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Feral' Parents: Austerity parenting under neoliberalism

Introduction

The question people asked over and over again last week was “where are the parents? Why aren't they keeping the rioting kids indoors?” [...] Well, join the dots and you have a clear idea about why some of these people were behaving so terribly. Either there was no one at home, they didn't much care or they'd lost control. Families matter. I don't doubt that many of the rioters out last week have no father at home. Perhaps they come from one of the neighbourhoods where it's standard for children to have a mum and not a dad... where it's normal for young men to grow up without a role model, looking to the street for their father figures, filled with rage and anger. So if we want to have any hope of mending our broken society, family and parenting is where we've got to start.

David Cameron, British Prime Minister, 15th August 2011a

The UK riots of 2011 saw the 'feral' parent discourse transcend through British media commentary via public political statements. Labelled 'the worst bout of civil unrest in a generation' (Guardian/LSE 2011: 1), the riots saw a cacophony of social commentary and an effort to comprehend events. Throughout and in the wake of the riots a barrage of 'chat' ensued through media and political institutions via continuous news coverage, online newspaper blogs and social media websites. Law enforcement and media outlets combined forces, such as the 'Shop a Moron' (France and Hughes 2011) or 'Shop a Looter' (Greater Manchester Police 2011) campaigns, summoning the public as citizens to aid the reprimanding of those deemed responsible. The discourse of the 'feral' parent emerged to position the blame for the riots on a class of 'feral' children borne of 'feral' parents. Specifically, this blame was centred upon the lone, working-class mother. The representation of the working-class mother as the antithesis of the 'good' parent reiterates a lengthy history (Lawler 2000; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008; Skeggs 2005; Tyler 2008). Yet, as Kirk Mann and Sasha Roseneil (1994) and Helen Wilson and Annette Huntington (2006) comment, whilst there are similarities to the scapegoating of the working-class mother, the nuances of this deserve attention as each reveals novel intricacies. The 'feral' parent discourse was imbued with unique meaning to aid socio-economic and political incentives under austerity. The Coalition Government has intensified notions that parenting enables the creation of the

‘good’ citizen, placing parents as responsible for their offspring, the economy, the locality and the prosperity of society overall. This is within a climate, however, that sees parents asked to withstand the impact of fiscal measures. The term ‘austerity parenting’ signifies the emerging emphasis on economic frugality, explicit morality and intensified governance that shapes contemporary parent citizenship.

This article explores the ‘feral’ parent discourse during and after the riots from an austerity perspective. Through analysing news media and political rhetoric, it considers austerity parenting as a significant component of neoliberal governmentality and positions Government and media institutions as sites of collusion where social norms around parenting, marriage and employment are naturalised (Allen and Osgood 2009; McRobbie 2009). Methodologically, I examine the sites of news media and political rhetoric through discourse analysis, a method that recognises that pre-existing linguistic repertoires are constitutive of cultural meaning, simultaneously constructing this meaning through discourse (Gill 2007, p.58). This article has a threefold aim: firstly, to contextualise this recent ‘feral’ parent discourse in a larger history of parental governance, with a gendered and classed focus. Secondly, to analyse how contemporary parent citizenship works by staging oppositions between ‘austere’ and ‘feral’ parents through considering the discursive threads of ‘feral’ parenting that emerged in the wake of the riots. Lastly, to explore how ‘feral’ parents are created as inevitable failures marked with negative value in the current austerity climate.

Parenting and Value

Within the Western context of late modernity, parents are considered to enable value production of themselves and their offspring devoid of traditional social roles or restrictions. Austerity parenting, however, raises questions about this assertion. Tracey Jensen (2010a) attributes the heightened emphasis on parenting to the muddying of the private/public sphere and the foregrounding of intimacy in contemporary society (Jensen 2010a). Beverly Skeggs’ (2010) theorisations of value offer further insight into the spotlight on parenting in recent times. Drawing upon 1980s European feminist domestic labour debates, Skeggs notes that as capitalism extends into the crevices of everyday life, what was previously considered surplus and naturalised to productive labour is overtly utilised for exchange-value (Skeggs 2010, p.31). In the shift to ‘speaking of “parenting” as a verb rather than an ontological category’ (Jensen 2010 p.2), the ‘mechanisms (labour, gift, affect) of exchange, carried, inscribed and recognised on bodies’ (Skeggs 2010, p.35) for value production surfaces

through parenting and parent subjects. Parenting has materialised as a site for the creation of the self as a 'reflexive project' (Giddens 1991). In line with Western notions of individualisation, the performance of 'reflexive parenting' (Jensen 2010b) exemplifies the emphasis whereby '[e]verybody is expected to display their selves as a source of worth' (Skeggs 2010, p.41). However, this is problematic as certain value is still related to acquiring different capitals in the symbolic and despite the foregrounding of alternative types of labour, power relations are still intact to ensure that the exchange is not equal (ibid). Parenting as an individualised, reflexive project is inscribed with value, yet this value production still relies on traditional frameworks and socioeconomic inequalities are left intact.

Parental Governance

Whilst there has been an intensification of the economic and moral value placed on parenting recently, state intervention into family life is not novel. Val Gillies (2007) notes that the family became an established political preoccupation in the nineteenth century. Fears of the rising urban 'mass' saw the rearing of children and the welfare of society overall interconnected (Gillies 2007, p.2). The mainstreaming of psychological norms of childhood development saw the distinguishing of the importance of parenting, alongside a shift from intervention of the child to the mother (ibid). There was a renewed preoccupation with the family as 'New Right' agendas of the 1980s and 1990s shifted state power to market led mentalities, greater individual responsibility with the reduction of welfare provisions, and New Labour mentalities in the late 1990s and 2000s continued this as 'social welfarist principles of taxation, public spending and government borrowing and redistribution were displaced by individualist policy discourse' (MacLeavy 2011, p.4). Gillies (2007) terms this the 'neoliberalisation of the family' (Gillies 2007, p.4).

The intensification of parent blame under neoliberalism sees maternal figures foregrounded. 'Parenting' suggests a proliferation of parental knowledges (Lawler 2000) and contemporary discourses place mother and father synonymously¹. Yet as many feminists note (Gillies 2005; Jensen 2010a; Lawler 2000; Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008) this neoliberal neutral language masks the gendered dimensions of parenting; women still perform the vast majority of caring roles and are expected to take responsibility for this. The depiction of the deviant lone mother responsible for societal collapse through male juvenile delinquency is especially prevalent, harnessed relentlessly in periods of social unrest (Gillies 2005; Mann and Roseneil 1994; Stone 2004). E. Kim Stone (2004) comments that representations of the lone

mother formed a discursive formation during Thatcherism, this figure received intense vilification as she was depicted as a feckless, welfare leech. This fell alongside discussions regarding the removal of economic support, becoming a moral discussion for conscientious parenting (ibid). Gillies (2005) comments that the introduction of The Child Support Act 1991 and constriction of welfare support aimed to instil financial accountability to 'absent' fathers and discourage lone motherhood through morality (Gillies 2005, p.5).

New Labour's arrival in 1997 saw an implicit link between parenting and blame. New Labour emphasised giving parents the 'skills' (and responsibility) to enable social mobility, redistributing opportunities rather than wealth and 'supporting' parents to make 'empowered' choices (Gillies 2005). Tackling 'social exclusion' through programmes, such as Sure Start, aimed to transcribe (middle-class) values around caring and parenting to 'disadvantaged' communities (Hey and Bradford 2006, p.55). Simultaneously, incentives targeting the 'dysfunctional' family, such as anti-social behaviour management and parenting orders, increased punitive governance. Largely bestowed upon mothers, this linked social mobility and dysfunctionality to individual upbringing (Peters 2011). Peter Squires (2008) notes that this fed into approaches to equality, social inclusion and 'responsibilisation' strategies (Squires 2008, p.15). Parenting is summoned to break the 'cycle of deprivation', social exclusion and antisocial behaviour (Gillies 2007, p.7). In the shift towards 'reflexive parenting', parenting is created as a transferable (middle-class) 'skill' imbued with cultural value that can be learnt and used for the 'good' society to prosper (Gillies 2007; Jensen 2010a), which Jensen (2010a) notes masks the realities of caring.

Neoliberal rhetoric around 'choice' states that as traditional social structures diminish, such as the state or religion, self-governance becomes essential and consequently responsibility for 'wrong' choices is placed firmly on the subject (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008, p.239). Imogen Tyler (2008) explores the vilification of the 'chav mum' that surfaced in the noughties, emphasising that this 'heightened class antagonism' relates to women's changing role in contemporary times. As women have entered the workforce under neoliberalism, they are called to perform their 'dual role' (McRobbie 2009, p.80-81). This trajectory emphasises the shift whereby citizens are addressed through paid work rather than benefit recipient category (Rafferty and Wiggan 2011), creating, as Angela McRobbie (2009) notes, a workfare, rather than welfare state. Due to the gendered dimension of parenting, under the 'new sexual contract' (McRobbie 2009) women are expected to simultaneously labour/consume and mother/care, shifting responsibilities away from the welfare state to

individuals, 'premised on the management of gender and sexuality by a wide range of biopolitical strategies' (ibid, p.81). The anxiety over the feasibility of this role surfaces through the demonisation of the 'chav mum' (Tyler 2008, p.20). This figure exemplifies 'bad' parenting, which works to 'attribute superior forms of social capital to the subject positions and social groups they are implicitly or explicitly differentiated from' (ibid: 18).

Under neoliberalism delinquency, 'dysfunctional families', and 'bad' parenting arise, meaning that, as Skeggs (2004) states, class is 'spoken euphemistically' (Skeggs 2004, p.44). These 'problems' become enveloped under the discourse of the underclass. Skeggs suggests that in political rhetoric concerning the underclass these 'representations unleash a chain of signifiers in which an underclass is not only represented, but also shaped by disparate discourses of familial disorder and dysfunction, dangerous masculinities and dependent, fecund and excessive femininities' (Skeggs 2004, p.87). Steph Lawler (2005) contends that as neoliberalism places the undeserving poor to blame for social immobility, the underclass rhetoric differentiates the working-class from previous periods where they may have been considered respectable, the underclass rhetoric 'works to *drive out* the notion of 'respectability' from the poor altogether' (Lawler 2005, p.435 original emphasis). Therefore, the neoliberalisation of the family invokes an individualising mentality stressing self-governance. It muddies the gendered realities of parenting and obscures contemporary class politics. These threads are drawn upon and accentuated within the current austerity climate. The following sections discuss the discourses of 'austere' and 'feral' parents in the context of austerity under neoliberalism.

Contemporary Parent Citizenship: 'Austere Parents'

Under the Coalition Government that formed in 2010, the neoliberalisation of the family has intensified via austerity parenting. Austerity parenting has emerged defining parent citizenship through economic frugality, stricter formulations of the 'good' parent and an intensification of external governance. The economic downturn of 2008 saw fiscal austerity via new political incentives, rising unemployment and social upheaval in Britain. Ostensibly opposing New Labour's 'excessive borrowing' response to the recession, the Conservative led Coalition Government that formed in 2010 implemented deep, fast austerity measures. Parents have been positioned as able to rescue the economy through an increased engineering into the labour market. The extension of welfare-to-work initiatives, new conditions on tax credits, and the lowering of the child age threshold conditionality when lone parents are compelled to

seek work² are all indicative of pushing parents into the labour market. Thus, parents are increasingly financially responsible for themselves and their children, exemplifying the ‘new sexual contract’ around parenting and labour.

Whilst this period of austerity echoes Thatcherism, this is not a direct return to this era of retrenchment as social action is intertwined under the Big Society rhetoric (MacLeavy 2011). As there has been a restriction on community based welfare services previously available to parents, such as the closure of Sure Start centres (Fawcett Society 2012a), parents have paradoxically surfaced as a way to reinvigorate the locality. David Cameron specifically positioned parents and families as fundamental to realising the Big Society noting that ‘[s]trong families are the foundation of a bigger, stronger society’ (Cameron 2011c). The Big Society rhetoric emphasises communities, volunteering, charities, and local councils as essential for the ‘good society’ to prosper through ‘empowering communities’, ‘opening up public services’ and ‘promoting social action’ (Coote 2010:2). This sees ‘getting involved’ and ‘taking responsibility’ for the family and community increasingly stressed. The encouragement of voluntary parenting mentors who support other parents in the local community (e.g. Williams R. 2012) or parent-led schools (e.g. BBC News 2011) under the Coalition Government’s school reforms agenda aiming ‘to improve parental choice and quality’ (Gove 2011), exemplifies parents’ intensifying role. The cultural and economic value of parenting is increasingly foregrounded. As the welfare state is further reduced/retreats through fiscal austerity, parents are envisaged to replace state support and build localities with an entrepreneurial spirit, boost the economy through labouring and caring for future generations: simultaneously ensuring that their children do this also without financially ‘burdening’ the state.

The ‘strong’ family is defined in increasingly narrow ways in this mentality. Cameron emphasised that via the Big Society the state will step in to help ‘build a society where families and communities are stronger’ and this is linked to boosting ‘our nation’s well-being’ (Cameron 2011c). The Coalition Government have placed themselves as dissimilar to the previous government by focusing on both children and parents: they have ‘had courage to say loud and clear that if you want what is best for children you have to address not just children but families and relationships too’ (Cameron 2011c). Within this, there has been an explicit focus upon marriage and the married couple is foregrounded as the most beneficial form of parent union. For example:

I am pro-commitment, I back marriage and I think it's a wonderfully precious institution. Strong families are where children learn to become responsible people. When you grow up in a strong family, you learn how to behave, you learn about give and take. You learn about responsibility and how to live in harmony with others. (Cameron 2011c)

As Gillies (2012) notes, this has seen a concern with relationship management with a drive towards counselling and support for married couples as one of many attempts to regulate family relations. The re-establishment of marriage also features in proposed governmental changes, such as the push towards tax breaks for married couples and reforms within the benefits system. Marriage is created as novel despite its substantial ideological history, envisioned to be able to instil responsibility, morals and values needed for social harmony to fix 'Broken Britain'.

The spotlight upon marriage seems to be related to perceived negative outcomes of family breakdown, which is costly to the public purse. The Coalition Government has linked fixing 'our broken society' with fixing the 'broken family' (Lister and Bennet 2010). This sees an increased emphasis on the perils of 'bad' parent relationships. According to Cameron, 'a bad relationship between parents means a child is more likely to live in poverty, fail at school, end up in prison or be unemployed in later life' (Cameron 2011c). This is visible cross-party. Labour politician Frank Field's independent review on poverty and life chances, *The Foundation Years* (2010), emphasised that parenting in the first five years of a child's life is essential to cease the transmission of poverty:

It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money, in determining whether their potential is realised in adult life. (Field 2010, p.5)

This individualisation of poverty sees an intensity of external governance into parents and children at an ever-younger age. Gillies (2012) suggests that the Coalition Government views parenting as a practice where competence can be taught with an emphasis on the state taking 'responsibility for fostering and enforcing the practice of good parenting' (Gillies 2012, p.15). To use Gillies' (2011) example, the Coalition Government's Early Intervention Programme extends the Family Nurse Partnerships scheme started under New Labour. This sees nurses assigned to pregnant women as early as sixteen weeks who's unborn child is considered at risk of 'social exclusion' to teach parenting 'skills'. Another example of this intensification of governance is the suggestion that Sure Start must return to its original focus to aid 'excluded' parents, rather than the middle-classes 'hijacking' this service³, through increasing the amount

of ‘properly trained professionals’, such as health visitors, visiting certain families in the home (Cameron 2010). This also works to justify the restriction of this service. Therefore, this ‘preventative’ approach not only continues the individualisation of poverty but it sees explicit targeted governance into working-class parents to enable them to self-govern themselves and their children to ‘bring the costs down’ (Cameron 2010) they cause society.

Austerity parenting is accentuated in an economy where it is increasingly difficult to fulfil, especially for lone, working-class mothers. As women are still main carers, childcare costs, flexible working and counteracting the male breadwinner model hinders them economically, exemplified by the gender pay gap (Fawcett Society 2012b). These difficulties are further exacerbated as women are experiencing austerity measures disproportionately to men. Since 2009 male unemployment has remained relatively stable whereas female unemployment has increased by 16% (Fawcett Society 2012c). The public sector sees higher levels of female workers as it offered more flexibility than others, therefore these cuts will unduly affect women (Sands 2011). Moreover, the recent welfare cuts are purported to be affecting parents, especially lone mothers (Sands 2011, TUC 2010, WBG 2011). Lone parents are more reliant on income from tax benefits and credits as users/citizens that have been reduced or frozen⁴. Angus McCabe (2010) notes a rhetorical shift from New Labour’s ‘equality’ to the Coalition Government’s ‘fairness’ in social policy. As parents are fully accountable for the outcome of their offspring under neoliberalism, concepts of ‘fairness’ become positioned within the result of ‘good’/‘bad’ parents/children, rather than the process that situates this. From a postfeminist perspective the shift from ‘mothering’ to ‘parenting’ has further meaning for austerity parenting. Ros Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) argue that neoliberalism *‘is always already gendered’* (Gill & Scharff 2011, p.7 original emphasis), thus parenting encompasses a feminist discourse of equality of caring practices, yet instills restrictive policies and attitudes that detrimentally affect women under neoliberalism.

Contemporary parent citizenship is shaped by austerity in three key ways. Firstly, parenting is targeted as a form of economic thrift, simultaneously parents are expected to boost the economy and locality, all within a period that sees them targeted by financial restrictions. Secondly, to achieve this, stricter forms of parent subjects explicitly define the norm of who the ‘good’ parent citizen can be. Thirdly, parents are subject to increasing external governance as not everyone can fulfil this ‘ideal’. This places parents as increasingly accountable for processes outside of their control. Parents under neoliberalism are wholly responsible for the mobility and future of their children, and as such parenting is reconfigured

as vital to mend the ‘broken society’ and soften the impact of austerity, thus extending the reach of neoliberalism. The next section analyses the ‘feral’ parent discourse, emphasising how parents who do not (or cannot) fulfil austerity parenting are demonised.

The UK riots: ‘Feral’ parents and failure

During and after the UK riots of 2011, the ‘feral’ parent discourse transcended through political and media rhetoric in explicit and implicit ways. Whilst the term ‘feral’ parents in relation to the riots seems to originate with journalist Melanie Phillips, as I will discuss, the discursive threads that encompass the discourse of ferality, parent blame and the riots were signified across a number of responses. A ‘feral underclass’ (Clarke 2011) was represented as apolitically partaking in opportunistic looting and ‘sheer criminality’ (May 2011), contrasting recent student or public protests that were framed as social critique⁵. Terming events as a ‘riot’ or ‘mob’ indicates the class distinctions that were invoked. The ‘mob’ is historically created in opposition to the rational, autonomous, white, middle-class male (Lawler 2002). As children are considered blank slates that must be scribed with ‘competent’ parenting to produce ‘good’ citizens (Gillies 2012: 20), the ‘bad’ parenting of the ‘feral’ rioters soon took culpability:

When I say parts of Britain are sick, the one word I would use to sum that up is irresponsibility. The sight of those young people running down streets, smashing windows, taking property, looting, laughing as they go, the problem of that is a complete lack of responsibility, a lack of proper parenting, a lack of proper upbringing, a lack of proper ethics, a lack of proper morals. That is what we need to change. (Cameron 2011d)

Through affective notions of disgust and a tautological use of ‘lack’ this extract places the rioters’ parents as irresponsible, immoral and unethical. The reason for the rioting lies with ‘improper’ parenting and thus it is this that must be disciplined to stop the reproduction of rioting ‘young people’. Right wing media reflected and magnified parent blame through the linkages between ferality, immorality and irresponsible parenting. Journalist Melanie Phillips stated:

What we have been experiencing is a complete breakdown of civilised behaviour among children and young people straight out of William Golding’s seminal novel about childhood savagery, *Lord Of The Flies*. [...] We are not merely up against feral children, but feral parents. (Phillips 2011)

This extract draws on ferality, savagery and parent blame creating the ‘feral’ parents who reproduced ‘feral’ children as outside the social order. Terms such as ‘wild beasts’, ‘animals’,

‘savages’, and ‘feral’ create an underclass of dirty, wild and uncontrollable beings loaded with negative value. ‘Feral’ signifies dualisms of domestic/wild, human/animal, civilised/uncivilised, opposing the white, autonomous middle-class male citizen. Left leaning reporters stated that the ‘pressures of life, such as unemployment, lone parenting, poor housing, poverty, and mental or physical illness can get in the way’ of ‘proper parenting’ (Tonkin 2011), which was lacking in the rioters’ lives. However, underscoring all these accounts is that the parents of those who rioted had not parented properly. Their parenting was uncontrolled and lacking, thus reinforcing the neoliberal mentality of individual responsibility and control. This places the riots as exemplary of when this is absent, creating these events (and future social unrest) as preventable if only these parents were ‘tamed’, thus their parenting would be and so would their children.

Kim Allen and Yvette Taylor (2012) note that despite the *Guardian*/LSE (2011) finding that 10% of those involved in the riots were female, mothers and daughters have acquired a ‘(hyper)visibility’. A feature of this was the ‘feral’ mother’s lone status and/or sexual immorality via bearing children through multiple fathers. As mentioned previously, the Coalition Government placed significant economic and moral value with marriage. ‘Dadlessness’ has heavily featured within this, which as Zoe Williams (2011) stresses, indirectly speaks of lone motherhood thus allowing differentiation from direct attacks of the 1980s and 1990s. Yet, as Image 1 exemplifies, the ‘absence’ of fathers in the riots was heavily debated across the political spectrum. Subsequent to the riots, Cameron stated that previous politicians have been ‘shying away from speaking the truth about behaviour, about morality [...] so you can’t say that marriage and commitment are good things for fear of alienating single mothers’ (Cameron 2011a). This attack of lone mothers intensified in media reactions:

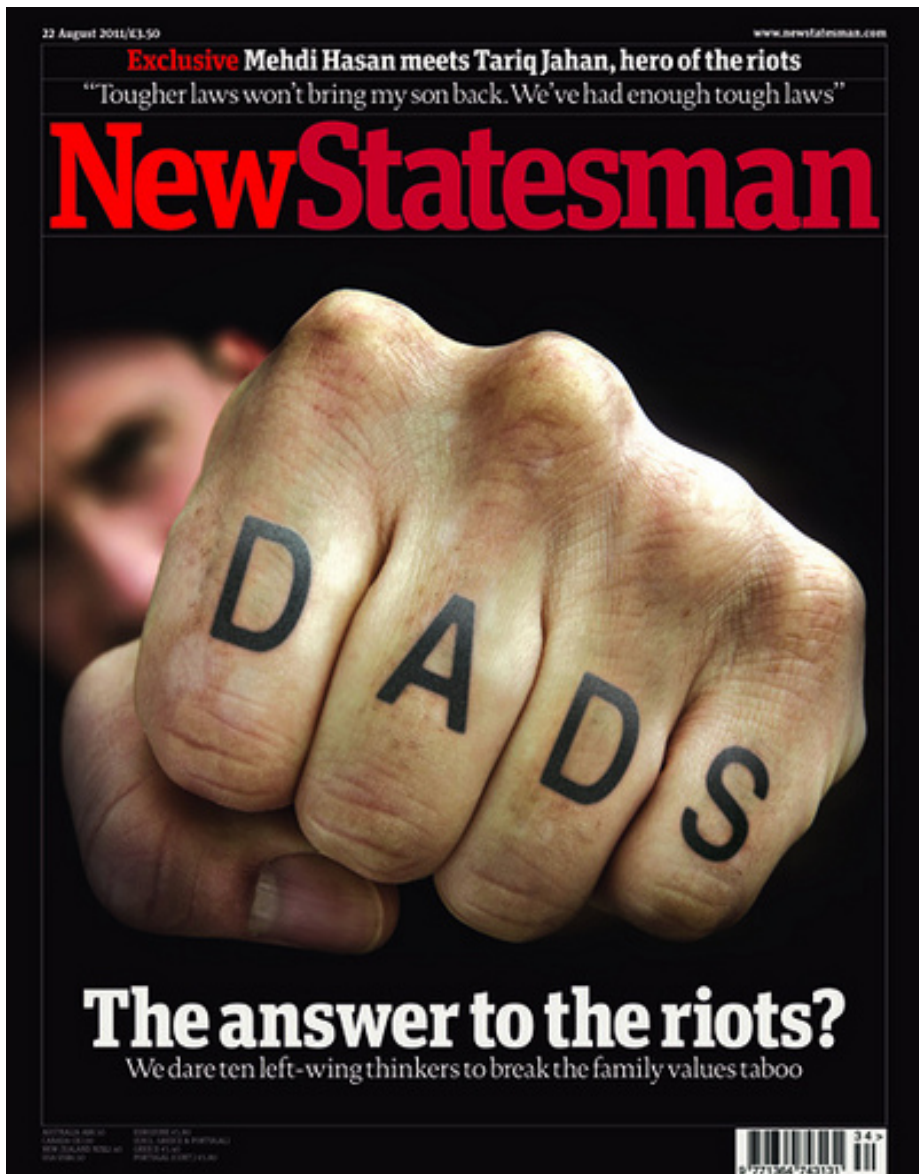


Image 1: Dads: The answer to the riots?

[M]ost of these children come from lone-mother households. And the single most crucial factor behind all this mayhem is the willed removal of the most important thing that socialises children and turns them from feral savages into civilised citizens: a father who is a fully committed member of the family unit. [T]here are whole areas of Britain, white as well as black, where committed fathers are a wholly unknown phenomenon. In such areas, successive generations are being brought up only by mothers, through whose houses pass transitory males by whom these women have yet more children - and who inevitably repeat the pattern of lone and dysfunctional parenting. (Phillips 2011)

The ‘feral’ mother is constructed as uncontrollably and immorally breeding. The spatialisation of ‘whole areas of Britain’ implies that she spreads her wayward ways generationally and infectiously through parenting. This draws upon the negative value of working-class women

Sara De Benedictis, ‘Feral’ Parents: Austerity parenting under neoliberalism

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as historically marked through incivility, animalistic commentary (Gidley and Rooke 2010), fecundity (Tyler 2008), excess, dirt and space (Skeggs 2004).

In the above extract, racialised slurs are layered through ‘white as well as black’⁶, simultaneously signifying an assumption that juvenile delinquency is solely of the black, working-classes to emphasise a sudden white underclass associated with this deviance, intensifying the hate speech of the ‘chav’ (Tyler 2008; Tyler and Bennett 2010). More broadly, in the direct aftermath of the riots parents were blamed for producing ‘gang’ members, implicitly signifying black, working-class young men, who were also deemed responsible for the riots (e.g. Odone 2011). As Gail Lewis (2005) emphasises discursive strands between black families and social unrest is so ingrained within cultural discourses, overt racialisation is not always required for meaning (Lewis 2005, p.552). Lawler (2012) comments that new formations of race and class have emerged, one of which is that in some sites a shift has occurred from representing the working-class from ‘dirty whiteness’ to ‘an *intensification* of a newly problematic whiteness’ and this creates ‘a form of extreme whiteness [...] that works as a counterpoint to “ordinary” (and middle-class) whiteness’ (Lawler 2012, p.2). The racialising of the underclass in relation to the riots sees a complex amalgamation of discourses surrounding dirty whiteness, ‘gang’ culture and black families. Whilst this is not the same formation of extreme whiteness that Lawler discusses, these work similarly to place those deemed responsible for the riots ‘as a counterpoint to “ordinary” (and middle-class) whiteness’ (ibid). Therefore, these discourses work alongside each other to implicitly and oppositionally inscribe the ‘austere’ parent with ‘ordinary’, middle-class whiteness.

The ‘feral’ mother was constructed as not only sexually immoral through the reproduction of ‘feral’ children or ‘gang members’ with multiple fathers, but as though lone mothers deprive children of a ‘normal’ upbringing through a lack of the nuclear family. This can only result in social decay. For example:

A large and increasing number of youngsters are brought up without dads. The majority of rioters are gang members whose only loyalty is to the group and whose only authority figure is the toughest of the bunch. [T]hese gang members have one thing in common: no father at home. [...] Their notion of family life was chaotic and conflicted. Mother lived alone or with a succession of men. (Odone 2011)

This novel cultural interchangeability of ‘gang’ members and rioters homogenises delinquency and reinforces a mother’s lone status and/or sexual immorality as responsible for all ‘criminality’. Reactions from left leaning commentators differed in form but had similar

content. In the *Guardian* article, 'Being liberal is fine, but we need to be given the right to parent' (Gentleman 2011), an interviewee emphasised that in Tottenham:

There is none of the basic starting presumption of two adults who want to start a family, raise children together, love them, nourish them and lead them to full independence. The parents are not married and the child has come, frankly, out of casual sex; the father isn't present, and isn't expected to be. (Stirling quoted in Gentleman 2011)

Underlying this separate but intertwined lone mother and multiple father discourse is the absence of a singular father figure, positioned as essential for authority and stability. This absence is constructed as a 'willed' choice, whereas in the multiple father discourse the father figure is constructed as absent/inappropriate due to sexual promiscuity. Spoken through lack, the 'feral' parent is positioned as failing to give her children a stable father figure by selfishly placing her will to parent alone or sexual desire above them.

The parent blaming of the lone mother emphasised that society's values overall have enabled mothers to go 'too far' through their parenting choices. Cameron inferred a lack of external governance towards lone mothers engenders the values that caused the riots:

In this risk-free ground of moral neutrality there are no bad choices, just different lifestyles. People aren't the architects of their own problems, they are victims of circumstance. "Live and let live" becomes "do what you please." Well actually, what [the riots] has shown is that this moral neutrality [is] not going to cut it anymore. (Cameron 2011a)

Journalist Max Hastings stated that the 'wild beasts' involved in the riots 'respond only to instinctive animal impulses — to eat and drink, have sex, seize or destroy the accessible property of others' and the blame for this lies in 'the breakdown of families' and 'the pernicious promotion of single motherhood as a desirable state' (Hastings 2011). Melanie Phillips similarly stated the 'liberal intelligentsia' created lone motherhood as a 'right':

[I]nstead of lone parenthood being regarded as a tragedy for individuals, and a catastrophe for society, it has been redefined as a 'right.'" Instead, it introduced the sexual free-for-all of 'lifestyle choice'; claimed that the idea of the male breadwinner was a sexist anachronism; and told girls that they could, and should, go it alone as mothers. (Phillips 2011)

This novel angle to the demonisation of the working-class mother, overall, places the 'feral' mother as having gone 'too far' with neoliberal ethics of choice in her parenting; the balance between 'rights' and 'responsibilities' has become eschewed. As many feminists have noted of maternal caring under neoliberalism (Hadfield et al. 2007; Stone 2004; Tyler 2011), there is a conflation surrounding gender roles as neoliberal notions of self-governance oppose concepts of maternal selflessness. The 'feral' parent is positioned as failing to give her children a

‘proper’ upbringing through enforcing her ‘right’ to reject the nuclear family and is charged with the responsibility of ‘our broken society’. Despite attempts to incorporate same-sex marriage into the Coalition Government’s agenda⁷, it is clear that the heterosexual, married couple is envisioned as lacking within these discourses. This is indicative of ‘familial re-runs’, as noted by Taylor (2009), placing ‘heterosexuality as a disguised and “neutral” identity and practice’ (Taylor 2009, p.8). The combination of the lone mother and absent father discourses implicitly states that the heterosexual, white, middle-class, married ‘austere’ mother-father combination is needed to fix ‘Broken Britain’.

The ‘perils’ of choosing lone motherhood was also layered with discussions of economic waste throughout the riots. The lone mother was recently summoned to seek economic opportunities: ‘[f]or that single mother who wants to work – we are making sure work pays’ (Cameron 2011c). In this context the lone mother’s unemployed status is assumed and re-coded. Lone and/or promiscuous mothers were not parenting adequately through irresponsibility and selfishness due to an improper work ethic, welfare entitlement and a novel attack of destroying the locality. Journalist Cristina Odone suggested that lone mothers teach children that ‘[w]ork was something losers did [...] and more immediate financial reward came from milking the benefits system’ (Odone 2011). Phillips explicitly linked lone motherhood, welfare entitlement and the riots:

[The] breaking of the family was further condoned, rewarded and encouraged by the Welfare State, which conceives of need solely in terms of absence of money, and which accordingly subsidises lone parenthood and the destructive behaviour that fatherlessness brings in its train. Welfare dependency further created the entitlement culture that the looters so egregiously display. (Phillips 2011)

This extract follows the discourse of lone motherhood as engendering inadequate values that caused the riots, as mentioned above. It places welfare support as enabling lone motherhood to be economically viable but emphasises this as flawed as children must be instilled with moral value that only a (married, white, heterosexual) couple can provide. Therefore this demonisation has a double incentive, establishing marriage as morally superior and aiding the economy through dual income households. The ‘feral’ mother is created as either not caring for her children or not economically supporting them. This parenting is created as futile, thus a needless drain on the precarious economy.

The ‘feral’ mother is constructed as not only ‘leeching’ from society, but also destroying it. Political and media institutions emphasised that the riots would severely harm the UK economy further through repairing damage or lost business (e.g. Hawkes 2011). Boris

Johnson, Mayor of London, signalled that those responsible for the riots were uncontrollably and illogically further damaging the locality and community:

I ask anybody who has the faintest vestige of sympathy with these people to ask yourself “what is the good in times of economic difficulty in raiding and destroying businesses that are the life blood of our community and that give people jobs?” Where is the sense in that? (Johnson 2011)

As the ‘feral’ parent is positioned as wholly responsible for the rioting children, this implicitly creates these parents as selfishly and irrationally rejecting austerity. The ‘feral’ parent is constructed as not only failing to re-build the locality but destroying it further and damaging the economy via their children’s rioting. This was vividly exemplified by the riot cleanup operations in the aftermath to the riots. In the prelude to *We are all in this together* Cameron defined ‘[t]he ones who called themselves riot wombles and headed down to the hardware stores to pick up brooms and start the clear-up’ as representing the best of Britain (Cameron 2011a). He elaborated that ‘[t]hose thugs we saw last week do not represent us, nor do they represent our young people’ (Cameron 2011a). The ‘fictive “we”’ that ‘symbolically excludes anyone not middle-class’ (Lawler 2005, p.432) also invokes the (middle-class) parent who cares for ‘our’ young people and fixes the destruction created by the ‘feral’ underclass. Allen and Taylor (2012) similarly comment that the riot cleanup saw ‘the middle-classes claim their position as “respectable” and “defiant” members of the community, wielding brooms as they go about cleaning up and repairing “Broken Britain”’. The ‘feral’ parents are placed in dichotomy to the ‘austere’ parents who are inscribed with aiding the economy and localism through social action.

Whilst Thatcherism pathologised lone parents as a social problem and economic threat, and New Labour promoted the engineering of lone parents into employment, emphasising individual responsibility, the Coalition Government amalgamated these themes; first, lone parents are created as individually responsible for their offspring, second, a pro-marriage stance is naturalised as the most beneficial form of kinship and, third, parents are targeted as an economic risk and placed as labourers/carers (Haux 2011). Additionally, parents are now deemed responsible for the locality. Defined by lack, the ‘feral’ parent was irresponsible, unmarried, unemployed, destructive and unable to discipline her children; she has not fulfilled the new social contract of the Coalition Government under neoliberalism. The riots become a metaphorical, magnification of this. The ‘feral’ parent is constructed as failing her children through her parenting decisions due to lone motherhood and/or sexual promiscuity; either way she selfishly places herself over her children by enforcing her ‘rights’.

She fails to offer stability and authority as she is envisioned to reject the nuclear family and this becomes interchangeable with unemployment and welfare 'entitlement', which position her as failing to care/ provide for her children. Furthermore, the 'feral' parent failed to contribute to the economy or re-build the locality via her rioting offspring. Overall, she is created as depleting the economy and society; she is positioned as failing herself, her children and Britain.

Conclusion

The 'feral' parent discourse exemplifies the formation of austerity parenting as an integral part of neoliberal governmentality. This article aimed to contextualise the 'feral' parent discourse within a larger history of parental governance, analyse contemporary parent citizenship through the oppositional 'austere' and 'feral' parent figures and explore how the 'feral' parents are created as failures in the current climate. As I have demonstrated, despite utilising the gender neutral term 'parent', the modalities of austerity parent citizenship draw upon prior meaning and value through the neoliberalisation of the family, simultaneously intensifying this and incorporating new contemporary elements to form the 'feral' parent against which to define the 'austere' parent. Those who do not or cannot perform austerity parenting in the manner required are increasingly likely to be demonised, marked with negative value, as exemplified by the riots. The responsibility apportioned to 'feral' parents masks the current economic 'double bind' currently experienced by parents and justify governance (of certain selves) through the punitive, moral language of blame, acting to dichotomously inscribe cultural, economic and moral value with the middle-class, white, heterosexual, married parent. As the 'feral' parent discourse emphasises, this places some parents, no matter what they do, down a path of failure.

A year on from the riots, the discursive threads of the 'austere' and 'feral' parent discourses that crystallised in this period sees no signs of abating. This parent blame has been positioned as a catalyst to escalate intervention⁸ into the 120,000 'troubled' families that are supposedly 'the ones that everyone in their neighbourhood knows and often avoids' (Cameron 2011a). This sees increased targeted intervention into the 'underclass' to inscribe middle-class values of parenting. Simultaneously, austerity measures continue to be driven. This logic sees an unwavering commitment to unemployment, poverty and social immobility being lessened through engineering parents into an increasingly precarious labour market with little state support, alongside reforming a 'fairer' welfare system. 'Fairness' is difficult to

decipher as austerity parenting shifts the responsibility for structural inequality and social unrest away from those that drive neoliberal-led market mentalities towards those most detrimentally affected by these, inscribing them as ‘feral’ in a (moral) crusade to mend ‘our broken society’.

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1 Cameron emphasised that, as society is supposedly equal now, “mother” and “father” are interchangeable’ (Cameron 2011b).

2 In 2008, as part of the welfare to work reforms, New Labour introduced a switch of welfare benefits from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance for lone parents once their youngest child reached 12. They lowered this age further to 10 in October 2009 and the Coalition Government lowered this age again to 7 in October 2011 with plans to lower this again in 2012. There are many issues in lone parents being made to seek employment in this way. For example, whilst work is emphasised as the best route out of poverty some lone parents are more financially insecure in employment (See Gingerbread 2010).

3 Cameron stated that Sure Start centres have been taken over by the ‘sharp-elbowed middle classes’ (Cameron quoted in Cassidy 2010)

4 Housing benefits or childcare costs within Working Tax Credits for low-income families are some of the support that has been reduced or cut (See Sands 2011).

5 The UK riots and ‘riot’ was omitted from The Guardian article, ‘Global protests: is 2011 a year that will change the world?’ (Harris 2011).

6 Another example of the racialisation of the underclass discourse is David Starkey’s speech on Newsnight where he referenced Enoch Powell’s rivers of blood speech, commenting that the problem with the riots was that ‘the whites have become black’.

7 Such as Cameron stating his commitment to marriage includes same-sex marriages in 2010 (See Cameron 2010). More recently, he confirmed this commitment at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender reception at Downing Street despite contestation from some Conservatives members and religious groups.

8 This has been visible through the launching of the Troubled Families Programme and the CANParent scheme in 2012.

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