



ASBO NATION

The criminalisation of nuisance

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Excerpt from Chapter 11

Parenting Orders...

By

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'The objectification of 'bad parents': the role of psy-complex

The production of expert knowledge regarding what is normal and what is not is generated by that 'army of technicians' within social science institutions. Such powerful discourses, which are embodied by the psychiatric and psychological professions, are referred to as the psy-complex (Ingleby, 1985; Rose, 1985) and it is this which colonises families by focusing on the new discursive space they construct between the private and public spheres: the social (Donzelot, 1979). Ingleby notes that the psy-complex is founded on a contradiction: 'with one hand it supports the sacredness of family relations, with the other it infiltrates them and subjects them to its management' (1985: 105), which may explain its increasing dominance in policy discourse and practices.

The psy-complex professions have achieved scientific legitimacy by producing increasingly sophisticated psychometric tools that have mobilised the concept of 'developmental milestones', enabling children to be compared against each other. That is made possible because the focus and unit of measurement of mainstream developmental psychology (which has colonised explanations and treatments of delinquency) is 'the individual'. Thus, accounts of 'development' (itself constructed as something natural and universal) are necessarily devoid of any reference to social and political contexts. As Burman states, 'instead of poverty, unemployment and

frustration, we have evil children, bad mothers and broken homes' (1997: 142). The development of such measures enables the success of failure of parents, as sole 'socialisers' of their children, to be established, and provides tangible evidence of a parent's own competence. It also provides the means by which parents, particularly mothers, can (and do) define themselves in opposition to 'the incompetent parent' or the 'problem family' (Unwin, 1985). However these normative milestones were developed by privileged white, middle-class professionals and were founded on research studies predominantly based on white, middle-class, heterosexual mothers (Busfield, 1987), while LGBT and disabled parenting only becomes visible within discussions of who is (and, is not) fit to parent (Burman, 1987). This has always been the case, and has been particularly prevalent from the early 1820s, when professional experts began their investigation into delinquency. For example, May remarks on how 'experts' judgments were coloured by their own values and prejudices throughout their writings, comparison between the realities of slum children and their own sense of a protected childhood is implicit' (1973: 104). Decisions made in custody, fostering and adoption cases and within fertility services are all influenced by how far the (potential) parent deviates from the norm (Burman, 1997), and it is likely that decisions made by magistrates regarding the issuing of Parenting Orders are no different.

So, the psy-complex has performed an important role in producing parents who are both objects and subjects of knowledge. However, in recent years, discourses in parenting that are founded on notions of individual responsibility; morality and blame were permeated beyond the psychological and psychiatric professions and have *bled into everyday public discourse, taking a very distinct form in recent youth justice policy...*