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Critical Maternalism: a window on the 21st Century?

The concept of “maternalism” emerged onto the socio-political stage during the mid-19th century, initiated by the army of middle class female social workers that arose within the deprived urban areas that grew rapidly in England after the Industrial Revolution. Historian Seth Koven reflected that such women ‘used maternalist imagery and arguments in advancing themselves and their visions of child welfare’ (Koven 1993, p.125). Maternalism was a markedly different way of analysing the problems emerging from working class, industrial poverty than the individualistic self-help view taken by the mainstream culture dominated by men (the “malestream”), and it was a gender divide that typically crossed social class and party political differences.

In the early 20th Century, highly diverse characters such as fiery socialist prophet Margaret McMillan (1860-1931), stiff, aristocratic Queen Mary (1867-1963) and the first two women to be elected to the House of Commons, wealthy socialite Conservative Nancy (Lady) Astor (1879-1964) and serious, committed feminist Liberal Margaret Winteringham (1879-1955) worked together over a long period of time in order to put the case for nursery schools on the national agenda (Jarvis and Liebovich 2016). While Astor contributed generously from her own personal wealth to the expenses of McMillan’s nursery in the deprived area of Deptford in South East London (Bradburn 1989) Winteringham’s last contribution to Parliament before leaving her seat in 1924 was a written question supporting a quest for pensions for nursery teachers (Pack 2011, online). What bound these apparently incompatible women together in such an endeavour was an over-arching maternalist orientation, focused upon the well-being of young children, particularly those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds; a ‘social maternalism’ (Brebony 2009, p.191).

Throughout recent history, women who have argued from maternalist positions have frequently faced much opposition, principally from powerful men, when maternalist agendas begin to conflict with the malestream. For example, psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882-1960) took the position that very young children were not as emotionally unsophisticated as Sigmund Freud (the founder of psychoanalysis) had proposed, challenging the overwhelming dominance of the father’s disciplinary role in mainstream Freudian theory. Klein emphasised the huge psychological significance of the intense emotional bond between mothers and babies, meeting with much angry resistance from malestream Freudians. John Bowlby (1907-1990), who later became world famous for an infant attachment theory which similarly emphasised the mother-baby bond abruptly dismissed Klein’s theories as those of ‘a frightfully vain old woman who manipulated people’ (Issroff et al 2005, p.57). Bowlby’s own theory of Maternal Deprivation ‘appeared at a time, soon after the end of the Second World War, when there was a big movement to get women, in many ways liberated by their wartime work experiences, to stay at home’ (Tizard 2009, online), that is, at a point where it staunchly supported the malestream agenda.

Margaret McMillan herself faced a crisis when her work as an elected member of the Bradford School Board was curtailed by a national policy which moved the responsibility of school administration from school boards to local authorities- to which, at that time, women could not be elected. Despite McMillan’s success in

achieving huge advances in the health and well-being of the children of Bradford, the male leadership of the Independent Labour Party, who had sponsored McMillan's candidacy for the Bradford School Board refused to support her; in fact 'some of the leadership actively supported the rational administration that the Bill embodied' (Steedman 1990, p.49). McMillan publicly protested against this legislation in the *Yorkshire Daily Observer*, commenting that 'when this bill was passed into law, all women would be put on one side. Their work was mentioned very little at present; but by this bill it was to be wiped out altogether' (Bradburn 1989, p.63). This was however to no avail, and McMillan's ability to improve conditions for deprived children in Bradford was abruptly curtailed. However, she did not give up, launching a similar series of initiatives in South East London in partnership with her sister Rachel, including the innovative Deptford nursery for which the sisters became world famous (Jarvis and Liebovich 2016). However, it should be noted that the nursery opened in 1914 - at a time when the malestream establishment required care to be provided for small children to allow their mothers to move into the national workforce, to cover the roles that men had to vacate in order to fight the First World War.

The lesson here for women is that a maternalist initiative is only likely to succeed when it is in harmony with similar malestream policy. It can further be argued that we have not moved on significantly from this position, even a century later. In the late nineteenth century, Margaret McMillan made the point that children's well-being was not a consideration for those creating malestream policies to meet the national agenda for obedient workers appropriately educated for industry; however by the early twenty-first century, although the child and his/ her parents continued to be constructed through malestream economic policy, the underlying milieu had changed. The population of England now found themselves within a highly technological *post-industrial* society, where adults were not only defined as units of production, but all human beings, both adults and children, were constructed as participants within a complex wheel of demand-led consumption.

This malestream Neo-Liberal policy has underpinned the governance of England for the past three and a half decades, under a succession of Conservative and New Labour administrations. A central pillar of Neo-Liberalism is that all adult citizens within society must be compliant, uncritical consumer/ workers within the national economy in order to stimulate the national and international money markets to the maximum extent. In this way, human beings become defined primarily as "capital". Where mothers of young children in the mid 20th century were actively encouraged to stay at home with their children (not least by John Bowlby's dire warnings about "maternal deprivation"), mothers of the early 21st century are expected to engage in paid labour and to pay professionals to care for their children. In this way children, too, can become capital for the market.

More women in the workforce boosts GDP, increases income from taxes, and reduces welfare costs... An increasingly competitive, knowledge-based global economy is [also] helping to convince both governments and parents that pre-school education is an investment in future academic success and employment prospects.

(UNICEF 2008, p.4)

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Where very young children under three are spending the major portion of the waking day in mass daycare settings, separated from their parents, homes and extended families, this raises another Neo-Liberal construction, that of “professionalised parenting”, where it becomes presumed that children’s best interests will be served by being cared for by “experts” as soon as possible.

A crucial feature of this change is a reframing and centering of childrearing as a job requiring particular know how and expertise. Policy-makers have sought to establish parenting as a complex skill which must be learnt... the politicisation of parenting.

(Edwards and Gillies 2013, p.33).

Research suggests that this situation raises multiple issues for mothers. For example, Vincent et al (2010) interviewed 70 mothers of young children who lived on two council estates in inner London, finding that while their participants felt huge pressure to obtain paid work, they still did not earn enough to be financially “comfortable”, and moreover, they were unable to be with their children to the extent that they felt would adequately fulfil the requirements of a “good mother”. The researchers commented: ‘the impossible tensions that these discourses articulate for working class mothers... an unstable mix of support, exhortation and the threat of punitive action’ (Vincent et al 2010, p.124). Crowley (2014, p.117) further proposes that the situation in which many modern mothers find themselves creates ‘extreme cognitive dissonance... continually pushed and pulled between their work and home worlds’.

While there is nothing inherently new in state regulation of motherhood: ‘historically one of the most regulated but least supported social institutions’ (Hey and Bradford 2006, p.55), Neo-Liberalism has imposed far more explicit, exacting standards upon parenting in general and mothering in particular than have ever existed within European society. ‘Intensive parenting... [has become]... part of the broader Neo-Liberal project’ Shirani et al (2012, p.2).

The knowledge bases for child-centered policies have created positions for “experts”, such as psychiatrists and psychologists, while parents and children are made to fit into these experts’ representational and normalizing discourses... These discursive formations reflect ideas about the welfare and best interests of all children and reinforce notions of Eurocentric middle class ideals that, in turn, negatively affect the lives of children and parents who do not fit these ideals

Hennum (2014 p.442).

The resulting rush to advise parents, mothers in particular on the ‘correct’ manner in which to raise their infants constitutes an element of moral panic, which politicians have been quick to utilise to legitimate greater state surveillance of the family; for example Alan Johnson MP proposed in 2007: ‘traditionally parenting has been a no go area for governments- but now it is an essential area for us to focus on’ (Vincent

et al 2010. p.124). Edwards and Gillies (2013. p.23) quote Frank Field MP, author of the national review *Poverty and Life Chances, The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* (2010): 'since 1969 I have witnessed a growing indifference from some parents to meeting the most basic needs of children, particularly younger children'. McCabe (2015) proposes however that conversely, empirical evidence suggests that the quality of parents' interactions with their children have in fact *improved* over the last half of the 20th century, so it is therefore dichotomous that the direction of travel for many western governments has been towards much greater surveillance of infants and their families. Edwards and Gillies (2013, p.28) claim 'our analysis of... classic studies reveals widely accepted practices and values from the 1960s that would today be viewed at best in terms of benign neglect and at worse as child abuse', citing documented incidences of children being routinely left at home alone, or left in the care of young siblings. They propose that the intensive, "child centred" parenting constructed by politicians as a fundamental process that must be present in 21st century families 'was nowhere to be found in accounts from the 1960s' (p.29). Smeyers (2010, p.271) suggests that, in recent years, there has been a growing 'responsibilisation' of parents, where a perceived requirement for professional guidance on a day-to-day basis has brought 'an encroachment of school goals and behavioural norms into homes'. He concludes that measures consequently taken by agents of the state to allegedly minimise risk results in policies and practices that tightly regulate the lives of young families- a process that Smith (2010) refers to as 'soft totalitarianism'.

Mothers and infants are thus continually defined by a dominant malestream ideology, which can be tracked through the past century on a trajectory from the casual disregard for the well-being of children that so incensed Margaret McMillan, in the days in which the care of children was viewed within a "private family" ideology, to the advent of the "mediated public family" that is an emergent factor of Neo-Liberalism, through its impetus to move parents of both genders into the workplace, and infants into professional settings dominated by state polices. Indeed, it was recently suggested by the OFSTED Chief Inspector, Michael Wilshaw that infants from disadvantaged backgrounds; in the Neo-Liberal construction, those whose families are not playing a full part in the work-consume cycle, should be in school by the time they are two years old (The Guardian 2015).

The extent to which New Labour's invocations of "social inclusion" that are so over reliant on labour market participation have real and worrying implications for mothers... in the sense of mothers' guilt about not giving their children enough time, but at the same time, about being a feckless, state-sponging parent "who couldn't care less"

Conroy et al (2010. p.61).

Jensen (2013, p.51) proposes that modern parents 'consume parent pedagogies delivered through popular representational genres' such as online parenting advice and of course, the ubiquitous reality television programmes such as *Super Nanny*. The temptation here is for individuals to compare themselves to those who have been insidiously depicted by media producers to elicit public ridicule. Hoffman (2013,

p.239) concludes: 'what is so ironic is that in the end the power struggles are... between parents themselves as they struggle to carve out identities in a contested field of parenting'. In this way, then, Neo-Liberal societies manipulate populations to not only police their own behaviour, but also that of others, creating the type of guilt experienced by Vincent et al's (2010) participants, caught in an irreconcilable double bind between home and work. Henderson et al (2010, p.232) reflect 'fear governs modern parenting practices now more than ever....creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it... with parents as the 'prisoners of experts [whose power is] everywhere and also inside us'. In this way then, governments can ensure that individuals not only guiltily police themselves, but are also covertly led to censure "non-compliant" others.

So how can we break free from such a powerful ideology? It is suggested that, for human beings, culture is as invisible as water may be to fish and air may be to birds, but nevertheless, a medium of vital and inescapable immersion (Trevarthan 1998). This indicates that we find it difficult to even fully perceive a dominant ideology from which we long to escape. Davies (1999) however suggests a strategy to increase "visibility" by comparing culture not to water, but to a clear pane of glass that can subsequently be metaphorically 'broken' to make it visible, and thence explored, deconstructed and challenged.

To explore, deconstruct and challenge the current construction of child care, we need to go back in time long before the early twentieth century maternalists, to the evolution of the human species. The genders evolved in a society in which they carried out different functions. Groups of men took the responsibility for hunting, whilst a community of women foraged for and gathered food while simultaneously caring for small children. Women's longer life expectancy is theorised by evolutionary psychologists in the Grandmother Hypothesis (Hawkes 2004), which suggests that grandmothers were instrumental in supporting mothers in the care of young children, and in this way, those children who had grandmothers to support their mothers were more likely to live to reproduce. This allowed the genes for female longevity to pass down through the species, and still currently bestows a longer life expectancy upon human females of every culture.

With the advent of agriculture, human life changed in many ways, but women continued to carry out their everyday work whilst simultaneously caring for children, most typically having access to nearby extended family to call upon for help when necessary. The strict division between home and work arrived only very recently, with the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century (Jarvis 2016), establishing the conditions from which the twentieth century housewife gradually emerged. As the economies of industrialised nations became more prosperous, wages rose, and increased mobility in pursuit of enhanced employment status and better housing meant that extended families were far more likely to live many miles apart (Young and Willmott 1962). The culture of lone women caring for their own children largely unaided is a very new situation in terms of the evolution of the species, and may explain much of the unhappiness and loneliness of the mid-20th century housewife/ mother. However, the solution that emerged through Neo-Liberalism was the payment of strangers to care for infants while mothers spent

many hours away from them in paid work, yet a further step away from our evolutionary heritage.

The traditional human manner of raising young children is therefore within a community of mothers who co-ordinate their non-child related responsibilities to offer support to one another, becoming secondary attachments for each other's children. The most available women within these communities are of course the older women with independent children who have made them grandmothers, and in this way, their contribution to their grandchildren's well-being created a subtle evolved change in the female of the species that is still in evidence today. It can consequently be proposed that when we smash the window of the current malestream, Neo-Liberal culture, we discover a chronically stressed, divided population of mothers, unable to effectively inhabit their natural role and moreover, being programmed by the state to exist in a constant state of guilt, unable to feel fully competent either as worker or mother. Towards the end of his life, Maternal Deprivation theorist John Bowlby reflected, this time in opposition to the malestream:

Man and woman power devoted to the production of material goods counts a plus in all our economic indices. Man and woman power devoted to the production of happy, healthy and self-reliant children in their own homes does not count at all. We have created a topsy-turvy world

(Bowlby 1988, p.2).

The ways in which we can move on from this situation can be helpfully informed by a *critical* maternalism, initially considering the ways in which the human species has evolved. This in turn can lead to the consideration of how a critical maternalist argument might be constructed in order to engage to engage in an equitable debate with the malestream agenda. It is now clear that while maternalism emerged onto the world stage in the voices of newly liberated, middle class women in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, it has never managed to break the glass between itself and the dominant malestream. Feminist policies of the later twentieth century were unable to advance maternalism, due to their assumption that women had the same ambitions and goals as men, setting the scene for Neo-Liberalism and its monolithic wheel of production and consumption that utterly dominates human lives, even to the detriment of the most ancient human institution of all; that of the family .

Critical maternalism can be used to stringently question an ideology which currently subjects our youngest children to a malestream-derived professionalisation of care and which places their mothers within an inescapable double-bind in which they are unable to reconcile their identity as a mother with their routine working lives, suffering debilitating guilt as a consequence. It has the potential to curtail the tsunami of mental illness that we are currently experiencing, particularly in the female population who are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (mentalhealth.org.uk 2016), added to a growing tide of mental illness amongst children and young people (Jarvis et al 2014) which have been linked to earlier attachment problems (Malekpour 2007). Critical maternalism can also provide a theoretical paradigm through which women might be freed to fully celebrate their identities as mothers and grandmothers, and thence to provide a platform from which they can lobby for access to a fair

proportion of the national wealth to support their role in caring for children in ways that are commensurate with their human evolutionary heritage rather than in opposition to it. In 1999, Singer called for 'policies... grounded on the best available evidence of what human beings are *like*' (p. 61). The care of young children within a community in which their mother is placed at the centre rather than the outskirts of their lives is clearly a key issue in this respect. Ultimately, critical maternalism has the potential to trigger a more deeply considered construction of human beings as complex evolved organisms who most naturally live in mutually supportive families and communities, rather than as individualised slaves to esoteric international money-markets.

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