

An 'authoritarian neoliberal' approach to child welfare and protection?

Nigel Parton University of Huddersfield, UK

Recent years have seen significant changes in the organisation and focus of children's services in many advanced 'western' societies. While this has varied in different jurisdictions (see for example Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes, 2011), we can identify one set of developments which have become increasingly evident in certain countries and which is perhaps illustrated at its sharpest in England with the emergence of, what I call, an *authoritarian neoliberal* approach to child welfare and protection (Parton, 2014). While the changes are often justified on the basis of needing to respond to the challenges thrown up by the economic crisis of 2008/09 and characterised in terms of the need for austerity it is also clear that the changes are as much premised on social and political rationales as they are on economic imperatives. Although a major part of the changes is certainly the attempt to cut back on a range of state welfare services, it is also clear that there are significant ideological rationales which have at their core key assumptions about the best way that society should be organised and, crucially, what the most appropriate role for the state in society should be, including its relationship to the 'family'.

With an authoritarian neoliberal approach the reform of the state and state welfare in particular is informed by the new public management practices of contracting out and payment by results, together with a much greater emphasis on a coercive paternalism that strives to strengthen labour discipline and social behaviour, particularly among the section of the population understood as the 'underclass'. While classical liberal thought from the early nineteenth century onwards was concerned with the intimate relationship between political freedoms and market

freedoms, this should not be confused with contemporary liberal thought which goes much further and attempts to extend the reach of market logic so that it becomes the organising principle for all social and political relations. Crucially, it is not attempts to limit the role and size of the state, which is usually claimed by its proponents to be its main concern, but the extension of markets throughout civil society which is its primary goal. It is a movement that aims to integrate state and market operations, mobilise the state on behalf of the market agenda, and to reconfigure the state on market terms. Rather than seeking to limit the state, contemporary neoliberalism envisions the state as a site for the application of market principles. Requirements to contract out services and the introduction of a variety of competitive performance systems aim to reconstruct the state's operations, in order to both mimic and promote private markets. However, it is argued that neither the market nor economic and social behaviour can be left to their own devices and be assumed to be 'natural'. They need to be 'constructed' and therefore organised by law and political institutions; they require political intervention and orchestration.

While it is claimed that the aim is to reduce the big, overblown state, this only applies to certain sections of society. While neoliberalism embraces ideas of increased *laissez-faire*, freedom and deregulation to reduce restraints on capital and entrepreneurial activity, it is far from embracing such ideas in other areas. Particularly in relation to the poor and marginalised it is argued that government should be directive, supervisory and disciplinary and that there needs to be a shift from a 'nanny' state to a 'muscular'

AOTEAROA
New Zealand SOCIAL
WORK 28(2), 7–8.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Nigel Parton
n.parton@hud.ac.uk

or 'authoritarian' state. The link between neoliberalism and coercive interventions lies in the definition of freedom as a practice of efficient living that requires a certain inner discipline, so that those who fail at this freedom must be trained into it. Such an approach is particularly evident in relation to the introduction of a range of *workfare* and other programmes designed to instil in recipients an understanding of what constitutes 'good behaviour' and the importance of a moral obligation to work and to manage one's family's affairs competently.

What emerges is a neoliberal state characterised by: economic deregulation; state welfare retraction and re-composition; and the institutionalisation of the cultural trope of individual responsibility which makes it clear that how you fare in the world depends on your own efforts and not the state. Contrary to neoliberal rhetoric what we have is what Loic Wacquant (2009) has called the *centaur state*, liberal at the top for the upper classes but paternalistic and authoritarian at the bottom for the lower classes.

An important, but often underestimated element of these developments is the changes that have been taking place in relation to child welfare and protection. Although such changes in the context of the overall scale of the changes in social policy may seem small, as they only directly affect a relatively small number of children and families, in other respects they are significant. They give out very clear messages to a much wider section of the population than ever and become directly involved with children's services regarding the changing relationships between children, families and the state and the primary roles and responsibilities of professionals.

In England it is not only that we have seen increased out-sourcing and privatisation, but there have been wide-ranging cuts in universal benefits and services for children and families. We have also seen major cuts in preventative services at the primary and

secondary levels with significant reductions in the availability of family support services. At the same time: the number of referrals to children's social care services has gone up; there has been a substantial increase in the number of child protection investigations carried out; and a notable growth in the numbers of children placed on child protection plans. Perhaps most significantly the number of children in care has gone up from 59,360 (54/10,000 children aged under 18) in 2008 to 69,540 in 2015 (60/10,000) and the applications to court for care has gone up from 6,241 in 2007/08 to 11,143 in 2014/15. Adoption is now promoted as a mainstream option for children in care and in 2014 5,330 children were adopted from the care system, an increase of over 60% since 2010. All of these developments were thoroughly consistent with government policy and in terms of the growth of children coming into care and adoptions, is actively promoted by central government.

Such developments have clear implications for the role of social workers who, more than ever, are in danger of being cast in the guise of 'child rescuers', using the full range of statute vested in them. Central government, while highly critical of the apparent failures of social workers and child protection systems in protecting children, increasingly casts social workers in the central role in the reform of such services and thereby the rescuing of children in the future.

References

- Gilbert, N., Parton, N. & Skivenes, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Child Protection Systems: International Trends and Orientations*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parton, N. (2014). *The Politics of Child Protection: Contemporary Developments and Future Direction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wacquant, L. (2009). *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.