

THE PARADOX OF CHILD LABOR AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In relating the child labor debate to the observed variety of children's work patterns, this review reveals the limits of current notions such as labor, gender, and exploitation in the analysis of this work. Particularly in the developing world, most work undertaken by children has for a long time been explained away as socialization, education, training, and play. Anthropology has helped disclose that age is used with gender as the justification for the value accorded to work. The low valuation of children's work translates not only in children's vulnerability in the labor market but, more importantly, in their exclusion from remunerated employment. I argue that current child labor policies, because they fail to address the exclusion of children from the production of value, reinforce paradoxically children's vulnerability to exploitation.

THE PARADOX OF CHILD LABOR

Irrespective of what children do and what they think of what they do, modern society sets children apart ideologically as a category of people excluded from the production of value. The dissociation of childhood from the performance of valued work is considered a yardstick of modernity, and a high incidence of child labor is considered a sign of underdevelopment. The problem with defining children's roles in this way, however, is that it denies their agency in the creation and negotiation of value. Illuminating the complexity of the work patterns of children in developing countries, recent anthropological research has begun to demonstrate the need to critically examine the relation between the condemnation of child labor on the one hand and children's everyday

work practice on the other. The emerging paradox is that the moral condemnation of child labor assumes that children's place in modern society must perforce be one of dependency and passivity. This denial of their capacity to legitimately act upon their environment by undertaking valuable work makes children altogether dependent upon entitlements guaranteed by the state. Yet we must question the state's role—as the evidence on growing child poverty caused by cuts in social spending has illuminated—in carrying out its mission.

This review is divided into three parts: (a) a discussion of the theoretical perspectives adopted by development theory as it has dealt with poverty and child labor, (b) an assessment of the contribution of anthropology to the child labor debate, and (c) a discussion of the need of future research based on the idea of work as one of the most critical domains in which poor children can contest and negotiate childhood. First, in the section on Approaches to Children's Work, I argue that from its inception the notion of child labor has been associated with factory work and hence was limited to Western countries. The interest in children's work in the developing world can be traced back to theories of socialization, a preoccupation with population growth, and unfair economic competition. The section on Children's Work and Anthropology probes the paradox of the market impinging upon locally accepted forms of child work without transforming it into "child labor." Here, I discuss how anthropologists have criticized the simplistic views of child labor espoused by Western development experts. Approaches to children's work undertaken from the anthropological perspective highlight the very complex interplay of gender and age in determining a child's work allocation. Third, in the section on The Negotiation of Childhood, I propose to enlarge the notion of children's exploitation to include the more mundane aspects of work. Finally, I outline the direction future research should take to enable us to understand not only how children's work is negotiated and acquires its meaning but children's own agency therein.

APPROACHES TO CHILDREN'S WORK

Recent concern with child labor draws on a shared understanding among development experts of how, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, Western industrial society began to eliminate through legislation the exploitation of children. However, historians still debate more deep-seated reasons for the nineteenth-century outcry in Western Europe and the United States against child labor, which is probably as old as childhood itself. For instance, Nardinelli (95) has questioned the assumption that this outcry was inspired, as some authors have argued (44, 117, 126), by the brutal treatment of children working in factories. Besides humanitarian reasons, Nardinelli argued that there was a desire to protect initiatives to mechanize the textile industry from the

uncontrolled competition of a labor force composed almost entirely of children. Another equally important reason was the fear of political instability created by a youthful working class not to be disciplined by the army, schools, or the church (84, 95, 127, 128). While some believe compulsory education was the single most important instrument leading to the elimination of child labor (44, 127), others have argued that changes in the perceived roles of children (126, 135) and the increase in family income (95, 116) played a more decisive role.

Progressive state legislation has marked the major steps of child labor abolition in the West. However, while this legislation defined child labor as waged work undertaken by a child under a certain age, it also established the borderline between morally desirable and pedagogically sensible activities on the one hand, and the exploitation of children on the other. While condemning the relatively uncommon forms of waged labor as exploitation, it sanctioned a broad spectrum of other activities, including housekeeping, child minding, helping adults for no pay on the family farm and in small shops, domestic service, street selling, running errands, delivering newspapers, seasonal work on farms, working as a trainee in a workshop, etc. In contrast with child labor, these activities were lauded for their socializing and training aspects (26, 126).

The distinction between harmful and suitable—if not desirable—work as defined by Western legislation has become the main frame of reference of most contemporary governmental and bureaucratic approaches to children's work. Many countries in the world have now either ratified or adopted modified versions of child labor legislation prepared and propagated by the International Labor Organization (ILO) (55, 57). The implications are far reaching. Legislation links child labor quite arbitrarily to work in the factory and excludes a wide range of nonfactory work. It therefore sanctifies unpaid work in the home or under parental supervision, regardless of its implications for the child. In the words of an ILO report: "We have no problem with the little girl who helps her mother with the housework or cooking, or the boy or girl who does unpaid work in a small family business....The same is true of those odd jobs that children may occasionally take on to earn a little pocket money to buy something they really want" (see 58a). Many of the odd jobs mentioned here, as in the case of helping on the family farm or in shops and hotels, though strictly not prohibited, are felt by both children and the public at large to be exploitative. Legislation also selects chronological age as the universal measure of biological and psychological maturity, and it rejects cultural and social meanings attached to local systems of age ranking (67). More specifically, it denies the value of an early introduction to artisanal crafts or traditional occupations that may be crucial in a child's socialization (see section on *The Negotiation of Childhood*). Finally, legislation condemns any work undertaken by a child for his/her own upkeep—with the notable exception of

work undertaken to obtain pocket money. The denial of gainful employment is the more paradoxical in that the family and the state often fail to provide children with what they need to lead a normal life (135). These are some of the reasons why the industrial countries, despite much lip service to the contrary, have not succeeded in eliminating all forms of child work (22, 51, 68, 69, 81, 133).

Given the factory origins of the notion of child labor, it is hardly surprising that children's work in the erstwhile colonies caused no concern. Most colonial administrations passed factory acts excluding children under 14 from the premises soon after they had been passed at home. However, these laws carried only a symbolic value: The colonies were merely seen as sources of cheap raw materials and semimanufactured goods produced by rural villagers, while the factory system of production was energetically discouraged. The administrations' main preoccupation was that the local rural population—men, women, and children—continue to find in the old forms of subsistence the means of surviving while delivering the agricultural goods necessary to maintain the colonial revenue (98, 129).

This may explain why in the West social activists expressed outrage about child labor at home, while anthropologists romanticized the work of rural children in the colonies as a form of socialization well adapted to the economic and social level of preindustrial society (78, 132; for a critique, see 54). Engrossed with the intricacies of age ranking and passage rites, anthropologists seldom hinted at what this meant in terms of work and services required by elders from youngsters (118). The high premium put on the solidarity of the extended family as the cornerstone of precapitalist society overshadowed the possibility of exploitation occurring within the family or the village.

This perception changed with the identification in postwar development theory of population growth as the main obstacle to the eradication of poverty in the new nations of the third world. Celebrated as an antidote to poverty during the colonial period, children's work contributions to the family economy came to be perceived as an indicator of poverty, if not its cause. In the 1960s and 1970s, a burgeoning literature on the "population explosion" tried to show that the fast-growing numbers of poor children—nonworkers with escalating expectations—were to be held responsible for consuming the developing world's scant resources (31, 34). These allegations often masked the fear that the mounting frustrations of youngsters would "fester into eruptions of violence and extremism" (77) and thereby threaten the stability of the postwar world order (82, 112). Large-scale foreign-funded research programs were introduced in high-fertility countries to induce poor couples to control births. However, resistance to birth control was unexpectedly staunch. By the mid-1970s, research began to provide clues that the poor desired a large family because children represented an important source of free labor (82). Mamdani's

seminal work on the importance of children's work contribution for the reproduction of the peasant household in the Green Revolution areas of the Punjab cast an entirely new light on high fertility by suggesting that India's peasants needed many children to meet their labor demands (71–73).

Mamdani's research inspired a fresh approach to children's work in terms of its utility to the peasant household. During the 1970s, anthropologists carried out extensive and painstaking time-allocation and family-budget studies to show that even young children were contributing to their own sustenance by undertaking a whole range of activities in the subsistence sphere of the peasant economy (53, 74, 89, 96, 131). The ensuing debate on the determinants of high fertility in peasant economies showed, however, that the claim that poor peasants' desire for children would be inspired by their value as workers was premature (25, 122–124, 130). Caldwell's work on Nigeria and India was particularly influential in mapping the wider setting of children's historical, social, and cultural roles (16–18). Research on intrahousehold relations also questioned the concept of the household as an unproblematic unit, highlighting the outspoken inequality that exists not only between males and females but between seniors and juniors (35, 39, 59, 110, 111). Another criticism of the "cost-benefit" analysis has been its exclusive focus on decision making at the level of the household; it ignores the larger context in which the actions of its members occur (46, 106, 125).

In spite of such criticism, the neoclassical belief that child labor is essentially a problem of household economics has continued to be espoused in the studies of child labor published under the auspices of national and international agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, and the ILO following the International Year of the Child in 1979 (7–9, 22, 44, 81, 93, 105). Similar views are expressed in the documents produced by the international charities devoted to the welfare of children, such as the International Catholic Bureau, Save the Children, Defence of Children International, Anti-Slavery International (for overviews, see 10, 14, 36). Typical of these publications is a moral preoccupation with abolition through legislation and a zealous belief in the desirability of extending Western childhood ideals to poor families worldwide. Their merit lies essentially in having staked out child labor as a new and legitimate field of global political and academic concern. As aptly put by Morice & Schlemmer, the continuous reference to (Western) moral values, however, all too often not only supplants scientific analysis but may at times mask its very need: The emerging picture is one of conceptual confusion, in which ill-grasped notions from diverse analytical fields are indiscriminately used (86). The most glaring confusion is undoubtedly the one between the moral oppression and the economic exploitation of children (86, 88, 97). Reference to broad and ahistorical causes of the oppression of children such as poverty, illiteracy, backwardness, greed, and cruelty fail to go beyond the mere descrip-

tion of oppression and ignore the historical and social conditioning of exploitation (107).

As a global solution to eliminate child labor, development experts are now proposing a standard based on the sanctity of the nuclear family on the one hand and the school on the other as the only legitimate spaces for growing up. If this becomes a universal standard, there is a danger of negating the worth of often precious mechanisms for survival, and penalizing or even criminalizing the ways the poor bring up their children (12, 24, 30). This criminalization is made more malevolent as modern economies increasingly display their unwillingness to protect poor children from the adverse effects of neoliberal trade policies (1, 23, 44, 90, 119).

CHILDREN'S WORK AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Children's lives have been a constant theme in anthropology. However, in-depth studies of their work remain few and have been inspired, as I argued, by a critical concern with the neoclassical approach to the value of children. Two main areas of research have elicited anthropologists' interest: the family context of work and the relation between socialization, work, and schooling.

One of the leading themes of economic anthropology has been the conceptualization of work and its cultural meanings. The growing numbers of publications on child labor in the developing world have invoked a renewed interest in the family context of work. Central to some of the most notable studies has been how children's work is constrained by hierarchies based on kinship, age, and gender, a constraint that results in its typically rural, flexible, and personalized character. Rather than a widespread form of exploitation, child employment is mostly limited by the free-labor requirement of families that is satisfied by giving children unremunerated and lowly valued tasks (21, 32, 76, 80, 104, 134).

Considering the low cost of children's labor, it is indeed surprising that employers do not avail themselves more fully of this phenomenal source of profit. Despite more than 100 million children in the age bracket 5 to 15 living in abject poverty in India, for example, a mere 16 million children are employed, the vast majority of whom are teenagers who work in agriculture. About 10% are employed by industries, largely producing substandard if not inferior products for the local market (48, 66, 98).

There is more and more evidence that poor children who are not employed perform crucial work, often in the domestic arena, in subsistence agriculture, and in the urban informal sector (20, 45, 74, 83, 85, 91, 98, 100, 104, 108). Theories explaining underdevelopment in terms of the persistence of pre-capitalist labor relations provide some clues about why these children are not employed (75, 79, 115). The crucial aspect of underdevelopment in these theories

is the unequal exchange realized in the market between goods produced in capitalist firms, where labor is valued according to its exchange value, and goods produced by the peasantry and the urban informal sector, where the use value of labor predominates. The latter group is paid only a fraction of its real cost because households are able to survive by pooling incomes from a variety of sources, undertaking subsistence activities and using the work of women and children to save on the costs of reproduction (125). The unpaid work of children in the domestic arena, which turns them into “inactives,” is seen as crucial for the developing world’s low labor cost rationality.

The reasons children are more likely than adults to be allotted unpaid work in agriculture or the household can be gauged by the work of feminist researchers that highlights how ideologies of gender and age interact to constrain, in particular, girls to perform unpaid domestic work (28, 33, 98, 101, 104, 110, 111, 134). The ideology of gender permits the persistence of an unequal system in which women are excluded from crucial economic and political activities and their positions of wives and mothers are associated with a lower status than men (33, 39, 60, 109). The valuation of girls’ work is so low that it has been “discovered” by feminist anthropologists making a conscious choice to include housework and child care in their definition of work (39, 59, 61, 110, 113). Girls are trained early to accept and internalize the feminine ideals of devotion to the family (6, 63). The role of caretaker of younger siblings has not only the practical advantage of freeing adult women for wage work, it also charges girls’ work with emotional gratifications that can make up for the lack of monetary rewards (70, 92).

Elson has argued that seniority explains why children’s work is largely valued as inferior: Inferiority is not only attached to the nature of the work but to the person who performs it as well. Poor children are not perceived as workers because what they do is submerged in the low status realm of the domestic (35). The effect of seniority is not limited to the control of children’s work within the nuclear family. Anthropologists have also uncovered how children’s work plays a cardinal role in the intricate and extensive kinship and pseudo-kinship patterns that are at the core of support systems in the developing world. While servicing the immediate household is young children’s mandatory task, poor children coming of age may also be sent to work as domestics and apprentices for wealthier kin (17, 65, 87, 108). For the parent-employer, this is a source of status and prestige (17). The widespread African practice of fostering the children of poorer (pseudo-)relatives is just one example of the intricate way family loyalty and socialization practices combine to shape how poor children are put to work. Another example is the practice among the poor in some areas of India of pledging their children’s work against a loan. Although the object of much negative publicity, the practice is seen by parents as a useful form of training, a source of security, and a way of

cutting household expenditures (45, 58, 98). Old crafts such as carpet weaving, embroidery, silk reeling, artisanal fishing, metal work, etc, lend themselves to protracted periods of apprenticeship in which a child is made to accept long hours of work and ill pay in the hope of becoming master (64, 88, 120). While often exacting, children may experience apprenticeship or living in another household as valuable, particularly if it helps them learn a trade or visit a school. Children's valuation of the practice is nevertheless ambiguous, and they may prefer employment to servicing their kin (44, 69, 98, 108, 114, 129).

There is a persistent belief, which finds its origins in the neoclassical approach, that schooling is the best antidote to child labor (44, 127). However, one consequence of the personalized character of children's work patterns is that this work is often combined with going to school. Reynolds' study of the Zambezi Valley describes how Tonga children need to work in subsistence agriculture while attending school simply to survive (104). Insecurity about the value of diplomas and marriage strategies are among the reasons girls in Lagos, Nigeria spend much out-of-school time acquiring street-trading skills (100). In Kerala, India, where attending school is mandatory, children spend much time earning cash for books, clothes, and food (99). Around the world children undertake all kinds of odd jobs, not only to help their families but to defray the fast-rising costs of schooling, be it for themselves or for a younger sibling (5, 11, 50, 67). However, children may also simply dislike school and prefer to work and earn cash instead (64, 129).

Although to some extent schools and work can coexist as separate arenas of childhood, schooling is changing the world orientation of both children and parents. Among the most critical effects is the lowering of birth rates, which has been explained by the nonavailability of girls for child care (19, 92). Another explanation, inspired by the neoclassical approach of balancing children's costs against the returns, is related to what Caldwell has called the "intergenerational flow of wealth." This notion suggests that schooling increases the costs of child rearing while reducing children's inclination to perform mandatory tasks for the circle of kin. The traditional flow of wealth from juniors to seniors is thus reversed (16). Perhaps of greater importance, schooling—despite the heavy sacrifices it may demand—provides children with a space in which they can identify with the parameters of modern childhood. It makes possible negotiations with elders for better clothes and food; time for school, homework, and recreation; and often payment for domestic work (98). Proponents of compulsory education have also argued that literate youngsters are likely to be more productive later in life than uneducated ones, who may have damaged their health by an early entrance into the labor market (127). For Purdy, schooling reinforces the useful learning imparted by parents at home and may, for some children, be the only useful form of learning (103).

Schools are also said to have a negative impact. Illness, lack of support at home, or heavy work make poor children's performance often inadequate and repetition and dropping out common. Competition in the classroom helps breed a sense of inferiority and personal failure in poor children, turning their work assignments into a source of shame. The high costs of schooling, including the need to look respectable in dress and appearance, incites poor children to engage in remunerative work, which contradicts the belief that compulsory education would work as an antidote to child labor (15, 44, 77, 127).

In the past few years, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with children have been encouraged to develop low-cost solutions to address the problem of child labor. The solutions are based on a combination of work and school and recognize the need of poor children to contribute to their own upkeep. The approach has gained support within the ILO, the organization that until recently was the most staunch defender of prohibition by legislation (10, 37, 43, 49, 56). The poor quality of the education imparted, the heavy demands of studying after work, and above all the fact that they leave untouched the unjust social system that perpetrates children's exploitation are among the most problematic aspects of the NGOs' interventions (13).

The articulation of gender, age, and kinship plays a cardinal role in the valuation of poor children's work and is instrumental in explaining why some work is condemned as unsuitable and some is lauded as salutary. Hierarchies based on gender, age, and kinship combine to define children's mandatory tasks as salutary work and condemn paid work. By legitimizing children's obligation to contribute to survival and denying them their right to seek personal gain, these hierarchies effectively constrain them to a position of inferiority within the family. It is then not so much their factory employment as their engagement in low-productivity and domestic tasks that defines the ubiquitous way poor children are exploited in today's developing world.

Anthropology has sought to explain the apparent inability of the market to avail itself more fully of the vast reservoir of cheap child labor by pointing out that the free-labor requirements of poor families are satisfied by giving children lowly valued tasks. This explanation questions child labor studies' conceptualization of the exploitation of poor children. Employment is clearly not the only nor the most important way children's work is exploited: Child work contributions to the family are instrumental to its subsistence and to the production of goods that reach the market at prices far below their labor value. The moral assumption that poor children's socialization should occur through the performance of nonmonetized work excludes this work from the same economic realm that includes child labor; it is as much a part of children's exploitation. This fact seriously questions the premises of modern childhood discussed in the next section.

THE NEGOTIATION OF CHILDHOOD

Irrespective of what they do and what they think about what they do, the mere fact of their being children sets children ideologically apart as a category of people excluded from the production of value. The dissociation of childhood from the performance of valued work has been increasingly considered a yardstick of modernity. International agencies and highly industrialized countries now turn this yardstick into a tool to condemn as backward and undemocratic those countries with a high incidence of child labor (14). The problem with this way of defining the ideal of childhood, however, is that it denies children's agency in the creation and negotiation of value.

The view that childhood precludes an association with monetary gain is an ideal of modern industrial society (27, 135). Historians highlight the bourgeois origins of this ideal and question its avowed universal validity not only across cultures but across distinctions of gender, ethnicity, and class (3, 4, 24, 30, 52). Some have argued that this ideal is threatened at the very core of capitalism and may be giving way to more diversified patterns of upbringing or even to the "disappearance of childhood" (38, 102). The current debate over children's rights is symptomatic of the discredit bourgeois notions of parental rights and childhood incompetence seem to have suffered (2, 41, 42, 103, 121). The exposure of child abuse in the Western media during the 1980s and 1990s has, in this line, been explained as a display of excessive anxiety sparked by the growing fragility of personal relationships in late-modern society that cannot but also affect childhood. Late-modern experiences of childhood suggest that the basic source of trust in society lies in the child. Advances in children's rights or media campaigns against child labor or sex tourism would point to a growing sanctity of the child in late modernity (62). This sanctity, however, is essentially symbolic and is contradicted by actual social and financial policies, as borne out by the harshness with which structural adjustment programs have hit poor children in developing countries and caused a marked increase in child mortality, morbidity, illiteracy, and labor (1, 23, 40, 44, 47, 90). Under these conditions it is no wonder that, as noted by Jenks, late-modern visions of childhood are now increasingly split between "futurity" and "nostalgia" (62).

As childhood becomes a contested domain the legitimacy of directing children into economically useless activities is losing ground (135). The need to direct children into these activities is linked to a system of parental authority and family discipline that was instrumental in preserving established bourgeois social order. The price of maintaining this order is high, because it requires, among other commitments, money to support the institutions at the basis of the childhood ideal, such as free education, cheap housing, free health care, sport and recreation facilities, family welfare and support services, etc.

Developing economies will unlikely be able to generate in the near future the social surplus that the maintenance of these institutions requires. As the neo-liberal critique of the welfare state gains popularity, wealthy economies also become reluctant to continue shouldering childhood institutions. It is interesting to note that with the retreat of the state, the market itself has begun more and more to address children as consumers, explicitly linking their status to the possession of expensive goods, thereby inducing poor children to seek self-esteem through paid work (129). Working children find themselves clashing with the childhood ideology that places a higher value on the performance of economically useless work. Although working for pay offers opportunities for self-respect, it also entails sacrificing childhood, which exposes children to the negative stereotyping attached to the loss of innocence this sacrifice is supposed to cause (8, 10, 14, 22, 44, 93).

Rethinking the paradoxical relation between neoliberal and global childhood ideology is one of the most promising areas for research. Research should especially seek to uncover how the need of poor children to realize self-esteem through paid work impinges upon the moral condemnation of child labor as one of the fundamental principles of modernity. In stark contrast with what happened in the nineteenth-century West, the future may very well see employers, parents, children, and the state disputing the legitimacy of this moral condemnation. Women, in particular, as they expose the construction of gender roles as instrumental in their discrimination in the labor market, are likely to be girls' foremost allies in contesting modern childhood's ideal of economic uselessness (39, 40). The ways children devise to create and negotiate the value of their work and how they invade structures of constraint based on seniority are other promising areas of future anthropological research. This type of research is even more relevant in that it may not only enrich our knowledge of children's agency but may prove seminal in understanding the process by which work acquires its meaning and is transformed into value.

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