

Editorial

The Politics of Parenting

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Bookstores in places as different as New York City, Beijing and Copenhagen all contain booming sections of self-help books offering advice to anxious parents on how to raise successful and well-rounded children amidst existential and political uncertainty. Parents today struggle to balance conflicting social imperatives of care and control, educational success and well-being, filiality and self-reliance, compliance and autonomy, discipline and free play, self-interest and altruism, fairness and merit - and the list goes on and on. They may simultaneously strive to nurture their child's unique talents - or manage a diagnosis - and ensure their belonging to a moral community even when the odds may be stacked against them. Across the globe parenting seems to have become a public affair, infused with political policies and shifting ideas about how to minimize risks and optimize the future of one's children vis-à-vis the nation state.

We are mindful that the link between parenting and politics is not new. In the early nineteenth century, with the increase of industrialization and the accompanying rise in poverty and crime, European nation states began to see children as the future of the nation (Dupont, et al., 2022). Childhood emerged in the social imagination as a distinct period

during which problematic lifelong habits and tastes could be formed with potentially problematic consequences for adulthood. In China, the discovery of childhood as a means for governing a nation happened a long time ago, at least as early as the consolidation of the Han dynasty (206 BC to AD 229) (Kuan, 2015). Educational institutions were established throughout the empire, as Confucian thinkers believed that moral education would serve as a more effective deterrent to crime than the strict laws and punishments of the Qin government. The Chinese term “guan” meaning “to discipline, control, and administer”, refers to both governing a state as well as the education, love and disciplining of children (Bregnbæk, 2016, p. 6). This form of “care and control” has a certain semblance with the “obsessive love” that Philippe Ariès identified with the social invention of childhood in Europe during the seventeenth century, whereby the child also became an object of discipline (Ariès, 1960/1996, p. 397).

During the 20th century the family was gradually seen as a precarious site for the development of children as future citizens. Bourgeois philanthropy and religious organizations established interventions for “families at risk” (Rose, 1989). The welfare state thus took an increased interest in the family. Whereas the family had previously been seen as a way of placing oneself within a larger social order, it became, informed by psychological theory, a “biographical event” where selfhood became understood vis-à-vis one’s past (Illouz, 2007, p. 7). During the last half of the 20th century, parenting became increasingly professionalized and scientized (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2012). Whereas birth control has been promoted in many countries around the world, China is the only country in the world to have adopted such strict birth quotas, with the One Child Policy’s aim to reduce the quantity of the Chinese population while increasing its “quality” (*suzhi*), creating social pressure to cultivate the perfect only child among Chinese urban families. In Europe and the United States in particular, psychological theories of attachment and child development have played a significant role in transforming the public understanding of family from serving a function in society to being a practice characterized by more or less competence. Parenthood was gradually being transformed from a term that described a relationship to a term describing a goal-oriented practice (Gillies, 2014).

By the 1980’s the institution of the family had taken up a more prominent space in the public sphere. The neoliberal reconfigurations of the welfare state in the 1980’s

enhanced the focus on personal freedom and responsibility. Parents became increasingly viewed as responsible for ensuring the successful future lives of their children (Furedi, 2001) giving rise to “intensive parenting”, which aims to maximize an infant’s or child’s social, emotional and cognitive capital in a family practice that is characterized as “*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive*” (Hays, 1996, p. 8, italics in the original). In what has been described as a risk-society (Beck, 1992), parents are oriented towards reducing potential risks pertaining to their children’s futures. Over the past decade or so there has been an increased concern with children’s mental health, with parents positioned as the primary actors responsible for ensuring sustainable emotional development of their children. An unprecedented number of experts seek to give advice and offer parenting courses, new therapies and even pharmaceuticals, intervening in the sphere of family life and the subjectivities of parents and children. Parents, and particularly mothers, increasingly report feeling under pressure to live up to cultural norms and expectations of optimizing the child’s development through curating the environment and cultivating the child’s skills and competencies (Dupont et al., 2022).

Through comparative analysis economists have shown, that in modern industrialized societies the trend of rising income inequality over recent decades has been accompanied by more intensive parenting, while permissive parenting has declined (Doepke, Sorrenti & Zilibotti, 2019). Within a new political ethos of personal freedom and personal responsibility, “a quality upbringing is all that is needed to ensure equal opportunity” (Gillies, 2005, p. 838). The logic is that children who are parented well have a better chance of social mobility. In some parts of the world, such as in China and SouthKorea, the expectations regarding parenting and in particular motherhood are so daunting that an increasing number of women give up motherhood altogether leading to a decline in fertility. The welfare-states in many Western societies to a greater extent assume responsibility for ensuring the future of the nation by supporting families that struggle through early interventions, monitoring parental performance indicators and regulating through financial disincentives (Gillies, 2014; Munck & Marschall 2021). These interventions, however, target different segments of the population differently. In Denmark, for instance, they are sometimes intimately linked to racialized policies of “integration”, whereby the parenting capacities of parents with non-European

backgrounds are monitored, evaluated and problematized (Jørgensen 2023, Larsen, 2022; Bregnbæk, 2022; Johansen and Jensen, 2017).

This special issue addresses questions of how the practices of (welfare) state practitioners and policy makers (trans)form the lives of families. The aim is to illuminate how social policies and educational institutions influence parents' hope for the wellbeing and future success of their children through new forms of audit culture and policies of early interventions. We invited contributions that explore how politicized ideals, norms and practices play out in the everyday lives of families as they are influenced by many-fold actors including officials regulating day-care, school, medical services, and child protection. What is at stake when distinguishing "good" from "bad" parenting practices and what are the specific (unintended) consequences for families of different social and ethnic backgrounds? How do parents themselves attempt to shape their children's lives and how are their decisions and desires inspired and constrained by evaluative processes?

Overview of articles

In the following we briefly present the articles included in the special issue. The articles start by exploring the implications of intensive parenting in different cultures, namely Denmark, China and the US, and in different life stages from early childhood through to adulthood. This is followed by articles that explore parenting in difficult life situations, addressing parenting strategies of families with children with special needs followed by articles addressing parenting in stigmatized housing areas.

In "Parents as learning facilitators. The institutionalisation of parenthood in learning-centered collaboration between early childhood professionals and parents", **Karen Ida Dannesboe** examines how the institutionalisation of parenthood has come to dominate early childhood education and care in Denmark. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, she argues that parents are appointed as learning facilitators, supporting their children's academic progress, and expected to embrace a learning agenda promoted by ECEC professionals. The analysis demonstrates how learning initiatives function as a learning technology, guiding parents to support early learning and improve their parenting skills. Parents' participation in such learning initiatives suggests that their engagements in early learning are intertwined with the practical organisation of family life and with ideals of a good family and a good childhood.

In “Instilling Care: Self-care and other-care in contemporary Chinese families” **Xuan Li** explores the concept of care as involving both self-care and caring for others as complex socialization goals among Chinese parents in the final decade of China’s One Child Policy. Xuan demonstrates that in addition to the longstanding Chinese moral imperative to cultivate filial piety in children, the culture of intensive parenting has increasingly also come to involve aspirations of nurturing altruistic care for people outside the context of the family, thus arguing that the private affair of childrearing may also interplay with China’s broader “moral landscape”.

John Loewenthal’s article “Supportive or overpowering? Entangled agency of young adults and parents during and after higher education in the USA” examines how young adults from international affluent backgrounds experience the “overpowering” interventions of their parents in their lives after graduation from a toptier university in New York City. Drawing on ethnographic research and in particular in-depth interviews, he argues that some graduates feel “fated” to certain trajectories through parental authoritarianism and subtle compliance to parents who continue to economically support their adult children post-graduation, making them existentially remain in a child-like position vis-à-vis their parents.

Jean-Baptiste Pettier’s essay “Just Merit? Authoritarian-Caring Parenting Style in China and the Challenge of Inequality and Hierarchy in Late Post-Revolutionary Societies” is based mainly on an ethnographic study of Chinese “marriage corners”, public spaces where parents assemble to introduce one another to their non-married adult children. He analyses how intense scholarly and marriage competition in post-Mao China is culturally and ideologically grounded in the production of “merit”. However, by contrasting the Chinese context to the situation in France - his own native country - and the United States, he argues that a culture of equality plays a significant role in how intense social competition for elite status takes place in “post-revolutionary societies”.

In “Shadow categorizations. Children with ‘special needs’ and the ethical work of parenting: minding the gap”, **Björg Kjær** discusses everyday experiences of Danish parents of children with so-called “special needs” and how these experiences related to children’s problems are influenced by available official and shadow categories. The article emphasizes parents’ concerns and hopes in their encounters with welfare state institutions. Inspired by anthropology of policy (Wright 2017), parents’ actions, efforts,

and negotiations are analyzed as a form of micro-policymaking, with an analytical emphasis on what Mattingly (2013) describes as everyday ethical work.

In the article “Genetic determinism and other causalities: How psychiatric thinking influences parents’ approach to their children’s development”, **Dil Bach** explores how Danish children, viewed as at risk, are subjected in new ways to “concerted cultivation” between childhood professionals and parents. The article identifies two forms of parental determinism 1. psychologically inspired parental determinism focusing on what parents do; and 2. genetic determinism focusing on the biological constitution of the parents. She shows that genetic determinism dominates the empirical material, suggesting an increasing influence from psychiatry in how parents understand children’s development. This creates new expectations from both parents and professionals in their collaboration. As a result, parenting at-risk children is characterized by less trust in one’s own intuition and a greater need for guidance to accommodate the child’s special nature.

Asger Martiny-Bruun analyses the everyday work of parents in stigmatized housing areas in the article “Parenting in the Courtyard: Understanding the Moral Dimensions of Socially Embedded Practices in Stigmatised Neighbourhoods in Denmark.” The article illuminates the moral tensions embedded in the socially and spatially structured task of parenting in marginalized communities. Parents struggle with finding a balance between risk and autonomy for their children, as well as grapple with questions as to what constitutes good local communities for their children and what this means for local solidarity and the moral order of the community.

The article, “Parents as both problem and resource. The political management of parenting in marginalized residential areas” is written by **Vibe Larsen, Üzeyir Tireli, Ditte Tofteng**, and **Mette Marie Høy-Hansen**. It also explores how contemporary political policies in Denmark position parents living in marginalized residential areas as lacking parenting skills but simultaneously being the key to reduce inequality for their children. However, despite this political discourse, the analysis highlights parents as agents actively opposing the dominant discourse and working hard to create good conditions for their children and their futures.

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