The Politics of Aging:
Globalization and the Restructuring
of Youth and Childhood

Sue Ruddick
Department of Geography, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada;
smrud@sympatico.ca

This paper explores the ways that constitutive elements of globalization—including a celebration of risk, reduction in state funding for social reproduction in developed nations and pressures to modernize in underdeveloped ones—are being “smuggled in” in the guise of new discourses around youth and childhood. Far from being a byproduct of capitalism in its various phases, youth and childhood can be located at its literal and figurative core.

In a crude characterization of the global map as it has emerged in over the past twenty years, one would find a world drawn roughly into three parts—and in each of these parts, youth and childhood is being restructured in a distinct way. These divisions look suspiciously like the earlier global models of developed, developing and underdeveloped nations, but the nature of the exclusions that sustain them spell particularly bad news for the world’s young people. Modern ideals of youth and childhood that became hegemonic in the West over the past century are being exported to non-Western contexts in which resources to adequately reproduce these forms are sadly lacking. At the same time, in Western settings over the past two decades, such resources have been eroded for children and young people, and celebrated aspects of “youthfulness” have been displaced to adults to justify lifelong learning and the increasing assumption of risk by older workers.

The paper urges a move away from the study of behaviors of “children and adults” as static categories and towards an exploration of shifting norms and forms of “childhood and aging” as dynamic processes that both help to constitute and are constituted by a new political economy.

Worlds Apart: Theories of Globalization and Theories of Youth and Childhood

The idea that one could, or even should, attempt to create links between theories of globalization and theories of youth and childhood would probably seem strange or even naïve to many scholars invested in exploring shifting political economies on a global scale. Surely, they might ask, both the scale and domain of these two processes naturalizes their divide and makes such a project unworkable? Global transformations, it seems, speak to newly emerging contours of economic, political and institutional arrangements on a grand scale and within the public sphere. The social reproduction of children and youth, by contrast, takes place at the local or national level at best and historically has often been relegated to the private and/or domestic sphere. Granted, specific
“global projects” such as international debates on child labour and the position of the World Bank on education speak directly to the conditions of children. And from an ethical and humanist perspective, one might consider the impacts of structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other such initiatives on the social, economic and cultural well-being of children as a defence of those least able to speak for themselves (pace Qvortrup 1993).

But beyond this (they might argue), how could concepts of youth and childhood do anything analytically to inform our understanding of processes of globalization? To make such a claim is to challenge well patrolled conceptual divides—between the global and the local, between production and social reproduction, between the public and the private, between the “clean models of economics” and the “dirty hands of sociology” (pace Hirsch, Michaels and Friedman 1990). But I would argue that it is precisely the enormity of the apparent space between these two discourses that makes their links more insidious and worthy of investigation. We will be better informed to critique and challenge particular aspects of globalization if we understand how some of its constitutive elements are being “smuggled in” (as I will elaborate below) in the guise of new discourses around youth and childhood: that is, we will better understand the bases on which aspects of new social formations catalyzed by processes of “globalization” come to be viewed, in fact, as normal.

What I will do in this paper is explore the ways that modern notions of “youth” and “childhood” are being broadly reframed in relation to a new political geography of nations—both responding to and helping to shape the ways social formations at a variety of scales are being included in or excluded from the contemporary “global system”. It is not possible to trace out these transformations in their entirety. But I will examine three different positionings of youth and childhood as they are being exported, eroded, or distended, both in Third World countries excluded from the global economy and in Western nations and regions increasingly embedded within it. The irony here is that modern ideals of youth and childhood that became hegemonic in the West over the past century are being exported to non-Western contexts in which resources to adequately reproduce these forms are sadly lacking. At the same time, in Western settings over the past two decades, such resources have been eroded for children and young people, and celebrated aspects of “youthfulness” have been displaced to older workers. This increasingly differentiated set of policies for youth and children acts as a medium for specific agendas around globalization. On the one hand, they justify neoliberal agendas, which reduce state costs of social reproduction for both young and old in the West as part of a broad agenda to enhance international competitiveness through “fiscal responsibility”. On the other, they demand that non-Western
countries follow and fund a “Western” path to modernization as part of an agenda to enhance competitiveness in the development of skilled labour markets.

**Forms and Norms of Modern Youth and Childhood**

Modern “childhood” and “youth”, as strictly age-graded phases in the life cycle, require supervision and training in an array of institutional contexts, from schools to camps to recreational programmes. The emergence of this form at the turn of the last century in Europe and North America had strong links to the anxieties of a growing middle class in Western industrializing nations. For this class, the rise of industrial capitalism required a shift in strategies of social reproduction towards an increasingly educated (male) progeny, as the path into clerical and managerial work was directed increasingly through the classroom and away from the “shop floor”.

With this shift, middle-class families discovered newly created dangers of “class mixing” of their children with their lower-income counterparts. Norms of youthful behavior once valued in pre-modern times and shared by youth of all classes now became unworkable. For instance, youthful precocity—embodied in the urge to strike out on one’s own, to avoid schooling and seek fame and fortune in the style of Pip in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*—was no longer the path to success, but risked entrapment in “dead end” jobs. The corresponding precocious adoption of adult mannerisms, once a herald of potential success, now became a signal of possible delinquency. Modern adolescence—a particular form of youth characterized by a state of prolonged emotional, psychological and economic dependency—can be seen, then, to have birthed its doppelganger—juvenile delinquency (Gillis 1981; Keniston 1970; Kett 1977; Platt 1969; Ruddick 1996).

It is equally important to consider the norms of modern youth and childhood, as these are, in the current period, being reorganized and displaced along the life course, as I will argue below. One of the century-long enduring mythologies of adolescence as a “rite of passage” in the West depicts it as a period of storm and stress subject to wide, hormonally induced mood swings and the solidification of values and a sense of self. Adolescence was viewed as a time of psychological stabilization and personality formation (Erikson 1968), development of core values (Berger 1963a, 1963b) or resolution of focal concerns in stages (Coleman 1961; Matza 1964).

Adulthood was achieved in the resolution—in appropriate timing and sequence—of focal concerns central to the formation of youthful identities, solidification of values and achievement of social and economic independence. Those who departed from this model were considered juvenile delinquents. But juvenile delinquents were considered, almost universally, to be candidates for rehabilitation. Many
of the social institutions that emerged in the last century, including the juvenile justice system, were intended to achieve this goal (Ruddick 1996:23–26, 79–89). Equally important was the idea that career aspirations—for boys, at least—and ideas of the self were a focus of intense experimentation during this stage of the life cycle; or, as Talcott Parsons (1949) put it, “a dynamism or the delirious multiplication of the possibilities of self”. The resolution of this delirium (apparently) marked the transition to adulthood.

Concerns about the instability of modern childhood and youth have, of course, been present from the conception of these models since their beginning, confirming current suspicions that, far from being the automatic outcome of a natural nuclear family, these have always been tenuous constructions at best. Modern childhood and youth have always depended on a battalion of social services, state infrastructures and prescriptive literatures (in addition to the naturalized nuclear family) to sustain them. In retrospect, the social reproduction of children and youth in this modern imaginary was clearly sustained by an impressive array of public institutions that were part and parcel of the Keynesian welfare state. The transition to adulthood was, moreover, effectively “guaranteed” until recently by rising employment and the seemingly limitless possibilities of white-collar jobs.

Far from being a byproduct of industrial capitalism, then, modern youth and childhood can be located at its literal and figurative core (pace Stephens 1995). Viewed another way, one can see how the need to protect and sequester young people helped to generate and justify many of the social relations associated with the rise of industrial capitalism. The sequestered raising of children and their training in public institutions encouraged, among other things: a hardening of distinctions in the gender division of labour; in North America, the proliferation of modern suburbs, inspired by Clarence Perry’s (1929) neighborhood unit as the quintessential space of childrearing (Mackenzie 1980); and the expansion of a plethora of institutional and professional contexts geared to the social reproduction of such suburbs. In Western nation-states, the last century witnessed the generalization of the norms and forms of modern youth and childhood, at least in principle accessible to all classes, reaching its zenith by the 1950s, the golden age of Fordism.

I do not want to leave the impression that these forms of youth and childhood have simply followed “larger” economic industrial transformation. There is much evidence to suggest that the social relations arising in one period were drawn upon in often unexpected ways that helped to constitute the next. Throughout the 1800s, for instance, the erosion of handicrafts and the rise of manufacturing that made use of unskilled labour was achieved, not insignificantly, through the relentless exploitation of proletarian children and women as a key factor in accumulation processes (Marx 1967:266–277).
It is an accepted part of the history of industrial capitalism that women and children played a seminal role in the rise of “modern industry”; as Marx so forcefully stated, “The labour of women and children … was the first thing sought for by capitalists who used machinery…. Machinery, by throwing every member of that family on to the labour market, spreads the value of the man’s labour power over his whole family. It thus depreciates his labour power” (Marx 1967:372–373). Of course, the problematic notion that the man’s labour power is “naturally” depreciated by the use of women and children has been the subject of much criticism by feminists, but the political implications of using the badly paid labour of women and children to undercut both earlier social forms of manufacture and rates of remuneration among the adult males were clear.

Curiously, the role of adolescent labour is rarely acknowledged in the founding mythologies around flexible accumulation, although the high rates of competition between adult women and adolescents for “teenage jobs” (Kalachek 1969, 1973) were evident in the rise of flexible work arrangements in the postwar period. In fact, the flexibility of this reserve labour force fueled the possibilities for developing new forms of work. As one scholar put it, by the late 1960s “there was a need to provide more jobs for teenagers, but not just any jobs would do. Part-time and part-year jobs were needed” (Kalachek 1973:128). In the postwar period, student labour-force participation in the US and Canada rose from less than 4% for 16-year-old in-school adolescents to almost 30% by 1970, which many analysts associate with the “growth of part time work, associated growth in service industries and greater managerial sophistication in using part-time workers” (Reubens, Harrison and Rupp 1981:187). And these new forms of work were made possible to a large extent by a burgeoning adolescent culture of consumption and the availability of young people to work part time, after school, on weekends and through the summer months. Through the 1950s, the Fordist system of accumulation helped simultaneously—in North America, at least—to produce an adolescent culture of consumption and a reserve of part-time labour that became part of the basis for its demise.

**Global Positioning: Restructuring of Youth and Childhood in the Contemporary Global System**

How can a global system, however partial in its truly internationalized features, manage when two thirds of its population is systematically excluded from the benefits of that system whilst the prosperity it generates is increasingly concentrated amongst the already employed and successful wealthy 14 percent of the world and a few client states? (Hirst and Thompson 1996:72)
The tenuous stability of Western, modern forms of youth and childhood described in the previous section was predicated in part on national Fordist systems of regulation. As the integrity of the nation-state has come under assault by an apparently more mobile capital, the pretense to a universal form of youth and childhood has been more difficult to sustain.

Many scholars are quick to point out, however, that economic globalization as characterized by the widening of capitalist social relations, “McDonaldization” and the enhanced mobility of transnationals is, at best, a premature prediction (Gertler 1997; Hirst and Thompson 1996). In fact, over the past forty years, and with increased intensity since the 1980s, the global reach of world capitalism is actually receding in terms of immigration and “real integration” of economies—although there is considerable debate as to the reasons for this (see Woodward 1998 passim). The contemporary landscape of globalization is characterized, it appears, by increasing economic divergence between (and within) nations and regions that are integrated into the global economy and those that are excluded.

In a crude characterization of the global map as it has emerged in over the past twenty years, one would find a world drawn roughly into three parts—and in each of these parts, youth and childhood is being restructured in distinct ways. Within the first cluster—developed nations—social, institutional and economic arrangements are deepening, accelerating and intensifying, stimulated by growth of information technologies, new divisions of labour and the creation of supraregional trading blocs involved, in varying degrees, in new modes of governance (Hoogevelt 1992). However, even within this group, economic convergence of per capita incomes has slowed down or stopped altogether (UNCTAD 1997).

The second cluster is a smaller number of developing nations, a “convergence club” of countries the GDP per capita at market exchange rates of which is converging with those of developed countries, limited to those nations with sufficient capital and human resources to take advantage of technological change (Baumol, Nelson and Wolff 1994; Woodward 1998). This group includes East Asia and, to some extent, Southeast Asia, where income shares of the poorest 40% have become stable.

A third group of nations remains caught in a low-income, low-education trap—particularly sub-Saharan African and parts of South America, which from the 1960s, and more sharply since the mid 1980s, have fallen deeper into poverty by any conventional measure. Eighty percent of the world’s poorest inhabitants remain concentrated in these 12 nations (Woodward 1998). Sometimes this convergence is limited to subnational regions: the world’s poorest countries, such as India, often exhibit islands of “First World” economic activity (Agnew
and Corbridge 1995; King 1990). Within these countries, one can find widening levels of regional disparity and deepening levels of poverty, leading some to term this model “growth without equity” (Perez-Bustillo and Cervantes 1997).

These divisions look suspiciously like the earlier global models of developed, developing and underdeveloped nations. What is new, however, is the nature of the exclusions that sustain them. And these exclusions spell particularly bad news for the world’s young people. The increasingly stringent barriers to immigration of unskilled labour erected by Westernized developed countries present a twofold problem: for the first sector, Western countries, which enjoy a deepening of capitalist social relations that are part of contemporary globalization; and for the third sector, the poorest nations, who are subject to exclusionary policies.

Dropping birth rates and increasingly aging populations characterize Western countries. Young, skilled adults—traditionally positioned as the leading edge of modernization—are in short supply. Here, prolonged education and retraining has distended the definition of “youth” for some to close to middle age. At the same time, the increasingly privatized costs of social reproduction mean that other young people, particularly “youth at risk”, exit more quickly into adulthood.

For poorer nations, immigration historically has functioned as a safety valve for unskilled labour, both at the turn of the last century and in the postwar period. But current barriers to mobility of people from underdeveloped countries mean that poorer people are trapped in place, able neither to escape their circumstances nor to support others through funds send back to homelands (Katz nd). And in these developing countries, we find roughly nine out of ten of the world’s children—or 87% (UNICEF 1997:24).

The processes and politics of exclusions linked to globalization, therefore, are mapped as much onto divisions between old and young as onto those between rich and poor, white and nonwhite. Political agendas around social reproduction intersect with the exigencies of population in such ways that some peoples come to be thought of as “necessary” or “surplus”. As I will argue below, it is in these global positionings—the confluence of different economic, political and cultural projects around globalization—that notions of modern youth and childhood are being transformed. This increasingly differentiated set of policies for youth and children acts as a medium for specific agendas around globalization.

**Modern Childhood Exported: Absent Modernisms**

**and Child Poverty in the Third World**

That Western concepts of youth and childhood were intrinsically implicated in the project of modernity somehow becomes “obvious”
when that project is displaced from its Western context to other settings. The struggle for the hearts and minds of children has been central to colonialism, both in Third World countries and in the internal colonization of native peoples of North America and Australia. With a new sensitivity to difference, anthropologists, ethnographers and sociologists are beginning to chart the extent of psychocultural wreckage produced by forced adoption of children, prohibition of the speaking of native languages and other transgressions wreaked in the name of progress. And yet, in the West, unless presented in this exceptional form, socialization processes of childhood and adolescence appear natural almost to the point of invisibility. It is this conceptual vacuum that has given the famalist policies of the right so much purchase.

If I sift back through the countless images of the Third World that have confronted me through the media—television, magazines and fliers sent to my house—one persistent iconography dominates. This is the tight-shot close-up photograph of a single child—usually (apparently) not older than ten or eleven, looking, wide-eyed, directly into the camera. This photo is not a portrait: it does not communicate distinctive characteristics of the child. This “Child” comes to stand as the universal child of developing nations, disconnected from context, with few clues as to his or her culture or background. To the extent it is included, context simply signifies excessive and incessant labour and/or poverty. What I am asked to consider is this child’s aloneness—his/her absolute dependence upon me as funder, political supporter, volunteer for his/her welfare. Support mechanisms—kinship structures, village context—are absent.

This absence intrigues me: it makes invisible a context that might be disrupted by my intervention, and it allows me to fill the emptied space with fantasies of my own idealized interpretation of childhood. Moreover, it is precisely this context in which I am asked to collude—the construction of buildings around the child are imagined structures of the modern world. I am in no position to decide whether my intervention will improve the life of this child and, if so, according to whose standards. The images disturb me for their absence as much as their presence: it is the absences that allow us to fill the void with the reimaginings of a Western childhood. (See Figure 1.) Early UNICEF publications share this iconography. They make wistful references to a (usually unspecified) larger project of modernization, the “something more” that becomes implicated with the dispensing of mere antibiotics, the provision of clean water and other basics deemed essential to the survival of children they target (UNICEF 1963).

What is at stake here is not the improved physical welfare of children, but the modes by which this is achieved. This presence and absence allows me to avoid complex questions about transgressions that might emerge from this intervention—the ways in which my/our
vision of childhood might conflict with complex roles in the host country, or the child’s village or neighborhood (see also Malkki 1994). It allows me to think of the wholesale “gift” of modernist structures as the “solution”.

By emptying these images of childhood of their supporting social cultural and economic context, we (in the West) are allowed a persistent vision of modernity (increasingly difficult to map explicitly onto other realms), which slips in via the back door. The ideal childhood can only be achieved in developing countries, it seems, through aid that builds the infrastructure of modern society.

Images of Third World child poverty appear disembodied from their context in First World campaign appeals for aid. But in the case of Third World child labour, the engagement of tropes of childhood are rather directly implicated in a new space-economy of globalizing capitalism, which (ironically) ties together more tightly links between production in Third World countries and consumption in the First World. Here, the ghosts of First World youth and children—nostalgic imaginings—haunt transglobal policies affecting the labour of Third World children in a variety of ways.

The issue of child labour is, of course, not new to policy analysts or scholars, including scholars of geography. And it is challenging our thinking in the West around many constructs that are fundamental to modern Western society, including the definition of childhood, the nature of work, play schooling and apprenticeship (see eg Katz 1991, 1998; Roberts 1998; Robson 1999). These are important issues. Child labour comes in many forms. International Labour Organization (ILO) definitions follow a distinctly Western model, counting labour as paid economic activity, but one can extend this definition to include others. There are children, mostly girls, who act as caregivers (Robson 1998), children who work as beggars, shoe-shiners, day labourers—with estimates
running around 80 million worldwide (Aptekar 1994; Schepers-Hughes and Hoffman 1992)—and children whose labour does not fit the Western distinctions between work and play but interweaves aspects of training, help in household economies and other kinds of socialization (Katz 1991, 1998). But it is particular forms of child labour that have caught the imagination of policy-makers in the West. These forms fit our collective historical memory of Dickensian child factory work. What interests me is that First World interest in and concern over child labour has grown over the past ten years, even as child labour itself has been decreasing overall worldwide since the 1950s.

Macro data such as that provided in Table 1, however, has to be treated with some caution. It does not include part-time labour, which would double existing estimates (ILO 1996). Nor does it include work within the household, which in micro studies has tripled existing estimates (Basu 1998), and may tend to underreport child labour in countries where such labour is banned. Moreover, where the amount of child labour is rising, direct connections can be made to contemporary processes of global economic restructuring. Individual studies suggest that participation rates for children are highest in countries that form part of the low-wage, low-education trap and the ones suffering most from exclusion from the new global economy. Participation rates in Africa nations rose through the 1980s (Basu 1998), often linked to the impacts of structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (ILO 1992; Robson 1999; UNICEF 1997).

These caveats aside, the decline in child labour and our growing concern over it in the West suggests that some other dynamics are at work that bear investigation. From the turn of the last century, child-savers appeared to be responding in part to a nostalgic reimagining of

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the idyllic qualities of rural, premodern youth and childhood as they devised policies and infrastructures to “save” modern children from the evils of the modernizing city (Ruddick 1996:24–25, 79–90).

At the turn of this century, it would appear, marketing strategies branding specific commodities—especially sports articles and apparel—with qualities of youthfulness and child-likeness make these commodities more susceptible to campaigns against child labour than are other commodities. More often, it is child labour that produces goods for the playtime of others—First World children—or situations in which commodities produced have been branded with qualities of youthfulness or child-likeness that have provoked particular outrage. The utilization of tropes of youth and childhood as a marketing tool is nowhere more apparent than in sports and apparel industries such as Nike, Reebok, Adidas and Calvin Klein. Here, the sale of running shoes, jeans and the like have been linked consciously to images of youthful energy and sexuality in an effort to capture not only the youth market but the youthful consumer market as well. Celebration of risk and hedonism figure strongly here, placing these enterprises firmly in the category of “hip consumerism” (pace Frank 1997).

Although the activities of Nike in this regard are by now widely publicized, they bear further investigation, precisely because the company so aptly represents the ways in which the construct of youthfulness has become both a strategy of representation and a source of contention all along the commodity chain. From the depiction of its company to the hiring of its staff to the targeting of its markets, the Nike corporation has been one of the more aggressive in using images of youth, youthfulness and the play of children to sell its product and its company. It has led its sector in market revenues, topping US$1 billion dollars in 1986 and $3 billion by 1991. And it has gone to considerable expense to do so: the majority of Nike’s expenditures are in research and marketing, not in production.

Nike’s use of youthful imagery extends beyond the marketing of product. Nike’s “I can” ad campaign, featuring young (ordinary) children engaged in sports activities as we witness them socializing themselves to train and compete in a range of sports, is perhaps the most obvious. “We connect the Nike brand to our consumer: emotionally, culturally, and with local relevance. When an 8-year-old makes her first basket or scores his first goal, that little yelp of joy sounds the same in every language” (Nike 1998). It has also engaged in “good-will” campaigns, such as the PLAY initiative (Participate in the Lives of America’s Youth), touted as a multimillion-dollar campaign to improve recreational opportunity for young people. And the language of youth and youthfulness saturates not only Nike’s ad campaigns but also its promotion of its own stock. For instance, in its annual report, Nike boasts confidently: “If Europe is our still-growing
adolescent, and Asia Pacific our precocious youngster, then the Americas region, made up of Latin America and Canada, is our serene toddler. A region replete with a huge population under the age of 25 with a fervent love of sports. Our kind of town” (Nike 1998).

But this strategy of youthful celebration is a two-edged sword, as consumers of the products and child-welfare advocates have used both the advertising and the new spaces of consumption or community engagement and even corporate web pages as rallying points for protest around both the messages marketed along with these products and the means of their production (see Roberts 1997, 1998). Other corporations are not immune from attack: Calvin Klein, for instance, was roundly criticized for its use of teenage models whose appearance seemed to endorse “heroin chic” (National Families in Action 1997). Prominent sports figures have, after acting as spokespersons for Nike, condemned the company for selling overpriced shoes to inner-city American children and youth but contributing to high levels of unemployment in those same neighborhoods by taking employment opportunities elsewhere and producing the same shoes with child labour in Third World countries. Playgrounds funded by sports companies and flagship stores such as Niketown have been rallying points for protest and pamphleteering against their labour practices. Children’s soccer leagues have been pressured to support fair labour practices in production of soccer balls (Campaign for Labour Rights 1997; Dignity in Labour).

Protests against child labour are laudable. In its extreme, child labour cripples the body and dulls the mind. But following the commodity chain is a risky business, in terms both of the unintended consequences that result when policies are applied without attention to context and of the difficulties that arise in enforcing codes of conduct. At times, transnational activities such as a wholesale ban on child labour or the boycotting of specific commodities have had the effect of forcing children into more hazardous work conditions, prostitution or outright starvation. The Harkin Bill, introduced into the US Congress in 1992, (passed in 1993 as the Child Labor Deterrence Act) to prohibit the import of products made by children under 15, is a case in point. In its early stages, it was not clear whether the bill’s intent was to protect child workers abroad or adult labourers at home in the West (Basu 1998). And the bill’s impact on Nepalese female children was devastating, as the 50,000 children dismissed from their factories sought work in street hustling, stone crushing and prostitution (UNICEF 1997.)

Codes of conduct carry their own problems with them. Nike set up a code of conduct in 1991 and launched its own investigation to respond to critical publicity about labour practices in Indonesia and Vietnam. But it maintains an arms-length relationship with workers on the shop floor, subcontracting out manufacture in an arrangement
that leaves it only indirectly accountable. As late as 1996, Nike was still involved in use of child labour in manufacture of soccer balls in Pakistan. “It’s an ages-old practice”, was the blithe defense offered by Nike’s Donna Gibbs, referring to the use of bonded child labour in Pakistan (Campaign for Labor Rights 1997).

The focus on First World transnational corporations, laudable though it is, can be easily circumvented. Subcontractors of sports equipment and apparel are often involved in production for several different First World corporations at the same time. For example, the Yu Yuan factory in Dongguan, Taiwan employs some 40,000 workers at a single site.

Reportedly the largest footwear factory in the world, it produces ten of the world’s top brand-name sports shoes and reportedly a third of the world’s Nike footwear. The Nike logo “Just Do It” covers the wall of one of the enterprise’s cavernous buildings. A huge “Adidas” sign sits atop an adjoining building. Other sports shoe brands that are produced in the same plant include Reebok, Puma, LA Gear, and New Balance. (Chan 1996)

This arrangement, and the ability it offers transnationals to distance themselves from their supplies and to play off one supplier against another, suggest that national or transnational policies around child labour are a better way to proceed than simply targeting individual corporations.

Following the “commodity chain” may provide important rallying points between the First and the Third World, but it also raises questions about what types of child labour are to be regulated, on what basis and by whom. Appeals to education as a source of protection and progrowth strategy also carry difficulties, although this is the new rallying cry of the World Bank, which attributes economic success stories in Asian countries to investment in primary education. In many of the poorest countries, however, child participation in education remains limited, not solely because child labour is needed to help in household economies, nor simply because the ancillary costs of education (such as books and supplies) make it prohibitive even if school itself is free, but also because the quality of education is so poor, and literacy rates so low, even for children who attend school, that parents simply do not see the advantages to keeping children in school (De and Dreze 1999).

**Youth and Childhood Eroded: Failed Modernisms of Youth and Childhood in the First World**

Any complacency about children and their place in society is misplaced, for the very concept of childhood has become problematic during the last decade. (James and Prout 1990:1)
The Feral Child

As tenacious as these images of Third World children are in Western representations, “modern childhood” and adolescence are rapidly disappearing from the landscapes of the Western world. The context of modernization that supports this particular vision of childhood, now exported to the Third World, has all but been abandoned in many Western nations.

The image here is not one of the discovery of the child in an inhuman insufferable context, but that of the lost child (see also Ivy 1995 on missing children)—lost to him- or herself first of all, reduced to a feral state, the child as predator. The idea of a “lost childhood” is, of course, in many ways not a new one. One can think back as far as Dickens’ horrific accounts of child labour in the workhouses and factories of industrializing Britain, or further back, to the proliferation of books devoted to the rearing of youth from the 1820s on, concerned with the need to control the passage of youth though puberty and the evils of the city. The “saving of children” has been a persistent and recurring project over at least the past two centuries.

What has changed is not the fact of child poverty or youth unemployment, but the nature of response to these perceived problems. A new language is emerging within social work and other child-saving professions in which overburdened teachers and caseworkers engage in discourses of containment. Problem youth and children are referred to as approaching “meltdown”, and the biologism that formed the underlying framework for turn-of-the-century models of adolescence returns with a vengeance in contemporary images of nature out of control. The family—the social support system that vanishes from Third World imagery—reappears in discussions of the American and British child, but it is implicated as the villain in the child’s decline, problematized as the reason for growing dimensions of social exclusion among poorer children and youth, whether in high drop-out and low literacy rates or in rising crime or growing unemployment (Ruddick 1996). A vilified modernity, the backdrop of the public housing project, becomes a contextual shorthand for a social system that fails children in the West. But (as Kotlowitz [1991] points out in his indictment of child poverty in the United States), ironically, the solution here is to abandon rather than rebuild. (See Figure 2.)

Here the issue has been reduced to one of personal choice or poor child-rearing practices of the family. In the US, California leads the way in this move, attempting over the past two decades to hold parents criminally responsible for the actions of their children and more recently passing Proposition 21, which subjects young offenders over the age of 14 to the possibility of lifetime imprisonment on conviction for a third criminal offense. In legal terms, the spectacularization of
crimes involving young children (as perpetrators as well as victims) has led to changes in the legal status of youth and children, often borrowing some of the more punitive features from adult criminal and justice systems without the corresponding rights and entitlements (Ruddick 1996; Steinhart 1982).

Economically, child poverty is becoming an increasingly common facet of modern industrialized countries. In many European countries, the presence of children is an increasingly reliable predictor of poverty in households. National averages, moreover, belie localized extremes, with race, migration and family status (especially lone parenthood) being good predictors of poverty among households with children (Council of Europe 1998). In the United States, which has led the way in public-sector retrenchments of services for youth and children, child poverty has increased 20% over the past two decades—up to 40% for children of black and Hispanic origin. Poverty is so pronounced in some inner-city areas of the US that mortality rates among children and infants have, at times, matched and surpassed those in the poorest Third World countries.

Moreover, the United States, which has the highest rate of child poverty after transfer payments of all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, is also a country where to be young and poor means, increasingly, to be nonwhite. Children under the age of 18 have had consistently higher rates of poverty than adults since the mid-1960s, with a dramatic widening of this gap since 1980, and the highest rates of poverty are to be found among children of black and Latino origin (Children’s Defense Fund 1994:3, 24) The United States is also the sole OECD country that has refused to sign the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

This has led to some curious “back talk” in First and Third World imagery and strategies. At times, child advocates in America—in a
curious postcolonial twist—call upon images of the Third World to buttress themselves behind African wisdom that “It takes a village to raise a child”. The extent of abandonment of First World children is brought up through constant comparison to that of Third World children. In Alex Kotlowitz’s *There Are No Children Here* (1991:7)—an evocative account of the life of two boys growing up in Henry Homer Heights, a public housing project in Chicago—he notes that infant mortality rates in the neighborhood were higher than in many Third World countries and the poverty so profound that in 1982, after a visit, Mother Teresa assigned nuns from her Missions of Charity to work there.

Australia, Canada and the UK have seen a rise in child poverty as well, to 9% by the late 1980s and climbing higher to between 10% and 15% by the mid-1990s. However, US figures far exceed the rates of child poverty in most European countries, which hover around 5%. This may lend credence to arguments that Western nation-states are able to achieve vastly different political compromises in the face of pressures for fiscal restraint. But demographics tell another tale. If we compare the population pyramids for the US and Germany (see Figure 3), it is clear that in the coming decades, the cost of social reproduction of young people will continue to dominate concerns of the policy landscape in North America, whereas in many European countries, the aging of the workforce is the more salient issue.

In social terms, childhood is further eroded as children are increasingly exposed to and implicated in heightened roles as consumers.

![Population pyramids](image-url)

*Figure 3: Population pyramids for the US and Germany*
This role includes children acting as consumers of goods in their own right. Aggressive marketing of toys no longer caters simply to holidays and birthdays as major moments of purchase; it simply occurs during the introduction of new product lines, with no seasonal rhythm. Child consumerism over the past two decades has been marked not only by an intensification of product cycles but also by increasingly integrated marketing strategies, with the launching of new and revamped cartoon characters and personalities systematically linked to the sale of toys, child’s clothing and furniture and the television and film industries (McDonnell 1994; Postman 1982). In wealthy Western countries over the past several years, purchasing cycles for toys are no longer limited to Christmas and birthdays, but to the introduction of new product lines as the “event” triggering acquisition. Market studies in both the US and the UK encourage the targeting of children in advertisements for general household products from dish detergent to automobiles, as market analysts come to recognize the increased role of children in influencing major purchases. US- and European-based marketing studies, although limited in their sample sizes, are mindful of the substantial influences children exert on parental purchasing decisions (Gregan-Paxton and John 1995; Hite and Hite 1995; Liebeck 1994; McNeal, Viswanathan and Yeh 1993; Rust 1993).

Youth Distended: The Aging Labour Force in Europe and North America

Life trajectories are becoming non-linear, i.e. at almost any moment in life one can “start from scratch” his/her family life, professional career, in other words, take decisions that are “normally” taken while one is “young”. (Council of Europe 1998)

In the 1960s and 1970s, a delayed transition from youth to adulthood (found, at the time, primarily among lower-class youth), produced concerns about the possibilities of deviancy that would arise from prolonged unemployment and lack of social integration into the labour force. Initially, rising unemployment among working-class youth from the mid-1960s until the 1980s gave rise to models of deviance, stigmatizing these youth for their “inability” to achieve the transition appropriately and raising concerns about depression, lowered self-esteem and delinquency. Scholars have looked to a range of factors to explain—and sometimes explain away—periodic fluctuations and increases in youth unemployment. These include spatial mismatch, rigidities in the market and impacts of globalization in cities (Trachte and Ross 1985; Waldinger and Bailey 1985). Models of intervention and policy responses were formulated with the intent of correcting these differences and achieving, at least in rhetoric, some more standardized norm, including an array of job creation and training programmes.
and repeated calls for various models of community service by youth (see eg Adams and Magnum 1978; Eberly 1977; Furnham 1985).

The Youthful Attitude
In the past fifteen years, however, some cracks have appeared in the conceptual foundations of deviancy theory. The ensuing discourse has shifted from a focus on *deviance from the model* to *deviancy of the model*, marking an abandonment of attempts at corrective action focussed either on the attitudes and behaviors of young people or outside “structural” factors. By the 1990s, it was the concept of the quick transition that had come under scrutiny, as middle and upper-class youth exhibited prolonged phases of dependence and no longer achieved the markers of adulthood in the “appropriate” order. This situation has led to new concepts of the life course in scholarly literature emerging in Europe and North America, including the idea of “postadolescence” (Cavalli and Galland 1995; Griffin 1993), a destandardizing of the youth phase (Olk 1988). In turn, British researchers note that “[W]e can no longer say at what age young people become adults, nor do we wish to—our concern is with trying to define the ways in which different groups of young people as accepted as ‘adult’ in different contexts” (Jones and Wallace 1992:4).

This challenging of the “youth phase” is not without precedent. Thirty years ago, sociologists were arguing for the delinking of our understanding of “youth culture”—associated with particular norms and behaviors (including hedonism, a propensity to risk, nonconformity)—from any stage in the life cycle. They argued in favour of “cultures of youthfulness” whose membership extended to people throughout the life course engaged in particular lifestyles (Berger 1963a, 1963b; Keniston 1970). It was thought that these cultures of youthfulness enabled individuals to perform particularly well in certain types of jobs and professions, including work as artists, musicians, professors, and art dealers (Berger 1963b). More recently, Thomas Frank (1997) has suggested that attributes of the values of the “counterculture” have been deflected, eviscerated and absorbed in a new culture of consumption that celebrates hedonism and risk.

I would argue that this value system has extended far beyond consumer practices to inflect cultures of work. In the restructuring of work—in particular, rising un- and underemployment, the need for prolonged education and new ideas around continual retraining and lifelong learning—youth has been more than simply the passive recipient of these transformations. Young and older adults in Western industrialized countries are increasingly encouraged to actively construct themselves as “youthful” in their ability to retool intellectually, to embrace uncertain career paths and—even in cultures of the body—to dress and discipline their bodies to appear younger, fitter and more energetic.
**The Youthful Body**

As Susan Wendell (1996) points out in her treatise on disability, gender is not the sole or even the dominant axis of corporeality. Diet, exercise and other disciplines of normality that produce contemporary bodies are often unmistakably oriented towards the recapture of youth or the slowing of the aging process. At its most extreme, cosmetic surgery “promises virtually all women (and men) the creation of beautiful, youthful-appearing bodies” (Morgan 1998:263). This intensified discipline of normalcy includes not only exaggerated standards of beauty but also new ideal levels of energy (Wendell 1996:90).

The dynamics producing this intensification are no doubt multiple and complex, evolving as they have over the past two centuries. At the most general level, one can attribute this process to an increasingly reflexive construction of self as an ongoing project in modernity whereby the body itself has become a focal point of personal identity: the body has come to signify the self (Giddens 1991; Prost 1991). But to understand the heightened significance of youthful bodies, we must trace a shifting social history in relation to particular changes in hegemonic body types. This includes the decline (for women) of the matron at the pinnacle of the Edwardian social hierarchy and a concomitant shift from fashions that enhanced and sexualized features of the matronly body, including the bosom, which positioned older women as “regal”, “magnificent” and representative of the feminine ideal. In this period, in fact, the predominant style of fashionable dress was designed with the older woman in mind: as one critic of the day noted, it was “only adapted for *jeunes filles* [in this case referring to young women in their late teens and twenties] and often very unsuitably at that” (Lucille in Steele 1985:222). It is not possible to trace this complex history in detail here. But the emancipation of women and their increased freedom both in the larger social world of men and the workplace has come with the enhanced popularity of a more puerile, androgynous body—emerging first with the popularity of the Gibson Girl and the flapper of the 1920s, and later with Twiggy and the successful corporate woman of the 1960s and 1980s. Part of this is undoubtedly linked to changing notions of masculinity and the changing landscape of heterosexism in the workplace.

A second axis has been the increasing mapping of desire and notions of the erotic onto the bodies of children, as argued in a series of provocative studies by Kincaid (1992). He (1992:210) notes that “[E]rotic children are manufactured—in the sense that we produce them in our cultural factories, the ones that make meaning for us”. They tell us what the “child” is and also what the “erotic” is:

Childhood in our culture has come to be largely a coordinate set of “have nots”: the child is *that which does not have*.... The construction
of the modern child is very largely an evacuation, the ruthless sending out of eviction notices. Correspondingly, the instructions we receive on what to regard as sexually arousing tell us to look for (and often create) this emptiness, to discover the erotic in that which is most susceptible to inscription, the blank page.... Children are defined and longed for according to what they do not have.... Innocence is what came to you in heaven or as a kind of prize ... Bodies are made to conform to this set of cultural demands ... (Kincaid 1992:211)

Kincaid’s linking of the eroticism of children to their simultaneous construction as void raises interesting questions about the relationship between this process and the struggles of women to contest this particular form of “othering”, challenging their construction as nature, empty vessel and the like. Surely there are connections between the historically recent ability of women to contest the role as “empty vessel” in the past half-century and the repositioning of children to fill the void. But even if this is the case, as both Wendell and Morgan suggest, women have not been able to fully escape this construction, now literally reshaping themselves as child-like or prepubescent in order to lay claim to a sexualized self.

Neither have men escaped. As one dominant image of idealized women’s bodies is increasingly “subfeminine”, evoking images of adolescence, the men’s ideal has become one of hypermasculinity, requiring chemically and programatically enhanced muscularity. In both cases, an increasing amount of so-called leisure time is devoted to the production and maintenance of a particular body. While body care varies widely between social classes and across regions, there is much evidence to suggest an extraordinary rise in time devoted to personal grooming (see eg Prost 1991).

Over the past three decades, contemporary culture in the United States, Canada and other Western countries has been marked by an increasingly aggressive packaging of youth-oriented pastimes and artifacts centered around the construction, adornment and testing of the body. The linking of extreme sports to the marketing of contemporary business technologies stands in sharp contrast to the signifiers of power for business elites a century ago.

The growth of gyms, bodybuilding and high-intensity and dangerous or “extreme” sports, as well as the intensification of conspicuous consumption, are all dimensions of this transformation. A cursory examination of the locations of major gyms, such as Bally, reveals that these gyms are most heavily clustered in Los Angeles and New York, sites of an aggressive transnational corporate culture. Youth, youthful bodies, youthful energy and creativity have become a defining ideal of contemporary Western culture.
The Youthful Career Path

The emergence of a secondary labour market employing youth in North America and Europe in the late 1960s was a testing ground for new labour practices, in particular the flexibilization of labour, as employers determined that young people—especially students—had weak labour force attachments. “Youth jobs” in fast foods and the like responded to this quality by providing employment with low incentives. The hiatus between school and permanent employment was often interpreted as a phase, allowing youths to engage in strategies to “find themselves” before settling into adult work and family responsibilities. From the 1980s on, however, the attenuated relationship of youth and young adults to the labour market and the increased difficulty of finding full-time permanent employment have become increasingly accepted conditions (see eg Fend 1994). The acceptance of characteristics associated with this impermanence—in particular, its state of unresolved uncertainty—has become normalized, transformed from a liberating moment, a great refusal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to a virtual requirement in the 1990s.

The distention of youth is also many-faceted, as young people delay “completion of the transition to adulthood” with increasingly long periods of unstable employment and education, but also as older adults increasingly retain qualities of youthfulness (a new kind of cultural capital) in order to ride out the vagaries of an increasingly competitive, flexible and short-term employment, trading on a new cultural capital—their youthful ability to sustain risk and to adapt. The wave of advertising depicting risk in business as comparable to risk in extreme sport (see Figure 4) is one variant of increased emphasis on youthfulness.

At this end of the spectrum, the transition to adulthood, with its associated markers of independence, has become increasingly uncertain. The traditional markers of adulthood—economic independence with

**Figure 4**: Businessman. O-029-0020 © David Stoecklein/CORBIS/MAGMA
the attainment of decent employment, marriage, family formation, leaving the family home—no longer follow in a tight, expected sequence in the mid-twenties. Young adults are increasingly returning home to live with their parents (Glick and Lin 1986; Shenan, Berardo and Berardo 1984); schooling is no longer a guarantee of secure, long-term employment.

In countries of the European Union (EU), which represents 6% of the world’s population and 20% of its total production, young adults in the workforce are in increasingly short supply. In northern European countries, young people tend to delay entry into the labour force, with participation rates falling steadily over the past decade, in part due to difficulties finding work and in part due to a desire to stay in full-time education and training programmes as long as possible. In southern member states, social exclusion is more the issue, as poorer, less-skilled young people fall out of the labour force altogether. The reduced number of young adults in the labour force presents a twofold dilemma. On the one hand, it limits the adaptability of business by reducing its capacity to draw on a young work force savvy in new technologies and new methods of work. On the other hand, it increases pressures on the systems of health and long-term care. Policy analysts no longer speak of a household wage but of growing dependency rates (the number of those 15 years old and over who are dependent on those who work).

With falling birth rates and increasingly aged populations, and a state in which increasingly flexible and rapidly changing technologies come face to face with an aging and less flexible workforce, EC policies increasingly call for lifelong learning as an “essential step” in preparing the EU for a new demographic perspective of a much slower growth and then a decline in the working-age population.

The era when youth looked forward to work and adults reminisced fondly about their school days is over. Now young people look back to their working days and adults ahead to schooling ... Young people find it increasingly difficult to “settle” in jobs and families for the well-known reasons of lack of financial resources and the shrunked labour market, but also for reasons of cultural change, and delay significantly transitory choices that are supposed to be made while one is (biologically) “young” and within a limited period of time. This makes it less evident to clearly identify youth as a transition stage, i.e. a life phase with unique and important characteristics. (Council of Europe 1998)

[The European Parliament and the Member States must also take account of the fact that 80% of the European labour force of the year 2000 is already on the labour market ... All measures must therefore
necessarily be based on the concept of developing, generalizing and systematizing lifelong learning and continuing training. This means that education and training systems must be rethought in order to take account of the need—which is already growing and is set to grow even more in the future—for the permanent decomposition and redevelopment of knowledge and know-how. The establishment of more flexible and more open systems of training and the development of individuals’ ability to adapt will become increasingly important, both for businesses, so that they can make better use of the technological innovations they develop or acquire, and for individuals, a considerable proportion of whom may well have to change their line of work four or five times during their lives. (Commission of the European Communities 1993)

Although the idea of lifelong learning is not a new one, its intersection with a neoliberal agenda of economic liberalism, particularly in the UK, suggests that the modern ideal of youth as a moment of celebration of risk—Parsons' notion of the “delirious multiplication of possibilities of self”—must now be restaged at several points along the life cycle.

Conclusion

The production of childhood and youth as local, bounded, protected processes should not be misread as evidence of their incidental relationship to “larger” economic processes. The restructuring of youth and childhood figured centrally in strategies for social reproduction in the transition from rural to industrial economies from the mid-1800s to the beginning of the last century, culminating in the emergence of a form of childhood and adolescence that became the idealized norm. The last century saw a radical restructuring of norms and forms of youth and childhood as a legitimating impulse for the labour force exigencies of industrial capitalism.

So, too, in the current era we are witnessing the demise of these forms and their rupturing and restructuring, as young people and young adults are being prepared for their inclusion into or exclusion from the new possibilities of a global economy. At a transglobal scale, we see the emergence of a new language of rights for young people. But in the context of a shrinking resource base for young people and children, whose vision do they ultimately serve? In what contexts are they relevant and applicable? And who decides?

There are enormous difficulties in reimagining new and possible futures for the world’s children and young people. “Globalization” presumes, in some places, to tie our lives more closely together, through more elaborate, intensive networks of trade and exchange and, in others, to separate us through more intransigent means of
exclusion. But we remain separated by cultures and continents, by vastly different understandings of what it is to be young, to be old. What is needed now is not a retreat into cultural relativism or the introduction of singular universal norms, forms or standards to which all must aspire, but rather the patient construction of more consistent and persistent connections. This is not an imposed ideal vision of the First World on the Third World, but an establishment of mutual and myriad connections that take into account varied contexts and resources.

Far from being extraneous to or even a byproduct of global transformations, these conflicts and re-representations of the nature of youth and childhood are at the very center of the struggle over hearts, minds and bodies in the emergence of a new globalized modernity (pace Stephens 1995). And while not immediately linked to processes of economic globalization, strategies of the social reproduction of youth and children, their education and training and their acculturation carry within them imagined paths to global competitiveness (both in the “race to the top” and the “race to the bottom”). What kind of youth and childhood we imagine for ourselves and our communities intersects in fundamental ways with what kind of future globalizations we will tolerate or create, the social spaces and infrastructures we develop, who is included or excluded—and how.

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Endnotes

1 It is interesting to note that this reliance on biologism as explanation originated before modern Christian notions of “the change”—that is, the onset of puberty—and has “scientized” roots in the works of Stanley Hall. More interesting still is that we continue to tolerate this biologism as an explanation of the behavior of young people where its application to women and people of color is now considered sexist or racist.

2 Clarence Perry’s design of the modern suburb centered its design around the elementary school, which, he argued, could support a population of 3500 people. The school was located in the center of the suburb, sequestered from society by a protective circling of single-family dwellings.

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