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Published online: 01 May 2007.

To cite this article: Olga Nieuwenhuys (2007) Embedding the Global Womb: Global Child Labour and the New Policy Agenda, Children's Geographies, 5:1-2, 149-163, DOI: 10.1080/14733280601108312

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733280601108312

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Embedding the Global Womb: Global Child Labour and the New Policy Agenda

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ABSTRACT Unevenly distributed symbolic resources misrecognize children’s lifeworlds in favour of a mythical global order. As new policy agenda representations of child labour in the global south hold out the promise of a labour-free global childhood, children’s day-to-day work routines are denied. These routines are typically located in hidden landscapes of reproduction (the ‘global womb’). Retracing the historical and territorial itinerary of child labour I highlight the child saving rituals set in place to demarcate today’s borderline between the global womb and global childhood. Children’s lifeworlds are trapped in the logic of a self-reproducing workforce for which rituals of child labour abolition summon up the ever-receding mirage of a better life.

KEYWORDS: International development, NGOs, International children’s rights, child labour, globalisation

Introduction

This paper seeks to understand how representations of child labour shape children’s lifeworlds globally. I use the term lifeworld to qualify the social world, which unevenly distributed symbolic resources contribute to misrecognize in favour of a mythical global order (cf. Couldry, 2003, 41 ff). My suggestion is that as representations of child labour hold out the promise of a labour-free childhood to the worlds’ children, children’s day-to-day responsibilities and work routines are diminished, denied or even criminalized. These routines are typically located in hidden landscapes of reproduction in the global south.

The wider issue informing my argument is the 1990s insistent appearance in international development policy of references to child labour. I suggest that the timings are not by chance. The unearthing of this typically nineteenth century northern policy issue signalled that something fundamental had changed. But rather than in the everyday practices of children in the developing world the change had been, I believe, in the northern project for the south. My argument seeks to retrace the temporal and spatial itinerary of what, to distinguish it from its earlier historical form, I term global child labour (see also Rahikainen, 2001) and runs as follows: With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the ensuing triumph of neo-liberalism, a global restructuring of production and reproduction...
superseded the post-war development project. In the developing world, global restructuring upset earlier post-colonial childhood policies, dramatically changing the policy environment for children. In the new policy agenda there was to be only one, global childhood, the preserve of a minority of children symbolically participating in the market as autonomous, liberated consumers. The image of the non-consumer child, partly born of draconian cuts in social expenditure imposed on the south and partly ideologically constructed, came to symbolize two things: on the one hand it added splendour to the staggering levels of consumption that globalisation ushered in for a minority of privileged children, on the other it justified intervention in the lives of the excluded majority in the global south. Children whose lifestyles contradicted the global ideal were represented as lacking in something essential. Little mattered how much their lifeworlds articulated enduring social relationships between the generations and how much had been done to rebuild these relationships on the ruins of the colonial world. Representations of global childhood revolved on the ‘best interest of the child’, defined as an individualized self-interest to become a full participant in the new market-approach to development. Here I propose to see global child labour as part of the rituals set in place to stake out the new field of consumer childhood and to explore what these rituals have entailed for the non-consumer child, particularly in terms of the symbolic violence exercised to discipline children’s lifeworlds.

I start the paper rethinking historical child labour and suggesting that its abolition in the course of the nineteenth century should be set against the paradox of territorialized nation-states emerging in a context of extra-territorial empire building. Abolition crucially misrecognized the lifeworlds of children in the occupied colonial territories. Secondly, I probe into the discontinuities between historical child labour in the industrial north and today’s global child labour by shortly discussing how development theory engaged with the issue of childhood in the post-colonial world. Reinventing childhood as the inevitable outcome of enlightened free-market economics, I thirdly claim, negotiates northern anxiety about an unfolding race to the bottom with the interests of southern elites in maintaining their comparative advantage. This is particularly evident in the ways child labour rituals are framed to justify southern elite’s opting out of public policy to ensure the reproduction of the vast reservoirs of cheap labour in their territories. The tacit policy understanding is that if draconian cuts in social spending generate child exploitation, the responsibility would entirely lay with the community’s backward culture and lack of understanding of the true nature of childhood. I finally argue that in the new social order children’s lifeworlds are trapped in the logic of a self-reproducing workforce for which rituals of global child labour abolition summon up the ever-receding mirage of a better life.

Rethinking Historical Child Labour

In a sense, there was nothing new in the way international development agencies came to restage child labour in the 1990s. Global child labour would be eliminated with means that had already proven their worth in nineteenth and early twentieth century industrial societies, so was the official belief (Weiner, 1991). My point here is that this belief ignores the existence of vast territorial dominions lying outside the borders of nation-states where the issue of child labour was simply not allowed to arise. Broadly re-examining from a global perspective the elimination of child labour in industrial societies, I suggest here that elimination may be interpreted as a way to deal with what ‘development’ had, paradoxically, made problematic: the production of life. I first dwell shortly on the neglected role of reproduction in industrial societies and maintain that the mainstay of child labour policies was to secure children’s free work in and around the home and in
childcare. Secondly, I suggest that as these policies turned out to be relatively costly in the industrial areas, with their free work children in the colonies subsidized abolition not only of child labour but of large families as well. Childhood became, thirdly, the ideological justification for territorial distinctions between areas in which children would have been saved from child labour and areas where they were subjected to new regimes of work that denied the likelihood of their being exploited.

Rahikainen forcefully argues that child labour eradication in industrializing nation-states should be reconsidered in the light of the wider context of international markets in which they operated (Rahikainen, 2001). She suggests that as opportunities to push child exploitation to the margins of the unfurling world economy grew, child labour could be abolished in the core areas. This does however not explain why the removal of children from employment had become an issue sufficiently important to inspire a vast child saving movement (Cunningham, 1991). I suggest that the missing link is the place of reproduction in industrial society. Dispossessed peasants no longer needed their children as living repositories of family wealth, for children could not repay their parents back by working on the land they no longer held. Industrial wages being barely sufficient to maintain a single worker, the elderly, the sick, the unemployed, but above all children, turned into a ‘social problem’. Though children were put to work as soon as possible, they seemed seldom able to earn enough for their maintenance (Rahikainen, 2004). The Lancashire cotton mills at the end of the eighteenth century that employed tens of thousands of children had soon discovered the disadvantages of child employment. Children were freely available from orphanages and poor houses, but employers had to feed, cloth and house them and this proved a costly affair. Children also formed an unstable labour force running away if offered better opportunities elsewhere. Sons and daughters of small peasants would only be available during the off-season and would return to their father’s homestead if needed there. They were also not as productive as often believed, the only way for the employer to recover the expenses of their maintenance being labour-tying contracts until the age of 21 (Lavallette, 1994, pp. 190–3; Rahikainen, 2001). Mill owners were gradually to discover that it was more profitable to employ adult workers, for as long as adults could keep a foothold in subsidence farming children could negotiate relatively good wages. The situation drastically changed by the end of the nineteenth, when men took the place of children and both women and children could be excluded from industrial employment. Men’s wages stabilized at the level of a ‘family wage’ in which allowances were made for the subsistence of women and a relatively small number of children, guaranteeing the net reproduction of the working class family. The payment of the family wage was crucially premised on the massive availability of cheap colonial commodities (tea, wheat, cotton, wool, etc.) that significantly enhanced its buying power but as well on the displacement of labour intensive food and raw materials production to the colonies (Wolf, 1982).

This brings me to the fate of children in the colonies. History is singularly silent on this issue. Their perceived agrarian nature and subsidiary economic role would have ruled out the likelihood that child labour existed there. My suggestion is that, by the times colonies were turned into providers of raw materials and cheap goods for the workers’ family, the idea had firmly been established that regulating reproduction was crucial for the stability and profitability of industrial production. Great pains were taken to preserve or, if needed, to reinvent, the peasant family as the locus of self-sufficient reproduction (cf. for an example Mamdani, 1996). A modest body of postcolonial research evinces that in the colonies children worked hard from a tender age and that their work articulated ubiquitous exploitative patterns between colonizer and colonized. Far from ever being effectively addressed, this work was simply not allowed to emerge as a policy issue. Tellingly,
even as late as 1919, the first ILO Convention on child labour conveniently excluded from its definition virtually all forms of colonial child work: ‘child labour’ did not include work outside the industrial sector, forced labour, work that was unpaid or carried out within the ambit of the family business, the peasant holding or the household. Both justification for the civilizing mission of the mother country and the smooth functioning of colonial administration required that overt competition over labour, even among the colonizers, be either kept strictly in check or be hidden under the veil of tradition, socialisation, education or corrective disciplining.

To disguise child labour on their plantations, planters-cum-missionaries in Swaziland, for example, changed the identity of their child labourers into school children by offering some form of free education in the off hours of work (Simelane, 1998); migrant child workers were redefined as ‘stray children’ in former Rhodesia and were assigned as servants to a white master supposed to teach them Christian values (Chirwa, 1992; Greer, 1994); in cities of today’s Bangladesh migrant working children were similarly labelled ‘street children’ and interned in workhouses (Balagopalan, 2002); to evade prohibition on the work of the thousands children slaving day and night in the tobacco factories the Netherlands Indies (today’s Indonesia) ILO definitions of factory, day-time and even ‘child’ were tropicalised. In the tropical climate, the day would be too hot for work, so that children would find no harm in working longer after sunset; similarly the ‘oriental’ child would mature faster, so that minimum ages could safely be lowered (White, 2001); South Indian children working from the age of three or four with their mothers in the manufacture of coir yarn to feed European mills were similarly set as example of the advantages of preventing child labour. The underlying justification was that the Oriental family needed household activities to keep rural women and children occupied. As an early example of the theory of ‘competitive advantage’, the coir yarn sector would demonstrate how child labour prevention enabled primitive forms of manufacture to survive in the face capitalist competition, guaranteeing hereby both social stability and plenty of docile, cheap labour power (Nieuwenhuys, 1994).

What this admittedly patchy evidence suggests is that child labour elimination in Europe and the USA went hand in hand with new forms of child exploitation unfolding in the colonial dominions. In other words, the success of the transformation of childhood into a perceived period of innocent play and study, owned much to its territorialisation. Unfurling childhood as the primordial site of national identity hinged not only on child labour abolition, but universal, compulsory schooling inculcating a common language and culture to the ‘becoming’ generations (Gellner, 1983; see also Libal, 2002). Childhood being territorially circumscribed to the colonizer’s home countries, in the colonial world children and adults merged into the indistinct category of the ‘Other’, people whose cultures and traditions made them fundamentally unknowable. The national borders of pre-WWII Europe can therefore arguably be read as symbolic markers of child labour-free zones justifying colonial projects in which very young people could be exploited at will because, in a way, they were not really children. The ‘Other’ was represented as growing up in lifeworlds situated in mythical traditional villages where daily life would be steeped in culturally meaningful rituals and subsistence practices (see Chirwa, 1993; Greer, 1994).

As after WWII newly independent nations born from decolonization started upon a course to catch up with their former colonial rulers, the latter had to reinvent a legitimate role for themselves. This they found in promising a brighter future for the coming generations of their former colonies though ‘development’. At the end of the path to ‘development’ shone, as I now turn to contend, the promise of a multiplication of national childhoods in a postcolonial world.
Paradox of Development

The gap between the end of historical child labour in the north around 1930s and the emergence of its global form in the 1990s, spans nearly 60 years. To understand why child labour re-emerged, a short incursion in the history of ‘development’ is illuminating. The question here is this: How to explain the paradox that ‘development’, that started holding out a brighter future to the post-colonial generations ended up producing fifty years later images of sweated children reminiscent of Britain’s industrial revolution? My contention is that global child labour reiterates the fundamental difficulty of ‘development’ to resolve the issue of reproduction and signals that major shifts towards new forms of labour control are underway. Here I do little else than roughly discern three phases in the history of development: (a) decolonisation (1945–1970), (b) transition years (1970–1990), and (c) globalisation (1990–today). My aim is to seek to understand why global child labour paradoxically signalled the end of development as an attempt to establish territorialized national childhoods in the former colonies.

After WOII the USA unfolded a vast political and economic programme of intervention in the former European colonies and protectorates. Introducing ideas of equality, liberty and rights, US interventions differed substantially from the old colonial paradigm based on perceived differences in levels of civilization and race between the colonizer and the colonized. These ideas were expressed in the Declaration of Universal Human Rights that accompanied the founding of the UN in 1948 (see also Rist, 2001). The Declaration differed however from the European and American constitutions on which it was framed in that, rather than protect citizens from interference from the state, it prescribed the United Nations’ duty to intervene in the lives of citizens in the developing world to provide them with their economic and social rights (food, education, health care, welfare, etc.) In other words, the Declaration laid the legal foundation for intervention in the newly independent nations in the name of development (see also Koshy, 1999).

In the first two decades of development, and in spite of extremely modest outlays, the idea that the north had to help the south develop gained growing ascendancy. A plethora of messy issues—racism, slavery, illiteracy, caste discrimination, landlessness, malnutrition, exploitation, child labour—which development promised to solve meshed in its antipode, poverty. Underneath the cloak of poverty, however, was hidden a fundamental presupposition: poverty would be nothing but the lack of a very specific sort of capitalist wealth. Forms of wealth departing from this form—such as natural resources, local institutions, knowledge passed down from generation to generation, reciprocal exchange of goods and services and so on, were treated as inconsequential if not as barriers to development. As development promised to develop a market of skilled labour, children’s roles in the reproduction of non-capitalist wealth continued, as under colonial rule, to be treated as a sign of backwardness or ‘resistance to change’. With wealth reduced to what counted in the north, the south was presented with no other option than to seek to follow the pattern of development set out for it. Without this vision of development, the term poverty was indeed meaningless (Escobar, 1995; Rist, 2001).

The 1970s oil crisis put an abrupt end to import-substitution strategies meant to make the new nations less dependent on export of raw materials and simple manufactures, the two sectors in which most of the population—including children—worked. Their reliance on these exports would have been the cause for the secular deterioration of their terms of exchange with the north. The Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank, etc.), founded in 1973, offered to recycle the mass of petrodollars that became available from the oil producing countries into loans to developing nations’ governments struggling to maintain their energy supply. This gave the institutions a vantage point in forcing the
soon heavily indebted southern governments to reform their economies in the interest of northern capital. In virtually all countries of the south these so-called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) entailed dramatic cuts in social spending and the roll back of the state. Protected food prices, feeding programmes and free primary education and health for the mass of children became gradually a thing of the past (Bradshaw, 1993).

Within two decades of the oil crisis most countries of the South had entirely abandoned earlier programmes of import-substitution and had set the door open to northern investments. The social sector had as much as possible been privatised, funds from the north being increasingly channelled through NGOs. As the market was left to perform the promised miracle of economic growth, social programmes were reduced to ‘targeting’ the most vulnerable. I return to this point in the next section.

What concerns me here is that at this juncture the global child labour issue starts appearing on the developmental stage. It is not the place here to go into the details of global child labour policy. Suffice to say that the issue gained international prominence during the founding ministerial meeting of the WTO in 1996 and soon received enthusiastic backing from Northern governments, exporters, trade unions and consumers. To channel the enthusiasm, the ILO was revived and received such substantial Northern funding for its child labour programme IPEC (International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour) that, by the end of the twentieth century, global anti-child labour campaigning overshadowed other activities of the organisation (see also Myrstad, 1999; ICFTU, 2000; Fyfe, 2001; Scheuerman, 2001; Burgoon, 2004). In this campaigning, global child labour was overwhelmingly interpreted as a repetition of northern history. This interpretation is misleading insofar that historical and global child labour differed markedly on several accounts: First, historical child labour was premised on a strict cognitive separation between national childhood and the Other, unknowable childhood. As national borders set the physical limits to the outcry against children’s exploitation, the issue remained an inward looking exercise. The role of the Other was to justify exclusion. Global child labour policies are radically different in their construction of the Other. They have originated from northern-dominated institutions and agencies as a diagnostic discourse about a social gangrene affecting newly independent nation-states in the south. As northern child labour seated uncomfortably with the issue it was carefully kept aside, national borders marking the limits of what was a deeply outward-looking approach. Second, public awareness about the evils of child labour in the north had articulated support for social policies. With global child labour the diagnosis coincided paradoxically with the imposition of an economic regime upon the south that effectively dismantled social policies and in particular scaffolding childhood institutions such as food security, free and universal education and free basic health. Third, though the discourse was cloaked in a language that suggested that a nineteenth century northern ghost had stood up from its grave, the reality was dramatically different. Historical differences between the industrialized world and what had become the developing world in the nature and incidence of child labour largely persisted. With a child population of roughly 400 million in 1980, India had for instance records of only 15 million children in employment, while the occupation of at least a 10-fold working in agriculture and in the informal urban sector was unaccounted for its failure to qualify as ‘child labour’. So did of course unpaid help, domestic work and childcare. In other words, with global child labour northern public opinion gathered against a monster that was largely of its own making. The exploited child in the developing world became the spectre unearthed from its historical grave to haunt the north’s economic security and welfare system. As it took the familiar form of an issue that would have been dealt with successfully in the past, it was a reassuring reincarnation ritually framing the new global policy agenda for the post-development south.
To now sum up this section, child labour was absent from the development agenda as long as postcolonial nation-states were either building their own national childhoods or managed to maintain the illusion that they were doing so. This changed when, with the triumph of liberalism the post-war development project effectively came to an end and trade barriers started giving way to a global market. It was then no coincidence that the child labour issue re-emerged simultaneously with the liberalisation of the world economy. First, it had existed before, but was ritually constructed to hide away the new forms of child exploitation unfolding in the occupied territories that formed the colonial world. A new geo-political formation, the colonial state, effectively justified this exclusion. Second, when it re-emerged, the international policy agenda was firmly set against post-colonial nations’ attempts at protecting their populations with trade and investment barriers. International financial institutions left no doubt that their teeming populations working for the proverbial bowl of rice represented the competitive advantage that would permit them to survive the transition to globalisation. And thirdly, threats to northern welfare in the form of mass migration and de-localisation needed to be directed towards a recognizable enemy. Collective memory about the role of child labour eradication in the making of the welfare state was sufficiently alive to align political response behind a common child saving agenda. To clarify why this agenda won legitimacy not only in the north but in the south as well, I now to turn to the power elites for whom global child labour offered distinct advantages that the post-colonial paradigm failed to do.

From National to Global Childhood

Global child labour policies were not merely imposed on the south. As elites in the postcolonial nations, voluntarily or under threat, gave up their ambitious project of catching up with the north, they pragmatically chose to compromise to remain in the game. Under enormous pressure from the Bretton Woods institution to eliminate protected food prices and make inordinate cuts in childhood-related spending, they needed urgently to find ways to justify these highly unpopular measures. This may explain, I believe, the unprecedented urge with which even governments notoriously failing their children ritually underscored that they were jumping on the liberalization train by ratifying the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Nieuwenhuys, 2001). My contention here is that ratifying the CRC signalled that the old national childhood paradigm had been abandoned in favour of what Pupavac pointedly terms a children’s rights regime (Pupavac, 2001). Understanding this regime is critical to explain why the exposure of global child labour failed to question draconian cuts in social spending. Even if southern governments certainly protested vigorously against the cuts, in global campaigning the link between these cuts and child labour was seldom made. The slogan of the day was rather TINA: There Is No Alternative. Authoritative policies coming from the IMF, the World Bank and, from the mid-1990s, also the WTO and the ILO, paid at most lip-service to measures such as debt relief, protection of southern markets or global taxing to support developing state’s need to protect children against the effects of liberalisation on their economies. The tacit mood was that it was simply unavoidable that children would pay with their lives what were evasively termed ‘economic reforms’, ‘exogenous shocks’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘risk-aversion’ and so on (Cornia, 1987; World Bank, 2001). Problems were attributed to the earlier inordinate ambitions and corruption of nationalist, socialist or communist post-colonial elites. Given the laws of the market, consensus about the state’s role in child labour converged around another set of practices: first, at the level of ideology, ritualistic celebrations of children’s rights, second, disengagement with social justice and, finally, financial support to projects and programmes aimed at reforming the children themselves under close surveillance of northern donors.
When global child labour policies unfurled, they did so through the language of rights at the ideological level and at the practical level through NGO projects and programmes carried out in close cooperation with northern donors. The new policy agenda was already well in place. Child labour was no longer to be the concern of the state alone: but of parents, communities and global civil society as well as the children themselves. The agenda to combat child labour did therefore not involve much more than applying what was already foreseen in the CRC: advocacy, training and lobbying in addition to detecting criminal cases and mobilizing the media and the judiciary. As trade unions failed to make core labour rights conditional for WTO membership, northern governments directed financial funds at the ILO in view of drafting a new child labour convention that would specifically address the problems arising from globalisation. The result was the 1999 ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, a document that curiously conflates crime with work and, though defended as a necessary addition to earlier child labour Conventions, in practice may in the long run replace them.1

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) that was virtually unanimously ratified from 1989 onwards, met with surprisingly little dissent. The CRC offers, as many have argued, a contradictory blend of entitlements, rights and wishful thinking that is the typical product of UN compromise. The overarching idea is that as children’s rights are put into practice they will be able to both accommodate cultural diversity and help local cultures evolve towards universal notions about the best interests of the child. As it offers but a broad framework, not a set of hard laws to be enforced without discussion, the CRC provisions have unsurprisingly been interpreted in the light of prevailing political economy in which the state is reduced to the role of guarantor of a level playing field and the onus of child protection is placed on the shoulders of parents. The quality of their children’s childhood is now envisioned as depending upon their ability to fully participate in the market.

A special committee reviews periodically developing countries’ progress in implementing the provisions of the CRC. Notoriously failing governments may be verbally heavily criticized, but are not subject to other sanctions. What is more serious, even if Bretton Woods institution and WTO policies, or for that matter major donor countries in the North play a growing role in shaping policies in the global South, they escape reviewing. Nor are MNCs or private banks submitted to scrutiny. Debt servicing, the retreat of the state from social spending, the creation of a liberal climate to attract investors and investments in infrastructure and security are all treated as constraints beyond discussion within which children’s rights will have to be accommodated. Within these constraints the room for manoeuvre is of course very small and is essentially a matter of good intentions. Implementation on the ground has been mostly left to human rights or children’s rights NGOs who are likely to be more accountable to northern donor agencies than to governments or the people they say to represent. The overarching idea is that NGOs are best equipped to mobilize means and people from a variety of sources—mostly private—through training, lobbying, and advocacy. For those seriously in danger, or perhaps more precisely those who pose a danger, special targeting programmes have been set in place, preferably through the voluntary sector. Targeting has the triple role of rolling back the state, building barriers against the demands of the poor for social goods and services and opening up fields for philanthropic entrepreneurship. Tellingly, the vast majority of children targeted by NGOs are teenage urban males. The very young, girls and those living in distant rural areas are generally unable to access their interventions.

The ‘model’ NGO-child is preferably sufficiently small in size to appear much younger, has a heart-rending personal story of extreme abuse that refracts negatively on both his or her own society and parents, has the determination and intelligence of an autonomous adult yet
nourishes only one dream: be restored to a lost childhood. The persistence of this model among the clients of NGOs across the south intimates that child rights projects may fruitfully be conceived as performances where carefully selected child-actors play out scripts ritually foregrounding the spectacle of global childhood. Local conceptions, culture and practices are treated as the Oriental Other, the ‘before’ on which the child actors are invited to dwell in extenso to contrast its hellish inhumanity with the ‘after’, where children attain both their rights and their salvation (cf. also Hecht, 1998). The script feeds on a common policy language which NGO-personnel can learn, understand and practice through a multitude of international conferences, training sessions and policy meetings in mutual supportive exercises that help stake out the global childhood policy field. Training packs, project design formats, evaluation protocols and financial accounting procedures further help create a truly globally shared culture about how to deal with children’s issues. The spectacle, finally, is routinely performed for visiting (potential) donors, in the media and during events that celebrate the great strides made in the advancement of children’s rights. Even, or, as I personally witnessed during a ‘street children ballet’ at the national theatre of Addis Ababa in the late 1990s, perhaps especially, when the government is under great pressure to cut down on the last vestiges of what could make the lives of children minimally bearable.

There have been distinct financial advantages for southern elites to jump on the children’s rights train once it set in motion. Busying the language of rights has become the key to access important funds being channelled through donor NGOs. These are typically represented as ideologically independent, non-political, non-confessional, non-governmental organisations that are financially unable to survive international competition without sizeable northern state support (Tvteid, 2002). Major children’s NGOs in The Netherlands (for ex. Plan International, Terre des Hommes and the Foundation Children’s Stamps) are, for example, governed funded up to 70%. The same is the case with the Norwegian and the Swedish branches of Save the Children. The US, for their part, have traditionally channelled most of their aid through NGOs (CARE being no doubt the classical example), and under the Bush administration have increasingly done so, particularly when it came to the evangelical ones (Hearn, 2002).

The privatisation of international aid turned out in the interest of ruling elites not only because NGOs paid significantly higher salaries and offered better career opportunities than the public sector but because they opened up to the emerging world of global childhood expertise on the one hand, and on the other helped feed clientelistic relationships with followers guaranteeing to elites a solid footing in local politics (Hecht, 1998; Michener, 1998; White, 1999; Ulvila, 2002). For heavily indebted southern government elites staying in power now increasingly means taking advantage of the new opportunities and finding a niche as intermediaries between the local poor and northern donors. Political legitimacy is no longer gained through some encompassing but difficult if not impossible policy of distributive justice, but through the forging of dependency ties, fed by global financial networks, with needy people.

Global child labour policies met both northern organised labour interests and those of southern elites: for organised labour the main point was to eliminate direct competition that would take away jobs. Reinventing the colonial division of labour between the industrial north and the agrarian south was hence the mainstay of policies. This becomes apparent, as I shall develop more in depth in the next section, from the justification sought for ignoring or dismissing children’s work in the domestic arena, in the non-criminal informal sector and in agriculture.

For the southern elites the stakes have been high. Accepting that there would be no childhood without a global market and global childhood being now patterned on the northern consumer child meant essentially that austerity and justice no longer went
hand in hand: to realize their child rights individual children can now legitimately consume ostentatiously even in the midst of acute deprivation. Nowhere does the CRC indeed state that this right would be predicated upon a principle of solidarity with less fortunate children. From now on enterprising parents earning money to spend on their children’s good quality food, education, health, housing and recreation, in other words, on the realization of their children’s rights, were to be set as examples. The failure to realize rights became a ‘failure of parental altruism’ and put on the account of poor parents’ lack of initiative, ignorance, laziness, insensitivity or, worse, religious and political fanaticism. A failure to offer constant care and supervision, to buy private education, to provide children with expensive medicines, vitamin-rich food, electronic toys and mobile phones and so on, was no longer the outcome of some structural injustice in the global system of distribution. Ruling elites could unfurl the familiar interpretation of poverty as resulting from the vicious circle of high fertility, early labour and ignorance (see for India, Ramanathan, 2000), and offer no more than support to empower people to ‘help themselves’.

A rights approach that shifted the focus from the state as distributor of public goods to the child as endowed with abstract universal rights, disembedded from the wider context, helped justify the state’s disengagement with social and cultural reproduction. As I will now turn to discuss, this disengagement was not only in the direct interest of the southern elites who acquired power as mediators of northern funds. It was more generally conducive to guarantee the stability of the ‘competitive advantage’ of the global south at the heart of the new international political economy.

**Disciplining the Global Womb**

Its vast reservoir of cheap labour is arguably the essence of the ‘competitive advantage’ that enables Southern elites to participate in the globalised economy (Fallon, 1998). In this section I argue that this advantage is, as of old, contingent upon preventing children from being directly employed in the labour market.

Though in-depth studies have remained scarce, anthropologists have recurrently analysed children’s work in the context of local cycles of exchange. In the early 1980s, Pamela Reynolds worked for instance among the Tonga of the Zambezi valley in Zimbabwe, a starving population whose economy seriously suffered from the combined effect of a lack of water (due to the construction of a large dam) and the exclusion from the use of commons for hunting (due to the creation of a wildlife sanctuary) (Reynolds, 1991, p. xxiv). As their work is intertwined with adults’ and with the local structure of subsistence farming, Reynolds contends that children:

... provide the adjustable labour during periods of intense farming activity, and that women depend upon their children’s assistance. Women and children perform as work units and it is these work units that are sometime called upon by men to provide labour in the field. Women direct children’s labour. While many children do not work as hard as adults nor achieve as much, they perform other duties at the fields such as the preparation of meals and guarding of crops that, were it accounted for, might balance the labour accounts. Children under ten are kept busy attending to infants and toddlers. (Reynolds, 1991, p. 53)

My own research on girls’ ‘invisible’ work in the production of coir yarn in a Kerala coastal village corroborates that this work is often part of a production process that relies heavily on the need of poor women to feed their families. When men are thrown out of work or migrate to distant fishing grounds the family relies mainly
upon the earnings from coir yarn to make ends meet (Nieuwenhuys, 1994, 121 ff). Few girls are aware that they actually contribute, as I was able to compute during my fieldwork, between 60 and 70% of the labour necessary to make the finished product. In spite of this, even the poorest household’s yearly income from coir yarn rarely exceeds 10% of their total earnings. The surprising survival of this ancient handicraft is only possible, I argue, because of the availability of girls working for inconsequential returns that are acceptable because they are enhanced by the moral value enshrined in the work. But this labour of love in no way stands in the way of the coir business’ profitability, and this is crucial. For a holder of capital, investing in coconut husks is just as profitable as any other investment in the rural economy, and enables to realize profits as high as 10–15% a month. These profits are only possible because of poor women’s and girls’ heavy dependency on the manufacture of coir yarn for a living, which compels them, in the absence of alternatives, to buy husks at prices that severely curtail the income they can realize after they have been processed into yarn. Not that husks are rare or highly valuable: in those parts of India where there is no coir making, husks are used as cheap fuel, and near to worthless. It is then the labour of love that they are capable of absorbing by being turned into coir yarn by poor women and their daughters that turn husks into alluring objects of investment and enables the local dealers to realize their profits. The economy of the village can clearly not cope without the insertion, on other than purely economic grounds, of girls’ labour of love in the making of the coir yarn. This insertion is itself part of a larger family strategy that supports and favours the successful competition of antediluvian forms of production against the threat posed by the rationality of the market.

Recent anthropological studies confirm this pattern of intergenerational sharing of responsibilities and work allocation in rural societies in Guatemala (De Suremain, 2000), Mexico (Bey, 2003; Taracena, 2003), Togo (Lange, 2000), Ghana (Van Haer, 1982), Nigeria (Schildkrout, 2002; Robson, 2004) and South Africa (Levine, 1999) as well as urban communities in for example northeast Brazil (Hecht, 1998; Kenny, 1999), Thailand (Montgomery, 2002), Peru (Invernizzi, 2001) and India (Swaminathan, 1998; Bukhut, 2005). These studies substantiate that children’s work cannot be understood in isolation from the totality of activities that make up local economies and that it appears far more crucial in the lives of the poor than common wisdom holds it to be. These studies also substantiate that employment is not the ubiquitous way the children of the poor are exploited. Children remain firmly attached to their primary role as carers, while also providing very essential services in the sphere of subsistence and helping produce the raw materials and manufactures that drive global economic growth. It is then precisely its being couched in the moral economy of the family, with its preoccupation with subsistence and the preservation of life rather than with economic gain, that makes for the ubiquitous way in which children’s work is embedded and acquires its meaning.

What are we then to make of the avalanche of casework bringing the global sweatshops, where nimble fingers would provide the ultimate source of capitalist gain, to the limelight? The problem is that this casework tells us very little about the incidence of sweated child labour while it is so overshadowed by moral outrage to become virtually useless to the more serious researcher. This type of casework is chiefly concerned with walling off acceptable from unacceptable forms of child work and tells us very little about the lifeworlds in which they are embedded. As if children’s everyday toil would be too banal to warrant attention, the spotlight is on the exceptional, extreme cases. Why this is so is, I feel, chiefly a matter of establishing an illusionary social order that naturalizes children’s lifeworlds in the global south. Striking largely unconscious emotional chords,
global child labour touches on sensitivities belonging to the collective imagination of the groups they address. The collective memory about child labour in the north is alive and its message is straightforward: Global child labour is both source and symptom of untold misery. Economic growth, welfare and consumption would only be possible if children are removed from the labour market. The ILO eloquently translates the emotions in the following way:

Child labour is clearly detrimental to individual children, preventing them from enjoying their childhood, hampering their development and sometimes causing lifelong physical or psychological damage; it is also detrimental to families, to communities and to society as a whole. As both a result and cause of poverty, child labour perpetuates disadvantage and social exclusion. It undermines national development by keeping children out of school, preventing them from gaining the education and skills that would enable them as adults to contribute to economic growth and prosperity. (ILO, 2002, p. 1)

What is proposed here is in fact a simple recipe based on the idea that the south can copy what the north achieved. Enough has been written on how a growing inequality in the distribution of world’s resources feeds the orgy of consumption among the happy few both in the north and among the elites in the south while exacerbating poverty among children for me to repeat it here. What is more important is to read today’s globalisation process and its preoccupation with child labour as a renewed engagement with the problematic of life production under capitalist conditions which emerged in the industrial north during The Great Transformation (Polanyi, 2001). Arguably, if children in the global south would massively engage in paid labour on any significant scale, adults would have to be paid more, as they would need to buy food, piped water and cooking gas, and, what is more important, hire nannies and nurses in addition to save for their old age and pay for their children’s education. In the ethnographic studies mentioned above, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that in many part of the rural south children contribute to the maintenance of teachers and school buildings by offering free labour on school gardens or during school improvement days. Were this work unavailable the costs of primary schooling would dramatically rise. Because children will, in time, also offer old-age support and produce new children for care-work of the elderly, the whole issue of pensions does not even arise. Were children only to work against payment, raising them would, in short, undermine the competitive advantage that drives today’s globalization.

Globalisation has opened up ways of tapping a steady stream of disposable adult labour through temporary immigration (the ‘nanny chain’) and outsourcing (the ‘global assembly line’). This labour is cheap because it is embedded in a family economy where women, the elderly, and particularly children provide a host of services for free that families in the north must buy in the open market. Notwithstanding family wages, social security, child-care, free education and medical care, pensions and housing schemes, children are much less available for this kind of services in the north and tend therefore to become an increasingly prohibitive ‘luxury’.

As an example that this is not the case in the south, one could take the discussion on ‘informal safety nets’ that followed on the critiques of IMF-led structural adjustment programmes. World Bank economists successfully claimed that where patterns of subsistence farming, mutual help in child care, the exchange of services and loans among neighbours and kin and so on are at work, in short where the family economy is still well in place as is widely the case in the global south, governments need not only provide additional welfare services but can safely ‘do more with less’ (Haddad, 1996; Ruel, 1999). What the economists failed to highlight was that children, who form anything between 50 and 70% of
the population in the global south, play a crucial role in all these activities. In the same
vein, the ILO brushes away:

... activities such as helping their parents care for the home and family, assisting in a
family business or earning pocket money outside of school hours and during school
holidays. (ILO, 2002, p. 15)
as not being ‘child labour’ but beneficial child work. Similarly, the World Bank believes that:

Not all child labour is harmful. Many working children are within a stable and nurturing
environment with their parents or under the protection of a guardian and can benefit in
terms of socialisation and from informal education and training ... (Fallon, 1998, p. 5)
The problem then is not with the mundane, necessary work for life production, but with its
preservation. It is in this key that one should read the policies put in place to deal with
global child labour: as ways of naturalizing children’s lifeworlds as sites where the extreme-
ly low-cost labour on which the new international political economy is premised would
be unproblematically reproduced.

Concluding Remarks

In the new world order that emerged after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the south was
not merely allotted the role of provider of low-cost labour but, more importantly, of life
producer. The centrality of life production lays bare how the family economy not only
feeds market demands for people but also preserves and reproduces life itself over
longer periods of time. What unfolded in the 1990s was a dramatically different represen-
tation of child labour than the historical one: from an internal social problem of nations
states, it became an international relations issue dividing the world between the highly
developed north and the low-income, low-labour standards but above all life producing
south. The period of economic reform and market liberalisation of the 1990s brought in
its wake a marked weakening of the autonomy of newly independent nations and
growing northern intervention in their economic, political and social affairs. Images of suf-
ferring southern children multiplied, feeding a steady current of texts on the need to rescue
and rehabilitate children apparently abandoned both by their own parents and their govern-
ments. Global child labour was part of this wider northern call to intervene in the south, but
addressed particular constituencies and had specific repercussions on the division of
labour between life producing and life consuming economic spheres.

For the vast majority of children in the south, global child labour reproduces the old colo-
nial representation of the colonized as an endless source of labour power produced for free in
the mythical moral economy of peasant families. But it also transforms this representation
insofar that it disarticulates childhood from earlier territorial projects. The limen (Turner,
1970) or borderline between the global womb and global childhood is gradually shifting to
new landscapes of symbolic power most clearly observable in the multiplication of media-
tized child saving rituals. Of course globalisation also undermines this new world order,
making it increasingly necessary for young men and women to seek supplementary
sources of wealth through migration. But children are much less part of this movement
and have remained overwhelmingly in the rural countryside or in the urban shantytowns.
Demonstrating their ability to effectively deter autonomous children from leaving the
global womb in order to invent childhood practices of their own, NGOs play a crucial role
in peddling global childhood representations between reluctant communities and local
elites, ritually staking out the mythical social order that embed the lifeworlds of today’s
children.
Note

1. From the moment that children’s protection is left to market forces, combating crime takes precedence above fulfilling even the most pressing social needs. It is yet too soon however to say if ILO Convention 182, as some critics have suggested, is in fact a legalisation of child labour, but what is clear is that failure to introduce core labour standards in the WTO means that violations of ILO Convention 182 cannot be the object of sanctions on equal footing with violations of WTO rules.

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