



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity  
Partner Network

## Studies in the Maternal

---

### Book and Exhibition Review

**How to Cite:** Bowen, C and Littler, J. 2020. Tracey Jensen (2018) *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-Blame*. Bristol: Policy Press. *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 12, pp. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.301>

**Published:** 07 January 2020

---

### Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

### Copyright:

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### Open Access:

*Studies in the Maternal* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

### Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

---

**The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.**

**BOOK AND EXHIBITION REVIEW**

**Tracey Jensen (2018) *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-Blame*. Bristol: Policy Press**

Clare Bowen and Jo Littler

City University of London, GB

Corresponding author: Jo Littler ([jo.littler.1@city.ac.uk](mailto:jo.littler.1@city.ac.uk))

---

Book review of Tracey Jensen (2018) *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-Blame*. Bristol: Policy Press.

---

The title of Tracey Jensen's wonderful new book is a reference to that classic work of cultural studies from 1978, *Policing the Crisis*, in which a team of scholars from the Open University analysed the moral panic over mugging via a multi-disciplinary approach linking social policy, media analysis and theories of racialisation. In the process they showed not only how negative public opinion was orchestrated by a complex machinery of media framing and political action, but how the panic was itself symptomatic of a rupture in the broader political conjuncture at precisely the moment now considered as entailing the emergence of neoliberalism in the UK.

*Parenting the Crisis* positions itself in the vein of this politicised tradition of cultural studies, and has a similar investment in demystifying, understanding and redressing damaging forms of scapegoating: this time of parents. As such it is part of a broader seam of contemporary British academic work combining media studies, social theory and political analysis in order to unpack the operations of a neoliberal culture attempting to secure the ever-expanding privileges of the 1% at the expense of the rest of the population (see for example McRobbie forthcoming 2020, Jones and Gunaratnam et al. 2017, Tyler 2013, de Benedictis et al. 2017, Littler 2018, Allen and Bull 2018).

Jensen's cogent and beautifully written text tracks how the rise of 'parent blame' is structurally concomitant with neoliberal policies dismantling welfare state provision. Under neoliberalism, parent-blame, and in particular 'mother-blaming' becomes 'a stigmatising repository for social ills'. Working-class parents are subject not only to punitive policies, but vicious moralising discourses blaming them for their own poverty and struggle.

After the book's argument and approach is outlined in the first chapter, Chapter 2 charts the development of parenting advice, or 'parent pedagogy'. Key shifts are traced from the 'scientific motherhood' of early mothercraft tomes, written predominantly by male physicians, to the present day. Here Jensen focuses in particular on the vastly influential online platform Mumsnet. She analyses how the 'flexible weaving' of themes of 'family values, individualism, social conservatism and middle-class parenting norms' form a background to online social interactions

with other mothers. The typical Mumsnetter is self-monitoring, reflexively exploring the consequences of her choices and engaged in discussion with others approaching pregnancy and parenthood in similar ways, thus creating a hegemonic ideal of what good parenting should be'. Focusing on 'class antagonism', a prejudice notably omitted from 'Mumsnetiquette' rules, Jensen pinpoints the interplay of middle-class legitimisation and working-class demonization on the platform.

Chapter 3 extends the analysis of contemporary parenting ideals in political context by tracking how the concept of a 'parenting deficit' has been spectacularly dramatised by the cultural industries, focusing on the TV show *Supernanny*. Noting how the programme coincided with New Labour's policy shift towards the 're-education' of parents, it shows how Channel 4's 'Devil version of Mary Poppins' 'scrutinized, advised and berated' families struggling to discipline their children in line with social norms, treating them 'as criminals subject to surveillance'. The voyeuristic presentations 'of real ordinary parents suffering the effects of failure right in front of the camera', Jensen argues, were decisive in defining, structuring and 'making sensible' the idea of a parental 'responsibility deficit' that was already in circulation. This was central to New Labour's communitarian-inspired rhetoric that situated 'the family located within the local neighbourhood' as the key force for social renewal, thus absolving the welfare state of responsibility and instead responsabilising the family unit.

The fourth chapter shows how this gradual 'supplanting of a supportive welfare state with a punitive neoliberal state' began to take shape and force in political policy. The re-emergence of the 'problem family' in New Labour's political dialogue, Jensen argues, made way for a 'respect task force' that, she quips, effectively took the shape of a 'Supernanny army'. She shows how a national squad of parenting practitioners and experts, set up to 'tackle anti-social behaviour' by focusing on its alleged roots of poor parenting and problem families, were used to facilitate the reordering of priorities of local governance and spending, and ultimately to expand the rationale of criminalisation: of the blaming of parents rather than structural injustice and poverty.

Chapter 5 examines how Cameron's conservative and coalition governments greatly extended this moralistic, hyper-individualising parenting discourse throughout and beyond the financial crisis. Jensen shows how the effects of the financial crash were repackaged by the right as the result of excessive welfare spending, rather than the greed of bankers, and this narrative was linked to moralising discourse on problem families. The demonization of the working-class as a social group was exacerbated during the 2011 riots, when conservative political discourse 'explicitly connected the failings of the welfare state to the criminality of the rioters'; focusing specifically on how individual family units were seemingly unable to adequately discipline their children. During the period that followed, poor families were seen as 'irresponsible and feckless, over-consumers, wanting the wrong things, unable to budget and constantly mismanaging the resources that were funnelled to them'.

In this chapter Jensen also interrogates the simultaneous rise of largely middle-class austerity media, which has often been framed as a return to 'wartime values' and presenting a 'psychologised vocabulary of recession'. Examining a variety of media genres offering 'austerity pedagogy' (*Be Thrifty, Ausperity* and *Live More, Want Less*), Jensen notes they that 'seek to resolve contradictions and ambivalence about (over) consumption' by emphasising an ethos of surveillant self-transformation'. Lifestyle TV like *Superscrimpers* 'works as a text of austerity romance, positioning thrift as not simply a matter of economic survival' but rather as transformative of the self. Notably, austerity pedagogy has frequently urged housewives to 'be happy', amidst the 'gender inequality of austerity that had disproportionately affected women, and more catastrophically, ethnic minority women'. At this political crossroads, in which many mothers on benefits and single mothers were being forced out to work, the practice of pitting of 'working mothers' versus 'their stay at home counterparts', again reared its ugly head: mothers' working practices were being put under the microscope and scapegoated as a both wholly individualised choice and potentially harmful to child-rearing.

Chapter 6, co-written with Imogen Tyler, examines how parent blame became increasingly weaponised in post-welfare Britain. It argues that narratives of

meritocracy and austerity helped usher in a new era of welfare reform, with welfare *itself* now being situated as 'a cause of poverty and social problems, including inter-generational worklessness, drug dependence, anti-social behaviour, troubled families, teenage parenthood, crime, and other social ills'. One key example given here is the media coverage of the case of Mick Philpott, who led a plot to burn down his own house with his children inside and blame the crime on his former partner in an attempt to regain custody of two of his children and allegedly, the benefits these children accrued. As Jensen and Tyler write, 'a casual relationship between excessive benefit levels and the manslaughter of the Philpott children' secured a position for the Philpott family as objects of welfare disgust, even though Philpott himself did not actually claim any benefits. They powerfully present how 'the receipt of state welfare, hitherto, marked as disgusting, and now linked repeatedly to the manslaughter of 6 children, became powerfully weaponised' and worked in turn to shape public perceptions around state welfare in general'. Their analysis expands to consider the wider genre of 'poverty porn' as presented through programmes such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, *Ann Widcombe versus the Benefits Culture*, *Benefits Street* and *On Benefits and Proud*. Jensen and Tyler show how these programmes worked to not only provide streams of revenue for media moguls but to incite consent for political policies of impoverishment.

The final chapter, an epilogue, opens by discussing the early days of Theresa May's premiership, which featured an ostensibly empathetic speech announcing she would help those in difficulty, including ordinary working-class families and those families who are just-about managing (aka 'JAMS'). Jensen notes how, whilst May was sometimes referred to as a 'Mummy' of the nation, 'her voting record on political issues, most affecting the lives of women ... reveals a disavowal with the feminist politics of social justice, and an alignment instead with neoliberal feminism'. Counter to the sentiments of the initial speech, May's leadership was authoritarian in nature, 'bringing the poor to the heel' and 'punish(ing) families that did not conform to gender and family norms'. Such familial viciousness was exemplified by the implementation of the 'two-child cap' on Tax Credits, in a move that was designed

to curtail the procreation of poor people. This final chapter therefore draws out Jensen's argument that a 'disentitlement strategy' has moved from cultural, media and political discourse to central policy machinery.

*Parenting the Crisis* is a remarkable and lucid work, and one that deserves to be widely read by anyone interested in parenting, inequality and the state of contemporary Britain. It draws our attention, through its fine-grained and multifaceted analysis, to what is at stake in the chasm between the fetishisation of maternal glamour and domesticity on the one side and the demonization of mothers held to be 'undeserving' on the other. As Jensen writes in the conclusion, this is a complex cultural tapestry: but it is one that we urgently need to unravel if we are to find our way 'to social solidarity and to think imaginatively about how to value, recognise and support the labour of social reproduction and the work of care'. *Parenting the Crisis* is, then, about how parents of individual children are understood and scapegoated in contemporary discourse as part of punitive policy; and it is also about how we need to do so much better at collectively parenting our social world.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Allen, K** and **Bull, A.** 2018. 'Following Policy: A Network Ethnography of the UK Character Education Policy Community'. *Sociological Research Online*, 23(2): 438–458. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780418769678>
- de Benedictis, S, Allen, K** and **Jensen, T.** 2017. Portraying Poverty: The Economics and Ethics of Factual Welfare Television. *Cultural Sociology*, 11(3): 337–358. ISSN 1749-9755. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975517712132>
- Jones, H, Gunaratnam, Y, Bhattacharyya, G, Davies, W, Dhaliwal, S, Forkert, K, Jackson, E** and **Saltus, R.** 2017. *Go Home: The Politics of Immigration Controversies*. Manchester University Press. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN\\_625583](https://doi.org/10.26530/OAPEN_625583)
- Littler, J.** 2018. *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315712802>

**McRobbie, A.** 2020. *Feminism and Neoliberalism*. Polity.

**Tyler, I.** 2013. *Revolted Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. Zed Books.

**How to cite this article:** Bowen, C and Littler, J. 2020. Tracey Jensen (2018) *Parenting the Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Parent-Blame*. Bristol: Policy Press. *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 12, pp. 1–7. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.301>

**Published:** 07 January 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Studies in the Maternal* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

**OPEN ACCESS** The Open Access icon, a stylized 'O' with a person inside, representing open access.