

## **Conclusion: Change, Globalization and Childhood**

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Amid all the complications of dealing with globalization and childhood, including its great unevenness, a crucial issue involves its relationship to larger, or at least earlier, processes of change. No conclusion can hope to embrace the various findings of the essays in this collection, but a final comment on this relationship will help.

The fundamental transformation of modern childhood began before globalization, at least as the latter is usually defined. It took shape initially in Western Europe and the United States, in association with rapid industrialization; although the West added in some particular elements, including ideas about children derived from the Enlightenment and Romanticism, it was really the industrial process that predominated. Change involved three intertwined elements, all of which developed over several decades, and qualified by social class, but all of which constituted decisive contrasts with childhood past. First, schooling replaced work as the child's primary social obligation, a radical departure from the norms that had predominated, for most families, in agricultural economies. Initially affecting young children, this shift would spread upwards in age. Second, the birth rate dropped, which altered children's relationships with their parents and, even more obviously, with siblings. And third, the child death rate plummeted, again with impacts on parent-child relations, including, potentially at least, parental emotional investment in individual young children.

Relationships among these changes were obvious: with schooling, children moved from contributing to the family economy to drawing wealth from the family. Once realized, this in turn promoted a lower birth rate. Schooling for women also correlated strongly with lower birth

rates because of new knowledge about options in life and potential birth limitation methods; this is a relationship first noted within the West, from one social group or region to the next, and later emerging worldwide. Lower birth rate and greater parental attention to individual children helped advance the lower death rate – which in turn encouraged further reductions in natality.

The implications of the three intertwined changes were also considerable. Relationships between young children and adults might intensify, for better or for worse; but schooling then could reduce family authority over children. Parental standards for children almost inevitably changed when the purpose of childhood was transformed away from work; explicit interest in measuring and encouraging intelligence in young children was a common concomitant. The same transformation gradually altered traditional gender distinctions among children, often amid considerable anxiety. Without eroding all distinctions, work divisions began to matter less, shared intelligence to matter more. Schooling and reduced sibling sets tended to promote newly-intense links with non-family peers, usually along increasingly age-graded lines. With children now an economic burden, and with the numbers of children reduced, the purpose of childhood in the family had to be redefined. Having fewer children who were now more likely to live could heighten emotional expectations and ideals; but there were also new possibilities for seeing children as nuisances and making them less central to definitions of family success. These implications were complex, and of course they would be shaped in part by the prior cultural standards of any individual group or society. They would also take some time to work out; arguably, even Western societies are still adjusting in many ways to the radical transformations of childhood.

The initial global implications of these changes were fairly straightforward. Societies seeking to imitate Western developments, beginning in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, had to include these

fundamental changes in the purpose and context of childhood, initially through new schooling requirements but also through other developments like public health programs. Sometimes, at least, this would generate additional and even more sweeping reevaluations of childhood, as in the case of Japan by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Western imperialism could also bring changes to childhood for some groups, particularly those exposed to new educational offerings, that might move in similar directions; but imperialists rarely made the extensive investments, or risked the disruption to established family expectations and work patterns, necessary to effect a full transformation. Japan and Russia, seeking to promote industrialization, launched the conversions more fully. It was crucial that 20<sup>th</sup> century communism embraced the transformation, first in the Soviet Union and later in China. Several Latin American states began to move in similar directions, at least in expanding schooling, though class and urban-rural distinctions qualified the development.

All of this could qualify as the first chronological phase of contemporary globalization, as some historians (though not the most explicit “new global” ones) have suggested.<sup>2</sup> A number of issues must be noted, apart from labeling. The developments noted thus far really constitute variants of a modernization/Westernization model that has certainly raised scholarly hackles in the past, so it is important to clarify. There could be no assumption, say by 1920, that all societies in the world would sponsor or accept a transformation of childhood along these lines; “modern” childhood was not a global inevitability. It is also important to specify – and both the Japanese and the Soviet cases illustrate this point nicely – that the introduction of a modern childhood was not a totally homogenizing process. “Modern” children, in the sense of commitment to schooling rather than work and adjustments to dramatically new birth and death rates, were not interchangeable across cultures: the modern Japanese child had many

characteristics that differed from those of his or her equally modern Western counterpart. And while some aspects of childhood modernity were doubtless imposed against great resistance, the societies that most fully sponsored the transformation did so in part because of the new opportunities they discerned, not simply as a matter of Western-dominated compulsion.

With all the essential qualifications as against older versions of modernization, however, the central point should not be lost: modernity was a crucial new version of childhood. It preceded globalization and initially spread, very unevenly, as part of adjustments to the Western model, in a common though definitely not blindly homogeneous pattern of change.

Then comes later-20<sup>th</sup> century globalization, in the sense of measurable innovations as well as intensifications of interregional contacts beginning, say, in the 1970s. If we see this as a second wave of contemporary-global change, the implications for childhood become intriguingly complex.

Important aspects of current globalization, as it has unfolded over several decades, purely and simply promote modern childhood. Globalization in this sense both intensifies and further disseminates the basic transformations, as is obvious from the general movement toward less child labor and more schooling, on an almost worldwide basis, along with reductions in child mortality and the trend toward lower birthrates. Schooling, as part of contemporary globalization, fits this pattern most obviously, and the other common elements it imposes, through the ordering of classrooms, increasing age grading, and broadly similar curricula, simply add to the shared process of change.<sup>3</sup> Human rights movements applied to children, emphasizing the child as individual and seeking to assure educational access and, often, a reduction of child labor, move in the same direction. UNICEF advertisements urging a global childhood agenda work explicitly to extend the new model of childhood to societies as yet incompletely

converted.<sup>4</sup> In other words, new forces are enlisted to further modern childhood, beyond those available around 1900 or even 1950. And no global rival to the modern definition of childhood emerges.

Other elements build into this contemporary picture. Enthusiasm for Western-style childrearing advice is one example, though Japan had of course participated even earlier. Many people, parents and children alike, though still attracted by traditional standards, seek some participation in the modern project.

Yet the same trends are both uneven and contested. All the caveats learned in earlier discussions of over simple applications of the modernization model apply with a vengeance, which does not mean there are not some strong trends to discuss. Resource differences continue to produce dramatic variations in the capacity of different societies to move to the schooling/low birth and death rate model, and there is no assurance that these variations will be erased by a more homogeneous movement toward modernity. The same is true from distinctions in urban – rural balance, for modernity became much more quickly characteristic of urban children. Even beyond resources and urbanization, many societies also see the modernity model as undesirable, as least in part, as an outside imposition little different from colonial domination – as, to some extent, it is. Here too, there can be no assurance that subsequent developments will replace a commitment, say, to a relational rather than a more individualistic definition of children and their orientation to society.

Even aside from these standard complexities, recent globalization adds ingredients to childhood in many societies beyond the modernity model. New economic disruptions are a case in point. Without over simply scapegoating globalization, it becomes clear that new patterns of international competition plus the pressure placed by international bodies like the IMF on social

spending lead to new economic hardships for several key regions and for lower class groups in even more areas.<sup>5</sup> New reliance on child labor can result, even though not usually in the global firms directly; hence, among other things, the exceptional patterns of increasing child labor in South and Southeast Asia. Street activities by children in other areas, and sexual exploitation, are additional facets that can at least be exacerbated by the new global economy and global tourism. These developments may directly distract from other impulses toward the modernity model, as in conflicting with schooling or conforming traditional familial economic relationships. Or they may enhance in new ways, for example when children get some additional spending money. But economic globalization provides an additional component to the modernity pattern, including new forms of diversity.

The same holds true for the contemporary aspects of migration's impact on childhood, to the extent that a migration-amid-globalization model can be defined that differs from older migration patterns.<sup>6</sup> Opportunities for children to move back and forth fairly regularly between host society and society of origin, for example, encourages new forms of change but also opportunities to maintain traditional family patterns – resulting not necessarily in alternatives to the movement toward modernity, but at least to some new amalgams.

The importance of global consumerism in adding to the constituents of contemporary childhood is obvious. The emergence of Britney Spears as an icon of beauty from Madagascar to Eastern Russia is a significant, and quite novel, development.<sup>7</sup> The globalization of childhood symbols -- from the world of Disney, or of youth costuming around blue jeans, or of childhood imagery from Japanese toy products, or of fastfood dining as an emblem of youth defiance of parental standards from France to Hong Kong generates a new set of expressions at least for urban children and adolescents that has no prior historical precedent. New forms of envy may

enter into the global experience of childhood, of course, as always with cultural globalization, signals are adapted by local cultures. Young people in Egypt watch Sesame Street to a later age than is true in other regions, which means some kind of creative adaptation of an apparently common media experience. But there are shared results as well. The worldwide spread of childhood obesity in the urban middle classes, from the United States to China, is one example of a phenomenon unknown, at the global level, before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> The same applies to a similar international incidence of eating disorders such as bulimia. Clearly, contemporary consumer habits and media access have some common results, in altering, and sometimes worsening, the childhood experience.

This particular aspect of globalization surely has an ambiguous relationship to the further development of modernity. In some ways it supports the process. Childrearing signals given in productions like Sesame Street help induce parents and children alike to pay more attention to some of the messages emanating from international organizations about the proper treatment and goals of the young. Ubiquitous new phenomena (since the 1970s) such as the singing of “happy birthday”, now widely available in local languages, may support a shared attention to the child as individual and center of attention. New parental guilts can develop, about providing children an adequate array of goods and fun but also appropriate schooling, across cultural boundaries. Again, local adaptations and constraints still apply, but there is some new corroboration for the basic modernity model. Consumerism may even provide additional motivation for schooling, with extrinsic goals in mind, or for further birthrate limitation. At the same time, however, consumerism adds a novel set of goals for children that may differ from the lessons of school and may even, at later ages of childhood, distract from school itself.<sup>9</sup> This is, again, a contemporary package, overlapping with but differing from the modernity model by itself.

One result of this new complexity might be an additional set of reasons to resist globalization, as being too strange and unsettling. If access to new kinds of schools means a certain degree of new individualism, and this in turn leads to new forms of children's materialism or sexuality, the ensemble may provoke heightened levels of opposition.

Another result, obvious from the cumulative conclusions of several papers in this collection, involves an additional array of changes, beyond those encouraged by modernity per se. The global spread of some concept and reality of adolescence, barely suggested in the basic modernity model, gains with the emergence of something like a global youth culture. The extension of youth into early childhood is another facet tentatively identified from the United States to Africa and beyond. Although still limited in application, a reduction of gender differences and even, in some instances, some new advantages of females over males in adolescence and youth constitute another new development. None of these emerging possibilities contradicts the modernity model, but cumulatively they add to it in significant ways.

The implications of marrying globalization and childhood are considerable, calling on historians of childhood to consider wider perspectives and comparisons, and also to identify major patterns and sequences of change. A host of topics await further data and analysis. Implications for globalization are just as strong. Not surprisingly, globalization's operation may vary from one facet of human society to the next. Whether the relationship between modernity and globalization applicable in childhood fits other topics invites additional exploration – childhood may prove to be a distinctive case or a useful overall model. Globalization does affect childhood, and the relationship will surely intensify in future. But the historical backdrop as well

as the local variations must be recognized as well, and social historians can contribute strongly to the interdisciplinary mix that charts the process.

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