Childhood

IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Karen Wells

Childhood in a Global Perspective

KAREN WELLS

polity

First published in 2009 by Polity Press

Reprinted 2010, 2012

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-3836-2 (hb)
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-3837-9 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 11.25/13pt Dante
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
MPG Books Group, UK

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

Childhood in a Global Perspective

For David Lawrence McKuur 1960–2006

Contents

1	**CHILDHOOD IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT**	1
	Introduction	1
	Is there a global form of childhood?	1
	The organization of the book	4
	The new social studies of childhood	4
	Governing childhood internationally	18
	Recommended further reading	24
2	**POLICY AND PRACTICE**	26
	Introduction	26
	Rescuing children: the history of child-saving	26
	From child-saving to child rights	29
	Children's rights: participation or protection?	30
	Responding to images of children	33
	From child-saving to child rights: helping those who help themselves	44
	Summary	46
	Recommended further reading	46
3	**RACE, CLASS AND GENDER**	48
	Introduction	48
	Gender	48
	Race and racism in the USA	56
	Racial classification, racial identification and mixed-parentage children	63
	The intersections of class, race, gender and age	66
	Conclusion	68
	Recommended further reading	69

4 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES 71
Introduction 71
The governance of the family 72
Children in public 79
Transnational adoption 86
Summary: the family in public 92
Recommended further reading 93

5 SCHOOL AND WORK 94
Introduction 94
Education and globalization 96
Working children 99
The impact of schools: schools as a moral technology 110
Summary 116
Recommended further reading 117

6 CHILDREN AND POLITICS 118
Introduction 118
Young political activists: children or youth? 119
School as a site of political mobilization 121
Political mobilization and generational conflict 133
Young moral guardians 137
Summary 138
Recommended further reading 139

7 CHILDREN AND YOUTH AT WAR 141
Introduction 141
Contemporary war 141
Failed states at war 144
Civil war in Africa 146
Why do children fight in wars? 149
Is war different when children are soldiers? 156
Working with war-affected children 160
Summary 163
Recommended further reading 164

8 RESCUING CHILDREN AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS 166
Introduction 166
What is social reproduction? 168
Rescuing children 172

The rights of cultures and the rights of children 178
Conclusion 183
Recommended further reading 185

Bibliography 186
Index 210

1

Childhood in a global context

Introduction

This book is about children and childhood in a global context. In it I connect children's experiences to concepts of childhood, drawing on research about children's lives across the globe. I show how concepts of childhood shape children's lives and how children, in turn, shape concepts of childhood. These concepts or ideas about what children should and should not do, of where children are safe and where they are at risk, and of where childhood begins and where it ends have been the central theme of the new social studies of childhood (Jenks 1996; Prout and James 1990; James, Jenks and Prout 1998). These studies have been important in advancing our understanding of how childhood is shaped by cultural and social practices and processes. However, with one or two exceptions, existing studies have focused on national contexts and have been dominated by accounts of North American and European childhoods. In an increasingly globalized world, a focus on national contexts has to be supplemented by an understanding of how local practices are impacted on by global processes and that *where* people live affects *how* they live. It is the task of this book to show that where children live affects what kinds of childhood they have and to explore how global processes and structures – especially the increasing influence of international law and international NGOs are reshaping childhood.

Is there a global form of childhood?

Childhood is socially constructed

The new social studies of childhood, whether from a historical, spatial or social perspective, have established that children's lives are shaped by the social and cultural expectations adults and their peers have of them in different times and places; what concept of childhood prevails in any specific

time or place is shaped by many factors external to a child. Even in a particular time and place, say the Southern states of America after the Civil War ended in 1865, what it meant to be a child depended, as it does now, on the complicated intersection of age with 'race', gender and class. Childhood is socially constructed, and children's lives are profoundly shaped by constructions of childhood – whether in conformity, resistance or reinvention. This is not to say of course that, if we could take a particular society and identify its model of childhood, all children's lives will measure up to what the model prescribes as a proper childhood.

Childhood has universal characteristics

Although childhood is socially constructed and therefore profoundly different expectations can be had of children depending on the society and culture of any specific time or place, childhood also has universal features because all children, by virtue of their immaturity, have similar needs and limitations. Infants are dependent on others for their physical care: for food, shelter, hygiene and safety. An abandoned infant cannot survive for very long. Children also need emotional attachment and, as with their physical care, how and who forms emotional bonds with the young child can be subject to a great deal of variation but the forming of strong emotional attachments to close caregivers is apparently a universal feature of human society. Of course the need for emotional attachment does not end with the end of childhood, but secure attachment seems to be very important, cross-culturally, for the child's wellbeing. If the infant's biological immaturity makes him dependent on others for his physical care, the child can also be considered as socially and culturally immature. Children may not be born as blank slates, but teaching young humans the whole range of cultural practices from how to eat their food to living ethically or morally is a shared concern of all human societies.

This is a material fact that places limits on how plastic or constructed early childhood can be. Nonetheless the limits that the infant's dependency places on the plasticity of childhood can be very broad. Europeans, for example, tend to think of the newborn child as being a 'tabula rasa'; sometimes the idea of the child as a blank slate might extend back to the unborn child's experiences, but in any case it is the child's sensory awareness (whether before or after she is born) that is the beginning of making marks on the blank slate of the child. This view contrasts very sharply with the widespread view in sub-Saharan Africa that infants remember the world they came from and indeed that, to stay in this world or even in a way to

become human, they have to forget this other life (Gottlieb 2004). Similarly, the infant has to be fed, but who feeds the infant will vary from culture to culture. In eighteenth-century Europe wet-nursing was a widespread and acceptable practice, but changing ideas about what the baby ingested with her mother's milk made the practice less acceptable. In Gottlieb's study any lactating woman may feed the child and the child will only be passed back to her mother if she refuses other women's milk.

Childhood is governed by international institutions and international law

A good deal of what is expected of children's primary caregivers and other individuals or institutions that also have responsibility for the child is codified in customary, religious or national law or ritual. In Islamic law, for example, the child is the responsibility of their mother until the age of seven when they become the responsibility of their father. In Jewish law the boy child should be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. National laws about children are concerned with establishing full entry into adulthood, which is generally preceded by the acquisition of responsibilities or rights (e.g. criminal liability; sexual consent; hours and places of work; compulsory schooling) at different ages. Increasingly the Convention on the Rights of the Child is being incorporated into national law, changing the legal definitions of childhood as well as establishing in law rights and responsibilities that may be at odds with socially or culturally prevalent models of childhood. In tandem with the CRC, international agencies translate international law into local practice.

Childhood is shaped by both the local and the global

In one sense then history and social studies suggest that there cannot be a global form of childhood; on the other hand children and therefore childhood do have universal characteristics. Additionally, there is a presumption that it is the responsibility of adults to care for children, in culturally sanctioned ways. Finally, there is now a body of law and a group of international actors – intergovernmental, non-governmental and private – that is based on the presumption that childhood can be governed at a global level. One way of resolving the question of whether there can be a global form of childhood is by thinking of the global level, including international law and international actors but also global media, economic flows, war and politics, as a structure that shapes childhood at the local level. Thought of in this way the global becomes one of several structures – others would

include the family, school and work – that shape the lives of children and concepts of childhood in any specific socio-cultural setting.

The organization of the book

The aim of this book is to examine this intersection between the local and the global by exploring how global processes and structures shape childhood in different domains of children's lives and how in turn children have actively tried, and sometimes succeeded, in remaking ideas about childhood. This book is structured around the argument that a particular model of childhood, one that originates in contemporary Western ideas about what it means to be human and what differentiates children from adults, is being globalized through international instruments. This model of childhood constructs healthy childhood as one that orientates the child towards independence rather than interdependence, towards school-based rather than work-based learning, and separates them from the wider forces of politics, economy and society. I call this model of childhood the 'neo-liberal model' because of the compatibility between liberal ideas that value independence, rational choice and autonomy, and the concept of childhood inscribed in this model.

In the rest of this chapter I introduce the models that are being used to theorize the experience of children and the concept of childhood in the broad field of social studies. I then summarize the key international legal instruments that are central to how dominant ideas about childhood get circulated globally. In the final section I explore how the insistence of social studies that children's lives and concepts of childhood are practised in different ways in different times and spaces can be reconciled with the attempts of international law and NGOs to produce a universal child.

The new social studies of childhood

The new social studies of childhood are a catch-all term for research from different disciplines in the social sciences and humanities that has put children and childhood at the centre of its concerns. These new social studies are united by their interest in children's social agency, and their recognition that children are active participants in society and not passive subjects of social processes. In the following sections I discuss the most important contributions to the new social studies of childhood in three disciplines: history, geography and sociology. I have framed the discussion around the topic of 'What is a child?' This may seem like a very simple question, but where

societies set the boundaries of the beginning and end of childhood, how children are raised, and what children themselves think about their place in society, are complex questions that have been answered in many different ways in different times and places shaped by wider changes in society. This chapter looks at what studies in history, sociology and geography have contributed to our understanding of how the question 'What is a child?' has been answered by societies, historically and in the contemporary world.

History of childhood

In 1960 Philippe Aries published his seminal study *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime.* This book, first published in English in 1962 as *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life*, has been the reference point for the debate on whether the concept of childhood is an invention of the modern period. Aries' argument was essentially that as soon as children left the dependent state of early childhood there was no concept of children as a separate category of people requiring special or distinctive treatment from adults. Children in the Middle Ages in Europe, he argues, were treated like small adults and were immersed in all aspects of social and working life and were not accorded any special protection, rights or responsibilities. Aries' work has been staunchly criticized by historians for the inferences that he drew from his sources (Pollock 1983). Those sources, mostly analysis of images of children in medieval portraiture, depicted children as small versions of adults. In these pictures, Aries claims, children are invariably wearing the same clothes as adults, without any of the stylized features – chubbiness, large eyes, body–head ratios, smiling faces, small hands – that later artists used to depict children as different kinds of people from adults. Aries infers from this difference in how children are depicted that in the earlier period there was no such thing as childhood.

Historians have taken issue both with the limited sources that Aries relies on and the inferences that he draws from these sources (Vann 1982). Portraiture was expensive and the people who commissioned portraits of their families or themselves were a small elite whose attitudes to childhood and, for the children, experience of childhood were likely to be very different from that of the general population. Portraits are also highly stylized and use special conventions, so that how children are portrayed in these paintings cannot necessarily be taken as an indication of their experience of everyday life.

Despite the lively debate about Aries' work the central contention of *Centuries of Childhood* that the attitudes, sensibilities and experiences that

we now think of as immanent to childhood are an invention of the modern period is widely accepted by historians and social scientists. In their introduction to the important collection of papers on historical research into American childhood, Hawes and Hiner comment that 'Aries has been justly criticised for his selective and sometimes uncritical use of evidence, but no one has successfully challenged his essential point that childhood is not an immutable stage of life, free from the influence of historical change' (Hawes and Hiner 1985: 3). Since Aries a steady flow of historical accounts of childhood has been produced in North America and Europe, and there has been renewed interest in the history of childhood by historians of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is these regional studies that I will now discuss.

Historical studies of American childhood

Although Aries' *Centuries of Childhood* was first published in English in 1962, it was not for another twenty years that the history of childhood became a major theme of historical studies of American society. Despite the relative paucity of historical work on childhood in the 1960s and 1970s some key texts were published including Robert Bremmer's three-volume collection of sources, *Children and Youth in America* (1971), and Joseph F. Kett's *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the present* (1977). Since the mid 1980s the new interest in children's studies across the social sciences and the humanities has stimulated the publication of books exploring the experience of childhood at different points in history, as well as the experiences of groups of children. Joseph Hawes and Ray Hiner published their edited collection on the history of American childhood in 1985. This collection is an invaluable source that brings together in one volume chapters that review the historiography of childhood and provide an outline of the conditions of childhood in colonial North America and the United States from the seventeenth through to the third quarter of the twentieth century. Taken together the chapters in this book tell a now familiar story in which children's lives become less harsh, more sheltered and possibly more cherished as the centuries unfold. However, this picture is complicated by the acknowledgement of how race, class, gender and geography impacted on children's lives and on expectations of childhood held by both children and adults.

A decade after the publication of *American Childhood* Hawes and Hiner edited the Twayne's History of American Childhood series, which has published books on child-rearing in the period from the Revolution to the Civil War (Reinier 1996), on how the Civil War and industrialization shaped the experience of childhood (Clement 1997), on the impact of Progressive Era

reforms on children (Macleod 1998), and on how children experienced the interwar years (Hawes 1997).

Reinier uses archival sources to trace what she argues is a shift in child-rearing from authoritarian, patriarchal discipline to the management and guidance of 'malleable' children. This shift in ideals of child-rearing was uneven in its impact, and Reinier shows that poor and enslaved children's labour provided the capital accumulation on which middle-class children's education and consumption depended. Clement's study also picks up this theme of the differentiation of childhood. Her main argument is that industrialization and civil war sharpened differences between the experience of working-class and middle-class children and between African American and European American children. Macleod's study continues the chronology of American childhood, covering the period 1890–1920. Macleod's claim is that the hardening of class differences in experiences of childhood did not diminish in the Progressive Reform era. Indeed he contends that the ideal of a protected childhood stigmatized parents who were unable to protect their children as well as those children who resisted increased protection because it diminished their freedom. Hawes's study of the interwar years is good on the role that the new sciences of childhood played in the formation of our idea of modern childhood. Sallee's *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South* (2004) also points to how the emerging concept of protected childhood was used to deepen racialized exclusion in campaigns that mobilized support for the abolition of child labour around the idea that it undermined white power and childhood for white children to be working.

The unevenness of the shift to protected or sheltered childhoods draws attention to the need for multiple histories that describe and illuminate how the experience of childhood has been shaped by race, class, gender and region. There is a small body of work on the history of African American, immigrant and working-class childhoods, as well as references to their experiences in general histories. Wilma King's *African American Childhoods* (2005) is a useful collection of essays on different aspects of African American childhood from slavery through to the civil rights era. It explores different aspects of children's lives in this period including slavery, education and violence. Many of the chapters focus on minority experiences of African American childhood – there are chapters on African American slave-owners and on African American families categorized as Native American for school attendance. While this is very interesting there is yet to be a comprehensive history of the experience of the majority of African American children in any era of American history. Steven Mintz

has a chapter in his *Huck's Raft* on growing up in bondage. In *Growing up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* Jennifer Ritterhouse (2006) examines how the determination of most white adults to maintain racial inequality after the Civil War shaped the childhood experiences and sensibilities of black and white children.

Ritterhouse's book makes extensive use of archival interviews and biographies of adults looking back on their childhood. This illustrates some of the problems with constructing histories of childhood: children leave few written records, and those that do tend to be children of elite groups. Despite the limitations of the sources and the focus on relations between black and white children, *Growing up Jim Crow* rounds out the experience of African American childhood after emancipation. A growing literature on children's involvement in the desegregation of schools and civil rights movement has also added to our understanding of childhood and the agency that children bring to bear on their lives in very difficult circumstances (King 2005: 155–68; de Schweinitz 2004).

Latin American childhood

In his introduction to *Minor Omissions*, an edited collection of essays on the history of Latin American childhood spanning the seventeenth to the twentieth century, Tobias Hecht cites del Priore's *Historia das criancas no Brasil* (1999) as 'the most ambitious – and successful – attempt to deal with children as part of a national history in Latin America' (2002: 9). Other than del Priore's volume, which is only available in Portuguese, the history of Latin American childhood is less developed than that of North American childhoods (Hecht 1999: 3; Kuznesof 2005: 859). The central focus of Latin American history has been on family structures, with Freyre's 1933 (1963) account of family life on a sixteenth-century Brazilian sugar plantation remaining a keystone of the literature. His 'vivid portrait made it clear the Portuguese family was the dominant institution in Brazil for colonization, government, education, maintenance of order and economic investment' (Kuznesof 2005: 862). The North American history of childhood forms part of a narrative of general progress and improvement, tempered by increased differentiation by 'race' and class of children's experiences. This is not the case for Latin American history where the themes that preoccupy historians of childhood continue to be the focus of the contemporary sociology of Latin American childhood. *Minor Omissions*, for example, has chapters on abandoned children and the structure of the family, criminal children, children and urban disorder, the child-saving movement, the impact of war on children, the practice of informal fostering, or 'child-circulation', amongst

poor families, and street children. Each of these, especially street children (Guy 2002), child-circulation, family structure, and conflict (Peterson and Read 2002), remain core themes of the Latin American sociology of childhood.

Histories of African childhood

What we know of children's experiences and society's concepts of childhood in the history of Africa is very limited. In *The Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society* (Fass 2003) there is only one entry on the continent, the entry for South Africa. There are no general surveys that form part of a coherent narrative of children's worlds in Africa as there is for North American and European history. With the exception of *East African Childhood: Three Versions* (Fox 1967), there are no readily available sources that attempt to recover the voice of the African child. The contributors to *East African Childhood* give a vivid picture of early childhood in colonial East Africa. The emphasis here is on the child's feelings about the child's world and, although they are written by adults in a rather stylized narrative, this is an invaluable collection of memoirs. More recently the biography of his boyhood in turn-of-the-century Ghana by the Asante social scientist T. E. Kyei (2001) has made an important contribution to our understanding of colonial African childhood. These memoirs, and other more literary memoirs by both African and European adults remembering their African childhoods, aside, most of the rather small historiography of African childhood is focused on child labour.

The emerging literature on African child labour (Swai 1979; Chirwa 1993; Hansen 1990) shows how important African child labour was to the processes of capital accumulation for white farmers and the (colonial) state in East and Southern Africa. Beverley Grier's 2006 *Invisible Hands: Child Labor and the State in Colonial Zimbabwe* is the first book-length study of the history of child labour in an African country. Grier's seminal contribution to the historiography of African childhood shows how African children 'struggled to shape the circumstances of their own lives and . . ., in the process, helped to shape the history of the colony' (2006: 2).

An organizing theme of Grier's book is that childhood in Zimbabwe was a racialized concept that meant that the lives of black children and white children and expectations placed on them by the colonial state, white farmers, and their families were entirely shaped by racist ideology. In the areas of significant white settlement childhood was 'racially based, with the childhood of settlers being organized in radically different ways from the childhood of Africans' (Grier 2006: 18). This theme is also at the heart of