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Children, Childhood, and the Historical Politics of Welfare in National, Imperial, and Global Contexts

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Abstract:

In recent years, the histories of child welfare and children's charities have been enriched by other historiographical developments, such as new imperial history, cultural history or the history of the globalizing processes. Thereby, historians have reassessed cultural constructions of childhood by examining the ways in which politicians, social reformers, philanthropists and scientists have attempted to make use of poor and (supposedly) needy children at home and abroad in order to further their respective political and social projects. This essay discusses three recent books that, by studying specific aspects of child welfare in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States, deal with the political, social, and cultural dimensions of child welfare and its development in national, imperial, and global contexts. This essay, moreover, discusses how the authors, examining a broad range of historical records (such as sources from welfare institutions, state archives, philanthropic journals, promotional literature, and oral history interviews, etc.), explore both the discourses on children and childhood as well as practices of child care that led to the formation of private and public welfare politics for geographically near and/or distant children in changing social and political contexts.

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Boucher, Ellen: *Empire's Children. Child Emigration, Welfare, and the Decline of the British World, 1869-1967*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 302 S., 72.00 USD. ISBN: 978-110-704-1387

Fieldston, Sara: *Raising the World. Child Welfare in the American Century*. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2015. 328 S., 39.95 USD. ISBN: 978-067-436-8095

Murdoch, Lydia: *Imagined Orphans. Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London*. New Brunswick/New Jersey/London: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 288 S., 53.95 USD. ISBN: 978-0-8135-3722-1

Abstract:

In recent years, the histories of child welfare and children's charities have been enriched by other historiographical developments, such as new imperial history, cultural history or the history of the globalizing processes. Thereby, historians have reassessed cultural constructions of childhood by examining the ways in which politicians, social reformers, philanthropists and scientists have attempted to make use of poor and (supposedly) needy children at home and abroad in order to further their respective political and social projects. This essay discusses three recent books that, by studying specific aspects of child welfare in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States, deal with the political, social, and cultural dimensions of child welfare and its development in national, imperial, and global contexts. This essay, moreover, discusses how the authors, examining a broad range of historical records (such as sources from welfare institutions, state archives, philanthropic journals, promotional literature, and oral history interviews, etc.), explore both the discourses on children and childhood as well as practices of child care that led to the formation of private and public welfare politics for geographically near and/or distant children in changing social and political contexts.

Recent events such as the so-called refugee crisis and its media coverage have brought new attention to the special status of children in discourses and practices of aid, welfare, and (international) politics. Whether it is unaccompanied refugee children, traumatized children or young victims of war and displacement, their stories, images, and representations often occupy a central place in public and political discussions. By now, due to a rich body of scholarship, the important place of children in political ideas and public debate in past and present contexts is well established. Historians have shown that, since the nineteenth century, children have been increasingly seen as the formable citizens of the future. Since the mid-decades of the nineteenth century, a growing number of social reformers, experts, and philanthropists conceived the (private) domains of child rearing and education as promising means to affect political change. The rise of nationalism impelled the expansion of state activities in child welfare and education, also because governments increasingly regarded children as a source for the (re)production of the national, social, cultural, and/or racial order. The three books reviewed in this essay take this approach further, for they convincingly point to the intersection of child welfare with larger social and political concerns within and beyond urban, national, and imperial borders. By doing so, the authors – historians Lydia Murdoch, Ellen Boucher, and Sarah Fieldston – emphasize the key place of children in the political imagination. Furthermore, they show that it was precisely in the effort of saving children that broad agreement was reached between politicians, philanthropists, social reformers, experts, and ordinary people in nineteenth and twentieth-century Great Britain and/or the United States.

Lydia Murdoch's study *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* discusses the history of child welfare in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century London. Insisting on the need to focus on both private and state initiatives as well as on their entangled activities in urban spaces, Murdoch skillfully examines how child welfare institutions came to play a role in the lives of many people in London, be they the urban poor, local philanthropists or social reformers. Besides, and while analyzing not only promotional literature but also archival records produced by welfare institutions, she manages to highlight a telling opposition between popular and institutional narratives of child welfare: while philanthropists and social reformers tended to represent poor children as either orphaned or abandoned, separating them from their biological families, archival sources from welfare institutions show that poor mothers and fathers usually did not stop caring for the well-being of their children placed at welfare institutions. Instead, poor parents made use of the existing institutions as temporary solutions in reaction to conditions of poverty and therefore claimed the opportunities provided by the emerging welfare system in order to negotiate the situation of their offspring (see p. 6).

Contrary to fundraising narratives, which often erased poor parents from the record, Murdoch's book

presents parents as historical agents who continued to care for institutionalized children. Hence, a significant question emerges: how can this divergence between popular narratives and actual attitudes of parents be explained? For Murdoch, the answer is closely connected to the political dimension of child welfare in Victorian Britain: the spread and power of the imagination of poor children as orphans relates to both growing pressures on poor parents due to new poor laws as well as to contested understandings of (imperial) citizenship and national identity. Thus, while social reformers and philanthropists tended to exclude the adult poor from the national community, they endorsed the inclusion of poor children by promoting their institutionalized remaking and transformation into 'civilized' and 'productive' citizens of the nation and the empire (see p. 9).

Similar age-based processes of inclusion and exclusion also constitute a major theme in Ellen Boucher's *Empire's Children. Child Emigration, Welfare, and the Decline of the British World, 1869–1967*. Based on the analysis of a broad range of written sources and oral history, Boucher discusses child emigration in relation to welfare as it emerged in late nineteenth-century Britain. Between 1869 and 1967, about 95,000 boys and girls from poor working-class households were selected by government-funded charities to permanently migrate to British settler colonies in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Southern Rhodesia (cf. p. 3). Philanthropists, social reformers, politicians, and scientists expected these children to take agricultural or other careers and to become 'valued' and 'productive' members of settler societies. That way, children from poor households, mostly aged between five and thirteen, should contribute to the British imperial project. Boucher argues that the protagonists of child emigration constructed children less as the offspring of individual parents, but with reference to Britishness as "the embodiment of an imperial race destined for greatness" (p. 9). Hence, poor children were charged with social and political value that related to the imagination of Great Britain as a major imperial power and gave shape to the development of new (and imperial) schemes in the field of child welfare and social reform. Imperialism thus not only shaped British social policies but also deeply affected the lives of politically powerless groups, such as poor children under institutional care.

However, the enterprise of child emigration, despite its ideological framing in terms of global Britishness, was marked by multiple tensions, which, again, related considerably to shifting and competing political visions, ideas, and realities. When the empire started to draw to an end, child migrants were still there and had to come to terms with the political, cultural, and social dynamics that came as consequences. Boucher, using a broad range of written sources as well as forty-six interviews with former child migrants, traces the effects of the end of empire on both welfare institutions receiving child migrants in Australia and Southern Rhodesia and the migrating children themselves. *Empire's Children* powerfully introduces the lives of poor children, who, originally selected, trained, and displaced to embody global Britishness, moved back and forth between Britain and the

colonies in search of belonging. They simultaneously faced the fragmentation and decline of the empire, experienced the nationalization of settler societies, and had to deal with the effects on their individual identities and subjectivities, according to Boucher.

The migration and displacement of poor children in the name of welfare and charity occurred not only in the British Empire. It particularly gained new impetus in the second half of the twentieth century, when transnational adoption emerged as a growing institution that facilitated the legal flow of children across national and continental borders. Recent studies have pointed to the prominent role of the United States in this enterprise as well as to its framing in terms of humanitarian concern. Sarah Fieldston's book *Raising the World. Child Welfare in the American Century* suggests seeing the growing desire and willingness of ordinary Americans to adopt a supposedly needy child from abroad in relation with the enormous expansion of international child welfare activities in the decades after the Second World War.

Likewise insisting on the need to study the expansion and globalization of child welfare in the context of the broader imagination of the United States' role in the world, Sarah Fieldston understands the emerging programs as both humanitarian projects *and* political missions of an emerging global power. For her, child welfare after 1945 aimed at both providing relief to children suffering as well as publicly demonstrating a set of 'American' social and political values, such as democracy or the concern of the United States for social well-being worldwide (cf. pp. 2f.). In addition, the expansion of child welfare was also inspired by a range of other factors, for example, novel ideas on child rearing and child psychology, a discourse on children's rights, and novel conceptions of childhood. In the second half of the twentieth century, more and more Americans – voluntary workers, experts or ordinary people – not only agreed on the idea that children had special needs but also understood childhood as a formative phase in human life that was crucial to both healthy development and adult attitudes worldwide. The global expansion of US child welfare was thus also part of the larger project of spreading democratic principles and molding new generations in the image of "American" values and ideas (p. 2).

This was particularly obvious in times of political tensions and crisis. Fieldston's first chapter starts with the telling anecdote of a meeting held at Columbia University in the spring of 1944 by a group of psychologists, anthropologists, educators, and sociologists. It was the goal of this meeting to think about possibilities and chances to erase the influence and legacy of Nazism and to rebuild postwar German society and even remake the Germans themselves. Discussing these issues, the group came to the conclusion that the project of remaking Germans after Hitler demanded an "intervention in the rearing of children" (12), which is why they suggested training German parents and establishing special programs, schools and nurseries in post war Germany and Europe. However, while the group

assembling at Columbia University in 1944 was well aware of the many tensions evolving from these ideas and therefore did pose the question about who was responsible for rearing the world's future democratic citizens, later child welfare programs were not always that considerate. With block formation proceeding, the field of child welfare was deeply affected by global power relations and strategic concerns. Despite remaining exclusively focused on the perspective of the United States, Fieldston addresses these questions and, for instance, points to the ways in which child welfare, by the early 1950s, became "a battlefield in the intensifying Cold War" (p. 79). At the same time, however, she emphasized that notions of love, family, intimacy, and international friendship were used to construct transnational relationships between ordinary people in the West, for instance through schemes such as child sponsorship or international friendship projects.

The combination of a 'private' language of love, care, family, and friendship with 'public' social and political strategies in the field of child welfare is a characteristic feature highlighted by all three books discussed. Murdoch and Boucher show how the institutionalization of young lives interacted and conflicted with ideas and practices of family and parent child relationships. Fieldston argues that international child welfare in America became inextricably linked with a language of love and friendship; a trend that even led to the spread of the notion of the United States as a "global parent" (p. 4). However, when considering the conception and promotion of (international) child welfare in terms of parent child relationships, it must be kept in mind that the concept of parenthood of course not only refers to notions of love and parental concern, but also closely relates to ideas of authority and parental rights, which are extended to the children of others, often under the conditions of highly unequal power relations. In this sense, it is valuable that all three books discuss child welfare as a public enterprise that was always political and shaped by (global) power relations. They show how children, who suffered from poverty, disaster or war, not only came to symbolize but also to embody future political actors and even bearers of hope. Contrary to their parents, who were often erased from contemporary discussions and historical records, children in need were to be remade in welfare institutions and expected to contribute to the glory of empire, settler colonialism, the national workforce, the democratic West, or international peace. However, given that all three books situate their stories exclusively either in the British or in the North American context, their focus remains limited, inasmuch as the authors do not pay much attention to inter- and/or transnational developments in the history of child welfare or other geographical and historical contexts. Of course, displacement of children in the name of welfare started well before the nineteenth century, and certain key schemes such as child sponsorship were no inventions of twentieth-century British or American charities. Other than suggested by Fieldstone, who traces the origins of these practices in the interwar years, they had been used long before in missionary fundraising all of Europe. Yet, the three books without doubt contribute considerably to our understanding of both the cultural dynamics created by child

welfare and its effects on issues of belonging in the various national (Murdoch), imperial (Boucher), and global (Fieldston) contexts.

German Abstract:

Kinder, Kindheit und die Geschichte der Wohlfahrt in nationalen, imperialen und globalen Kontexten

Die Geschichtsschreibung zu Kinderwohlfahrt und -fürsorge wurde in den letzten Jahren durch andere aktuelle Trends in der Geschichtsschreibung, wie zum Beispiel der New Imperial History, der Kulturgeschichte oder der Geschichte von Globalisierungsprozessen wesentlich bereichert. Historiker_innen haben dabei insbesondere kulturelle Konstruktionen von Kindheit neu bewertet, in dem sie danach fragten, wie Politiker_innen, soziale Reformer_innen, Philantrop_innen und Wissenschaftler_innen versuchten, arme und (angeblich) hilfsbedürftige Kinder weltweit für ihre jeweiligen politischen und sozialen Zwecke zu nützen. Das vorliegende Essay diskutiert drei neue Bücher, welche verschiedene Aspekte der Kinderwohlfahrt in Großbritannien und den Vereinigten Staaten seit dem 19. Jahrhundert untersuchen und insbesondere nach ihren politischen, sozialen und kulturellen Dimensionen in nationalen, imperialen und globalen Kontexten fragen. Darüber hinaus zeigt dieser Essay wie die Autorinnen auf Basis von vielfältigen Quellenanalysen (von z.B. Dokumenten aus Fürsorgeeinrichtungen, staatlichen Archiven, philanthropischen Zeitschriften, Werbematerial und Interviews) sowohl die historischen Diskurse über Kinder und Kindheit als auch die Praktiken der Fürsorge untersuchen, die in bestimmten sozialen und politischen Kontexten zur Ausbildung von staatlichen und privaten Wohlfahrtsinitiativen für geographisch nahe und/oder ferne Kinder führten.

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