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Reconfiguring Childhood

Boys and Girls Growing Up Global

BY CINDI KATZ

CHILDREN ARE A SPUR, A COMMITMENT, A WAY OF IMAGINING the future—but all too often these sorts of phrases just rattle around a vacuum, their utterance the beginning and end of the commitment. We emphasize “the best interests of the child,” but this gloss provides a moral imperative to all manner of uncompleted projects and unfulfilled policies. Likewise, the use of children’s images or presence in public forums of all types gives a patina of honorableness to practices and plans that never actually make good on the promissory note of childhood. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit is a notable example. Such saccharine calls to futurity often bypass the presents and presence of flesh-and-blood children. Actual boys and girls, of course, live in the sedimented residues of the past, their life chances worked out—and mired—in particular historical geographies and political economies that are not always accommodating to their forging livable futures. At best, these geographies are shifting and uneven. Even the most local circumstances—conditions of the body, the home, the neighborhood—are interstitial with processes at larger scales. The imperatives of capitalist-driven “globalization,” for instance, alter the terrains of children and childhood, rendering the previously taken-for-granted up for grabs as commitments to particular places and paths of social reproduction are wrenched. I’ve focused much of my research on these altered terrains and their consequences for children coming of age in vastly different places, most notably

rural Sudan and the urban U.S., in particular central and East Harlem. The common experiences of young people in both places brought rejigging the practices and commitments of social reproduction, and the non-coincident ways that children were not learning what they probably would need to know as they faced the shifting circumstances of capitalist globalism, compel me to argue that “globalization” must be made sensible at the scale of children’s everyday lives if it is to be understood at all. My experiences in the arid lands of Sudan and the streets of New York lead me to ask what these processes may mean for Latin American children, whether in sprawling São Paulo or the Chilean desert.

These concerns have led me to projects that address children’s everyday lives and prospects in the transformed political economic landscapes that result from global economic restructuring. But they also have provoked me to think about how large scale political economic, cultural, and social changes have reworked childhood itself and made its various figures recognizable to one another. The consequences of these shifts open up a number of arenas for political engagement. Childhood and the experience of being a child are, of course, historically and geographically contingent. Globalization reconfigures childhood and what it means to be a child by reordering and rescaling relationships between production and reproduction, altering the spaces of everyday life and reconstituting



Left: a child works in the Mexico City post office; right: children enjoy ice cream in a Chilean mall.

geographies as certain places are brought closer together while others are hurled away. Different figures of the “global child” emerge in these spaces and help to form their material social life.

The child worker is one such figure, and it is the very processes of globalization that make this child sensible to people in the global north, as mediated processes of exchange force ‘us’ to reckon with child workers as instrumental to ‘our’ comforts. This recognition has galvanized an energetic anti-sweatshop movement in some quarters, provoking a response from some producers dependent upon child labor. A number of multinational corporations have raised compensation rates for all workers, improved their (minimal) standards for employment, and established schools and other facilities for child workers. Yet despite good intentions, much of this movement is misguided. It misses an essential point. If these children did not work, they and their families might go hungry. In the North we tend to think that if children did not work, they would go to school. In most cases, that’s simply not true. The expenses of schooling, of uniforms, of the loss of children’s household work often make formal education too costly even when children do not work outside their homes. Movements to change the horrible truth that ‘our’ comforts rely upon ‘their’ work need to work a broader ground than an opposition to sweatshops or child labor alone allows, important though such imperatives might be.

Another figure of the global child that arouses far less apparent concern, is the child-consumer. This child is as much a part of contemporary processes of global change as the child-worker and the two are not easily separated. The literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recently added another global child to the picture, the child-investor, who likewise provokes little anxiety in the (Northern) global imaginary. Why, she asks, does only the child-worker trouble our imaginations and unsettle received notions of childhood? If, indeed, childhood is not a time of life that is sacrosanct from the market, then shouldn’t all children have the right to ‘get a piece of the action’? Without confusing the vast differences between children born to substantial stock portfolios and those with few means of economic survival apart from their early employment, it is important to recognize the ties that bind them in order to figure out political strategies capable of redressing these contradictory relationships. The child consumer is, of course, one of the links. Children are not only a huge and growing “market niche” in the global North, they are increasingly recognized and hailed as influencing household consumption choices, even for such things as automobiles and other consumer durables.

It is perhaps not so new that children with significant market clout coexist with child-workers on the uneven and contradictory terrain of capitalist globality. Some kids insist on Nikes and oth-



Left: boy in door; right: a Latina girl in Boston helps her mother at Haymarket.

ers make them. But the techno-cultural circumstances of contemporary globalization have the capacity to render child-consumers, child-workers and child-investors intelligible to one another, at once heightening the contradictions but making possible a politics that would embrace them all. The complex and non-innocent integrations between and among globalized children make clear what is at stake in the reworkings of childhood associated with contemporary global economic restructuring. Such integrations demand a geographically lithe political imagination if they are to be confronted and redressed. Instead of bringing children of every color together for the palliative politics of globalony, why not spend that money and time in really exposing children of vastly different circumstances to one another's taken-for-granted worlds *and* the circuits through which they—the worlds and the children—are connected? Young people who get to breach the thin lines that separate privilege and poverty or the ugly glue that binds children's production and consumption might develop political imaginations that cut through their unseemly contradictions. Such exposures have worked at a much smaller scale in various participatory and exchange projects involving children and young people, such as those by Roger Hart and Sharon Sutton.

If the potent contradictions raised by child workers, consumers, and investors operating in a more tightly bound global economy and emporium call forth a novel transnational politics with interesting implications for and from Latin America, so too do the concerns raised by childhood's reworking as capitalist production goes global. With the globalization of production, an aura of placelessness frequently unhinges historical relationships between production and social reproduction. These shifts enable producers to jettison former commitments to place and the reproduction of any particular labor force while drawing upon workers nurtured and educated a range of geographies. Reneging on place-based commitments to the social wage goads neoliberal imperatives of tax

revolt and privatization. As public support for social welfare, education, housing, health care, and public space withers, children's presents and futures hang in the balance. Insisting on the importance of social reproduction as a metric for understanding global economic restructuring revalues and reimagines globalization in registers much more significant and vibrant than those associated with the formal economy and its tedious institutions. It also puts children at globalization's heart. Rendering the toll of globalization visceral in this way signals how it might be reconfigured by those it is most likely to strand. Young people's experiences of being deskilled or ineffectively prepared for the (limited) employment possibilities that await them in places as different as New York City and rural Sudan, but also in the Chapare under the strictures of anti-coca forces or in structurally adjusted Buenos Aires and elsewhere, often have striking resonances. Their sense of being marooned in an ever more vivid and tightly bound global economy might propel a transnational politics that works across these odd common grounds. Elsewhere I have imagined these transnational connections as "counter-topographies" of globalization, and tried to work out "contour lines" that link discrete places by virtue of a specific relationship to particular effects of global economic restructuring such as young people's deskilling or militarization.

While these spatialized politics gesture towards the connections among disparate children—a project crucial to countering capitalist globalism—what of the particularities, differences, and disjunctures around childhood and its reworking? Here I want to focus on two interrelated phenomena: the expansion and constriction of the spaces of childhood and youth, and the scramble to produce young people who might make it in the unsteady and uneven historical geographies of neoliberal capitalism. My research in Sudan and on contemporary childhood in the U.S. points to divergent strategies, and I wonder what other approaches to 'making it' might be found in Latin America. In Sudan the physical horizons of chil-

dren's everyday lives—already more open than in the urban U.S.—expanded in response to the changes brought about by 'development;' while in the U.S. the zealous protection of children has become engulfing since the 1970s when discourses of fear became more pronounced in the media and public imaginary. If in the U.S. the degradation of the public spaces of childhood—among other things—has tended to reinforce restrictions in children's spatial range, in Sudan the environmental degradation associated with agricultural development propelled the expansion of children's everyday geographies as they went further afield for various resources.

In a similar vein, as the Sudanese children came of age, it was increasingly apparent that to be viable in the rural environment required and tapped into a sprawling geography simply to stay in place. This is not unlike what is happening in much of Latin America and the Caribbean. Through a process I refer to as 'time-space expansion,' young people in rural Sudan were able to draw on the knowledge they had acquired in childhood to farm, tend animals, and engage in forestry, but these activities were feasible only through geographical extension, and increasingly had to be complemented by non-agricultural work in urban areas or overseas. But geographical extension was not the only means of meeting the changed landscape of 'development.' Within one generation, I also found a phenomenal shift in the relationship to formal education as evidence mounted that the political ecologies and land tenure arrangements associated with state-sponsored, multilaterally-funded 'agricultural development' would not absorb most young people coming of age. Between 1980 and 1995, primary school enrollment in the village where I worked increased 75% for boys and an astonishing 1000% for girls 7-12 years old. As traditional bets on the future wore thin, the village leadership devised a number of self-

Globalization reconfigures childhood and what it means to be a child by altering the spaces of everyday life.

help initiatives to increase school enrollment and attendance, with particular sensitivity to girls' education. In 1983, they provided piped water to help free girls' labor time, and after a few years hired women teachers and constructed separate classrooms for girls. By 1995 a secondary school was under construction in the village to allow a greater number of boys and girls to be educated without short-changing their families of their labor. Each of these processes suggest the production of more flexible and diversely skilled young people. Their engagements with the harsh terrain of structurally adjusted and war-divided Sudan might yet be frustrating and draining, but the resilience of their practices together with the sorts of strategies through which the local population reworked the conditions of everyday life were impressive; all the more so in the face of the sort of structural problems that characterized Sudan.

In the U.S., on the other hand, at least among the bourgeoisie, the new terms of neoliberalism and its 'lean, mean' political economics seem to have called forth a devotion to producing specialized children ready for niche marketing. This pattern can also be seen in urbanized, middle-class Latin American families. Parents and others fearful of the limited horizons of an increasingly globalized capitalism seem to almost commodify their children, tooling them to fit into a specialized place in a system with fewer and fewer guarantees, even for

relatively privileged families. A huge number of strange but increasingly normalized things accompany and betray this anxiety. Among them are an over-protection of children so that the space-time of their lives is scheduled, surveilled, and geared to specific outcomes rather than the intrinsic pleasures traditionally associated with childhood. Another effect of these concerns is witnessed in the excessive parental concern with preparation for all of the imagined hurdles of growing up so that the disciplining of pregnant women is now a matter of course in the U.S., but increasingly so is the provision of pre-natal and neonatal intellectual stimulation through the acquisition of a battery of specialized toys and other products. These sorts of practices are often accompanied by heightened concern for securing a place in the 'best' pre-schools and schools, and making sure that children are enrolled in specialized classes and competitive in sports. The long march to Harvard seems to be increasingly secured in the over-scheduling of children and the narrowed gauge of their free time. Of course, these concerns are class specific and overdrawn, but these sorts of practices are becoming the ether of contemporary childhood in the U.S. Not only do they have tremendous consequences for the children they are meant to protect and support, but the evidence suggests that they are oppressive to parents who feel they must conform to them or risk their children's future chances.

The childhoods associated with these divergent responses to the chilling effects of capitalist globalism in the U.S. and Sudan are wildly different, as are their customary geographies. Where in Sudan producing the flexible flyers of globalism occurs in and draws upon an expanded spatiality, the U.S. niche filler grows up cosseted in the shrinking time-spaces of over-scheduling and parental hyper-vigilance. Of course these differences of nation are mediated by class, race and gender, often creating common grounds of experience—and

concern—across disparate geographies.

Growing up global, whether in the privileged enclaves of Caracas, the barrios of Bogotá, the mountains of Peru, or as a Poblano in East Harlem or along the U.S.-

Mexico border, commands a reconfiguring of childhood and its imagined horizons. The subjects of this reworking—kids who make their parents laugh, worry, and dream—get to know the world and their place in it in the mundane spaces of their everyday lives. Countering the erosive effects of capitalist globalism on these spaces demands actions that at a minimum produce livable and survivable environments at all scales. More ambitiously, it calls for spaces that promote learning, cooperation, self and mutual respect, creativity, and the testing of limits in ways that are enabling rather than threatening, open to difference rather than hardened against it, and secure rather than surveilled. In the interests of truly social reproduction and the production of a socially just and vibrant world, the spaces of children's becoming (adults) must be made to foster their agency as producers of culture rather than as recipients of its debris.

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