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State intervention and parenting in CEE and beyond

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Since the early 2000s onwards, the well-being of children has been a central item on the agenda in both EU-level policies and the politics of individual nation-states across Europe. The renewed interest in children in past decades has also turned attention towards parental practices. Child raising has become an increasingly public rather than a private matter that is perceived to need the intervention of trained professionals (Thelen & Haukanes, 2010). Experts, parenting books, and online platforms that seek to give advice and at times intervene with what most people consider their private family life have multiplied. Moreover, policies that instruct parental choices and practices have become widespread, such as parenting training programmes, early intervention measures, restrictions on home/alternative schooling and pregnancy policing, to name but a few. The spread of conservative populist political forces across Europe has given further impetus to this renewed interest in children and the institution of the family, whilst also altering its normative elements and leading to further interventionist measures.

The way parents raise their children has been the target of national and professional concern for a long time. However, the current interest in parental practices and family life reflects a significant transformation in the importance of children and the role of child raising in society's welfare (Lee, 2014a). Neoliberal transformations have led to the re-evaluation of children, who according to this political-economic logic are considered an investment and potential future resource in economic production (Gillies et al., 2017). Such a re-conceptualization of children, however, has also led to the problematization of parental practices and the amplification of the latter's responsibilities in relation to raising the next generation of citizens.

Concerns about parental behaviour and the attempts of states to influence parental practices have been evident since the development of public child-welfare institutions in Europe (Schumann, 2010). Professionals in schools, kindergartens, and welfare offices have been in contact with parents, spreading dominant norms and seeking to intervene in family practices in line with political agendas as well as the dominant scientific approaches of given periods (see Barron & Siebrecht, eds., 2017, Schumann, ed., 2010). However, the degree and form of this interference, its normative elements, and its acceptance by wider society have

changed over time and varied across nation-states. Whilst in Central and Eastern Europe such forms of state interference into the private sphere have to a certain degree been more widely practised during various historical periods (cf. Varsa, 2021), in countries such as the UK, where the sanctity of the private realm has been strongly respected by the state, it constitutes a radically new approach (Macvarish, 2014). Regardless of whether the current trends are embedded in former practices or constitute a more radical shift, a more explicit political focus on parental practices is evident across Europe (Daly, 2013).

The thematic issue attempts to more closely examine these current tendencies through empirical studies from different European countries. States can influence parenting practices and norms through various channels: (1) policies and regulations (family support schemes, regulations pertaining to education, healthcare policies, etc.), (2) institutions (such as schools, medical services, and child protection) and, (3) the everyday practices of state officials or civil servants (teachers, welfare workers, medical practitioners, home visiting nurses/healthcare visitors) as they interact with parents. These state practices are often highly normative and seek to determine the 'best' ways of child-rearing, which reflect dominant social (often middle-class and 'White') values, and often lead to social differentiation. The studies in this issue address these different forms of state intervention and discuss their consequences for parents, their decisions, and their self-perception.

1 A re-evaluation of children and encompassing parental responsibility

The current intensification of state influence is partly related to the above-mentioned political-economic processes but also strongly linked to changes in the parenting approaches of the past few decades. Linked strongly to the advancements in the study of developmental psychology and neuropsychology, as well as to a growing risk consciousness in general, from the 1970s onwards parenting and the parent-child relationship have increasingly emerged as problematic and in need of expert assistance (Lee, 2014a). A pervasive belief that stems from the psychologization of parenting and increased risk awareness is the idea of 'parental determinism' (Füredi, 2002). Parental behaviour is construed as crucially affecting – in fact, determining – the future happiness and success of children. At the same time, parenting is viewed as an activity that cannot be naturally carried out anymore; it needs to be learnt and be guided by experts in order to succeed (Lee, 2014b). It is seen as a skill set that parents need to acquire in order to help their child best fulfil their potential and avert potential risks that would inhibit this.

Thus, studies that discuss the recent transformations of parenting culture identify two important developments that have proved crucial in relation to recent beliefs about the omnipotence of parental behaviour and its deterministic effect on children's well-being and future success (e.g., Füredi, 2002; Lee, 2014a; Macvarish et al., 2015). One is the shift in the general thinking about risk. Risk is no longer perceived as a probability (which could potentially lead to positive outcomes) but rather as an unwanted possibility; a dangerous outcome that should be prevented. A growth of risk consciousness and its institutionalization, as Füredi (2011) explains, can be linked to the weakening of cultural authority or moral value systems that are less and less able to provide meaning and clarity.

The second, parallel development, which has gone hand in hand with this growing and individualized risk consciousness, is the medicalization of harm and the spread of the psychological approach in different spheres of life (Illouz, 2007). In the field of parenting, potential harm is primarily construed through neuroscientific evidence and developmental psychology (Macvarish et al., 2015; Thornton, 2011). However, discussing potential harm in scientific language leaves little room for questioning or debate as it involves presenting often socially constructed and moralized statements about children and the parent-child relationship as scientific truths based on medical evidence (Hunt, 2003). The power of these approaches is so prevalent in policymaking and public discourse that such statements have remained mainly unchallenged, despite various studies pointing to the lack of scientific evidence to back them up (Macvarish et al. 2015, p. 250).

Transforming ideas about parenting are also linked to a broader shift that has resulted in the dominance of a 'therapeutic' or 'emotional culture' that 'anchors the self in childhood and in one's primary family relationships' (Illouz, 2007, p. 24). It corresponds with the shift in interpreting social phenomena through a psychological lens – i.e., as the result of individuals' emotional states, which are rooted in childhood experience. As such, the family environment and children's emotional relations with their parents are construed as the main determinants of the personality and success of future adults. This psychologization of social phenomena along with the scientification of harm have paved the way for the increasing problematization of parental behaviour and increasing intervention into parenting due to growing concern for the welfare of children and the separation of the vulnerable child's interests from those of its parents (Wyness, 2014).

Both trends have had important consequences for thinking about childhood and parenting. Children are increasingly construed as vulnerable and being 'at risk', which permeates all discussions about children, ranging from pregnancy to children's play and education (Lee, 2014a). Parents are consequently seen as managers of risk. But their main responsibility is not only to protect their children from immediate dangers, but also to foresee and prevent any threats that could inhibit the child's optimal development and future success (Faircloth, 2014). This not only leads to the enhanced monitoring of children's activities, but also makes formally mundane practices related to child rearing planned and conscious activities based on scientific evidence. Parents accordingly need to be informed about various threats to the well-being and development of their children and be able to make choices about their parenting practices in the midst of a multitude of pre-existing trends and expert advice.

At the same time, this increased risk consciousness and parental determinism not only posits parents as those primarily responsible for averting risks and therefore crucially influencing their children's development and future, but increasingly as the primary adults who can pose these risks through 'risky' behaviour, such as smoking or drinking during pregnancy or feeding formula to their children (Lee et al., 2010). However, a relatively new development is that parents are also seen as posing a risk to their children even if they do not necessarily indulge in risky behaviour but are simply unaware of possible harms – for example, that of the internet, too much television watching, or an unhealthy diet (Faircloths, 2014). This, in turn, makes parenting an increasingly debated, moralized, and publicly discussed issue.

These developments, however, have not only transformed the parent-child relationship, but also made child raising a more 'intensive' practice that requires ample resources, time,

effort, money, and involvement from parents (Hays, 1996; Lee, 2014a). As the 'stakes' of parenting have exponentially grown, it has also become a more stressful activity that can cause great anxiety and self-doubt amongst parents (Füredi, 2002). What is more, because not everyone has the required cultural, social, and financial resources to become intensively involved in the above-described way nor follow expert-guided practices (including paid-for after-school classes, development professionals, etc.), the new parenting ideals can lead to further social differentiation and inequalities.

2 New policy paradigms

The new approach to children and parenting is also mirrored in current policy trends, which increasingly focus on parental behaviour as a target of intervention. The early years of this century saw the restructuring of the welfare state and the emergence of the social investment paradigm that became the cornerstone of European social inclusion strategies and state reforms. In response to challenges of the post-industrial age, welfare policies turned towards 'ex-ante capacitating interventions' (Hemerijck, 2018) that focused on children and early childhood development services. Such policy approaches are rooted in the idea that 'investment' in children, especially in early childhood when external influence can be most effective, 'pays back' over a longer term (Jackson, 2014). Consequently, social investment policies that promote early intervention and prevention measures, in order to maximize children's potential and enhance their opportunities, became a major priority in both EU and national politics in Europe (Daly, 2013). These measures rest on the premise that the inter-generational transmission of social disadvantages may be ameliorated or compensated by the establishment of good quality early childhood development services and preventive programmes (Churchill & Clarke, 2010), while they situate the causes of disadvantages in the home environment and parental upbringing, leading to the stigmatization of poor parents and the closer monitoring of parental practices in general (e.g. Churchill & Clarke, 2010; Clarke, 2006; Gillies, 2008).

This reflects a shift from structural explanations of social problems to an individualized view of social ills, which are often explained by dysfunctional parenting (Gillies, 2013). Various studies have argued that this policy shift often enhances neoliberal agendas, as arguments for early intervention are used to justify welfare cuts, and reconstructing child raising as the solely individual responsibility of parents is part of the individualization of risk management and the self-responsibilization of individuals (Gillies, 2013; Gillies et al., 2017; Thornton, 2011). Such individualized approaches to social problems make the intimate aspects of family life of major public and political concern as they are linked to the wellbeing of the whole of society. This paves the way for increasing formal intervention into and surveillance of the private sphere, which is particularly apparent in the case of economically disadvantaged families (Gillies, 2013). Growing up in poverty becomes naturally equated with dysfunctional or irresponsible parenting (Gillies et al., 2017), making economically disadvantaged families the main focus of early intervention programmes. This has been particularly evident in the US and the UK and has materialized in various parenting support programmes (Dodds, 2009; Gillies, 2013; Gillies et al., 2017; Jackson, 2013; Macvarish et al., 2015; Picot, 2014).

Ideas about early intervention and social investment have become dominant policy prerogatives in various countries during the past decade, increasingly making parental behaviour the focus of welfare policies and often formally tying certain welfare provisions to 'good' parental behaviour (cf. Gillies 2013, p. 96). Moreover, a relatively new trend is for the parenting of better-off families to also be increasingly problematized and considered to be in need of professional advice and/or state scrutiny (Faircloths, 2014). Moreover, the intensification of the political focus on and intervention into family life have gained new impetus through the more recent rise of (neo)conservative political forces across Europe. The individualization of social problems and strong focus on the nuclear family have been also central themes in revived (neo)conservative political discourse. Related policy prerogatives often promote socially conservative values in areas such as traditional family structures, abortion, gay rights, patriotism, and religiosity (Cooper, 2017; Csillag & Szelényi, 2015).

The articles in this special issue explore the various ways this renewed interest in children and intensified state interference into family life have influenced parents, professionals, and child-focused institutions. Each paper uses rich empirical material and draws on qualitative research, thus offering insight into the mechanisms through which such interference works and the ways it influences day-to-day practices (of both parents and professionals), parental choices, and parents' self-perceptions. The special issue accommodates examples from various European countries that help illuminate the ways these currently dominant trends materialize in different institutional, socio-political, and historical contexts. The papers remark on the above-explained changes in the approach to parenting, each revealing the various ways it influences policies, parents, and professionals in specific national contexts.

Three main topics permeate the issue:

(1) State regulations and parental practices. As policies and regulations that target parents and seek to intervene in family life have multiplied, it is paramount to further understand their consequences for parents, their practices, choices, and self-perceptions. The former are the most apparent and direct way that states can intervene in parental practices and influence parental choices.

(2) The everyday practices of state professionals. State policies and regulations operate through the working of institutions and the everyday practices of professionals who work with families and children. These 'street-level bureaucrats' (cf. Lipsky, 1980) during their daily work not only mediate but also reinforce or contravene dominant norms about 'good' parenting and 'proper' childhood. Therefore, studying the work of these bureaucrats or public officials/professionals is as important as examining policies and regulations.

(3) Class and parenting. Some of the papers focus less on the state and more on the ways parental practices are used for social differentiation. The practices linked to *intensive parenting* require multiple (monetary, cultural, social, etc.) resources from parents. However, access to such resources and therefore the ability to partake in practices of *intensive parenting* are not equally available to all parents. Thus, the link between class and the 'new parenting culture' (cf. Lee et al., eds., 2014) appears to be an unavoidable issue.

3 State regulation and parental practices

Several papers in the thematic issue explore the links between the new parenting approach and current state regulations that target parents. In particular, they uncover the ways these regulations influence parental practices and decisions at the everyday level. Daily parental practices can be a 'space' for subversion, where parents find ways to subvert these regulations and shape them to their benefit. At the same time, they can also be the ground on which these regulations become integrated into taken-for-granted everyday practices. Pauline Proboeuf's paper gives an example of the former; she presents how the state regulation of home schooling has provoked resistance from parents in the French context. In contrast, the article by Dóra Szekulesz talks to the latter issue as she argues that Hungarian women internalize the medical and conservative political discourse about fertility, which emphasizes only women's responsibility in reproduction.

Proboeuf's paper argues that the increasing interference of the state in parental practices goes hand in hand with parents' loss of trust in the state. One of the signs of this erosion of confidence is that French parents are increasingly choosing to homeschool their children or to send them to 'alternative' independent schools. However, the state reaction to this trend is to tighten control of homeschooling and independent schools. The paper points out the tensions that the expansion of parental responsibility (linked to the re-valuation of children) causes between the state and parents. While intervention in parental practices is getting stronger, parents' trust in state institutions – mainly in the field of education and health care – is getting weaker. The parents in the study report that state schools obstruct the flourishing of children's personality and abilities, which is one of the main goals of *intensive parenting*. In state schools, the goal is to raise 'good citizens', not to cultivate 'happy individuals'. The choice of numerous parents to homeschool or opt for alternative schools thus becomes a political act; a kind of conviction; a conscious decision; a choice of values that goes against the state and the mainstream.

However, in the case study by Dóra Szekulesz state regulations and discourse are internalized by her interviewees rather than provoking resistance. Szekulesz' paper studies how the Hungarian conservative political discourse on fertility shapes the experience and self-interpretation of women who participate in assisted reproductive treatment. The paper argues that conservative political discourse about gender roles – which primarily emphasizes women's responsibility in fertility-related issues – deeply pervade the medical process of assisted reproductive treatment. Although women sometimes express criticism of such medicalization and the politically promoted conservative discourse on fertility which make them both vulnerable and responsible for (not) having children, they themselves also use these narratives when they interpret their experiences and processes of decision-making. The paper furthermore points out that various aspects of the new parenting approach, such as expert guiding and growing risk consciousness, appear even at the phase of conception.

4 Everyday practices of state institutions

Another important topic that the papers in this issue address is the ways the new parenting approach can influence the work of child-focused professionals in public institutions and how it can affect their relations with parents. More precisely, they uncover how currently

dominant parenting ideas can influence the way professionals construe 'good mothering' and delineate good and bad parenting practices along with the reasons for more direct intervention.

The paper by Alexandra Szőke uses the concept of 'street-level bureaucracy' (cf. Lipsky, 1980) to underline that policies and regulations are mediated, reinforced, or even contravened by public officials as they go about their day-to-day work. Thus, she argues, if we want to understand the novel aspects of the current intensification of state interference in child raising, we also need to examine the everyday practices of these officials. The author highlights that these professionals construe what 'good parenting' entails, consequently delineating 'good' and bad 'parents', which can have important consequences in relation to offering assistance to different groups of parents, or withdrawing it. The analysis draws on Lipsky's conceptualization of the discretionary power that street-level bureaucrats can wield in their daily encounters with clients based on their personal convictions, sympathies, and dominant norms. The paper examines how the new parenting approach and current policy directives have influenced the practices of child welfare caseworkers in Hungary. In particular, the paper studies how the latter have been transforming the evaluation of parental competence and identification of cases for child removal, and how current notions of 'good motherhood' have become further intertwined with dominant forms of social differentiation. She argues that the global transformation of parenting ideals, such as the individualization of social problems, parental determinism, and the early investment paradigm, have become integral parts of Hungarian state policies. However, these are embedded in the specific context of Hungarian childcare institutions, which have historically been vested in maintaining the dominant ideals of parenting.

Szőke identifies a significant shift in the reasons for initiating child removals that reflects the current spread of a psychological approach: while earlier child neglect and parental competence were assessed mostly in material terms, we are currently witnessing how they are increasingly discussed in emotional terms. However, the term 'appropriate emotional ties' is an extremely subjective and elusive one, and even more difficult to judge than material circumstances. This elusiveness opens up space for caseworkers to define and interpret what kind of parental behaviour can be identified as neglectful and endangering. What is more, the paper shows that the tendency towards child removal at birth also reflects the spread of a new approach to parental responsibility amongst professionals – namely, a move towards early intervention on the basis of preventing possible risks. The author argues that, although dominant norms of ideal parenting have changed in the Hungarian context, this only involves a relatively new way of making distinctions between middle-class parents and parents from lower social strata. The latter continue to be more likely to be the clients of child-welfare institutions, including child removal procedures, as they are less liable to conform to the norms and expectations linked to intensive parenting.

Laura Preissler studies the ways in which the new parenting approach has influenced child-welfare professionals in the Western European context, in Switzerland. Her case study on the daily work of counselling for mothers and fathers (MVBs) is a good example of the spreading dominance of the social investment and early development paradigm in state policies, as well as the growing importance of expert guidance in parenting. Preissler uses the Foucauldian concepts of 'governmentality' and 'pastoral power' as she highlights that the exercise of power is not a one-way process. In fact, the new parenting approach prevails throughout different levels of power relations within society – for example, between MVB advisors and parents.

The paper presents how advisors interpret and promote the new parenting paradigm as a 'technology of self' which parents have to acquire. The former often behave or think of themselves as 'good pastors' who lead parents – who have become puzzled/lost in the chaos of expert knowledge and cognitive approaches – to find 'their lost instincts'. As such, it could be argued (even though the author does not explicitly mention this), that the advisors in their daily work critically relate to some aspects of the currently dominant parenting approach (which in many other senses they otherwise promote). More specifically, they are rather critical of the fact that mothers often lose touch with their instincts in the midst of a fog of multiple sources of expert advice and knowledges. At the same time, their role is very ambivalent. Whilst the MVB advisors rarely use directly intrusive techniques such as child removals, Preissler argues that their practices nonetheless can be seen as techniques of power. According to their own interpretation, the advisors 'merely' teach the parents to recognize their own instincts. At the same time, it is advisors who decide what is considered a 'good maternal instinct' and what is not, thereby re-enforcing the importance of expert guidance for mothers. Accordingly, whereas the analyses in the two papers address professionals in very similar roles, their modes of interference and level of intrusiveness are very different in the two national contexts.

5 Class relations and intensive parenting

The links between the reproduction of inequalities and *intensive parenting* are highlighted in the literature that focuses on the new parenting approach (see e.g., Edwards & Gillies, 2011; Gillies, 2006; 2008; Lareau, 2003). Child-raising practices linked to the currently dominant parenting ideals require financial resources and immense time and effort, as well as emotional and cultural investment from parents (Hays, 1996). As such, related parenting practices are most dominant amongst the middle classes and with more educated parents (Lee, 2014a). As such, *intensive parenting* can be interpreted not only as a new mode of maintaining middle-class status, but also as a relatively new means of the (re)production of class distinctions (Gillies, 2008; Lareau, 2003).

At the same time, as the article in this issue by Irina Chereseva highlights, the link between the new approach to parenting and the reproduction of middle-class status is constructed in different ways in countries with differing positions in the global economy. Moreover, she argues that the concept of *intensive parenting* is based on the experience of the 'core' countries (but primarily that of the USA), thus the elaboration of the concept is strongly embedded in these political and economic contexts. Consequently, Chereseva argues for rethinking the concept from the perspective of peripheral or semi-peripheral countries, of which she provides a good example in the form of an analysis of Bulgarian middle-class parenting practices. Her paper argues that the construction of the Bulgarian middle class cannot be interpreted without considering the centrum-periphery relationship between European countries. Bulgarian middle-class parents align themselves with an imagined Western European middle class that they want to catch up with. They identify legitimate knowledge and practices related to 'good mothering' as 'Western' knowledge and practices. For example, emigration to Western European countries is one of the surest ways to impart a middle-class position to their children, so language learning has become a significant element of *intensive parenting* amongst Bulgarian middle-class mothers.

In addition, she argues that the new Bulgarian middle class significantly differs from its Western counterpart; the former has always involved a more vulnerable position in an economic sense. In the absence of economic capital, symbolic and social capital such as taste, habits, cultural consumption, and having 'proper' networks have become the most important factors in the reproduction of their class position. Using symbolic capital, they try to align with the imagined 'Western' middle class while striving to maintain a distance from the dangers associated with 'Bulgarian society'. The reproductive class strategies of her interviewees are 'based on imagining themselves as modern (as opposed to having a socialist past), Western (as opposed to involving "oriental backwardness") and culturally and morally superior to both the "poor masses" and the *nouveau riche*' (Chereseva, in this issue). The paper underlines that the link between intensive parenting and class relations cannot be studied without considering the given social historical, political, and economic contexts.

Kutrovátz's paper studies the links between class position and the parental mediation of teenagers' digital technology use, which is strongly connected to the new parenting approach. She argues that the use of digital technology puts further pressure on *intensive parenting* as an online presence is interpreted as a serious risk that can endanger the adequate development of teenagers, thus requires constant restriction or monitoring. However, parental mediation demands not only time and effort from parents but also special knowledge and skills, which can help children to develop appropriate online behaviour and improve their digital literacy. The required knowledge, skills and time, however, are not equally available to parents in different social positions. Kutrovátz experienced significant differences in parental mediation according to class position. Parents from a middle-class background placed more emphasis on active mediation: steering their children's online presence in the 'right' direction (one which could be useful in relation to their future), to organising family time as an alternative to screen use, and so on. In contrast, due to an absence of time and knowledge, lower-status parents' main means of influencing their children's screen time was restriction. In comparison to middle-class parents, the former perceived digital technology much less as an opportunity for their children. As such, parental mediation as a practice of *intensive parenting* can deepen pre-existing inequalities.

Overall, all the contributions to this thematic issue account for the spreading dominance of *intensive parenting* and the expansion of parental responsibility across Europe. The empirically grounded individual case studies call attention to the ways this leads to various forms of state interference in family life through policies and dominant discourses, as well as professionals' and parents' practices. The issue, however, shows that the content, the mode, and the societal consequences of such state interference are strongly embedded in the historical, institutional, and socio-political contexts of the studied countries. As such, the thematic issue should prompt further empirical research that points to the specific, contextually embedded character of these broader transformations. It furthermore advocates for further empirical research that can expose the ways in which these new tendencies influence parental practices, their choices, as well as the everyday work of child-focused professionals and relations with parents.

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