

REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

Childhood Redux

Jens Qvortrup, William A. Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig, *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 452 pp. \$US 161.50 hardcover (978-0-230-53260-1)

Karen Wells, *Childhood in Global Perspective*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009, 212 pp. \$29.95 paper (978-0-7456-3837-9), \$83.95 hardcover (978-0-7456-3836-2)

The “new” childhood studies of the 1980s emerged in a triangulated fashion across scholarship in the US, the UK, and the Nordic countries (and to some degree Germany). Among the involved American sociologists was UC-Berkeley professor Barrie Thorne, and in the decade that followed she exposed numerous graduate students (myself included) to the fresh and somewhat freeing scholarship of people like Ann Solberg, Chris Jenks, and Viviana Zelizer. These were some of the progenitors of the “new childhood paradigm” that broke with what had seemed to me, and apparently them, the deadweight monopoly of developmental psychology and functionalist theory on historical and social studies of children. They displaced emphases on socialization, universalized and gendered roles, and the passive, vulnerable child with inquiries into children’s active participation in social life, historical constructions of “the child”, and childhood as a collective form.

As the introductions to these two newly published texts attest, the paradigm can no longer really be called “new” in that its institutionalization in numerous journals, centres, and conferences now spells debate and critique. While *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* is edited by some of the “fathers” of the new childhood studies, there is no “new” in its title, and one of its stated aims is to “faithfully represent new insight and perspectives ... [t]o remain an up-to-date and living document [that] cannot and should not hide productive disagreements” (p. 7). Karen Wells’s *Childhood in Global Perspective* is in some ways a response to

what she sees as the flaws of new childhood studies, namely, that it has been “dominated by accounts of North American and European childhoods” (p. 1), has underplayed globalizing and material structures, and has neglected race, class, and gender as social forces shaping childhood.

While both books mean to be broad overviews, they differ dramatically in character and function. The one is a handbook, a rich compendium of current research (in the Western world), a journey through the highways and alleyways of a burgeoning area. Qvortrup, Corsaro, and Honig have smartly structured their volume of works by thirty-one authors into six sections that move from the “bigger” questions of theory, method, and historical context, to research on the everyday lives and practices of children, and to considerations of children’s rights. It is the kind of book I want handy as a reference for both teaching and research. An attractive anthology for use in a course on childhood at the advanced undergraduate or graduate levels, it provides multiple tools for navigating theoretical, methodological, and epistemological terrains of research in “new” childhood studies.

Wells’s book also concludes with a consideration of children’s rights, but gets there in a quite different fashion. Inspired by both critical feminist theory and Foucaultian analyses of governmentality, her monograph is structured to demonstrate that “the multiple insecurities of children in the contemporary world are being driven by global capitalism and its constant production of crises in social reproduction” (p. 184), and that these are in turn underwritten by increasingly globalized Western ideas about childhood. This intervention on inequalities draws on the new childhood studies but makes a more explicit political critique of a global confluence of neoliberal discourse and material restructuring. She begins with an historical critique of child-saving and children’s rights in law and policy, and an explication of intersections of race, class, and gender in shaping experiences and opportunities in particular times and places. In subsequent chapters she draws on extant research from various parts of the world to examine how children and childhood are shaped by (and also shape) institutions of family, school, work, politics, and war. In the end, this is a book as much (perhaps more) about globalization as childhood, since it is dotted with examples that provide background on selected cases (such as Jim Crow or the Iranian Revolution) considered within theories such as neoliberalism and global gendered reproduction.

The differences between the aims of the two books, or at least the complementary angles they provide on childhood studies, are crystallized in the questions they pose. In their introduction to the *Handbook*, Qvortrup et al. ask, “How is the child possible?” asserting that this question must be answered “through the analysis of the social conditions for

making children observable” (p. 8). The volume is true to this question, considering the multiple parameters and stakes and aporias of producing knowledge about the child/children/childhood. Honig’s chapter on the constitution of the child — on the sticky relationship between “children” and “childhood” — is an especially agile treatment of the question. Most of the chapters explicitly take up one or more of the key terms and debates in childhood studies, giving the anthology an impressive coherence.

Where the *Handbook* provides readers an overview of the state of childhood studies, Wells wants to argue something specific about the lived state of children. And so she frames her discussion around the question “What is a child?” in order to foreground its complex set of answers “in different times and places shaped by wider changes in society” (p. 5). With this question, Wells can recognize cultural and geographical differences in ideas of the child while leaving herself room to claim structural and even biological universals that bind children (for example, being codified into international law and needing the care of adults) as well as globally differentiate them (for example, via raced and gendered inequality in the global division of labour).

Childhood does not entirely deliver on its project for several reasons. First, in the process of demonstrating the complexities of childhood across time and place, Wells reifies (and unreflexively deploys) both the global and the regional — her introduction includes a puzzling section on historical studies of “American,” “Latin American,” “African” (and so on) childhoods. She invokes globalization without really defining what she means by it, or acknowledging the wildly divergent discourses about it. Secondly, the rhyme and reason of her choices across time and space remain opaque. She uses the case of the American south in her chapter on race, class, and gender; South African apartheid and the Iranian revolution in her chapter on children and politics; and national and international surveys in her treatment of school and work. The whole book would benefit from an introduction that lays out the rationale for its structure: why these chapters, and these particular cases and sources? In some ways, the book tries to do too much.

Wells is asserting a specific argument about global structures, and thus is a much easier target than Qvortrup et al. Reflexive and rich, the latter collection on childhood studies lays bare some of the field’s own substantive and conceptual tensions, but many of its chapters review the issues more than they assert a specific argument — or if they do, these are conceptual arguments that provide frames for analysis (as Alanen puts it in her chapter). Whether one agrees with her or not, Wells has an answer to what it is that turns children into children, i.e., the institutionalization of particular ideologies of childhood into the material structures of

capitalism. Her work thus gestures toward some of the shortcomings that Honig (ch. 4 in Qvortrup et al.) calls on childhood studies to address, such as coming to terms with real differences of age, engaging with international comparison, and examining non-western childhood sociologies. Where Cook, in his chapter “Children as Consumers,” asserts that it “remains an open question as to the extent to which the forces of capital will shape childhoods or perhaps homogenize them into the figure of a ‘global child’” (p. 343), Wells asserts a definitive answer (albeit, importantly, with regard to social reproduction and not consumer culture). Perhaps most saliently, Wells attempts to bridge - if sometimes awkwardly - discursive and material approaches, which is one of the steps childhood studies must make if it is to bridge “childhood as a symbolic order of knowledge and children as social actors” (Honig in Qvortrup et al., p. 69).

A comparison between the final chapters of the two books, both of which consider children’s rights, suggests the differences between them. Last chapters, even in anthologies, are usually meant to signal a kind of final word, including what the next steps in a field might be. The ubiquitous debate on children’s rights and the “best interests of children” seems to fit the bill. But where Kaufman and Rizzini (in Qvortrup et al.) call for filling the gap between children’s rights and the (insecure, unequal) realities of their lives by further developing the reach and enforcement of international law, and identify economic and social conditions as an obstacle to doing so, Wells points squarely at economic and social conditions as the root problem and at international law as complicit in constructing needy children and responsabilized families. Documents like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are signs of hope for Kaufman and Rizzini, and instruments of oppressive governmentality in the hands of Wells.

The debates within and across these two texts echo important tensions in childhood studies between the normative and the epistemological (see Honig’s chapter), between ethnography and discourse analysis, between structural and poststructural approaches, and between the politics of scholarship and the politics of social relations. Perhaps, then, the scholarship of childhood studies needs some re-working, just as books like Wells’s might need a more systematic deployment of the theoretical and methodological insights provided in the *Handbook*.

There is in fact something refreshing about these two kinds of texts *together*. They mostly work with the same central set of terms: agency and structure, universal and particular, social reproduction, and generations. They are important together in part because they take up these terms *on* somewhat different terms. For example, Wells treats children’s agency mostly as a matter of their participation in politics, where the

Handbook contains multiple chapters on children's active construction of places of play and practices of consumption, and the agency enacted through their bodies and habits. Both books are concerned that the new childhood studies may have taken agency too far, to the detriment of pinpointing structural realities. But where the *Handbook* moves back and forth between agency and structure, *Childhood* is decidedly interested in power relations in the structures of global capitalism. Wells does not dismiss children's agency, she just doesn't linger there. Her work might benefit from the section devoted to "generations" in the *Handbook*, where scholars like Alanen (ch. 10) and Olk (ch. 12) work through ways to conceptualize the generational order as part of the social order, and justice as a matter of an intergenerational political economy. In addition, Olk and Nieuwenhuys (ch. 19) take up the challenge of theorizing children's productive labour and participation in working rights movements across global North and South.

The point, in the end, is not to compare these two texts. They are meant to do very different things, in that Wells's monograph is a particular argument about children's lives in the global order while Qvortrup et al. offer an anthology that represents various perspectives on a field that has come into its own. Yet as I have tried to show, they speak to each other and thus open up new fissures and questions for the not-so-new childhood studies. And they do so precisely because they foreground the dissonances between theory and practice, demonstrating our continuing need to reflexively work the gap between the politics of scholarly engagement with childhood and the politics of critical engagement with the social forces in children's lives.

Unfortunately, no scholars from Canadian institutions figure in the *Handbook*. As Côté lamented in a recent review essay in *CJS* (Vol. 34, No. 3), youth studies lag woefully in Canada. But perhaps Canada is ripe for a sociology both "professional" and "critical" (see Goldberg and van den Berg in the same volume of *CJS*), i.e., positioned to take up the kind of progressive critical work Wells attempts, while being ensconced in the nuances of scholarly production evident in Qvortrup et al.

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