

Disciplinary Social Policy and the Failing Promise of the New Middle Classes: The Troubled Families Programme

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This article looks at the promise of the ‘New Middle Class’ (NMC) inherent in the neoliberal ideological ideal of individualising societal responsibility for well-being and success. The article points to how this promise enables a discourse and practice of welfare reform and a disciplining of life styles particularly targeting the very poor in society. Women and some ethnic minorities are particularly prone to poverty and then therefore also discipline. The article then provides a case study of the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) and shows how the programme and the way it is constructed and managed partly undermines the provision of the material needs to alleviate people from poverty and reproduces discourses of poor lifestyle and parenting choices as sources of poverty, thereby undermining the ‘middle-class’ promise.

Keywords: Troubled families, (new) middle class, disciplining social policy, neoliberalism.

Introduction

This will be a Budget for working people ... This is the new settlement. From a one nation government, this is a one nation Budget that takes the necessary steps and follows a sensible path for the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom. (George Osborne, Budget Speech, 8 July 2015)

This is how the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer prefaced his first budget speech as part of the new majority Conservative government in 2015. His aim was to emphasise the commonality of material experience faced by ‘working people’ and that the reforms he was about to announce would be in the universal interest. As Marx and Engels warned in 1846 (1968), alarm bells should sound whenever elites present policies as in the universal interest – they rarely are.

Politicians do regularly appeal to a rhetorical universal interest. During the post-War period, they were helped in this by the social construct of the ‘New Middle Class’ (NMC) – a social group whose interests could be associated with those of all because of its assumed universal *potential*. Even where the material reality of access to a position in the NMC became questionable, the public policy rhetoric suggested that ‘inclusion’ could be defined more by consumption, cultural experiences and, crucially, behavioural choices. The spectre of Marx could be held at bay, it seemed, by a new world of status derived

from individual expression and increasingly post-modern consumption of goods, services and even 'experiences'.

Those unable to make the shift to this expanded NMC were increasingly ghettoised conceptually and politically. If they could not access the material reality of a position in the NMC, they could at least behave as if this were possible and in this way access the cultural experience of 'inclusion'. A failure to do so was to risk state discipline. Since the 2008 crisis, this disciplinary emphasis has been markedly intensified, with social policy focusing on enforcing individual and household competition for access to a now contracting and polarising NMC. This article uses the Troubled Families Programme (TFP) as one example of such a disciplinary social policy. Interviews with policy makers and programme directors in two locales show how families get locked into disciplining policies and discourses that condemn their lifestyles and life choices rather than providing long-term solutions to structural inequalities.

The rise and fall of the New Middle Class?

The development of post-war capitalism in the 'West' seemed to suggest that Marx's forecast that society would gradually evolve into two opposing classes was incorrect. The emergence and rapid expansion of the NMC seemed to suggest that the economic contradictions of capitalism might be held in check and displaced by the social and political realm. The material underpinning of the NMC resulted from urbanisation and the increasing managerial, supervisory and administrative occupations in expanding corporate and state structures (Burnham, 1941; Kerr *et al.*, 1960; Veblen, 1978). The NMC lived in improved housing conditions in the new suburbs and was able to take advantage of the benefits of consumerism and technology to make life demonstrably easier. The harsh edge of exploitation was smoothed by improving wages and living standards.

Conceptually, the NMC appears problematic. New class theory especially drew attention to the importance of culture and self-understanding as the basis for social stratification (Wacquant, 1992) and away from conceptualisations of 'objective' class positions. From a historical materialist perspective, such understandings clash with the notions of abstract and objective class relations, defined by relations to the means of production (Radice, 2014). From this point of view, the NMC seemed nonsensical as its members were required, for their subsistence, to offer their labour power for commodification. Of course, Marx himself allowed for both the abstract necessity of a working class that is always internally subdivided, and, in his historical critiques, for the political significance of cultural and social subdivisions within both the capitalist and working class (Marx, 1937[1867]: chapter 25). Objective classes then may be cut through with status divisions on the grounds of identity (gender, race, age, sexuality, religion and disability), culture or behaviour, producing very different intersectional inequalities and political alliances (including inter- and intra-class factions) in different places and times. These two accounts do not have to be in contradiction with one another because they are not describing the same thing.

In our reading then, the NMC is largely a cultural and ideational social construction, but it has significant material underpinnings – in the growth of service sector employment – and implications – in subdividing the working class in ways that obscure and contain class struggle within the realm of culture and distribution, as opposed to production. It does not displace objective and relational understandings of class but augments them,

helping to show how ideological structures serve as a veil for, and distraction from, objective class positions. Adopting such a distinction helps to show precisely why the NMC and its promise have been so politically stabilising.

The material expansion of NMC occupations from the 1950s to 1980s did benefit many from the previously manual working class who were able to enter the new occupations and benefit from improved living standards, but it was not universal. Residual industrial communities and women were excluded from direct participation, with the latter's class position continuing to be determined by their familial association with men (Ganzeboom *et al.*, 1989: 4; Goldthorpe, 1987; Halsey *et al.*, 1980). Yet, the significance of the NMC was its *promise* – in both class and gender terms. Even those who did not directly move into these new occupations could look forward to a future in which they *might* – shifting the responsibility for remaining inequalities to individuals and their own personal and familial strategies to achieve this. Even where those outside the NMC could not see a way that they could enter it, there was at least the possibility of their children/daughters 'doing better'.

Under conditions of neoliberalisation, the material underpinnings of the NMC have begun to unfold. Private sector strategies of offshoring, technological change and attempts to reduce labour costs have run alongside public sector strategies of privatisation and undermining employment protection legislation and the bargaining power of trade unions and the material security of even the 'included' NMC workers. In such contexts, neoliberalisation has meant increasing polarisation within the NMC. The post-2008 period is marked by both the intensification of these material processes and popular debunking of the ideological constructs of the NMC with the 1 per cent/99 per cent logic of the Occupy movement gaining widespread resonance far beyond those that were directly involved in these protests.

In this context, two highly gendered and contradictory household level dynamics have been apparent. First, poorer households have acted as shock absorbers for the withdrawal of state provided services. Second, the households that fared more successfully in this transition were those households where two adult partners were able to access relatively advantageous positions in the emerging occupational structure. Because households are usually formed in class and racially cohesive ways, increased female participation increased the polarising pressures within the NMC. Coping with this polarisation is highly 'depleting' (Rai *et al.*, 2014), especially for households lacking the resources necessary for the work of reproducing their members on a day-to-day and generational basis. Such depletion may then undermine the capacity for some poorer households to continue to behave in ways consistent with the NMC, as well as their motivation to do so. Depletion then puts pressure on the reproduction of ethical norms that sustain and stabilise society. Those left behind would not only to be disciplined because they were unable or unwilling to access 'inclusion' but because this was deemed to undermine social stability (Elson, 1998).

Social policy as discipline in neoliberalisation

Loic Wacquant has long written of the increasingly disciplinary nature of social policy in the US:

it works to bend the fractions of the working class recalcitrant to the discipline of the new fragmented service wage labor by increasing the cost of strategies of exit into the informal

economy of the street; it neutralizes and warehouses its most disruptive elements, or those rendered wholly superfluous by the recomposition of the demand for labor; and it reaffirms the authority of the state in daily life. (Wacquant, 2009: 6–7)

For Wacquant, social policy has become a tool to both incentivise and enforce behaviour deemed to be appropriate to staying in, or entering, the NMC, even where the material prospect of success is receding, while disciplining and warehousing those unable or unwilling to struggle for such ‘success’. Early neoliberalisation in the UK was oriented around such a ‘two-nations’ approach (Jessop *et al.*, 1984) to divide the working class, delinking those able to reap relative advantage from state policies and occupational change from those who were disadvantaged by them (Nunn, 2014). The first group could be assimilated into the material, cultural and social edifice of the NMC, bolstering the political coalition in support of neoliberalisation, notably through the welfare trade-off. The second group were to be marked out for state discipline in the form of both welfare retrenchment and enhanced coercion (Gamble, 1979).

This dualistic strategy has a long heritage in the UK, going back as far as the Poor Laws of the seventeenth century (Polanyi, 1957). Here, it is not structural inequalities but rather the lifestyles of the poor that were deemed responsible for social problems. More recently, New Labour sought to address the concerns of families about the dangers of falling out of the NMC (Nunn, 2007). The language of ‘inclusion’ was the perfect vehicle with which to articulate a strategy for a renewed and rhetorically ‘universal’ class compromise, in which the NMC was seen electorally as the most important cohort to court. Gendered concerns with social reproduction related to the household–state relationship on issues such as education, childcare, the quality of public services and security from crime were clearly important in New Labour’s appeal not just to the NMC but to *NMC families*. The focus of these interventions was equality of opportunity rather than outcome, with opportunity defined as the capacity to compete for positions within the NMC (Nunn, 2012).

In the latter years of the 2000s, as New Labour imploded, the Conservative Party prepared for government by establishing its own welfare and social policy agenda. The Tory think-tank, the Centre for Social Justice, established by Ian Duncan Smith, published several influential reports, including the catchily titled *Breakdown Britain* and *Breakthrough Britain* (Duncan Smith, 2006: 15) which constructed the *responsibility* for poverty, unemployment and other social problems at the level of the individual and as the product of *choice* (Slater, 2012), even in advance of the 2008 crisis. The consensual and incentivising aspects of New Labour social policy, including stealth redistribution, were even then identified as inducing poor quality choices.

In power, the Conservative Party sought to play to the politics of aspiration and competitiveness that were by then successfully engrained in popular culture. However, *via* the politics of austerity the Coalition Government also combined this politics of aspiration with a renewed ‘two-nation’ strategy of differentiating within the NMC, now in the rhetorical guise of the much vaunted ‘hard working family’, from the ‘undeserving poor’; with the former celebrated and the latter targeted for disciplinary political rhetoric and social policy interventions.

Much attention has been placed on the way in which discipline is implemented *via* welfare retrenchment and workfarist activation (Wiggan, 2015). However, we seek to show how such discipline is complemented by measures that are much more interventionist and are designed to extend state discipline into the heart of the family (Daly and Bray, 2015),

coercively promoting normative individual and parenting behaviours associated with the NMC, even while the material potential is ever-more clearly constrained (Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage, 2016). Social policy has become much more disciplinary in nature and targeted specifically at those deemed *not interested* in, or *unable* to reach, a position within the NMC.

The Troubled Families Programme as disciplinary social policy

As outlined by other articles in this themed section, the TFP was one of the flagship programs of the previous UK Coalition government and is strongly championed by the current Conservative government. It demonstrates the disciplinary logic outlined above and aims to foster aspiration in those seemingly unable or unwilling to participate in the NMC.

The TFP was designed to ‘turn around the lives’ of what was initially claimed to be 120,000 families in the UK by 2015 in order to relieve the costs these families apparently cause ‘the public purse’ (DCLG, 2013). While this number was dubious from the outset (Levitas, 2012), it emerged in August 2014 that new – similarly questionable – estimates suggest 500,000 families in Britain are now considered to fulfil the criteria (Watt, 2014). These ‘forgotten families’ were identified by the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel final report (RCVP, 2012). While the panel found that very few young people involved in the 2010 riots were members of an official ‘troubled family, it argued for an extension of the principles of the programme to the 500,000, underpinning our claim that the fracturing NMC leaves a gradually increasing proportion of the population subject to disciplinary interventions.

The programme clearly aims at conditioning the behaviour of parents, promising a different and better future, conditional on more effective parenting – though what precisely that should look like is less clear (Tepe-Belfrage, 2015). The TFP then is aimed to closely monitor families, foster aspiration and individual responsibility rather than to offer substantiated economic and social assistance to offset or correct low income, poor health, bad housing or deprivation:

interventions are delivered in the home, in schools and many other locations with a lead keyworker for every case. The direct work is fitted to individual need by providing practical, emotional and financial advice and support to empower individuals within the family and the family unit itself, to build up their capabilities with the view to raising personal development and aspirations. The ultimate aim is to effect change, which can be sustained and passed on through future generations and to enhance resiliency to lessen the impact of further difficulty. The lifecycle will not continue without further challenge at either the societal or personal level, hence the need for sustainability. (Interview in Tower Hamlets, 2004)

Research

The empirical research underpinning this article involved a series of fifteen interviews with programme managers, case workers and policy makers between 2014 and 2015 in two locales out of the ten councils with the most Troubled Families (Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, Essex, Lancashire, Kent, Bradford, Norfolk, Bristol and Nottingham). The interviews were part of a research project on the ‘Political Economy of Family Intervention

Politics' funded by the University of Sheffield from 2012–16. The interviewees were chosen according to availability and willingness to participate in the study and initially selected *via* a basic internet search. Further interviewees were identified by snowballing. Ethical consent was received from all participants for anonymous interviews, with exact location and participants remaining undisclosed. The interviews followed a feminist research methodology where the role of the feminist researcher is understood as an 'active agent in constructing knowledge' (Fonow and Cook, 2005: 2219). Accordingly, close attention was paid to the dynamics of the interview process, and 'active listening' (DeVault and Gross, 2006) formed an integral part of the interview process. This allowed new lines of inquiry to emerge from the interviewees and enabled an open-ended form of discussion between interviewee and interviewer. Feminist critical discourse analysis guided the analysis of the interviews where questions of power and advantage, exclusion and disempowerment have structural priority in analysis, following a social emancipatory and transformatory goal (Lazar, 2010).

Findings

The findings from these interviews partly contrast with those of other research on Family Intervention Policy, which tends to highlight the complex ways in which national policies are implemented, negotiated and partly circumvented and undermined at the local and frontline levels (see Parr and Nixon, 2008; Hayden and Jenkins, 2014). Yet, while we acknowledge a multitude of approaches and intentions as well as outcomes in the implementation of the TFP, we highlight common trends present throughout our interviews.

While we know that 'generations of people that have never worked' are statistically almost non-existent (MacDonald, 2015), the idea of such multi-generational benefit receiving families remains firmly embedded in social policy discourse and in the minds of those implementing the TFP. According to one programme manager:

it's about linking them [the Families] in and having them with aspirations . . . people have been in a benefit culture and we've worked with third-, fourth-generation and beyond of all being in benefits, and there are certain pockets of this city that are the most deprived or have been the most deprived in Europe, and therefore those people have no aspirations whatsoever. (Interview with Programme Manager)

In this context, one programme director emphasises the inter-connection between shaping the families' own behaviour and the wider community:

About how we get those people to be far more resilient, to have far more aspirational views about their future and about how they invest in their own communities outside of their own immediate family. It's about a community as well (Interview with Programme Director).

The contradiction between a shrinking material base for the NMC and even shrinking possibilities of 'dreaming' about joining the NMC and the intentions of the programme to foster aspiration and hope for a 'better' future remained hidden. Indeed, it was continuously stressed how achievements that would result from increased aspiration would help to overcome the perceived 'intergenerational problems' faced by families:

And achievements. You know these achievements, things to be proud of and also give examples to your children. They're things that [we] are very much trying to move forward at the moment. (Interview with Case Worker Coordinator)

Indeed, the importance of changing cultures, cultural practices and thereby lifestyles was stressed repeatedly. Cultural change was presented to go hand-in-hand with the development of aspirations, surprisingly talked about as somewhat detached from the deprivation that was however widely acknowledged and was faced by nearly all of the families that had been assigned to the programme.

That's also trying to break the culture that's been around, because some of the families we're talking about come from a particular area or areas that have high levels of anti-social behaviour, gun crime, etc . . . they're working with real, hardened criminality families. And so that is a real uphill challenge . . . I suppose, even if you only do it with one family, it's going to save thousands. It saves an awful lot of money, you know' (Interview with Programme Director)

In this way, the instrumentality of the TFP was justified in terms of the benefits that could be derived by the hard working, tax paying families of the NMC coalition. At the same time, the recognition of the absence of the consumption and cultural opportunities associated with the NMC was acknowledged as part of the problems of troubled families. One programme director for example acknowledged that:

I mean, you've come in to the city centre now, you've got lots and lots of resources for families late at night, but you can go to certain areas in this city and there won't be a bank, there won't be a shop, there won't be anything that's a resource for a family . . . businesses have pulled out because people haven't got money to spend on a day-to-day basis . . . The basics for managing family life are not around them

Yet, this acknowledgment did not result in a questioning of the lack of provision of infrastructure as part of the TFP. The programme director quoted above focused on parenting classes as the source of developing the skills to manage the very same families lives by teaching parents how to be 'good examples' to their children, emphasising behaviour as the implicit cause and explicit solution to being in a 'troubled' state. Again, these contradictions between the material reality and the desire to make 'troubled families' believe NMC cultural inclusion is possible were present throughout the interviews.

Statistics on the demographics of the families involved in the programme are hard to access. Freedom of information requests (February 2014) to the ten councils identified as having the highest number of families identified as 'troubled' did not reveal this information (see also Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage, 2016). Anecdotally, it appears that single-parent and single-mother households in particular are over-represented, with one programme director suggesting female-headed single-parent households would make up to 80 per cent of the families included in the TFP in his council. Similarly, the very limited governmental data available indicate a 'higher than average proportion of lone parents (49 per cent compared to 16 per cent in the general population' (DCLG, 2014). Yet, these data have to be looked at with significant caution as the report authors themselves recognise that they are 'unsure whether the data submitted is representative of all troubled families going through the programme' (DCLG, 2014: 3). Parr and Nixon (2008) suggest that the bulk of family intervention projects in the UK are aimed at female-only households, with

a tendency 'to blame female tenants for the 'inappropriate' behavior of their male partners or teenage sons'. Parenting Orders have also been predominantly given to lone mothers (Martin and Wilcox, 2013: 157).

Different local authorities have implemented the TFP in different ways. Yet, in several of the local authorities we researched, the focus has been on developing a multi-agency approach to family intervention, where previous less coordinated interventions from different providers are now provided by more integrated or even single units that negotiate between the various public and private providers, including for example, health commissioners, charities, local authority providers, police, probation services and voluntary, community and faith organisations. While these coordinating efforts have been successful in terms of providing families facing multiple problems with integrated support, they also result in increased coordination and effectiveness in monitoring and disciplining.

Coordinating social policy more narrowly was already a prominent feature of Family Intervention Policy under New Labour along with changing understandings of social solidarity and of what should be done about 'antisocial behaviour' (Rodger, 2008). Indeed, key features of social policy since New Labour and under the Coalition government were to link the 'reform of the welfare system and the development of a criminal justice agenda [to] dealing with dysfunctional families, anti-social behaviour in children and early intervention to rescue the ill-disciplined "feral children" in the peripheral housing estates and poor inner cities from entrapment in . . . "inferior life trajectories"' (Rodger, 2012: 415). According to Rodger, the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998 and the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 exemplify this point of continuity. 'The two key principles that underpinned criminal justice legislation were early intervention into families that were failing and reinforcing parental responsibility' (Rodger, 2012: 415). Indeed, both acts were linked up with attempts to create community efficiency and crime prevention partnerships. The 2010 Parenting Order on Breach of Anti-Social Behaviour Order further signifies this continued development.

As Garrett (2007: 221–2) recognises, family intervention projects such as the TFP are 'schooling families to accept new temporal frameworks' by infantilising adults. Families, and particularly single mothers, are monitored in their parenting skills, subjected to parenting classes and intensive teaching of 'life-skills' though which it is intended that they foster aspirations among generations of perceived aspirational failures. These interventions and close monitoring of the poor are backed-up by welfare cuts and restrictions to access welfare. As pointed out by Danil (2013), 'these interventions take on an agentic approach that focuses entirely on the families and treats their problems as endogenous and self-generated, rather than examining the structural factors, and larger socio-economic context in which those families operate' (Danil, 2013: 11).

Conclusion

Research on the TFP, and Family Intervention Policy more generally, has generally emphasised the complex ways in which national policies are implemented, negotiated and partly circumvented and undermined at the local and frontline levels (see Parr and Nixon, 2008, Hayden and Jenkins, 2014). In contrast, and in line with the crucial aim of instilling a sense of aspiration in the families targeted, we find five common themes in our research on the TFP: (1) the aims and logic are focused on promoting behaviours and cultures consistent with the social and political construct of the NMC; (2) the programme

is targeted at poor families and often women, especially lone parents, as bearing the responsibility for reproducing NMC values; (3) in-depth intervention, monitoring, performance management and conditionality are involved that focus on household and family behaviour; (4) the programme could result in disciplinary interventions for not upholding and reproducing NMC values and cultures; and (5) local implementation often acknowledges the links between individual family and household dynamics and the wider local community, and therefore attempts to change both. While other research may show that local agents act in ways that show solidarity and sympathy with programme 'beneficiaries', this often merely softens the disciplinary elements of the programme.

Thus, we argue the TFP showcases the increasingly disciplinary nature of social policy that replaces the services and supports that poor individuals' households and communities previously relied on disproportionately. Our claim here is that discipline is present in the highly interventionist elements of family social policy. The TFP is one example of this. The TFP is constructed in the minds of those implementing it as a tool to normatively promote behaviour consistent with a position in the NMC. Families subject to the attention of the TFP are regularly divided according to their willingness – with incentives and sanctions – to struggle for a position in the NMC. Importantly, those regarded as unwilling to strive for a position in the NMC are targeted for disciplinary interventions at the very heart of the family.

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