

Preface: Globalization and Childhood

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This issue gathers several papers plus additional research notes and comments on the subject of globalization and childhood. The assumption is that if globalization, one of the most widely-discussed characterizations of contemporary history, is a real and measurable phenomenon, it will show up in changes in childhood in many parts of the world; and that changes in childhood, in turn, will affect and at least help define the nature of globalization. Assessments of globalization constitute perform an interdisciplinary project, and this too is reflected in the essays in this volume. And while not every major area, or every facet of childhood, is covered, there is reasonably wide representation, again an essential feature of an effort of this sort.

The project represents a twofold challenge. To proponents of globalization as a concept, the extension to childhood, a deeply personal and in many ways culturally contingent experience, provides an opportunity to measure just how far-reaching contemporary change is. This is particularly true for partisans of the “new global history”, who argue that, while globalization builds on the complex evolution of previous stages of interregional interconnectedness, the phenomenon involves exceptionally far-reaching recent change (usually held to begin either in the 1950s or the 1970s).¹ More generally, globalization risks too often being seen in terms of very broad processes, particularly economic, sometimes cultural, too rarely political, that are not translated into human terms through discussions of concrete change and continuity. Childhood, obviously, insists on that kind of translation.

The second challenge goes to historians of childhood. The history of childhood is a rich subject, but it has not been evenly explored across the world; a pronounced Western disproportion continues to affect the field. Comparative, much less global, opportunities have rarely been addressed. Discussing childhood in a globalization context suggests a number of new research approaches and analytical possibilities.²

The hope is, then, that the combination of two challenges will help refine (and complicate) approaches to the contemporary history of globalization while providing new, less regionally-confined perspectives on childhood.

Participants in this volume were not asked to adhere to a single definition of childhood. All are agreed that childhood consists of an intricate mix of standard biological and psychological processes – a major shift in capacity, for example, some time around age six, no matter what the setting – and a variety of culturally-defined features including age of effective adulthood. Essays on globalization almost inevitably seize more on adolescence and youth than on earlier childhood, and this introduces an even larger number of culturally contingent factors. Authors have been asked to be clear about what kinds of children are being discussed, but the overall picture of relevant childhood should emerge from the essays, not confine them.

The same applies to definitions of globalization. Several essays do reflect the idea of sharp changes in the last few decades. Others assume an earlier onset of something like contemporary globalization, or at least an earlier phase. Questions inevitably arise about the relationship between modernity and globalization, or between globalization and a continuation of colonialism under other names. Issues of globalization's timing and

fundamental nature conjoin. Here too, fuller pictures will emerge from the essays taken as an ensemble, despite or even because of differences in assumptions and findings.

Studies of global history inevitably discuss the interactions between the global and the local, and this theme is amply reflected in the essays that follow. The two disciplines most involved, history and anthropology, are both notoriously place-specific. But there is also an effort not to lose sight of larger themes and at least incipient comparisons. Noone, however, insists on globalization (for better or for worse) as simple homogenization, and both variations and great unevenness form essential parts of the overall account.

Qualitative evaluation almost inevitably enters in, but it is variously handled. Some authors believe it is important to discuss progress and/or loss amid the changes associated with globalization. And the whole field of globalization calls forth passionate and complicated assessments of this sort. The history of the history of childhood in the West offers some useful cautions. Two decades ago, there was a group of historians of children who argued not only for sharp contrasts between the modern and premodern, but also for sharp preferences for the modern. This was not a fruitful approach, for inevitably and correctly revisionists immediately insisted on the qualities of childhood in their period, to the point sometimes of erasing any sense of significant change at all.³ A new generation of historians of childhood is capable of recognizing validity in many approaches to childhood, past as well as present, while dealing with variations – often, significant variations – over time. The same sense of nuance must apply to globalization and childhood, even if, ultimately, there is some sense of certain progressive results or certain deteriorations.

Another kind of issue, though potentially relating to qualitative evaluation, involves children's agency, the extent that children can participate in determining the frameworks within which they live. Do the changes associated with globalization improve or worsen children's opportunities for active agency? Amid specific discussions of schooling, or new consumerism, or the most contemporary aspects of children in migration, attention to shifting power relationships is crucial. Children undoubtedly learn to handle and value certain aspects of globalization more readily than adults, but other aspects may impose new constraints.

This volume primarily addresses globalization as a force for change – without prejudging the extent of the force or, certainly, its quality. Resistance to globalization is a vital mirror-image topic, of great importance. A sequel project might well involve the role of children, and concern about children, in motivating and shaping resistance to globalization. That is not the explicit focus of this effort, but there are some relevant analyses and sidelights, that are taken up again in the concluding essay.

Any analysis of globalization or of children involves attention not only to regional specificity – the local alongside the global – but also social class and gender factors. Children, undifferentiated, usually constitute too sweeping a category, as opposed to these social subdivisions. At the same time, globalization undoubtedly contributes to changing the salience and precise nature of some of the categories – even gender. This again will be an element taken up explicitly in the conclusion, and it is treated in many of the major articles.

Contemporary childhood has been examined from numerous angles, often in context of globalization and sometimes with a degree of historical perspective. The topical approaches are not fully duplicated in the essays that follow – while additional areas are established – but there is obvious overlap. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have explored specific cases of child labor in global industries – though only about 5% of all children employed are directly involved in the global economy. Regional variations loom large, with child labor gaining only in South and Southeast Asia, but the subject remains important and raises obvious questions about the potential applicability of industrial models where the phenomenon steadily declined after an initial upsurge.⁴ The sexual exploitation of children involves a special aspect of child labor, again with some historical precedents. Education is the second staple topic, with a rich comparative literature that does not usually involve direct consideration of globalization. Here, the historical story usually picks up in the later 19th century, as in a recent study on the kindergarten as a global phenomenon from the Soviet Union to Vietnam.⁵ Human rights studies applied to children constitute a third important area, often linking labor issues (with efforts to limit children’s work) with schooling (efforts to promote).⁶ Historically, the evolution of 19th century humanitarian impulses into more focused global attention to children provides a backdrop, with the Save the Children organization emerging in the aftermath of World War I. The Western basis of many rights efforts, and also the limits on many of the conventions particularly aimed at children, constitute obvious features that can be clarified with historical perspective and applied directly to globalization. Finally, though more tentatively, studies of contemporary changes in migration and its impact on children, including new questions of identity, forms an important topical area

directly related to globalization. This topic, too, is pursued in this collection and linked to other issues.

Other topics beg for exploration, and again the following essays among other things seek to expand the list of targets as well as preliminary findings. Global consumerism and the media, most obviously, apply strongly to children and youth, and international trade in cultural items – books, films, music – began growing exponentially in the 1980s.⁷ Here too, the field of study is truly global, for while the items originate mainly from West or East, issues of impact may be as complicated for children in Britain as they are for children in Pakistan or South Africa. To be sure, children in areas outside the West (including migrants) are particularly likely to become “bicultural”, but children in the West share some of the same issues as they negotiate with adult structures.

The overarching challenge to research on globalization and children involves synthesis, including the application of topical studies to children’s real lives – to their relations with adults, with siblings, with peers, and to their construction of emotional expression as well as cognitive development. How does child labor, however constrained by poverty, relate to global consumerism? Have the major changes in key areas loosened traditional patterns of family authority over children? Has globalization, including possibly some trickle down of new rights discussions, affected discipline? And with all this, comparative approaches remain vital. Different cultures and prior patterns receive and respond to globalization impact variously, and this may apply to childhood more than some other phenomena.

Globalization can imply some radical simplifications. This collection suggests that globalization may be a useful category, but only if complicated in a number of directions.

References

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