

Childhood (re)materialized: bringing political-economy into the field

Jason Hart & Jo Boyden

Introduction

The decades between the 1870s and the 1930s witnessed profound transformation in the lives of children in North America and Western Europe. According to Viviana Zelizer during this period there emerged an ultimately hegemonic view of the young as “economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless’” (1985: 3). Immense practical changes in children’s lives were occurring at the same time. These changes did not, however, result simply from a shift in popular sentiment towards the young. For example, it was due to an array of factors – only one of which was growing public distaste – that working class children ceased to be employed in factory work and domestic service. Similarly, the economic dependence of middle-class children upon their parents was prolonged as a consequence of factors that included, but were not limited to, affect.. As Wanda Minge-Kalman noted “The nascent concern with education by all classes eventually rescued children from the factories and put them into schools” (1978: 460). However, full-time education became the norm at every social level not only because it was widely felt to be more appropriate for the newly sacralized child, but for reasons that were rooted in political and economic consideration. A skilled and disciplined labour force became the priority for industrialists, while for the poor education came to be seen as a means of avoiding exploitation and achieving economic advancement.

The shift that resulted in children from high-income countries becoming economically “useless” but emotionally “priceless” can only be comprehended through an analytical approach that integrates the socio-cultural with the political-economic. This essay is motivated by the conviction that Childhood Studies has, for the most part,

focused strongly on the former while paying insufficient attention to the latter. This is not only unfortunate for scholarship, it has also constrained the contribution of Childhood Studies to efforts aimed at enhancing the lives of children.

We begin by explaining the manner in which we deploy the notions of ‘political-economy’ and ‘neoliberal’: terms that are central to our analysis. We then offer an account of Childhood Studies, paying particular attention to the history of its emergence and the reasons for its primary interest in the socio-cultural domain. We end by outlining some of the theoretical and methodological work that we believe is needed for the integration of political-economy within Childhood Studies.

Laying out our terms

Political-Economy

Our employment of the notion of political-economy refers to two distinct but inter-related phenomena. Firstly, we are interested in political-economy *as a field of study concerned with the relationship between the exercise of power and the distribution of resources*. Of particular interest is the analysis of how power, applied to and operating through institutions of governance at local, national and supra-national levels, informs the material conditions and life chances of children. Such power should be understood as differentially distributed across humanity as a whole. In recent years considerable attention has been given to inequities in distribution along lines of gender, race / ethnicity, and (dis)ability. For us class is a further vital factor that both marks and mediates disparities in distribution between sections of the population. It is a necessary element within an intersectional approach that we consider essential for analysis of childhoods embracing socio-cultural and political-economic perspectives.

Following Nitzan and Bichler (2013) we see the core aim of elites not simply as accumulation but rather *differential* accumulation and thus power relative to direct competitors and to other sectors of society. Growth and high employment may benefit the general populace but, according to these two authors, it is during periods of stagnation and crisis when political-economic elites can increase their share of national income and thus augment their power. Their analysis of capitalism “as a mode of power” renders participation in the market (and hence society) as inherently a zero-sum game in which the aim is to gain relative advantage: in short to be a winner or at least to minimise loss. The implications of this for children’s lives and for childhoods are immense, as we shall explore below.

We are also mindful of the usage of ‘political-economy’ to refer to *a methodological approach foundational to a distinct field of study*. Thus, our suggestion that Childhood Studies, as a field, embraces political-economy relates both to the subject matter requiring attention and to the necessary mode of investigation. Political-economy analysis is inherently interdisciplinary and multi-scalar, bringing together, most particularly, economics, sociology and political science to consider the two-way relationship between action by capitalist elites and material outcomes.

The challenge posed by political-economy to Childhood Studies is to contextualize the domains of children’s everyday lives – family, school, work, leisure, etc. - within a larger system in which power is exercised in a highly asymmetric manner. Bronfenbrenner’s familiar ‘ecological model’ (1979) can be utilized as a framing device for such a purpose. This model conceives of ‘the child’ (problematically rendered in individualistic terms) at the centre of a series of nested and interdependent ‘systems’, some proximal to and some more distal from the young. Within the ‘microsystem’ are institutions closest to children that include immediate family, peer

groups, the neighbourhood, religious organisations and school, all of which directly impact them in multiple ways through routine exchanges and participation in close relationships and recurring activities. These institutions also affect children's lives through their interaction and influence on each other, such as when a child's school performance is affected by the involvement of volunteer teaching assistants from the local community. This interaction occurs at the level of the 'mesosystem'. 'Exosystem' refers to settings that children may not engage in directly but which nevertheless exert a strong influence on the micro-system – such as welfare services, or the parental workplace etc. Clearly, the content and working of the 'exosystem' may vary according to cultural context and particular circumstances. The 'macrosystem' is most distal from the young. Many elaborations of Bronfenbrenner's model place culture, media, and wider society here. A few of the numerous iterations explicitly mention economic conditions and political bodies.

Bronfenbrenner intended this model to indicate that children's lives unfold and are profoundly shaped by interacting systems and processes. However, the model has been subsequently invoked to reinforce normative assumptions around the primacy of the immediate and intimate in children's lives and the attenuated relationship between institutions of governance – through which elites exercise power - and the young. This ignores the evidence that macrosystems function consistently to affect all other systems. The more proximal systems are profoundly influenced by the actions of political-economic elites: from the food that the young eat to the curriculum that they study and the conditions in which they do so; from their access to health services and leisure facilities to the capacity of caregivers to provide effective nurturance.

Neoliberalism

The argument for embracing a clear focus upon political-economy within Childhood Studies is only strengthened by the changes wrought around the globe over the last forty or so years: changes that may be associated with the rise of neoliberalism. The ‘neoliberal era’ has witnessed the rapid and inexorable concentration of wealth and power in the hands of elites (Dumenil and Levy 2005: 9). As of mid 2017 the wealthiest 10% of the world’s adult population owned 88% of global assets (Credit Suisse, 2017). Key causes *and* consequences of this concentration of economic and political capital include constraints placed upon organized labour and depressed wage growth for all but those at the top, massive cuts to public spending, tax breaks for the wealthy, the loosening of regulations governing the activities of large multinational corporations and the growth of the tax avoidance industry.

We follow Wendy Brown by attending to neoliberalism as a rationality – “a peculiar form of reason” – that is reshaping state, society and the human subject (2015, 17). Brown has described the overarching nature of this change as the ““economization” of political life and of other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities” (Ibid).

She explains the process as follows:

“...neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities – even where money is not at issue – and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo oeconomicus*.” (p.31, emphasis in original)

Childhood should be considered as one of the domains potentially reshaped by the “model of the market”. This can be understood as a process of privatisation - in various meanings of the term. In one sense it entails reconfiguring children from a section of the population for which the nation or society bears a collective responsibility

to mere individuals who are the concern of their families. This goes hand-in-hand with the withdrawal of the state as provider of welfare and the transfer of services from the public to the private sector to be run according to market principles. Facilities particularly used by children such as libraries, youth clubs and leisure centres have been severely affected by this move. Writing prophetically in the mid-1980s Zelizer noted that: “The sacred child is... a private luxury; children in need of public support are treated unsentimentally, assisted only if the investment is justified in economic terms.” (1985: 216)

The reconfiguration of society in accordance with the model of the market also informs how children are apprehended. Earlier we argued that under neoliberal capitalism the goal is not growth or productivity but rather the defeat of competitors and other sections of society in order to claim a larger share of national income and thus augment one’s power relative to others. The pursuit of this aim has profound implications for children. It promotes radical individualism and renders community, exchange and mutuality as impediments to success in a market-place of winners and losers. Accordingly, childhood becomes the period for human capital formation wherein the principal aim is to develop towards maximum competitiveness. In neoliberal understanding citizenship is of little concern. What matters is for children to strive to become winners in the market place of work and other domains, including personal relationships (Brown, 2015). Parents, teachers and youth workers are made responsible for undertaking such investments and, as children grow towards adulthood, they bear increasing responsibility for self-investment.

Serious enquiry into childhood in contemporary society must, in our view, entail focus on the penetration of neoliberal rationality and the market into all aspects of life. In respect of children, this is needed, at the very least, to contextualize their

educational, work, familial and social lives. Yet, with some notable exceptions, scholars in Childhood Studies have shown little interest in bringing political-economy and consideration of class into their analysis. For this to change we need to understand the reasons for such reluctance.

Childhood Studies: a socio-cultural project

Countering the hegemony of developmental science

The field of Childhood Studies emerged in Western Europe and North America during the ascendancy of neoliberal rationality in the latter decades of the 20th Century and evolved in direct challenge to child development research. Seeking to identify the factors affecting children's progress towards adulthood, this latter field of enquiry experienced a huge surge in the 20th Century across medicine, psychology, and the developmental and human sciences, with neuroscience a more recent contributor. Its influence on the social sciences has been most evident in economics, which has harnessed the theory and research tools of developmental science towards identification of the determinants, pathways and outcomes of human capital formation. In the process, the field has become complicit in perpetuating neoliberal rationality, insofar as 'successful' development in children is defined in normative terms through cognitive and other outcomes that have been found to promote labour-market readiness, competitiveness and productivity.

Childhood Studies scholars were galvanized by concern about the positivism inherent in dominant approaches to child development. They were also disquieted by the fact that the empirical base of developmental research was largely confined to high-income countries in which only a minority of the world's population live, thus rendering claims of global applicability profoundly misleading (Bornstein et al., 2012). They asserted that childhood is fundamentally a construction shaped by specific socio-

cultural conditions in particular settings, with the consequence that the representations, experiences and competencies of children are highly variable across time and space. Through such a perspective, the diversity of childhoods around the globe became a valid field of enquiry in its own right, with emphasis on the contexts in which boys and girls live and operate, their everyday experiences and actions and their emic perspectives.

Moreover, Childhood Studies sought to diverge from the bulk of scholarship around child development by giving weight to the part children play in shaping not only their own lives but also the environments that they inhabit. Studies have revealed the many ways in which the young are “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.” (Prout and James, 1990:8; also Corsaro 1986; Solberg 1996). In the process, and in alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), a new ethic emerged that emphasized the authenticity of children’s voices as well as their right to participate to the greatest extent possible in all aspects of research.

Rejecting ‘Human Capital’

Child development research has been integral to work concerned with the formation of human capital, which seeks to provide insight into the ways that the young can be best prepared for their role in capitalist society and is thus orientated towards the future rather than the present. Rejection of this endeavour is paradigmatic for Childhood Studies. Jens Qvortrup’s insistence that the young be viewed as ‘human beings’ and not just as ‘human becomings’ (1985: 132) is perhaps the most frequently-cited articulation of this position. The argument against seeing the young in terms of what they will become is strongly moral in nature and is at the core of Childhood Studies scholars’

advocacy for children to be viewed as agentive social actors. However, critique of the future orientation of the human capital approach has served to foreclose attention to the potential impact upon children's lives of the larger project in which the conceptualization of childhood as a period for the formation of human capital was embedded. The aim of neoliberalism that children should become competitive in the market place profoundly shapes the domains of children's lives. This includes, for example, organized youth activity. Tania St Croix in her account of the impacts of changes in UK government policy makes the following observation:

“...success for a young person is not about enjoyment, ethics or living their lives for the 'here and now'; instead they should focus almost entirely on their individual future, with every decision a calculated move towards their 'outcomes'.” (2012:3)

In an era of neoliberal governance, children, as the rest of society, are expected to act as “self-investing capital that constantly attempts to enhance its market value.” (Rottenberg, 2017) Capitalism's concern with future viability and success is thus a vital force in the everyday lives of children. Yet Childhood Studies, in its rejection of the human capital approach on moral grounds, largely fails to engage critically with this force.

The Politics of Culture

Childhood Studies emerged as a field at the time when neoliberalism was fast becoming the dominant rationality of polity and economy around the globe. This was also the era that witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and, in consequence, the discrediting of Marxist political-economic formulations. For social scientists Marxist critique was over-deterministic, even anti-humanist, in its focus upon macro-level structural

analysis. Attention was given, instead, to individual agency, participation and the politics of identity. Childhood Studies reflected this mood, advocating for attention to and participation of children in a manner that echoed similar moves by liberal feminists. As with women, gay people and the previously colonized, children were seen as a ‘muted group’ that required recognition by society and polity (cf. Ardener, 1975; Hardman, 1973, Mayall, 1994).

Childhood Studies, as founded upon the theorisation of authors such as Prout, James, Jenks, Valentine, and others, largely side-stepped the materiality of childhood that might lead to consideration of political economy. Reflecting on his work a decade and a half earlier in promoting a new paradigm for the sociology of childhood Alan Prout acknowledged that:

“...[social constructionism] grants discourse (narrative, representation, symbolization...) a monopoly as the medium through which social life, and therefore childhood is constructed. Accounts of the socially constructed child always privilege discourse. Some versions are distinctly idealist about childhood while others are simply silent or vague about the material components of social life. At best there is an equivocal and uneasy evasiveness about materiality...”
(2005: 63)

The unease that Prout expresses here resonates with concerns that began to be expressed from the late 1990s about the dominant attention to the politics of identity and recognition. For Carl Boggs, for example, the focus on individual subjectivities was being bought at the cost of blinding ourselves to commonalities in the experience of disempowerment and impoverishment due to the workings of global capitalism. He noted that:

“There are two problems: privileging the “discursive field” over structural factors and preoccupation with localized micro concerns in such a way that the macro realm of state governance, corporate power, and global economy is diminished.”
(2000: 217)

Incipient Efforts to Attend to Political-Economy

In recent years a small number of scholars have, in different ways, brought together the study of children and childhood with an explicitly materialist perspective.¹ To the best of our knowledge, however, none of these has advocated explicitly for Childhood Studies to address its lack of attention to political-economy. Take, for example, Alison Watson’s book on *The Child in International Political Economy* (2009). This volume is concerned largely with encouraging scholars in the sub-discipline of International Political Economy (IPE) to treat children as “worthy of recognition” (p.91). The author draws directly upon key texts within Childhood Studies to advance her argument in favour of a “‘kindered’ IPE” through which “the equality of rights between adult and child” (Ibid) is promoted and “new vistas in traditional debates” within IPE might be opened up (p.90). We do not take issue with the aims or argument in this book. However, it leaves unexamined the converse benefits to Childhood Studies of embracing the focus and methodology of political economy. The examination by historians, including Hugh Cunningham (1995), Harry Hendrick (1997), and Viviana Zelizer (1985), of the interplay between the institution of childhood and social, political and economic forces over time, could serve as a guide to the ways that the socio-cultural may be integrated with the political-economic. However, this aspect of

¹ Contributions include Kent (1995); Stephens (1997); Levine (1999); Pupavac (2001); Ansell, (2005).

their work has generally been marginal to scholars bringing a sociological perspective to issues around children and childhood.

(Re)Materialising Childhood Studies

Focus

To be clear, we are not suggesting that emphasis upon the socio-cultural domain within Childhood Studies should be supplanted by attention to political-economy. Rather, we seek engagement with both. The importance of this integrated approach may be illustrated by the effort to understand patterns of non-participation in formal schooling. On one hand, there is a need to attend to the attitudes and behaviour of parents, teachers, community leaders and others who may encourage or obstruct children's participation. In the effort to comprehend access to and experience of schooling such enquiry is vital: potentially revealing, for example, patterns of discrimination that inhibit access, or perceptions of quality that inform the willingness to attend. This focus, however, is insufficient in itself. Also required is examination of such matters as the budgetary allocation to education and its impact upon quality, provision of transport and other vital infrastructure, employment opportunities for those who complete schooling, etc. These are issues determined by the 'system', itself shaped disproportionately by the agenda of elites. Education budgets may be redirected to other areas where well-placed individuals can gain profit, such as through military equipment (Feinstein, 2013). Or, it could be that state support is skewed in favour of particular geographical areas or specific populations of children with which the relatively powerful are aligned (Williams, 2016).

Challenging discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, while arguing for appreciation of children's agency and for the value of concentrating on their "voices" constitutes engagement in the "politics of recognition" (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). In the view of Berry Mayall "recognition of (children's) responsibilities may help raise their social status" (2002: 2). However, as Nancy Fraser has observed, "struggles for recognition occur in a world of exacerbated material inequality" (1997:11). A principal means towards the realisation of social and economic justice has to be redistribution (Fraser and Honneth, 2004).

Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's 2009 book *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone* indicates the impact of mal-distribution upon the young. These authors considered the relationship – at national level and, in the US, at state level - between income inequality and an index of health and social problems. These problems include several that directly affect the young: infant mortality, school dropout, bullying, teenage pregnancy, social immobility and obesity. There is not the space here to discuss in detail the explanation that Wilkinson and Pickett offer for the relationship between income inequality and the incidence of these and other problems. At the core of their argument, however, is the issue of societal hierarchy and the breakdown in social trust resulting from a high level of inequality. This loss of trust may have direct impacts upon children's lives – for example in constraining their movement and activities beyond the home out of fear of harm from strangers.

A focus upon the politics of redistribution is not simply a complement to the politics of recognition, however. It may also serve to rescue scholars of childhood from being co-opted. As Nancy Fraser has argued in relation to the experience of feminism:

"The turn to recognition dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that

wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social egalitarianism. Thus, feminists absolutized the critique of culture at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy.” (2009: 109)

As well as attending to redistribution (alongside recognition), we also need a consistent focus upon intersectionality. This entails consideration of children’s lives as shaped by factors that include gender, ethnicity, disability, and class. The last of these has been masked by the treatment of children as an undifferentiated group in socio-economic terms – even as a class in themselves (Oldman, 1994).

There may be several reasons why Childhood Studies scholars have paid relatively scant attention to the issue of class. These include the general antipathy towards class-based analysis following the end of the Cold War and the perceived collapse of communism, already mentioned. In respect of children, consideration of class raises uncomfortable issues that draw attention to differences in power between children. Moreover, children from relatively privileged families may exercise power over adults, for example domestic servants. Attention to classed difference thus potentially blurs the association of children, as a section of the population, with social marginalisation and lack of empowerment. This association has animated the field of Childhood Studies since its inception. Yet, in an era shaped by neoliberal rationality where the young are obliged to compete in a marketised economy and society of winners and losers, attention to classed difference amongst children has never been more vital.

The work of theory-building within Childhood Studies has been overwhelmingly undertaken by scholars from the ‘global North’, focusing often on

their own societies. By default, therefore, their efforts to shape the field around themes such as ‘agency’, ‘family’, ‘play’, ‘consumption’, ‘media’ have largely drawn upon experience in Western Europe and North America most particularly. While scholars from and / or working in the ‘global South’ have been welcomed their contribution has often been limited to descriptive accounts and to issues around child rights. The 2009 *Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (Qvortrup et. al.) clearly illustrates this division of labour.² Had those with extensive experience of the ‘global South’ played a greater role in theory-making it is conceivable that the materiality of childhood and of children’s might have figured far more.

Methodology

The concerted effort in Childhood Studies to promote a view of the young as agentic and as capable commentators on their own lives has coexisted with the contention that the young inhabit a “world”, “culture” or “community” separable from that of adults. For example, Prout and James state that “Children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.” (1990: 8). Lawrence Hirschfeld takes it further in arguing that:

“children...constitute themselves into semi-autonomous subcultures and as such can be as usefully explored by anthropologists as Senegalese street merchants in Marseille, Vietnamese rice farmers in Louisiana, or high-energy physicists at Lawrence Livermore” (2002:613)

² A similar observation about ‘global North orientation’ may be made of the foundational text *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* edited by James and Prout (1992).

This contention about children's (semi-)autonomous subcultures, taken together with the view of the young as agentive and as commentators on their own lives, has marginalized perspectives other than those of children. These two contentions have also had important implications for the methodology conventionally employed by researchers within the field of Childhood Studies. A particular hallmark has been the use of qualitative methodology relying on small samples and documentation of emic perspectives and the everyday. Such research has typically entailed a concentration on intimate relations and spheres of activity, such as peers, school or work colleagues, the family and household. Ethnographic fieldwork with significant participant-observation has been commonplace, while focus groups and, to a lesser extent, semi-structured interviews, have been undertaken as a principal method by researchers more pressed for time.

The young may offer profound and invaluable insights into the experience of children in their community and wider society. They may also articulate insights into local dynamics of power and wealth and how these affect their lives. However, they are unlikely to have access to the vantage point from which to locate such experience in relation to the exercise of elite power through institutions of governance at levels beyond the micro. Focusing on the experiences of children in isolation from attention to the larger structural forces therefore imposes particular limits on understanding of their lives. To illustrate we refer to a pilot study we undertook together in Sri Lanka in 2002 (Hart et.al, 2007). This research was focused on the impacts of civil war upon Tamil children roughly in the age range 8-15 living in a rebel-controlled area. One source of great concern that emerged from our interactions with children was snakes. Children spoke at length about their fears of snakes entering their homes at night and showed acute awareness of the high incidence of child mortality as a result of snake-

bite. However, they were not able to explain how this fear related to the specific conditions of their locale as produced by political-economic forces.

Through engagement with local NGO workers, with parents and local officials, we were able to comprehend the impact of actions by the warring parties (Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam [LTTE]). Programmes to contain the snake population and the creation of local clinics equipped with the necessary medicines had been curtailed or denied. Freedom of movement was also restricted. In large measure children were dying as a result of bites due to the unchecked number of snakes compounded by interminable delays at checkpoints and a ban on travel during curfews that often made it impossible to get to a clinic where an antidote might be administered in time. Understanding how and why fear of snakes was an important issue in children's lives it was necessary to attend not only to their experiences but also to the larger structural constraints and the calculations of warring elites that perpetuated such constraints.

An approach to research that serves to identify the linkages between phenomena at the micro, meso, exo and macro levels is, in our view, essential to the effort to embed a far stronger political-economy dimension within the field of Childhood Studies. In particular, the effort to understand the precise causal channels through which macro-level political-economic forces affect children's lives requires an approach that likely involves mixed-methods, that draws upon multiple data sources and that might entail longitudinal, multi-scalar and multi-sited study. We illustrate the particular benefits of these different elements through reference to three very different studies.

In their study of the impact of maternal migration on the physical growth and cognition of children in Peru, Javier Escobal and Eva Flores (2009) compared the children of non-migrant mothers with those whose mothers had migrated from areas affected by civil war and a third group whose mothers had migrated from communities not affected by conflict. The authors attended systematically to factors that the literature anticipates might influence children's outcomes – such as service access and parental income – that, in turn, may be linked to political-economic forces. These factors were considered in relation to mothers prior to, during and/or following migration in the context of armed conflict. The authors controlled for the characteristics of the mother preceding her first migration episode and the characteristics of the birthplace by introducing a series of variables, such as the mothers' age, years of education, and maternal language; they also included mother's height to proxy for genetic circumstances. In doing this, the authors attempted to parse out other factors that may have influenced child outcomes, in order to isolate the effect of the migration decision.

As may be expected, there were important differences between children from areas of high-intensity conflict and those from areas free from conflict, the latter having higher cognitive scores than the former. However, the study found that, overall, children of mothers who migrated fared better than those whose mothers had not, showing a significantly lower level of stunting and significantly higher levels of cognitive achievement.

By distinguishing the effects of maternal exposure to various environmental conditions, including armed conflict, the study reveals how macro-level political-economic processes play out directly in the lives of children. What remains unanswered and what can perhaps be best addressed through qualitative research is how more

specifically the mothers' very different experiences may have moderated their beliefs, practice, relationships and decision-making in ways that shape children's outcomes.

In making the case for interdisciplinary and multi-scalar research, we thus advocate for the integration of micro qualitative data based on children's perspectives with other data types and sources. Matching micro data with nationally-representative cross-sectional data, such as Demographic and Health Surveys, the Living Standards Measurement Study, administrative data or civil registration systems, can provide context for enquiry into children's experiences, perspectives and outcomes. Some nationally-representative data make it possible to disaggregate between groups of children on the basis of place of residence, household economic status, gender, ethnicity, religion, caste or other factors of social status, and thereby to reveal disparities in access to resources, infrastructure and services, together with associated outcomes in children. Qualitative evidence from a sub-sample of children can be used to interrogate these wider distinctions and explain the many implications for children's lives.

Long-term qualitative research with children and other respondents in the locality can help draw out wider processes that bear down on the young through repeated triangulation. For example, Cindi Katz (2001) documented the effects of government efforts to compel farmers to switch from subsistence farming to the production of cotton for the global market in Howa, a village in rural Sudan, over the course of fifteen years. Amongst numerous other effects, including the production of unprecedented local-level socio-economic disparities, Katz notes the disembedding of children's economic activity from their social relationships. In place of shepherding livestock in the company of peers – an activity that exhibited elements of both play and environmental learning – boys in Howa became increasingly involved in cash cropping

with adults: “activities that produced an income or saved household expenditures for newly commodified goods” (2001: 148). This had important consequences for their lives more broadly:

“If work and play are separated and children’s peer groups become settings for play alone, they are gradually isolated from the larger society caught up with work....If these conditions isolate the peer group, so, too, do they trivialize play as a “childish” activity in the eyes of adults. The conceptualization of play as a trivial and inessential activity consigned to inferior symbolic status because of its separation from work is surely part of the deracination of everyday life that capitalist “modernization” brings.” (2001: 148-19)

In this case, the changes prompted by a state-led endeavour to capitalize Sudan’s rural economy were, it seems, intensified by neoliberal rationality which instantiated the economization of sociality. Diverse aspects of everyday life became commodified to the point that “money came to define a growing number of relationships and exchanges, including those within families” (p.138).

Longitudinal, locally-based research of the kind conducted by Katz can give us a valuable picture on the direction of change and how such change is experienced, drawing into question the relationship between macro-level processes associated with the penetration of the global market and children’s everyday lives, including play. However, on its own such study may be limited in helping us understand the precise dynamics of causal pathways.

Multi-site research with diverse actors in interconnecting institutional structures, with shared discourses and procedures can be very effective at tracing specific routes through which particular political-economic influences touch children’s lives. For example, Neil Howard’s study (2017) of the policies and experience of ‘child

trafficking' in Benin involved interviews with numerous respondents from diverse governmental, inter-governmental, and non-governmental policy and practitioner organisations internationally, nationally and sub-nationally, as well as with a purposive sample of former and current migrant working children(mainly boys). Interviews with the child respondents were conducted in both sending communities in Benin and in the artisanal quarries in Abeokutu, Nigeria where they had migrated for work. In addition, the research tracked child protection policies and discourses as explicated globally, regionally and nationally in a multitude of conventions and protocols, as well as in agency documentation. Focusing on major organisational players, such as the ILO and UNICEF - both at global HQ and on the ground - and revealing how their vision and objectives were echoed by smaller local organisations, Howard exposes the relations of power operating within and between institutions from global to local level.

Howard found that while the dominant position in policy circles is to label children migrating for work as victims of trafficking, these young migrants and their communities did not see or experience the situation in such terms. Rather the movement of children for the purposes of work represented the continuation of a well-established economic and learning strategy in the context of rural poverty. Moreover, Howard's study pointed to the connection between the workings of global capitalism and the deepening of this poverty. US subsidies for its own cotton industry in the context of enforced free trade had undermined the cotton industry in Benin. The study concludes by pointing to the very real damage caused by abolitionist child-trafficking policies in contexts where child work is both a form of learning for the young, and a valuable contribution to the domestic economies of the rural poor. The making and implementation of such policy raises questions about agencies' tendency to frame the situation of children primarily in terms of socio-cultural factors (typically as 'harmful

traditional practices’) while paying insufficient attention to the impact of political-economic forces.

Conclusion

We began our essay with allusion to the changes for children in high-income countries during the last decades of the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries. One major element of such change was the ending of children’s large-scale involvement in paid labour. That the young became economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless’ was due to the interplay of factors that were technological, cultural, political, and economic in nature. By contrast many millions of children in low-income countries remain economically active, in some cases under highly exploitative conditions that put them at considerable risk of harm.

As a field Childhood Studies has aspired to improve the lives of the world’s young and with that goal in view has done much to document the perspectives of children exposed to diverse forms of marginalisation and exploitation. But if we are to help challenge such harm it is not sufficient to attend solely to experience and to local attitudes and behaviours. We must also address the larger forces that perpetuate poverty, inequality and lack of access to the services and resources that children themselves value. As scholars we need to develop the capability to situate our analyses of children’s lives and of childhood in relation to such phenomena as austerity economics, involvement in the globalised capitalist economy, war-making, and the capture of governance processes by powerful interests. Conversely, the innumerable accounts of diverse childhoods amassed over recent decades may provide a powerful basis to counter neoliberal rationality and the attempted naturalisation of children as self-investing entrepreneurs whose early years are primarily a preparation for competition in the marketplace. The requisite blending of ethnographic enquiry with

political-economic analysis of the conditions in which those lives unfold has the potential to challenge the status quo at many levels but will require us to rethink the dominant methodological and disciplinary bent of Childhood Studies. Failure to do so would be an act of negligence.

We write this essay in 2018 while witnessing the ascendancy of political leaders claiming to serve the interests of citizens, while they work harder even than their predecessors to shore up the wealth and power of elites. At such a moment reimagining Childhood Studies as a field focused both upon the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution has never been more necessary, nor perhaps more daunting.

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