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Governing through parents: a genealogical enquiry of education policy and the construction of neoliberal subjectivities in England

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore the various spaces and sites through which the figure of the parent is summoned to inhabit and perform market norms and practices in the field of education in England. Since the late 1970s successive governments have called on parents to enact certain duties and obligations in relation to the state. These duties include adopting and internalizing responsibility for all kinds of risks, liabilities and inequities formerly managed by the Keynesian welfare state. In this paper we examine how English parents are compelled to embody certain market norms and practices as they navigate the field of education. Adopting genealogical enquiry and policy discourse analysis as our methodology, we explore how parents across three policy sites or spaces are constructed as objects and purveyors of utility and ancillaries to marketization. This includes a focus on how parents are summoned as (1) consumers or choosers of education services; (2) governors and overseers of schools and (3) producers and founders of schools.

In this paper, we explore elements of a new state–citizen relationship by focusing on the changing role of parents in the field of education. Here, the role of the state arises as a disciplining actor in a neoliberal setting. As suggested below, the market is considered here as one of the policy technologies that create a 'risk-friendly' environment. However, by 'encouraging' uncertainty, anxiety and apprehension, a new discipline of subjects emerges based upon the rules of the market. The 'new' citizen is summoned as the *responsible individual* and *choice* becomes the key organizing mechanism of such responsibility. This 'new' individual is expected to make the 'right choices', determined in terms of a never-ending need to maximize his/her benefits and to situate him/herself in a 'more secure place' within social space (Brown, 2006). In the following sections we consider how shifts in education policy discourse in England since the 1980s have been shaped with a view to constitute parents as engaged, responsibilized agents of education services – active, supportive, discriminating, challenging and so forth. From this perspective, policy discourse can be viewed as a dynamic space through which ruling political elites legislate

changes over how citizens might be better governed and obliged or persuaded to better govern themselves (or self-govern). The key thing to note here is that policy discourse is not simply a form of empty rhetoric. Rather, it gives rise to real symbolic and concrete consequences and challenges for those it addresses or seeks to address, and works (though not always successfully) to enfold citizens in new relations, identifications and practices of belonging, vis-à-vis the state.

Given our interest in 'the discursive and political work of articulation' (Clarke, 2008, p. 139) by which relations between citizens and the state are managed and organized, we adopt a genealogical enquiry as a framing for our investigation with a focus on policy discourse analysis and a literature review of previous research findings. By tracing a genealogy of the figure of parent in the field of education, we highlight some of the contingencies, circumstances and dilemmas that have shaped the construction of parents as 'active/passive' and 'effective/ineffective' and the across and through three different policy arenas (see below). A genealogical approach necessarily begins with the negation of the existence of a set of universal categories, transcendental continuities and immovable truths. This means loosening any conception of what it means to be an 'active' or 'effective' 'parent' and taken these conceptions to be unstable and shifting. Following Foucault, Olssen (2014) characterizes genealogical enquiry as an analytical strategy concerned with mapping 'the historical process of descent and emergence by which a given thought system or process comes into being and is subsequently transformed' (p. 29). Genealogical enquiry means paying attention to the fluidity and discontinuity of institutional orders and subject formations, seen here as condensations of shifting and unstable relations of power. The purpose of genealogical enquiry and indeed the whole theoretical enterprise of a Foucauldian approach is therefore to demonstrate through critique, scepticism and problematization 'that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted' (Foucault, 2002, p. 456).

On this account, we present here the first steps of an on-going enquiry which aims to observe and examine how the figure of the parent is guided by policy technologies through which they are made and remade as objects of specific political and economic rationalities. These rationalities can be traced through the circulation and generation of representations, codes, conventions and habits of language conveyed through policy discourse. Here, we conceptualize policy discourse as a dynamic, productive space in which different governments or regimes intervene through the use of strictures, boundaries, limits and injunctions to shape and guide the formation of parents as bearers of certain rights, obligations and entitlements. More specifically, dwelling on existing literature and our own research enquiries during the last decade, we sketch here how education policy discourse since the 1980s has circulated and legitimated the logic of business and rationality of the market with a view to transforming parents into neoliberal subjects as an extension of market reforms. Our main theoretical challenge consists on beginning to think about and articulate what we understand as new technologies of 'governing through parents'. To this end, the paper is organized around three interrelated poles in which parental participation in education can be explored as means and expressions of this state-market entanglement: parents as consumers, parents as governors and parents as producers.

The state-market entanglement: a 'new' stage for 'new and renewed' actors

During the last four decades, the market has become a central mechanism in the regulation of what Jessop (2002) named as the 'Schumpeterian competitive state', and, therefore, in the transition towards the consolidation of 'market societies' (Polanyi, 2001) or, from a slightly different perspective, what Rose (1996) understands as 'advanced liberal democracies'. At their heart lies a new model of governing, which, as Lentzos and Rose (2009) suggest, is made possible by the interweaving three mechanisms: democracy, freedom and responsibility. These three terms are intimately interrelated and play a key role in the redefinition of the relationship between citizens and the state. The supposedly 'old fashioned' interventionist state – the welfare or social state model, that is, the state as guarantor, promoter and responsible agent for the social and economic well-being of citizens via the control of the dynamics of redistribution of capital – is reworked in neoliberal terms in an effort to increase the efficiency and efficacy of the market and of the economic as a framing for guiding relations between citizens and the state. Under neoliberalism, the state can be understood as a facilitator of the market, 'a market-maker, as initiator of opportunities, as re-modeller and moderniser' (Ball, 2007, p. 82). Therefore, far from disappearing, the state retains an important role in the development of the market society and of the role of the market in shaping the field of education. Even the most determined laissez-faire advocate would argue that the state is still needed, but for a different purpose and with limited duties (Brown, 2006). This point raises an interesting question when applied to education research. As Ball (2007) puts it:

> This is not the end of the state or of state education but the beginnings, real and symbolic, of the emergence of a different kind of state and state education and a different kind of relation between education and the state. (p. 82)

This statement implies the need for new ways and spaces of mediation between the users and producers of what once was understood as 'public services'. In this sense, as a policy technology, the market can be understood as both a 'physical' space, where transactions of different forms of capitals take place, and a 'virtual' or discursive space within which particular class interests, meanings, imaginaries, and individual and group strategies are mobilized, secured and recursively regenerated through the actions of willing, participating citizens. Theoretically, neoliberal advocates present the market as an open space, more or less regulated, in which subjects can freely exert their right of choice in order to pursue their aspirations and needs. On the one hand, discursively it is an 'aseptic scenario', where the risks are strategically unbalanced and weighted towards the side of the producers. In this imaginary, the consumers cannot lose, and in cases in which this happens, the consequences appear as if they are always 'fixable'. The emphasis is on the subject as individual, on the choices made by each person, without the need to explain how the results of those choices are dependent upon the decisions taken in parallel by others. On the one hand, the market is envisioned as a 'fair space' in which the 'bad players' will lose and will be publicly exposed (this is the case of the under-recruiting school, the inefficient teacher, the unsupportive parent etc.). The way in which subjects successfully position themselves as individuals within the market (atomized, self-seeking, self-regulating) determines their possibilities of success or failure. On the other hand, the market represents a potential and

constant 'state of danger', forcing each one of us to struggle and engage proactively in order to reach a minimally stable and secure position, which, once reached, will be opened up to re-examination, becoming 'unstable and unsecure territory'. For the citizen, life becomes a constant process of finding short-term solutions within the market to the constant instabilities and insecurities experienced in their everyday lives (see, for instance, Ball & Vincent, 1998; Lucey & Reay, 2002). In this new configuration, individuals find themselves increasingly atomized, 'alone'. They are 'responsible' and in charge of their own well-being, without the traditional 'safety net' of the welfare state when unexpected/uncalculated problems arise.

This new form of governmentality represents what Lentzos and Rose (2009) called 'govern without governing society', that is, 'governing through the responsibilized choices of autonomous entities, whether these be organizations, enterprises, hospitals, schools, community groups or individuals and their families' (p. 233). The market, therefore, constitutes a new means of individualized discipline and subjectification. Governing, understood in a Foucauldian sense as 'the conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1991), implies the construction of new or renewed mechanisms for guiding subtle and indirect forms of control, as well as novel conceptions of the individual and the group and their potential and limitations for action. At this point, it is important to bear in mind the Foucaultian differentiation between domination and government, which, as Rose (1999) suggests, is particularly helpful when analysing the intricate dynamics in which social relationships are configured and redefined:

> To dominate is to ignore or to attempt to crush the capacity for action of the dominated. But to govern is to recognize that capacity for action and to adjust oneself to it. To govern is to act upon action. This entails trying to understand what mobilizes the domains or entities to be governed: to govern one must act upon these forces, instrumentalise them in order to shape actions, processes and outcomes in desired directions. Hence, when it comes to governing human beings, to govern is to presuppose the freedom of the governed. To govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one's own objectives. (p. 4)

Therefore, acting in the market requires the embodiment of a new rationality, a more complex one in which different possibilities and positions need to be taken in account. This new rationality modifies the 'traditional' definition, roles and ways of understanding the different actors, but also the state itself as it operates as a mediator between them (Jessop, 2002). In the remaining sections of the paper we will focus on the three dimensions in which a new policy actor, the neoliberal parent, is constituted and the new nature of his/her relationship to the state.

Parent as consumer: governing through choice and competition

Describing the policy developments of the 1980s, Jones (2003) highlights how –

> … it destroyed the educational culture which had been developed between 1944 and 1979, and began the work of creating a different one, in which old 'social actors' were marginalized and new ones rendered powerful. (p. 131)

The 'old' educational culture was a political settlement closely bound up with norms and relations made possible by the regime of expansive or welfarist liberalism to emerge

during the 1940s. This included the creation of new 'governmental inventions' (e.g. medical provision, town planning, expanded state bureaucracy) (Miller & Rose, 2008) which served to safeguard and support the rights of individuals and families to social protection (economic security, care, access to welfare provision and so forth). During this time each child was provided access to state education provision free at the point of delivery. It was the specific role of the Local Education Authority (a provincial governmental service) to coordinate school admissions and allocate each child a school place based on their geography and proximity to available provision. However, due to a torrent of anti-statist rhetoric from across the political spectrum during the 1970s, a new political-cultural hegemony was assembled (the 'New Right'), one which lambasted the governmental programme of welfarist liberalism as economically unsustainable, over-bearing, demoralizing and oppressive (Hirschman, 1991).

But rather than abandon the interventionist role of the state, the New Right simply endowed it with the new role of steering and commanding the moral-religious tone for society (Brown, 2006). Hence the peculiar term 'neoliberalism': an emphasis on possessive individualism and the efficiency of the markets (liberalism) *plus* government steering and intervention in areas where market attitudes and behaviour do not exist or need inventing/supplementing. The rearticulation of the role of the state in this way is best captured through what Hall (1979, p. 15) described as 'authoritarian populism' – state power coupled with moral/religious authority. Neoliberal subjectivity, for example, is a form of moralized agency. It refers to the production (hailing, commanding, inciting) of subjects who not only take responsibility for events, risks, costs or crises previously managed by the Kenyesian welfare state, but who also consider it *morally repugnant or irresponsible for themselves and others not do so*. Implicit to this logic is a dividing practice or active–passive dynamic in which behaviour and attitudes can be indexed through binaries of action–inaction, deserving–undeserving, willing–unwilling, effective–ineffective and so forth (Wilkins, 2010).

What the New Right (and later the Thatcher-led Conservative government of the 1980s) mobilized was a new political rationality which reorganized the balance between citizenship rights, obligations and entitlements (Dwyer, 1998). In the specific case of education, parents were summoned to inhabit and perform certain responsibilities and obligations in order that they might become more 'active' and 'effective' as parents. As Keat and Abercrombie (1991) observe, the neoliberalization of welfare state organizations during the 1980s occurred, on the one hand, through reorganizing public service delivery through a market logic derived from the private sector. On the other hand, such a programme or policy framework came 'to be presented in "cultural" terms, as concerned with the attitudes, values and forms of self-understanding embedded in both individual and institutional activities' (p. 1).

Parents for example figured centrally in this new political settlement as discriminating choosers of education services ('active') rather than recipients of provision allocated on the basis of local government decision-making ('passive'). Parents were encouraged to practise a consumerist orientation to education, for example – calculating, discriminating and individualistic. Therefore, any refusal to engage as a consumer is often presented as a transgression of parental duty (Wilkins, 2011), which works to locate moral agency in a field of consumer relations and practices. Parents are now addressed as consumers of education services, tasked with the responsibility and duty of choosing a school best suited to their child. These powers and freedoms were enshrined in the 1980 and 1986

Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) introduced by the then Conservative government. Later in the 1990s, these duties and responsibilities would be further enshrined through *The Parents Charter* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1991), in which stated in bold capital letters on the inside front cover it reads:

> THIS IS YOUR CHARTER. IT WILL GIVE NEW RIGHTS TO YOU AS AN INDIVIDUAL PARENT, AND GIVE YOU PERSONALLY NEW RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHOICES.

Later the document describes how 'This charter will help you to become a more effective partner in your child's education' (DES, 1991, p. 1). The introduction of school league tables and an independent schools inspectorate (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [Ofsted]) during the 1990s aimed to enable parents as 'effective partners' by insisting on public services being delivered in accordance with the rights of citizens as bearers of consumer rights (see *The parents charter*, DES, 1991 and The Citizens Charter, 1991). Consequently it was considered both necessary and practical for parents to be sufficiently informed about the range of public services available in order to best fulfil their duties and responsibilities as active citizens and choosing subjects. Similar attempts to link consumerism with effective models of user engagement can be discerned during the 2000s when the government insisted that 'becoming better informed' is a 'legitimate investment for effective citizenship' (Ministers of State, 2004, Section 3.4.3). Later in 2006–2007, the then New Labour government introduced 'choice advisors' – schools admissions experts employed by the government to assist parents with the handling and preparation of their school choice application (see Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2006, 2009). These services were created specifically to target those parents who 'find the system difficult to understand and therefore difficult to operate in the best interests of the child', or who are simply 'unable or unwilling to engage with the process' (DCSF, 2006, p. 2). These policy trends reflect *neoliberalism par excellence*: government intervention where market behaviour or attitudes do not exist and need to be created, supported or supplemented. Other researchers highlight the inequities built into such a programme, namely that school choice privileges the well-off and the well-informed (Ball, 1993; Gewirtz, 2001), in particular those who can successfully navigate and negotiate the vagaries of the market and the forms of engagement that distinguish preferred from non-preferred consumers or service users. This might include parents with sharp elbows, loud voices and good contacts, in other words the middle classes. Reay and Ball (1997) argue in effect that school choice translates into a 'social device through social class differences are rendered into educational inequality' (p. 89).

Influenced by public choice theory at the time (Niskanen, 1973), the political rationality for these moral and legal pronouncements was that parents, when sufficiently informed about their choices, are rational utility maximizers – those 'who always seek the biggest possible benefits and the least costs in their decisions' and who are 'basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare' (Dunleavy, 1991, p. 3). This has created certain ethical and moral quandaries for parents to engage with, especially those who consider lying on their admissions form (tantamount to fraud) in order to get their child into the 'right' school. Such an ethical dilemma rarely outweighs the strange moral injunction to act within market imperatives, however. Oria et al. (2007) demonstrate something similar through their own studies of school choice among middle-class parents, where

they argue that the promotion of school choice generates and legitimates an irresistible, compulsory moral injunction to pursue competitive familial advantage.

As the current Prime Minister David Cameron once asserted, the 'active citizen' is someone who 'plays the system' (quoted in Webster & Eliot, 2008). Possessive individualism and self-interested, unethical behaviour is thus naturalized as something desirable, even essential to the role of the active chooser. The injunction to choose is translated into an injunction on behaviour – the need to be calculating, moralizing (acting in the best interests of the child), self-regarding and committed to pursuing competitive familial advantage above consideration for any notion public interest, public orientation, public ethos, fairness or equity. Fairness in other words is translated through self-interest: the pursuit of individual wants, needs and desires. As Clarke (2007) shows, the citizen symbolizes relations and identifications mediated by the 'public realm' – a space, site or practice where 'people as citizens fulfil their obligations to one another; engage in mutual deliberation; and collectively pursue the "public interest"' (p. 98). Understood in this way, the consumer (private) and citizen (public) suggest different, potentially conflicting sets of relations and practices. On this account the parent is directed towards embodying elements of the market with the expectation that public services will respond to them as if they were consumers. Parents emerge as modalities or vehicles through which the state governs education in the image of the market. This is what Kickert (1995) terms 'steering-at-a-distance' and Du Gay (1996) calls 'controlled de-control'.

Parent as governor: governing through regulated-participation

Another way in which education services are governed through the principles and practices of the market form is through the activation of parents as governors. In line with requirements set out under the 1944 Education Act, each school is required to provide for 'the constitution of [a] body of managers or governors' (Section 17 [1]). Later in the 1970s, especially around the time of the release of the Taylor Report, governing bodies were given specific powers and responsibility to mediate relations between the school and different interest groups and stakeholders, namely parents. As Kogan, Johnson, Packwood, and Whitaker (1984) observe,

> The 1970s proved to be a decade of active public opinion about schools, and their control … also whether the 'wishes of their parents' were in any effective sense influencing the education which children received. (pp. 4–5)

Earlier legislation (Education Act 1944 and Education (No 2) Act 1968) therefore point to the existence of governors, but it was not until the 1980 Education Act that the government made attempts to specify the remit and composition of the school governing body and assign statutory rights to parents to be elected as governors and influence schools. Subsequent legislation (Education (No 2) Act 1986, Education Act 1993, ERA 1988, Education Act 2002, Education Act 2006) extended the responsibilities of school governors, principally to 'conduct the school with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement at the school' (School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Pt. II, Chap. III, Section 38). School governing bodies are typically made up of different stakeholders (unpaid, non-executive volunteers) which include parents of registered children at the school (parent governors), teaching and non-teaching staff at the school (staff governors), local people drawn from

the community (community governors), locally elected officials such as councillors (Local Education Authority [LEA] governors), and people appointed by the trust, diocese or sponsor of the school (foundation or partnership governors).

Understanding the changing role and responsibility of governors since the 1980s is important in order to capture how parents as governors have been summoned to behave in particular relations with the state as partners, custodians, stewards, cheerleaders, critical friends and above all neoliberal subjects. Now, it is important to note the democratic-participatory nature of school governing bodies – what Ranson, Arnott, McKeown, Martin, and Smith (2005) describe as 'the largest democratic experiment in voluntary public participation' (p. 357). The previous Labour government highlighted a need for school governing bodies to adopt a stakeholder model 'designed to ensure representation of key stakeholders (parents, staff, community, local authority, foundation and sponsors)' and which 'helps governing bodies to be accountable to parents, pupils, staff and the local community' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005, p. 7). School governors – whether they be elected parent governors or appointed community governors – are assigned statutory rights to participate in the governing of schools (statutory rights which are enforceable through judicial review). However, the role of school governing bodies in England has changed dramatically since the 1980s. The democratic-participatory impulse of school governing bodies is highly questionable at a time when schools are increasingly driven to behave like businesses (accountable, efficient, cost-cutting, profit-making institutions). Also, a stakeholder model implies some form of 'representation' which would include aspects of minimal hierarchy, social and cultural diversity, equal valuing of specialist *and* lay knowledge, and forms of open participation which allows for conflicting viewpoints as well as scope for difference and deliberation.

As Deem, Brehony, and Heath (1995) observed in their research into school governing bodies, it is difficult for school governors to behave as 'critical citizens' (engage as political subjects with potentially conflicting interests and modes of participating) when they are conscripted to behave as 'state volunteers' and perform managerial-bureaucratic duties which satisfy narrow utilitarian measures of accountability. Almost 20 years later and the situation remains largely the same (see Wilkins, 2014, in press). In fact, the very idea of taking the democratic potential of governing bodies seriously (the potential to mediate difference and deliberation to ensure a sense of collective bargaining and shared ownership of public resources) is considered by some to be too radical, risky or impractical. This is because a democratizing impulse is 'exacerbated by the distrust of sectional interests on the part of governing bodies, their avoidance of internal conflict, and the disconnection between school governance and other forms of community governance or activism' (Dean, Dyson, Gallannaugh, Howes, & Raffo, 2007, p. 49).

In addition, the demand for 'good governance' (an appeal to professional standards and technical expertise as mechanisms for service delivery) has impacted the role, responsibility and composition of school governing bodies, to the extent that particular volunteers are now privileged over others for their 'hard' skills in finance, enterprise, data analysis and risk management as well as 'soft' skills in negotiation, communication and networking (Wilkins, 2014, in press). In England an important number of schools are converting to academy status in their droves (as many as 2481 state secondary schools according to a recent statistics obtained by the Department for Education [DfE], 2013a) with a view to adopting legal responsibility for the financial and educational performance of the school. Academies and free schools in England ('state-funded independent schools') imply that

the school governing body adopts legal responsibility for shaping decisions about finance, curriculum, human resources, premises and strategy – once the remit of local government. Such a 'high stakes' transfer of power and responsibility means increased risk (risk of poor governance, poor training, poor evaluation, poor oversight, poor challenge, poor standards when left unchecked etc.). The government has partly responded to this problem – arguably a problem of its own making – by demanding the inspection and professionalization of all school governing bodies; specifically a demand that governing bodies conduct themselves on the basis of professional standards and technical expertise provided by 'high quality' and 'high calibre' governors who possess the skills and knowledge relevant to enhancing accountability. As Schools Minister Nash (2013) highlighted in a speech to the Independent Academies Association national conference,

> I'm certainly not opposed to parents and staff being on the governing body, but people should be appointed on a clear prospectus and because of their skills and expertise as governors; not simply because they represent particular interest groups … Running a school is in many ways like running a business, so we need more business people coming forward to become governors.

Understood in this way, parent governors are complicit in the routine embedding of neo-liberal practices in schools to the extent their contribution as 'skilled' volunteers ensures schools are rendered intelligible to the market. For example, the key strategic functions of school governors today include 'Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction'; 'Holding the head teacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils' and 'Overseeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent' (DfE, 2013b). In the same way that parents as consumers are located through an active–passive dynamic (see previous section on *parents as consumers*), here parents as governors are similarly interpellated through a dividing practice which sets skilled parents apart from non-skilled parents, and which places a premium on knowledge and experience which has business application and utility in the promotion of a view of the school as efficient and effective:

> Governing bodies have a vital role to play as the non-executive leaders of our schools. It is their role to set the strategic direction of the school and hold the headteacher to account for its educational and financial performance. This is a demanding task, and we think that anyone appointed to the governing body should therefore have the skills to contribute to effective governance and the success of the school … This could include specific skills such as an ability to understand data or finances as well as general capabilities such as the capacity and willingness to learn. (DfE, 2014, Section 2:1)

The above statement indicates who is to be included and excluded from the business of school governance with more desirable parents seen as those who are bearers of relevant knowledge and expertise, namely those who are best placed to enhance accountability to the funders and to the regulatory body. Parents as governors may therefore be viewed as implementers of reform (Forrester & Gunter, 2009) or sponsors and guarantors of the state in the absence of the direct intervention by central government.

Parents as 'producers': governing through autonomy and responsibility

The final aspect of the parental neoliberal subjectivities that we would like to consider here relates to the new role that the current government assigns to parents as 'producers' and

'edu-managers' in a literal sense. This new facet of parental participation in education needs to be understood in the context of the new political framework unveiled by the current UK conservative/liberal-democrat coalition government, whose joint political powers were consolidated under the vision of the *Big Society*. Based on a rhetoric empowerment of local communities, businesses and individuals', the Big Society implies a devolution of power from central government to local groups, charities, non-profit and for-profit social enterprises in processes of local and national policy-making and policy accountability. This new initiative is a good example of what Rose (1996) defined as 'a new pluralization of "social" technologies' (p. 56) based on strategies of diversification and decentralization. The resulting model displaces the apparent incompatibility between anarchic (market-based) and hierarchic (state-centred) forms of coordination and replaces them with more flexible structures (heterarchies) where relationships, responsibilities and processes of decision-making are shared at different instances by a heterogeneous group of old and new actors with different backgrounds, profiles and interests (Jessop, 1998). By working on the context and conditions in which these systems operate, the intention of heterarchical activities is to strategically influence others' agendas and internal processes of decision-making, while avoiding the need to become directly involved in their 'raw operations'. It involves moving away from previous top-down forms of imperative coordination and points towards what Rose and Miller (1992) identified as processes of 'governing at a distance', which also encompass processes of continuous dialogue and the creation of alliances between political and other actors from different fields. Far from a 'roll-back' (Peck & Tickell, 2002) or a total 'hollowing out' (Rhodes, 2007) of the state, this new model implies a 'roll-out' of government, that is the creation of new structures and technologies of governance that would redefine its roles and responsibilities but, at the same time, that would resituate it strategically both in normative and institutional terms. David Cameron's speech at the House of Commons back in 2011 openly defends this new 'duty' of the government within an increasingly plural networked-state:

> … what we are talking about here is a whole stream of things that need to be done. First of all, we have got to devolve more power to local government, and beyond local government, so people can actually do more and take more power. Secondly, we have got to open up public services, make them less monolithic, say to people: if you want to start up new schools, you can; if you want to set up a co-op or a mutual within the health service, if you're part of the health service, you can … I don't believe that you just sort of roll back the state and the Big Society springs up miraculously. There are amazing people in our country, who are establishing great community organisations and social enterprises, but we, the government, should also be catalysing and agitating and trying to help build the Big Society.[1]

As Hatcher (2011) points out, through initiatives like the Big Society and the Free Schools programme (see below) 'the Coalition government is replacing local democracy through elected local government, including the provision and allocation of schools places, by a fragmented market system' (p. 499). The role of government moves towards what could be understood as 'the monitoring state', which 'declines to offer solutions to particular problems but defines those problems, or "societal challenges", for which solutions must be sought' (Hodgson, 2012, p. 539). The new scenario also implies a change in the role of parents within education. They are expected to take responsibility not only for their children's trajectories or to contribute to their schools as active members of the educational

community, as we saw in the previous two sections. In this case, parents are summoned as producers and are expected to engage directly in the design, creation, management and administration of schools, according to their expectations and needs. The Prime Minister's speech digs deeper into this idea and clarifies even further:

> To me, there's one word at the heart of all this, and that is responsibility. We need people to take more responsibility. We need people to act more responsibly, because if you take any problem in our country and you just think: 'Well, what can the government do to sort it out?', that is only ever going to be half of the answer. …) So, responsibility is the absolute key. If you ask yourself the question, 'Can I take more responsibility, can I do more?', very often, the answer is no. How easy is it, if you are not satisfied with education, to club together and start up a new school? It's incredibly difficult. How easy is it to try and take over the closing down pub in your village to keep it running? It's incredibly difficult. How easy is it to volunteer if you want to take part and do more, with all the rules in the past about vetting and barring and criminal records? It's extremely difficult. So, what this is all about is giving people more power and control to improve their lives and their communities. That, in a nutshell, is what it is all about.

What is remarkable for our purposes here is not only the fact that the British Prime Minister might consider that running a school seems to involve the same level of competence and social scope than running the local pub down the road. The previous quotations represent a good example of the move towards new political configurations based on responsibility and duty. Cameron's words stress the new forms of moral agency brought in by neoliberal governmentality, what Shamir (2008, p. 4) defines as the 'moralization of economic action', highlighting the fact that 'while obedience had been the practical master-key of top-down bureaucracies, responsibility is the practical master-key of governance'. Responsibility has become in itself a source of authority, one 'that operates at the level of individual actors, reconfiguring roles and identities … so as to mobilize designated actors actively to undertake and perform self-governing tasks' (p. 8). According to this logic, parents, among others, are morally expected and encouraged to take action, assuming a key role in the organization of public services. In this sense, in connection with the Big Society initiative, the UK government has recently created the Free Schools scheme in England which represents yet another example of this new sensibility of governance. The New Schools Network, a charitable organization mainly funded by the Department of Education (DfE),[2] was established to promote the Free Schools programme and encourages the creation of such forms of coordination. As stated on its website:

> The more you connect, the stronger your group's offer becomes. The most successful Free School groups are those with a diverse range of individuals, skills and contacts … Groups of teachers, parents, organisations and charities should be allowed [this is what the Free Schools programme authorises] to set up schools with the freedom to offer what parents want.[3]

The Free Schools Scheme was launched in 2010 and allows the creation of schools in England that are funded directly by government though remain outside the control of local authorities; have their own admission criteria; follow their own curriculum; and are not restrained by or respond to national union agreements. The programme has generated an important debate and controversy, not only among political parties, but also teachers' unions, professional organizations, and various parental and local community groups. The concealment of the application process, the blurriness of the criteria for

approval, and the fact that the already mentioned New Schools Network is exempted from the Freedom of Information Act given its charitable status have been initial causes for concern. Also, the raise of research questioning the model, results and impact of those programmes used by the Secretary (minister) of Education as evidence of good practice to support the new scheme (Swedish Free Schools, Charter Schools in the USA and Academies in England – see, for instance, Gunter, 2011; Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013; Ravitch, 2010). Furthermore, as Higham (2014) suggests, the process of:

> 'responsibilisation' is embodied clearly in the free school application process administered by government. Free schools proposers are required to set out an education vision, detail their curriculum and staffing plans, and provide evidence for both parental demand and their own capacity and capability as proposers. (p. 4)

That aspect raises important questions in terms of who would be able to access and apply within the scheme, the quantitative and qualitative nature of the capital and capabilities required throughout the process and their spread across society, and, finally, the motivations and aims that different groups might pursue in their attempt to enter the programme. Higham shows how parental groups represent the higher percentage (19%) of the total of proposers in the first round of applications, followed by teachers (17%), faith groups (16%) and other private schools (14%). Furthermore, engagement with the free school process demands possession of certain skills, knowledge, competencies, contacts and alliances.

The Free School application and setting up process relies heavily on parent groups utilizing skills and knowledge among professionals (legal and finance for example), working with the local council to determine need based on existing demographics, capitalizing on network capacity and contacts to summon help from professional volunteers, mobilizing accumulated social and cultural capital, engaging with different stakeholders – all these things demand a certain entrepreneurial behaviour, a willingness and capacity to form alliances, negotiate contracts, secure community support. However, the previous does not seem to be appealing and suitable to all parents equally. Looking in more depth at the characteristics and success rates of the admission process in terms of who and where are those better equipped and willing to take on such responsibility, Higham (2014) suggests that the 'proposers most able to fulfil the government's access requirements were on average not those most willing to locate in and serve disadvantaged communities' (p. 135). He cites secondary data from the Department for Education that highlights that even though '60% of the 24 free schools are located in the 50% most deprived LSOAs, 19 admit fewer pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) than a equivalent school in the same local authority' (pp. 14–15). The initial and exploratory evidence that steams from the existing literature draws a picture that raises important questions related to processes of democratization and the problems of social justice and perpetuation of inequalities likely to stem from these reforms. This data raises important concerns about the negative effects that this initiative might be exerting over existing dynamic of social reproduction. As Higham's (2014) study concludes, the Free Schools programme 'rather than being well disposed to meet the complex needs of disadvantaged communities, this process appears capable of diverting state resources towards more advantaged actors' (p. 16).

The Big Society extends even further the logic of individual choice as the central mechanism of organization and functioning of public services. It is the role and responsibility of

citizens (and, in our case, the parents) to design, organize and manage their own schools, which resituates the traditional role of government 'limiting' it 'to assess the business cases put forward for establishing Free Schools, to determine budgetary levels for schools, and to provide and respond to performance feedback' (Hodgson, 2012, p. 542). These are part of a deeper transformation of the political sphere wherein the processes of 'degovernmentalisation of the state' (Rose, 1996) are producing new forms of political organization in which governments no longer exert monopolistic control over state actions. The parents become the new subjects (and subjectors) of government. Freedom, responsibility and autonomy are, therefore, the core values of the new subject, which are underpinned by the market-blended logics of choice and competition (Rose, 1996, p. 57). This represents a move from the individual as citizen (in the liberal conception of the term) to the individual as omni-consumer/customer, self-enterprising, networking and networked subject. Within all this they become self-governing agents, and take on the responsibility for competition and self-improvement through techniques 'disciplined self-management' (Ozga, 2009, p. 152). These new subjectivities, and attendant ideas about human nature and self, risk and reflexivity, human ethics and freedom – are not outside or antagonist to power and its technologies. On the contrary, they are the results of power configurations, policy technologies and rationalities, and techniques of self-governance (such as the Free Schools programme).

The state we are in

In this paper we have evidenced the ways in which education policy discourse and practice works to summon parents as responsibilized agents with moral obligations that can be satisfied through the advance of technical solutions provided by the market. The focus of the paper has been to trace the subject positions, meanings and practices by which parents are invited, and in some cases compelled, to enter into relations with the state as neoliberal subjects: consumers, governors and producers. By activating parents in this way, the state strategically and systematically works to govern education at a distance, with parents emerging as vehicles or modalities for the expression and reproduction of market rationalities. Through a genealogical enquiry that focuses on the analysis of policy discourse, we have demonstrated how the state assigns new responsibilities and obligations to parents in order that the risks, liabilities, inequities and potential crises that stem from a deregulated education market may be absolved by the direct intervention and action of non-state actors. In the first instance, we highlighted how parents are constructed as consumers or choosers of education services. Parents are compelled to act in self-interested ways and inhabit competitive forms of behaviour (be an 'active citizen', for example) in order that they may secure the best possible education for their child. In the next section we looked at how parents are summoned as governors or overseers (custodians) of education services. The role of governors in this context is to enhance accountability to the funders (the DfE) and to the regulatory body (the schools inspectorate, Ofsted) by supporting and challenging school senior leadership on issues relating to financial and educational performance. From this perspective, parents are charged with the responsibility of overseeing high-risk decisions relating to strategy, finance, curriculum and legal and statutory compliance. Finally, we focused on the new policy solutions that open up the possibility for groups of parents to create and run their own schools with the

support and funding of central government. This is a further move and new dimension in the construction of the neoliberal subjectivities in education. In the name of broadening democracy and establishing the 'Big Society', the UK government has recently launched the Free Schools programme, an attempt to engage groups of parents, among others, in the organization and provision of core educational services. The parent is from now on invited and expected to inhabit the figure of a producer within the educational market. In doing so, the role of the government is also reworked, focusing on 'secondary' as opposed to front-line, tasks such as assessment, evaluation and delivery of services. The decisions over the pedagogical models, the format and contents of the curriculum, and the results and academic achievement of the students will fall on now on the new figure the new parent-producer.

In the three cases presented above, it is important to bear in mind how participation, commitment and 'success' within the education market's disciplinary processes depend on the deployment of a set of meanings (symbolic capital), dispositions and total volume of capital (as the total sum of its different dimensions: economic, cultural and social capital) available to individuals or families (Bourdieu, 1986). Subjects from different social groups do not perceive the space and the possibilities to interact within the market in the same way. Thus, social class is useful as a way of understanding/framing the behaviour of actors within the education system, where social class can also be captured at the level of effect, as the result of actor's choices within the education system (Ball, 2003). But the nature of the market easily blurs the influence of social class and, therefore, the development of mechanisms of social reproduction. The supposed freedom and responsibility to interact within the market and its individual character tend to neglect the existence of shared dynamics among groups.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-big-society.
2. After a competitive bid, the current grant consists of over £1 million for the academic years 2011–2012 and 2012–2013. But, as denounced by *The Guardian*, in 2010, the charity received £500,000 directly from the DfE with no bidding process at that moment. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jul/06/michael-gove-new-schools-transparency. For more details on the current grant see: http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a00199422/new-schools-network-awarded-grant-to-support-free-school-applicants?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter#).
3. http://newschoolsnetwork.org/network/introduction.

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