*Department of Social Policy*

*London School of Economics*

1. The family and the state
2. Division, branding and blame
3. Symbolism and discipline
4. In conclusion (reframing supportive intervention)

# The family and the state

- ‘The family’ as an ideologically constructed social institution (e.g. Gittins).
- The rise of administrative state power and disciplinary technologies (Foucault).
- The transition of the family from a *form* of government to an *instrument* of government and a site of social control (Donzelot).
- Neo-conservative celebration of the ‘traditional’ family as the ‘incubator of the habits of free citizens’ (Novak; *cf.* Thatcher)

# Division, branding and blame

Late 19<sup>th</sup>  
century

The residuum



The respectable

The dangerous

The perishing

*Criminal Justice  
System*

*Social Work  
intervention*

*ASB  
agenda*

*ECCE  
agenda*

Troubled  
families

conflating criminality and neglect

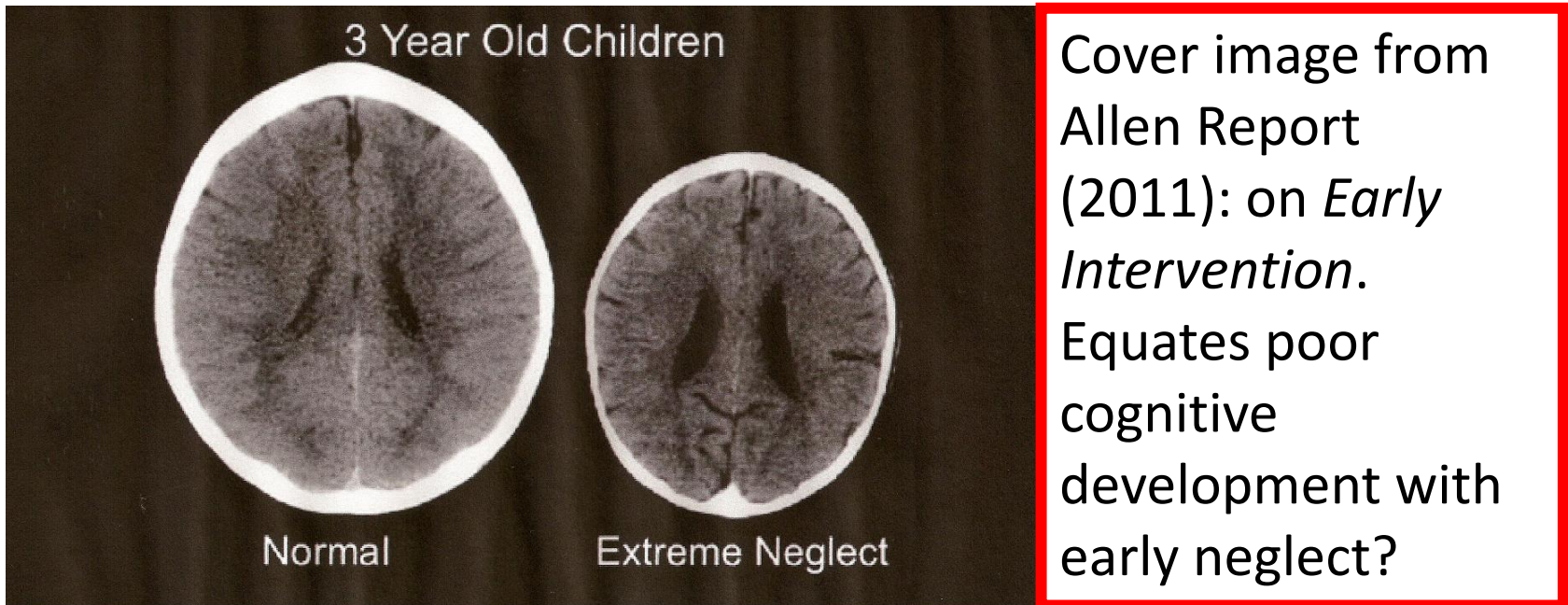
Early 21<sup>st</sup>  
century



Hard-working  
families



## An aside: indirect implications of the social mobility agenda



**Implications?** - Educational inequality is attributable to:

- Nurture, not nature
- Neglect, not poverty

**Critiques:**

- by Neuroscientists – for misinterpretation/oversimplification
- by critical education scholars (e.g. Peter Moss) – for attempting to de-politicise the issues and/or blame the parents

# Symbolism and discipline

- Foucault on 'delinquency' and the immanent logic of policies that apparently fail, yet fulfil a symbolic function.
- As a symbolic construct, the 'troubled family' (like the 'underclass') defines the aberrant, unwholesome and blameworthy 'other'. It is a spectre from which respectable, hard-working families must distance themselves.
- It is (arguably) immaterial whether the Troubled Families Programme 'succeeds' in reaching the right families or in 'turning them around'. Its significance (like that of the Victorian workhouse) is symbolic.

# In conclusion

- Troubled families as ‘real’ families with multiple problems and needs.
  - Intensive family support ‘may prove more effective if decoupled from demonising discourses and practices’ (Parr, 2011)
- Parallels with research on highly vulnerable individuals, for whom the state can be a part of the problem (e.g. Dean 1999; 2003).
- Reconceptualising needs and (inter)dependency (e.g. Dean 2010; 2015) and reframing supportive intervention in terms of a ‘life-first principle’; an ethical principle that favours collective action in support of good lives.

## References:

- Allen, G. (2011). *Early Intervention: The next steps*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Dean, H. (1999) (ed.) *Begging Questions: Street-level economic activity and social policy failure*. Bristol: The Policy Press (Chapters 2 and 6).
- Dean, H. (2003). Reconceptualising welfare-to-work for people with multiple problems and needs. *Journal of Social Policy*, 32(3), 441-459.
- Dean, H. (2010). *Understanding Human Need*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Dean, H. (2015). *Social Rights and Human Welfare*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Donzelot, J. (1979). *The Policing of Families: Welfare versus the state*. London: Hutchinson.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gittins, D. (1993). *The Family in Question: Changing households and familiar ideologies* (second ed.). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Novak, M. et al. (1987) *The New Consensus on the Family and Welfare*. Washington: American Enterprise Institute.
- Parr, S. (2011). Family Policy and the Governance of Anti-Social Behaviour in the UK: Women's Experiences of Intensive Family Support. *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(4), 717-737