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

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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 19th century

The residuum

The dangerous

Criminal Justice System

The perishing

Social Work intervention

ASB agenda

ECCE agenda

Troubled families

conflating criminality and neglect

Early 21st century

The respectable

Hard-working families
An aside: indirect implications of the social mobility agenda

Cover image from Allen Report (2011): on *Early Intervention*. Equates poor cognitive development with early neglect?

**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: