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Parallels and ruptures in the neoliberal intensive parenting regime

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Abstract

This Open Space commentary will offer a response to the SI paper by Ana Vergara Del Solar, shedding light on global linkages and discontinuities in childhood and parenting in two national contexts which sit at the heart of the neoliberal project (Chile and the UK). In particular it explores how social investment rationales have worked to instrumentalise parent child relationships, enforcing a stifling intensification parenting.

Key words: Parenting; neoliberalism; social investment; family

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The conviction that childrearing has the power to shape personal destinies and secure national prosperity goes largely unchallenged in contemporary UK policy. As a number of papers in this special issue highlight, such beliefs are now similarly influential in Chile (Vergara et al), Singapore (Chiong), and Turkey (Arzuk).

To take the Chilean example as a case study for comparison, as Vergara et al point out, this shapes and contains the hopes, fears and imaginations of the parents and children participating in their research. This reflects the extent to which child development models and agendas rooted in the Global North have spread to large parts of the Global South. But as the authors note, the intensification of parenting in Chile is contextualised by an intensification of neoliberal ideals. Their paper describes the increasing privatisation of daily life and the individualisation and responsabilization of family members as hyperactors amidst growing precarity and insecurity. The resonance with contemporary UK experience is striking.

The social and economic parallels between the two countries date back to 1970s, when Chile became the first nation to institute an explicitly neoliberal policy regime. The US supported military coup in 1973 installed Augusto Pinochet who drove through a draconian program inspired by the free-market ideology of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. Pinochet's reforms were designed and overseen by a group of economists schooled by Friedman at the University of Chicago, widely known as the 'Chicago Boys' (Harvey 2005). Privatisation, deregulation and spending cuts were unleashed alongside brutal repression. Hayek himself was so impressed by the application of his theory that he wrote to his friend and supporter, the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, exhorting her to follow suit in reforming the British economy. Chile was a test bed for Thatcher's efforts to destroy and discredit Keynesian welfarism in the UK and helped her usher in a new global political age. 'Economics are the method' she declared, 'but the object is to change the soul'.

While the political consequences of the neoliberal project have been subject to meticulous debate, its penetration deep into the arena of family relationships is more rarely explored. The intensive parenting described in Vergara et al's paper reflects a series of formative changes in public conceptualisations of children and parents since the 1970s, highlighting how a particular kind of individualism and economic reasoning have come to reconstitute understandings of personhood and relationality. This profound social and cultural change did not evolve naturally, but can instead be credited to another collection of influential Chicago Boys; Gary Becker and James Heckman.

Becker was a Professor of economics at the University of Chicago and a free market ideologue. He was famous for applying rational economic theory to seemingly incompatible social issues, reducing them to matters of personal economic interest. Families, according to Becker were best understood as small factories, held together not by obligation or sentiment but by mutual interest in the human commodities they produce (namely children). Becker though is best known for his theorising on human capital; that is the notion that our knowledge, skills and attributes can be measured in relation to its economic value. It is hard to overestimate the significance of this concept in education policy and beyond. The narrow, instrumental vision of learning

it generated held the promise of economic productivity and competitiveness, rendering education a means to an end rather than a goal in its own right.

Significantly human capital also positioned children's development as a new frontier for capital accumulation. James Heckman, another eminent economist from the University of Chicago, argued that human capital is actually cumulative rather than fixed. 'Skills beget skills and abilities beget abilities' he claimed. According to this logic, the earlier you invest in children the greater the 'return'. Based on that reasoning, Heckman developed an economic model advocating the front loading of state investment to develop human capital. And the earlier the better because the value held by the child will then accumulate at a faster rate (or so the theory went).

Heckman's argument was that states should view children as human investment portfolios; promote child development and watch the dividends grow into self-sufficient, self-managing citizens. Intensively parented children, it was argued, would be better able to navigate and capitalise on post-industrial opportunities. The job of cultivating competent minds, fit to compete in the global knowledge economy was regarded as too important to be left to untrained parents (particularly the poor) so he advocated a programme of public support to accelerate child development. This account captivated the incoming UK New Labour Government who sought to incorporate it into a Nordic informed social investment approach. In their 'third way' model, state sponsored family intervention would be strategically directed to optimise the next generation. The well-parented young would be primed to thrive in a flexible, globalised, knowledge based economy, and perhaps more importantly, be sufficiently skilled to manage their own risks (low pay, precarious contracts, shifting demands for skills).

After the devastating Thatcherite retrenchment of state services in the 1980s, this rationale for Government investment seemed like a new hopeful direction. Many hailed it as a progressive alternative to neoliberalism, without recognising it was in fact neoliberal to its very core. This brand of social investment was seized with particular enthusiasm by the European Union, the OECD, UNICEF and a wide range of development agencies. Few paused to consider whether Heckman's claims were grounded in empirical research. As I have argued elsewhere, there is little evidence to support the impact of family intervention on children's development at all, let alone the impact of accelerated development on their future prospects (see Gillies et al 2017).

Social investment gained particularly strong traction in Europe and Latin America with development agencies helping to setting the agenda. In the UK, government attention and money was directed toward regulating and 'optimising' parenting. A drive to intensify mothering was sold as a panacea that would reduce inequality and promote social inclusion. "Changing the world one baby at a time" remains a common NGO tagline, capturing this evangelistic faith in power of children's development to save us all. In Chile, the soft left presidency of Michelle Bachelet also came to adopt a social investment approach focused on early childhood, (epitomised in the Chile Crece Contigo program - 'Chile Grows with You'). In the UK a slew of family intervention programs were introduced by Labour and Conservative governments, including Sure Start, parenting classes, Family Nurse Partnerships and the Troubled Families Program.

Two key changes flow from the mass incorporation of social investment rationales across these regions, providing an important context to many of the papers in this special issue. First, parenting comes to be seen as the labour-intensive job with relational bonds of love and care technicalised through the instrumental language of parenting skills. Second, and relatedly, children are accorded a new protected status as individual subjects, with their needs and rights separated from those of their family. But this a child centric contract in which the present exists for little more than developmental optimisation. Both parents and children are disciplined by a highly moralised vision of the future (as Rosen and Suissa expand on in this special issue), defined through the capacity to compete in a prospective marketplace.

This instrumentalization can produce a claustrophobic sense of responsibility experienced by parents. As numerous papers here demonstrate, the belief that any slight inattention to detail could condemn their children to a bleak future is encapsulated by the parent who feared having to ask 'What did we not do?'. This is a sobering and worrying insight, but there is some room for optimism. The quotes from the children in Vergara et al's research demonstrate this morally loaded regime of personal value acquisition is in reality lived through a much more substantial ethic of care. As they comment, this reciprocity exists beyond dominant dependent/independent binaries, representing a small but significant triumph of values over value. This lived and experienced interdependency is the last refuge from economic colonisation; it cannot be captured by the logic of capital and it never will. Moreover, it has the potential to become something more by providing a foundation for resistance and change.

These insights are highly relevant for those of us keen to see that change in action, but it raises some important questions about where we go from here. What hope is there for a future in which collectivist values and responsibilities can operate outside of oppressive narratives of familial sacrifice? Are there spaces in which families can challenge or subvert the logic of intensive parenting? By learning from and engaging with different national contexts the global reach of the neoliberal project could be the very thing that accelerates its downfall. With this in mind we should be thinking carefully about what that potential for change could and should mean for parents and children.

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