



THE LANGUAGE OF DECEIT, DIVISION AND DOMINANCE

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ABSTRACT

In the UK, fathers often face great difficulties maintaining a meaningful involvement in their children's lives after parental separation. Men who are victims of partner abuse face almost universal disbelief and a dearth of provision to help them. The reality of male victims of partner abuse is kept submerged, whilst that of female victims is sometimes amplified in order to undermine fathers' attempts to obtain court orders for child contact. Feminists dominate the academic research in these areas and hence control the narrative which shapes Governmental and judicial policy, and this maintains the status quo. By concentrating upon the recent works of one individual as an exemplar, and by deconstructing the language used and its poststructural trappings, the mechanisms which continue to propagate this institutionalised deceit are exposed.

Keywords: parental alienation, domestic abuse, poststructuralism, family court

INTRODUCTION

The language in question is that of Adrienne Barnett. Dr Barnett is a Senior Lecturer in Law at Brunel University London. She formerly practised for many years as a family law barrister. I shall focus particular attention on two of her works. Firstly, “A genealogy of hostility: parental alienation in England and Wales”, (Barnett, 2020). This paper discusses the role of parental alienation (PA) within the English and Welsh family courts. I shall refer to it as “the PA paper”. Secondly, Adrienne Barnett’s PhD thesis from Brunel Law School, UK, “Contact at All Costs? Domestic Violence, Child Contact and the Practices of the Family Courts and Professionals”, (Barnett, 2014), henceforth “the thesis”.

I hold no animus towards Dr Barnett. I use her works as exemplars of a kind because she has been particularly active in these matters this year (2020), as will become apparent from this article. If the issues raised here were merely the foibles of one individual, they would merit scant attention. The subtext, therefore, is a widespread prevalence of views, arguments and language essentially the same as those exemplified by Barnett. It would be too long a digression to demonstrate this claim thoroughly, but I shall allude in passing to evidence for it from contemporary events within the UK Government and Parliament. If said views, arguments and language were labelled simply as *feminism*; then the claim that it is widespread, and influential, would hardly need defending.

I shall begin gently with a critique of the PA paper. Here I shall use empirical evidence and elementary logic. That may seem an unnecessary statement. Regrettably, no longer. The terms of engagement have changed. As we will see, there is no longer a mutual agreement that the purpose of argument (or *discourse*) is to seek the truth about some objective empirical reality. Words are no longer the servants of reason but instead are the instruments by which the world is created, we are being told.

The deconstruction of the PA paper will lead us naturally to the epistemological issues which underlie this peculiar shift. Hence it is useful to look at Barnett’s thesis in which these matters are explicitly discussed. The thesis is informed from the start by the poststructuralist perspective, and in particular the role of *construction* which I shall examine in some detail.

I finish by looking at events this year (2020) in the UK Government and its legislative activities which serve to illustrate the impact, and dominance, in practice of the perspectives exemplified by Barnett's work in the context of domestic abuse and the operation of the family courts in the UK.

The burden of this article shall be that, whatever the intellectual merits of poststructuralism might be in principle, it is being deployed to lend spurious legitimacy to deceit in the service of promoting dominance of a divisive narrative which eschews balance. Thus, whilst the academic language of poststructuralism may seem arcane and a long way from everyday affairs, in fact it is having a catastrophic effect on our society.

THE PARENTAL ALIENATION PAPER

Defending the psychological validity of parental alienation is not part of this article, and my argument here does not depend upon the validity of PA. However, I must state what parental alienation is, or is claimed to be. Parental alienation is a process by which a child's natural attachment to a parent is disrupted and replaced by an irrational, and often extreme, dislike for that parent. The condition is induced in the child by persistent negative portrayal of one parent by the other. It is an induced psychological pathology in the child. The alienating parent effectively uses the child as a weapon against the target parent. It is primarily a form of child abuse, but may also be considered a form of domestic abuse of the alienated parent (though it is not recognised as such in English law).

The striking thing about the PA paper is that Adrienne Barnett neglects almost entirely the alienated children – until the last sentence, when she seems to remember what she should have been addressing. The entirety of the paper is presented from a sex war perspective. Claims of parental alienation are portrayed in this paper as a weapon being deployed by abusive fathers against mothers and their children, and—Barnett claims—credulous courts are falling for it.

Barnett appears to have little interest in PA. Her paper is actually about *claims* of PA, rather than PA itself, and about the effectiveness of such claims in influencing the outcomes of adversarial contests in the family courts. Any discussion relating to PA as principally a form of child abuse is notable for its absence. Instead her perspective revolves around *claims* of PA being a weapon deployed by men against women in a sex war: the child disappears from the picture.

There is much to say here. Let me unpack it in parts. The principle parts are these,

- (i) The status of PA, specifically the existence of a credible body of evidence that PA is a diagnosable form of induced psychological pathology in the child, and hence a form of child abuse;
- (ii) The claim that PA is asserted as a counter-attack to allegations of domestic abuse perpetrated by the father;
- (iii) The language used in the paper and what it reveals.

Let's take these in turn. Firstly, people of Barnett's persuasion do not believe that PA is real. They regard it as a ruse. Specifically, Barnett's position is that claims of PA are a cunning stratagem by abusive fathers to deflect attention away from their abuse of the mother and/or child. She writes in her Conclusion, "PA is a concept that is proving more powerful than any other in silencing the voices of women and children resisting contact with abusive men. PA is not an 'equal' counterpart to domestic abuse, it is a means of obscuring domestic abuse, and should be recognised as such."

Over and over again throughout the paper this perspective is reiterated. A couple of quotes will suffice,

"It is no coincidence, it is suggested, that PA, in its initial form of parental alienation syndrome (PAS), emerged when the courts recognised domestic violence as a factor militating against contact."

"The emergence and development of PA in England and Wales shows a clear pattern of (initially PAS) and PA being raised in family proceedings in response to concerns about and measures to address domestic abuse. This, it is suggested, cogently reveals PA's intended purpose – to shut down domestic abuse in private family law."

To "shut down domestic abuse"? She means, of course, "to shut down the effectiveness of allegations of domestic abuse".

Note how the language betrays that PA itself, i.e., the child abuse, is ignored. The phrase "PA's intended purpose" makes no sense unless we interpret it as the author clearly does in her own mind as "the intended purpose of *allegations of PA*". It is not the child abuse which interests her, and this is why reading the paper is so disturbing. She is only interested in the effect of

claims of PA, interpreted as a tactic to manipulate judicial rulings and score a hit in a sex war between parents.

This is the language of division. It is the opposite of what we should learn from the reality of parental separation (whether one accepts PA as a valid condition or not), namely that parental conflict should be overcome for the sake of the child. But Barnett does not want conciliation. She wants mothers to *win* and is willing to subordinate the best interests of the child to do so. If this seems a rather harsh interpretation of her position, we will see shortly how Dr Barnett views “the welfare of the child”.

Adrienne Barnett also has an article in the house magazine of the UK Association of Magistrates (Barnett, 2020B), “Parental alienation and the family courts”. In it she states simply, “There is little, if any, credible scientific support for the theory of PA”. This is a statement which is readily proved to be false. I should emphasise that whether or not PA is a valid phenomenon is not my concern. An assertion that it is would require a thorough examination of the whole body of literature on the topic, with a view to discerning if a consensus has arisen. That is unnecessary here. All that is required to refute Barnett’s contention is to establish the existence of a substantial body of evidence in the literature, and that this evidence has been provided by workers with credible credentials. Consequently, the following observations will suffice.

By 2016, parental alienation and alienating behaviours in separated or divorced families had been well documented in over 500 references drawn from the professional literature across 30 countries, (Harman et al, 2016).

By 2018 there were more than one thousand research and clinical studies reported in scientific and professional journals, books, and book chapters, (Kruk, 2018). That reference summarises the position as, “Research evidence of the many facets of parental alienation is much more robust than is often assumed”.

According to chartered psychologist and PA expert Dr Sue Whitcombe (2017), the prevalence of alienation within the general community of separating parents has been estimated from random sampling to be up to about 15%, but in samples of the most intractable cases the prevalence can be up to 40%. She quotes Sarah Parsons, Principal Social Worker and Assistant Director of the UK’s Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) as

stating in July 2016 that “parental alienation is responsible for around 80% of the most intransigent cases that come before the family courts”. Whitcombe has estimated that this implies that parental alienation is likely to be a feature in a minimum of 9,000 family proceedings applications per annum in England and Wales, involving more than 18,000 children.

(Lorandos, 2020) has performed a search for PA cases in US courts between 1985 and 2018. His search terms are defined in detail in the paper. Searching on the basis of relevant text alone produced 3,555 case reports. This will be only a small fraction of cases in which PA was mentioned as most trials will not be reported. Lorandos and his co-workers then filtered those 3,555 cases by requiring either, (a) that an independent expert testified on the subject of PA, or, (b) the court found on any basis that there was PA. These criteria were rigorous, e.g., in (a) a recognised PA expert was required, not a general therapist, mediator, etc. As regards (b), mere speculation by the court on the subject of PA was not sufficient. 1,181 cases made it through this filter. The incidence of PA cases recognised by the US courts (i.e., within this filtered dataset) was found to have increased steeply in the last three decades. 25% of the alienators were fathers, 75% mothers. On the basis of his extensive dataset, Lorandos concluded,

“In the thirty-four years since the term PAS was first introduced and then later reformulated, trial and appellate courts across the United States have found the construct PA to be material, probative, relevant to their tasks, admissible, and worthy of discussion, as they have grappled with emotionally abusive parents and damaged children. Review of the thousands of opinions located by the query reveals that courts understand that there is a distinction between ‘when one parent says negative and disparaging things about the other parent to the child’ and when an aggressor parent ‘engages in behavior designed to sabotage the child’s relationship with the victim parent.’ Hundreds of opinions illustrating courts confronting ‘unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child’s actual experience with that parent’ were located.”

Barnett’s dismissal of PA on the grounds that “there is little, if any, credible scientific support for the theory of PA” is thus established to be false. Whilst PA does have its detractors, that is not the same as denying the existence of the credible body of academic work alluded to above. Moreover, it is not just widespread academic support, but a vast tranche of judicial opinion over decades. The disturbing thing about Barnett’s claim is that it was made in the house journal of the UK Magistrates’ Association, suggesting an attempt to seriously misdirect

an influential judicial body.

We shall see below that Barnett has had an even more recent opportunity to influence the UK Ministry of Justice directly.

Let us turn now to the claim that PA arises as a counter by fathers when they are accused of abuse in the courts. Barnett draws upon 40 cases of PA in courts in England or Wales in the period 2000 to March 2019, nearly 20 years. Hence just 2 cases per year on average. It is not clear if these were all the cases that could be found, or if they were selected. She writes, “A total of 40 cases (comprised in 54 judgments) were reviewed in which PA/PAS was raised or referred to. These were identified in Family Law Reports and on BAILII, and a few unreported judgments were identified in Casemine.” She adds, “The reported cases cannot provide a representative sample of all such cases.” Indeed, they cannot. One is thus left wondering what one is supposed to make of the observations which follow.

Of these 40 cases involving PA, in 35 cases the father claimed to have been alienated, and in 5 cases the mother claimed to have been alienated. Abuse was alleged in 27 cases (and I assume this means alleged abuse by the father in all cases, though that is not made clear). Hence, in 27 out of 35 cases a father who was alleged to be an abuser claimed there was alienation (77%). This appears to be a strong association, albeit from a tiny dataset with uncertain provenance.

However, an association tells us nothing regarding whether the allegations of abuse were causal in bringing about an assertion of alienation. One might alternatively argue that, where PA is genuinely present, a false allegation of abuse is also likely. Barnett concludes that, “The emergence and development of PA in England and Wales shows a clear pattern of (initially PAS) and PA being raised in family proceedings in response to concerns about and measures to address domestic abuse. This, it is suggested, cogently reveals PA’s intended purpose – to shut down domestic abuse in private family law (see Meier 2020).”

Let us leave aside the statistical weakness of making such a sweeping claim based on 40 cases which Barnett admits cannot be representative. The conclusion would be invalid even if there were one thousand cases because the connective “in response to” asserts a causal connection about which no evidence at all has been presented. One might assert with equal logic

(or lack thereof) that allegations of domestic abuse are raised in response to allegations of parental alienation. Barnett's paper provides no evidence of the direction of causality, or even that there is a causal connection.

However, she advises that we look at (Meier, 2020). Let's do so then. Joan Meier identified 669 cases in the USA in which one parent made an alienation claim against the other, but, of these, only 222 involved mothers accusing fathers of abuse and fathers accusing mothers of alienation. The data used by Meier is strongly skewed as they originate overwhelmingly from appeal courts. Nevertheless, from that sample, two-thirds of alienation claims could not have arisen as *tactical counters* by fathers in response to them being accused of abuse – because they were not accused of abuse. Consequently, Barnett's claim that "allegations of fathers' alienation arise in response to accusations of abuse by fathers" gets little support from this source either. This is particularly noteworthy as the skewed nature of the sample of cases identified by Meier would tend to enhance both factors (i.e., allegations of abuse and of PA).

Nor does Barnett's claim have anything to say about the 25% of allegations of alienation made by mothers in Lorandos's far more extensive dataset.

One might have expected a researcher to be disconcerted about having drawn a conclusion in a published work which is so easily discredited. But this is to misunderstand the mindset involved, which has scant interest in consistency of reasoning or statistical significance. This is betrayed by the language used, and by the poststructural position on *truth* which underlies it, as we shall see.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE PA PAPER

Turning now to the language used in the PA paper, and what it reveals. Let us unpack the following sentence, "PA is underpinned by, and premised on, a particular dominant construction of children's welfare, that constitutes the involvement of fathers in post-separation families as overwhelmingly important for children's emotional, psychological and developmental welfare."

This is not the language of true empirical enquiry, but the language of sly insinuation. Note the corrosive role of the word "construction" in that sentence. It betrays the author's poststructuralist mindset: there is no objective truth, only *narratives* vying for dominance. The idea that fathers are important in child development is one such constructed narrative, the

author implicitly claims. I shall examine more closely in the next section the poststructural usage of *construction*.

The word can have a benign meaning, especially in theoretical psychology where it may be understood as a collection of correlated behaviours which it is useful to give a name. Thus, the big five personality traits, such as extroversion or openness, are constructs. But this is not how Barnett is using the word. There is an analogy here with the way the word *theory* is correctly used in science, in contrast with the everyday expression “that’s just a theory”. Barnett’s usage of *construction* is closer to the latter, with its intended connotation of being unsubstantiated, arbitrary and optional. At this point it is helpful to reproduce a quote from (Gill, 1996) taken from Barnett’s thesis, (Barnett, 2014), “The notion of ‘construction’ is important in discourse analysis because it ‘emphasizes the fact that, in a very real sense, texts of various kinds construct our world.’” I shall have more to say shortly about this conception of the world being “constructed” by “texts”, rather than having an objective existence. My position will be that it is being used as a device to provide spurious academic legitimacy to deceit and prejudice.

Fathers’ importance to child development is not a “construction”, in Barnett’s sense of being something that can be magicked away by appropriate discourse: it is a well-documented empirical reality. But this is the origin of the dispute in which we are engaged. The main goal of the feminist movement has, from its inception, been to make women independent of men, and this includes making the family independent of men, (de Beauvoir, 1949), (Greer, 1970), (Lyndon, 1992). The feminist credo is precisely *families don’t need fathers*. It is the most staggering arrogance, as well as being false.

Even the most hardened adherent of the view that men bring nothing of social, emotional or psychological value to a child (or a partner) will not be able to sustain the claim that families don’t need fathers unless they are also willing to forego both the child maintenance and also all welfare benefits, which are 73% financed by men’s taxes. Barnett opines that “PA is underpinned by, and premised on” the “construction” that fathers are significant in their children’s development. She is telling us that PA is an invalid concept because it is predicated upon the significance of fathers to their children’s development – which she also regards as an invalid concept.

Here we reach the nub of the issue as far as the PA paper is concerned. Barnett refers to the “FRM” (Fathers’ Rights Movement), exemplified by such organisations as Families Need Fathers. Am I being overly imaginative, or can one sense the curling of the lip into a sneer? Between the lines we read that fathers deserve no rights; the very thought is obnoxious.

But it isn’t about father’s rights. The assertion explicit in the appellation *Families Need Fathers* is entirely different, but one which the prejudiced movement represented by Barnett equally oppose: that families have any need for fathers. There would have been no impetus to create organisations with such a name unless there were a belief within some parts of society that fathers were, in fact, superfluous to requirements. The feminist position which has gained dominance in academe and in politics is that fathers are not necessary.

Yet it is not so. Indeed, if one broadens the claim from fathers to men in general, it becomes the height of silliness for women to imagine they do not need men, but that does not stop it being asserted, (Rosin, 2013). What such women really mean is that things have now been so arranged that men’s contributions to society in general, and to women in particular, need never be acknowledged, and so all respect and appreciation can be foregone and replaced with denigration instead. Yet any job which predominantly involves interaction with inanimate matter is overwhelmingly dominated by male effort. Whether it be the production of food, the creation and maintenance of built infrastructure, both commercial and domestic, the provision of fuel, energy, water and disposal of waste, and the transportation of goods, men do almost all of it. Men do it because women do not want to (or they undoubtedly would).

In the UK, men put very nearly three times the taxation revenue into the Exchequer as women, which then pays for the welfare state from which women benefit far more than men. For the unemployed, or working poor, single parents (overwhelmingly mothers) receive far more in direct benefit payments than a single person, e.g., a non-resident father, (Collins, 2020). The public sector is funded entirely from taxation, and twice as many public sector employees are women as men, though men are paying three times as much to support it. Overall, the UK taxation and benefit systems constitute a process to syphon money from men to women, and so long as this prevails it is mere conceit and self-delusion for women to pretend that men in general, and fathers in particular, are now redundant. It would be more accurate to note that this transfer of money from men to women has now been rendered almost entirely anonymous and

impersonal, and so it passes unrecognised and increasingly unappreciated.

However, I digress. It is not financial matters that are the immediate issue. Barnett's contention is that the "construction" that fathers are important to their children's emotional and psychological development is invalid, i.e., it is merely a construction. Actually, there is a huge literature on the role of parents in their children's psychological development, and this includes literature specific to the significance of fathers. A tiny fraction of it has been reviewed by (Collins, 2019). Nor are the roles of mother and father identical and mere strength in depth, but distinct in some aspects. I shall not rehearse the case again here. The deleterious effects of fatherlessness have become increasingly well documented since the classic polemic "Families Without Fatherhood", (Dennis and Erdos, 1992, 3rd ed 2000). Both authors professed to be socialists of some complexion, so dismissing their work as the rantings of antediluvian conservatives will not do. What we have now in our culture is not the outmoded conflict of left and right, but the perennial power play of divide and conquer, and this time the division is between the sexes.

There are rich pickings in Barnett's PA paper when it comes to language. I'll just list a few and leave the reader to deconstruct them at leisure,

- "political fathers" (nothing political about Barnett herself, of course).
- "discursive" as in referring to PA as "part of the discursive repertoire of current family law", noting that "discursive" implies digressing from the subject. In what way are the courts digressing from the subject in considering a potential harm to a child when their statutory duty is to make the child's best interests paramount?
- "unimpeachable" as in "the myth of the unimpeachable father on which PA is premised". This is a lovely straw man argument. No one has claimed that every allegation of PA is valid, and no one has claimed that every instance of PA involves a saintly father. But more disconcertingly this is another instance of Barnett's blindness to PA as a harm to the child and her insistence that it is only a strategy in a battle between the parents;
- And one of my favourites, "abuse perpetrated by 'normal' fathers" – oh, so sly.

That the axis which insisted "the personal is political", the original axe blow which aimed

to divide the sexes, should now be a bit stuffy at fathers being “political” is rather rich. The sex war has been inflamed by this axis for fifty years, with ever increasing intensity.

THE THESIS, POSTSTRUCTURALISM AND POWER

I now turn to the thesis, (Barnett, 2014), which is most helpful in making explicit the theoretical position which underlies Barnett’s other work. Recall that the thesis is about how domestic abuse is addressed by UK family courts in the context of fathers’ contact with their children. As promised, I will concentrate on the role of *construction*. Barnett tells us that her PhD study will, “provide a productive framework for exploring the world constructed in and by current family law, how meanings are represented and produced, and the consequences of those representations and meanings for judicial and professional practice and consequently for the women and children who are subjected to those practices.” Fathers, it seems, are not subject to those practices, and it is made amply clear that they (or the patriarchy on their behalf) are the ones doing the “constructing” to ensure that it is women and children alone who are “subjected to those practices”. But let us apply discourse analysis to that quote. It is itself the enunciation of a construction, namely that it is men who are actors (agentic) while women are acted-upon (hypoagentic). This is a familiar construction: it is the construction of the traditional gender roles. Thus, at least in this case, Barnett’s perspective itself emanates from the construction of traditional gender.

This may seem paradoxical to readers who understand feminism to be smashing traditional gender roles. But feminism opposes traditional gender roles only when it suits. The narrative of oppression, or victimhood, is the engine in the feminist machine, and it is powered by the traditional view of the vulnerable female in need of protection. Developing this theme further would take us too far from our present objective, but see (Collins, 2019). It is important to draw attention to it, however, because Barnett’s own discourse is presenting us with a construct of how the courts operate, and we are predisposed to accept this construct precisely because it aligns with the ancient constructions of gender.

Consider this quote, from the Abstract of the thesis: “This study concludes that in order to regain a valid and authoritative voice for women in current family law we need to expose and disrupt law’s construction of the ‘scientific truth’ about children’s welfare”. Are you happy with “disrupting scientific truth”, i.e., radically changing or destroying scientific truth? Especially

where it impacts children's welfare? No? And yet you are being inveigled to go along with it on the grounds that scientific truth is actually merely a construct called "scientific truth". Do you see how cunning this is? It cuts the ground away from any counterargument based on empirical evidence, however crushing a case it might appear to present, because actually it is all just a tale that one may spin, a mere construct.

You think I may be overstating? Then digest this quote: "These perspectives recognise that data, like meaning, are constructed, not 'discovered', and reject the purely positivist notion of scientific objectivity, including the privileging of 'scientific' research, which has been criticised for perpetuating patriarchal power relations, and the silencing of women's voices." [Barnett here cites (May, 1993), (May, 2001), (Judd, Smith and Kidder, 6th ed 1991)]. Clear now? Data are constructed. Reject scientific objectivity. Do not "privilege" "scientific" research.

And in case there is still any ambiguity, "What post-structural feminist and 'systems' theories share is a rejection of modernist, interpretive principles, where individuals are seen as the primary sources of social meanings, and where 'true' and certain knowledge is considered possible. At the core of feminist post-structuralist ideas and, it is suggested, Luhmannian thought, "is the crucial insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge." We can thus see the phenomenal world – the world that has meaning for us – as wholly constructed...". [Barnett cites (Banakar and Travers, 2005), (Reinharz, 1991), and (King, 2006)].

It was inevitable that historic power differentials would feature: "The founding insight of post-structuralism is that language constitutes, rather than reflects, social 'reality', so that meaning and therefore knowledge is not absolute, fixed and certain, but is "always bound up with historically specific regimes of power and, therefore, every society produces its own truths which have a normalising and regulatory function." [Barnett cites (McNay, 1992)].

If you struggle with some of these quotes, it helps to remove extraneous verbiage to leave the core meaning exposed. For example, from this, "Deploying gender as an analytical tool enables us to disrupt and displace the hierarchical bipolar oppositions, such as the binary divisions of male/female and public/private that structure gendered power relations, as well as the moral validity of objectivity and neutrality, thereby creating the space for other ways of

knowing”, we can extract the more cogent but deeply disturbing “deploying gender enables us to disrupt the moral validity of objectivity and neutrality”. Clearer?

In the next section when we see that Dr Barnett has been commissioned by the Ministry of Justice this year (2020) to produce a major literature review of the operation of the family courts, do remember her commitment to “disrupting” objectivity and neutrality and her determination not to privilege scientific research. Then ask yourself what chance the unemployed, under-educated young father has when, his partner tiring of him, he is thrust, all unknowing, into the steam press that has been prepared to crush him by a generation of Adrienne Barnetts. Then tremble for his son.

Let’s look at how these poststructuralist ideas play out when explicitly applied in the family court context. We are told that “implacably hostile mothers” are...yes, you guessed, another “construct”. So are “safe family men”, of course. So, there’s no such thing as either (or so it is slyly implied). Here is an extract which explains that “the welfare of the child” is also just another construct, so we really don’t need to fuss about it: “concepts such as ‘the welfare of the child’ have been selectively constructed by the reductive operations of law. By deconstructing the notion of ‘the welfare of the child’ and locating it within its historical, social, political and ideological context, it can be seen to operate as a mechanism of power that serves particular interests.” Barnett is presenting “the welfare of the child” as just another ruse used by wicked fathers against the mothers of their children. So, it’s nothing to do with the risk of a child being beaten, neglected or otherwise mistreated – perhaps by the mother? Ah, but “the welfare of the child” does revert to being literally the welfare of the child when the father is the abuser. That is what Barnett means by “the welfare of the child” is a “contingent and unstable familial construct”. Yes, it is contingent upon who the abuser is as to whether she sees it as abuse.

Let us pause a while to reprise what we have learnt. The world, we are to believe, is constructed, and hence contingent, not objective. There is no world as it really is. There are only various possible views of the world, established and upheld by discourses. We must concede that there is a limited sense in which this perspective is undoubtedly valid. But this limited sense insists that we interpret the world as consisting only of the beliefs and behaviours which can be successfully instilled in the public at large, and those in authority especially. Thus, the limited sense in which the poststructuralist epistemology is valid is so limited as to degenerate into

tautology. If all one means by *the world* is the set of beliefs and behaviours which people can be inveigled to adopt, then clearly the ability to influence those beliefs and behaviours through persuasive discourse constitutes changing the world in that limited sense. But that leaves the matter of truth and objective reality all untouched – not discredited but axiomatically ignored. Thus, the entire edifice of poststructural epistemology stands exposed as vacuous: a smoke screen whose purpose is to misdirect.

There is an objection to poststructuralist views which will immediately occur to those of us so antediluvian as to believe in objective reality and absolute truth: if there is no truth, why do poststructuralists bother writing anything at all? But this is easily answered. The puzzlement only arises if one sticks stubbornly to the notion that argument is for the purpose of establishing truth, or our best approximation to it. To those of us who still adhere to this laughably archaic idea, all purpose of discussion, argument and writing disappears if there is no truth to discover. There is no point in firing an arrow if there is no target to hit. But it does, in fact, make perfect sense within the poststructuralist purview. One only has to divest oneself of stubborn notions of empirical reality, neutrality, fairness, truth, etc., and instead to embrace the idea that the purpose of all discourse is to impose one's will upon others. All writing is an exercise in power. This is the ultimate cynicism, and one can only guess at the depths of moral and spiritual bankruptcy from which it springs.

When Dr Barnett writes, she does not – according to her own lights and words – seek to expose a pre-existing objective truth, rather she seeks to impose her will upon you. The *truth* for her has been redefined to be whatever she can successfully induce you to believe. It is all an exercise in power, and that's all it is.

There is a small problem here, so very obvious that I am almost embarrassed to mention it; but mention it I must. Given that all Dr Barnett and her ilk are attempting to do is to impose their will upon us, why should we not simply tell them (in the invective of your choice) to go away?

UK GOVERNMENT AND LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITIES IN 2020

This article has concentrated upon the work of one individual, but I want to close by illustrating how this is embedded within, and characteristic of, the operation of Government and

legislation in the UK. For this reason, the intellectual impostures of poststructuralism cannot be dismissed as harmless academic gobbledegook because they adversely affect the lives of millions. The reader will be patient while I lay out the UK legislative background before returning to Adrienne Barnett's part in these very recent proceedings.

At the time of publication, a new domestic abuse Bill, nearly three years in the gestation, has completed its passage through the House of Commons in the UK and has started its journey through the House of Lords. Addressing the content of the Bill would be too long a digression. Suffice it to say that it is draconian in many respects, not least in respect of the appointment of a Commissioner for Domestic Abuse whose supra-governmental powers, in the hands of an unelected person, are worrying.

The progress of a Bill through Parliament includes a Committee stage in which a Committee of around 16 MPs debate the amendments proposed and return an amended Bill for its third and final reading in the House of Commons. The Committee therefore has considerable power over which proposed amendments will be included in, and which excluded from, the near-final version of the Bill. Anyone can submit written evidence or opinion to the Committee via Parliament's Scrutiny Unit. However, it is at the Committee's discretion whether they invite individuals or organisations to be interviewed in person by the Committee. The Committee is under no obligation to give credence to any of this written or presented evidence; they have complete discretion. In practice, the Committee's sympathies or concerns are indicated by whom it is they invite to be witnesses in person. In contrast, unsolicited written evidence is likely to be given scant attention, and much will not be looked at by the Committee at all.

Between 4th and 17th June 2020 the Committee for the Domestic Abuse Bill received 95 written submissions, (House of Commons, 4-17 June 2020). A number of these (at least 8 and perhaps 10 or 12) were from individuals or organisations sympathetic to male victims and concerned that the Bill did not reflect their position (one being from a charity of which I am a Trustee). Most of these supported certain proposed amendments to the Bill, such as including parental alienation and false allegations as recognised forms of domestic abuse. However, the 15 individuals or organisations who were interviewed in person by the Committee were all strongly feminist, or female victims of abuse, and excluded all representatives of fathers or male victims of domestic abuse. The amendments proposed to reflect men's experience of abuse were not

taken up in the revised Bill put forward by the Committee.

All these outcomes were entirely predictable, and I doubt that anyone sympathetic to male concerns were in the least surprised. The reason, as was clearly reflected in the witnesses called by the Committee, is that only one voice is heard in the corridors of power on matters related to domestic abuse and it is the feminist voice, typified by Adrienne Barnett.

To cement this claim here is further evidence. In parallel with the progress of the Domestic Abuse Bill through parliament, the UK Ministry of Justice (MOJ) saw fit to instigate, in May 2019, a review of family justice to address “how the family courts protect children and parents in cases of domestic abuse”. They convened a panel to conduct the review, claiming that, “The panel members represent key organisations from across family justice including the Judiciary, academia, social care, policy officials and third sector organisations which represent and advocate for victims of domestic abuse”, (Ministry of Justice, 2019). With the possible exception of the MOJ chair and Justices (though even that is in serious doubt), the academic, social care and third sector advisors were unambiguously of strong feminist sympathies. Complaints were levied at the MOJ from organisations representing male victims, but the response was to draft further feminist representatives onto the panel.

The MOJ reported the outcome of the panel’s deliberations on 25th June 2020, (Ministry of Justice, 2020): interesting timing given that the Domestic Abuse Bill was then poised for its third and final reading in the Commons. The MOJ announced a major overhaul of family courts to protect domestic abuse victims. Of greatest concern to fathers is this statement in the press release, “Ministers will launch a review into the presumption of ‘parental involvement’ that often encourages a child’s relationship with both parents, unless the involvement of that parent would put the child at risk. It will examine whether the right balance is being struck between the risk of harm to children and victims, and the right of the child to have a relationship with both parents.”

This threatens to be a further wedge which will be driven between separated fathers and their children. 92% of non-resident parents in the UK are fathers. Exact figures are not available, but about half of separated fathers fail to obtain sufficient time with their children to maintain a meaningful parental involvement. Even for the luckier half, the *de facto* standard has become

three days per fortnight with just one or two overnight stays. Nearly one-in-three separated fathers ultimately fail to have any contact, or only extremely infrequent contact, with their children as striving Dads morph into McDads and finally achieve deadbeat status in popular parlance, driven there by forces beyond their ability to counter.

In the family courts of England and Wales, 50% of cases addressing child contact involve allegations of domestic abuse, a frequency of allegation which is beyond credibility. This suggests that more than half the allegations are fraudulent and made for the advantage such allegations provide to the accuser in court.

The output from the MOJ's family justice review consisted of three documents: a 216 page final report, a 19 page implementation plan, and a 171 page literature review by Adrienne Barnett, (Ministry of Justice, 2020B). One cannot accuse Dr Barnett of being lazy; she has had a productive year, her latest being (Domestic abuse and private law children cases A literature review, 2020). I will not attempt a critique of this lengthy document lest I strain the readers' patience overmuch. It suffices to observe that the MOJ has seen fit to commission such an influential piece of research from a person with known partisan sympathies and a poststructuralist perspective on truth.

Allow me to regale you with some final quotes from Barnett's thesis which make clear how she views research.

"The task of research, according to a poststructuralist perspective, is to examine historically how knowledge (and in this context, dominant patriarchal knowledge) and truth in society is produced, to deconstruct the processes by which that knowledge is formed, and make visible the relations of power that give rise to discursive claims to truth." [Barnett here cites (May, 1993), (May, 2001)]

"Hesse-Biber and Leavy note that "many feminists openly question the viability and utility of neutral, value-free research methods and the positive concept of objectivity itself", in particular because quantitative research is based on and validates the 'masculinist' values of neutrality and 'objective detachment'." [Barnett here cites (Leavy, 2007)]

"...feminists question and render problematic the concepts of rationality, impartiality and objectivity by showing that these are historically specific and contingent generalisations embodying dominant values which, in the process, devalue those attributes associated with 'the feminine' such as 'unacceptable' emotions and desires." [Barnett cites (McNay, 1992)].

We can conclude, then, that Barnett is opposed to impartiality and objectivity, and rejects the utility of neutral research methods and quantitative research as being “masculinist”. This compounds Barnett’s other poststructuralist opinions exposed in the preceding section. Why, I am compelled to ask, would the MOJ commission empirical research from someone with such views on the nature of research? By doing so they have become complicit in the complete erasure from judicial policy of two major features of domestic abuse: the abuse of men by women, and the abuse of children by women, both of which are comparably frequent as the abuse perpetrated by men. This is the actual, real, empirical truth which is rendered invisible by Barnett’s poststructuralist discourses, which we may call, with less pretension, simply bias and prejudice.

CONCLUSION

Under Dr Barnett’s tutelage we have learnt that the world is constructed by whatever discourses are dominant. It is not as epistemologically deep as it appears. Actually, it exposes how restricted is the scope of the world in the minds of those who adopt this philosophy. Their world has shrunk to whatever they can persuade sufficient people to believe; their world has shrunk entirely to the exercise of power. Bias and misdirection cease to be bias and misdirection according to this outlook if no one that matters knows. Truth is what you get away with. It is convenient to espouse the poststructuralist edifice of verbiage only because it lends spurious legitimacy to deceit.

Who would wish to legitimise deceit? Would that be those who are genuinely disadvantaged, or those who are not but wish to appear so?

And who would be best placed to make use of suitable discourse to mould apparent reality? Would that be those who dominate the narrative by being the only voice within policy and legislative decision making – or those who are excluded from it?

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