Jacques Donzelot's *The Policing of Families*: Then and now

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In the early 1980s I was in the final year of my social work degree and on placement in a children's mental health service where family therapy was the primary mode of intervention. It was a challenging placement, I had a wonderfully engaged supervisor who saw her job as teaching clinical skills and helping me to integrate my university learning with the challenges of working with families.

My placement was a great introduction to a model of intense clinical work, with feedback provided instantly and the opportunity to watch skilled clinicians who were very dedicated to practice. And yet, I was experiencing some cognitive dissonance stemming from the contrast between the family focus of my placement setting and the focus on structural analysis in the early part of my Master of Arts (Social Work) programme. We had been challenged to think about the deep inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand society; we had talked constantly and passionately about racism and sexism. Over the summer with some student colleagues I had helped to run a two-day conference on racism in social work. John Rangihau spoke, signalling the work that would emerge, in a few years, in *Pūao-te-Āta-tū* (Department of Social Welfare, 1986). John McCreary, in his final year as head of social work at Victoria University of Wellington, was in his element, encouraging rich and honest dialogue. In class, Trish Hall and Jenny Harré Hindmarsh encouraged many discussions about patriarchy and the glaring impact of violence and sexual harassment against women.

And yet here I was, in the midst of this very rich and demanding clinical setting which appeared to me somewhat disembodied from the politics of everyday life – unemployment, housing problems, family violence, health disparities, racism, sexism, ableism and homophobia. It seemed to me that our work was depoliticised, that we *treated* private troubles and ignored public issues.

In my reading for a major assignment I explored a range of critical texts that helped me to better understand my concerns through exploring a radical and feminist framing of social work's problematic positioning in relation to a conservative state, brilliantly epitomised by Bourdieu's much-quoted depiction of social workers as "agents of the state" who are "shot through with the contradictions of the state" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 184). One book in particular, Jacques Donzelot's (1979) influential text, *The Policing of Families*, stood out for me then and, in re-reading it now, it seems to have enormous relevance to our present era. It taught me that the state's focus on families was deeply political. In the foreword, Gilles Deleuze situates Donzelot's contribution as a commentary and critique of "the rise of the social" (p. ix), with "the social" being "... a particular sector in which quite diverse problems and special cases can be grouped together, a sector comprising specific institutions and an entire body of qualified personnel ('social' assistants, 'social' workers)" (p. ix).

Donzelot's focus was on developing a new analysis of the family in the 20th century. The conservative view of the family is as a protector of traditional values and bourgeois accumulation. The left's view of

the family traditionally is that it reproduces inequalities and, for feminists, it preserves the patriarchy and the resultant oppression of women. The family is also an institution about which competing discourses surge. In this passage Donzelot has an eerily prescient take on the contestation, although he is discussing prostitution, and in the context of the 18th century:

> What troubled families was adulterine children, rebellious adolescents, women of ill repute – everything that might be prejudicial to their honour, reputation or standing. By contrast, what worried the state was the squandering of vital forces, the unused or useless individuals. (1979, p. 25)

And there, contemporary reader, we have a forewarning of the modern neoliberal state's obsession with costs, and its anxiety about managing the 'forward liability' of 'troubled' or dysfunctional families. And how rooted it is in very old narratives about the moral character of the poor.

Donzelot argues that the family in the 20th century was a "buttress at the foot of which all criticism" of the family stops (1979, p. 5). It became a site for protection of living standards and for transformation. The idea of saving or rescuing families, birthed in the early decades of social philanthropy, was institutionalised as a state project. The conservative view has exhausted itself from any further development and simply reproduces the old order. The left critique ties the discussion of family to economic systems and thus reduces critique to one dimension. And yet, in post-war social policy, the family became the focus of so much renewed intervention in the new sphere of "the social." At the heart of Donzelot's critique, and clearly influenced by Foucault's work, is the exploration of how this project became so focused on family life at what we would call the micro level. Donzelot attributes this narrowing of gaze to the growth of the psychological professions.

It was at this point in my understanding of Donzelot's thesis that lightbulbs flashed for me. While some of my discomfort in my placement was about the invisibility of structural analysis of the families we worked with and, in our work in the clinic, their disembodiment from their communities and the social forces that impacted on their lives.

Donzelot's analysis was based on a thorough historical review of how concepts of interventions in families reflected institutional and political discourses – the incursion of the medical profession into intimate parts of family life, for example, childbirth; family planning; parenting and so forth; alongside the growing role of judicial and correctional influences on families.

His exploration of his contemporary society included detailed analysis of case records from juvenile justice and child protection services. Add to this the *psy complex* – the group of professions dealing with the human psyche: psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, psychiatric nursing, and social work – and Donzelot argues families are surrounded by technicians in the service of the apparatus of the state:

> Set within this double network of social guardians and technicians, the family appears as though colonised. There are no longer two authorities facing each other: the family and the apparatus, but a series of concentric circles around the child: the family circle, the circle of technicians, and the circle of social guardians. A paradoxical result of the liberalisation of the family, of the emergence of children's rights, of a rebalancing of the man-woman relationship: the more these rights are proclaimed the more the stranglehold of tutelary authority tightens around the poor family. In this system, family patriarchalism is destroyed only at the cost of a patriarchy of the state. (1979, p. 103)

This passage captures much of Donzelot's thesis about the policing of families in the

service of continuing capitalist accumulation in the 20th century. A significant contribution from his historical review is found refreshed in very contemporary critical social policy and parenting studies. In her 2018 book, *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-Blame*, Tracey Jensen acknowledges Donzelot's legacy in his reporting of the 20th century turn to *scientific motherhood* – the obsession with child-rearing practice, the constant measurement and assessment of children, and the growth of parenting education. Jensen notes that this represents a "professionalisation of child-rearing. Producing happy, compliant and convenient children required standardised and 'scientific' practice and was considered crucial to reproducing the nation and the citizens of tomorrow" (p. 30).

It is at this juncture of family and the development of a science of childrearing, relabelled as "parenting" later in the century, that social work expanded its reach. In the early 20th century obsession with the *mothercraft* of poor mothers, social workers drew on the emerging science to identify at-risk families and to intervene. At the worst end of the spectrum, and perpetuated by the medical profession, mass sterilisation was promoted as a solution to the problem of the poor (Tyler, 2013a). At the gentler end was the emergence of parenting expertise: as the power of the male parenting expert waned, mothers themselves (or at least white, middle-class mothers) were expected to become their own experts, to discipline themselves. Jensen discusses the way parenting becomes a kind of "shopping around" for the right advice, the consumerist concept of parents as autonomous individuals negotiating choices. This becomes a rather false empowerment, though, when examined from a class/race perspective: "we need a deeper theorising of the difference between mothers, some of whom live lives that are already inscribed with social and cultural value and some of whom are already pathologised as lacking or deficient" (Jensen, 2018, p. 38).

And it is because of the embedded inequalities that permeate so much of the argument that "dysfunctional families" must be corrected, that social workers must have all their critical faculties engaged when exposed to the waves of experts who will seek to impose their will based on pop-culture science. It has fascinated me for decades how simple attempts to humanise medicalised natural processes can become fetishised and oppressive. For example, the discovery of the link between maternal bonding in childbirth and skin-to-skin contact, initially challenged medical routines; yet later, in the hands of the same maternity care professionals, it becomes almost compulsory, a requirement for all *good* mothers regardless of individual circumstances.

This new wave of societal policing of parenting is clearly exemplified in the current focus on early intervention. And nowhere has the consequence of the uncritical acceptance of this as holy writ been more brilliantly challenged than in "A marriage made in hell: early intervention meets child protection" by Featherstone, White, and Morris (2014). Featherstone et al. locate the current focus on early intervention within the politics of welfare cuts and the neo-conservative anxiety about welfare and morality. Ignoring ingrained, persistent poverty, neo-cons obsess about future financial liability for dysfunctional or troubled families and, using all kinds of social engineering tactics, attempt to assert control over the unruly poor (Crossley, 2018; Tyler, 2013a, 2013b). Rather than address the structural issue of poverty, neoliberal governments want to minimise tax liability, and to do so by holding errant mothers to account. Early intervention has never been just about wanting the best for children. There is a pernicious association with surveillance, so brilliantly described by Donzelot in 1979 and captured again in the current critique. At the heart of this phenomenon is the need for patriarchal capitalism to ensure uninterrupted capital accumulation – for which a white, middle-class family form, one that reproduces itself consistently, is required. Social mobility must be kept within bounds. Intervention – whether early childhood education, widening

participation schemes or charity – must not rock the boat too much. When the post-war social contract loses favour because of global economic crises, austerity rules. In their recent book Gillies, Edwards, and Horsley (2017) challenge "the politics of early intervention." Gillies et al. (2017) provide a detailed analysis of the political direction and influence of early intervention, including the wholesale acceptance of weak neuroscience as legitimising surveillance of parents (Wastell & White, 2017). Gillies et al. point out that the old axiom that prevention is better (and cheaper) than cure provides a basis in common sense. This narrative then overshadows the broader concerns of poverty, racism and gender inequality, health inequities and social exclusion:

> Rather, a prevailing liberal orthodoxy foregrounds personal agency. This convention sustains the notion that individual actions, intentions, behaviours and biological traits are at the root of all social ills .... It is such a denial of collective responsibility for human travails and wellbeing that drives futile attempts to manage risk at the level of the individual through expensive and often ineffectual intervention programmes. (Gillies et al., 2017, p. 168)

So, four decades later, we face intensified inequalities, global crises of displaced people, homelessness and social conflict. In this climate, Donzelot's book still has currency. He asks, again, with seeming prescience, "how can one go on claiming that prevention no longer has anything to do with the exercise of a repressive power when it is judicially mandated in order to penetrate into the family sanctuary, when if necessary it can mobilize a police force to accomplish this?" (1979, p. 98).

Donzelot goes on to essentially argue that we should stop arguing about whether social work is about care or control (1979, pp. 98–99). Rather, he suggests, we should study social work and try and understand the strategic forces at play in the institutions in which it is practised. Does it comprise:

> Those generous human sciences which will lead ... to the near-disappearance of man's oppression... [or] that abominable power which appropriates knowledge for its own ends and nullifies pure intentions in the interests of a blind and extensive domination[?] (1979, p. 99)

So, in 2018, social workers should be as wary of the white-coated men (and, sadly, women) of science as they were of the white-coated doctors of the middle decades of the last century. Have the rigid bibles of child rearing and mothercraft been replaced by the beguiling and narcissistic calls to *best practice* parenting where children's every moment is engineered for maximising their future performance? There's a great deal to think about and I found re-reading Donzelot very rewarding.

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