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The Rescue, Reform and Restoration of Childhood:

**A Hundred Years of Child Labour
in Britain (1780 - 1880).**

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years, child labour has drawn heightened attention from the global community, especially through debates over labour standards and international trade. The plight of these working children in the present-day Third World is however not unlike the plight of those children who were once employed in the fields, factories, mines and workshops of Britain. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the industrialisation of the British economy that intensified the exploitation of children and normalised their labour. Today, it is globalisation and the World Market that assumes this role, overwhelming the lives of millions of children in the Third World. The interests of working children in Britain were clearly of low priority in the years prior to the 1840's, just as they are today in many underdeveloped countries around the globe.

This thesis aims to draw attention to these similarities by revisiting the past and by trying to unravel the interconnected narratives that have produced the countless theories that seek to explain this phenomenon. This study also analyses the relationships between child labour on the one hand, and economic development and the socioeconomic structures of a society on the other and challenges the simplistic common belief that

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poverty is the cause of child labour and that child labour can be reduced only through economic development.

One important conclusion of this study is that child labour is affected by the transformation of the economic and social structure rather than merely dictated by the economic necessities of households that supply child labourers. Thus the one thing that becomes abundantly clear from this study is that when it comes to understanding and evaluating child labour – regardless as to whether it is the spinning of cotton in a British mill of the nineteenth century or the weaving of carpets in a Pakistani factory of the twenty-first century – childhood and adulthood are interdependent and the ways in which children are treated are in turn a reflection of the values and priorities of adult society.

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1

Introduction

During the 1980s and 90s, child labour in the Third World drew a lot of attention from the global community, in particular through debates over child labour and international trade. However, this concern about the safety and well-being of working children is not new but is a revival of much of the same arguments employed against child labour in nineteenth century Britain. As Seabrook points out, the more recent defenders of child labour, like those in early nineteenth-century Britain, have always had a ready rationale for the necessity of child labour in the same way as the abolitionists have always had a clear justification for releasing children from their occupations (2000:80).

In Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries children were integral to the agricultural and handicraft economy of the period and often their wages were the most common source of family income aside from what fathers earned (Wasserman 2000:10). Much as it is today in the poorer countries of the world, Britain had depended on the labour of all able-bodied people, including children. Yet while today, most people in the West believe that full-time work for children is bad, in eighteenth century Britain, work was believed to be beneficial for a child's character

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and moral upbringing. Far from being exploitative, work integrated children into their societies and prepared them to assume even greater responsibility as adults. But in today's world, the children of the industrialised nations have been disassociated from productive work.

What then is so new in the child labour equation? The answer is very little, except that the arguments that were voiced in nineteenth century Britain about child labour are now being heard, on the global stage. No one would think to argue that the child labourers of the British eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were better off than their twentieth and twenty-first century descendants. The appropriate comparison, however, is not between twentieth and twenty-first century childhood and eighteenth and nineteenth century childhood in Britain but whether or not children were better off from their participation in the industrialisation of the British economy. The general consensus is that they were not.

The arguments posed by those who are in favour of child labour in the twenty-first century are often expressed in terms that would have been familiar to people living in nineteenth-century Britain. Their support for child labour often reflects the certainty that 'reform', and 'improvement' can follow the same – retrospectively – fairly simple path pursued by the first great industrial power two hundred years ago (Seabrook, 2000:82). Today's international debate about child labour, therefore, is in many ways a revival of the late nineteenth century anti-child labour movements when attitudes were fuelled in part by images of children being sucked into the new factories, and in part by nascent perceptions that childhood should be a period for play and education instead of work (Bachman, 2000:548). It is all too easy, of course, to dwell upon the horrors of child labour, even though it is beyond dispute that hours were too long and that in some cases the children were ill-treated. Today the endangered child-subject is a focal and unique issue that intersects with foundational epistemological categories of this period, specifically those of social welfare. Although this constitutes a recognisable and familiar social

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category, it is also unique because the child occupies a position that homogenises rather than fragments the social community (Berry, 1999:4).

It is, as Cunningham suggests, 'history's task to deconstruct stories; to lay bare the elements and the purposes which have gone into their making' (1991:232). But historians never speak with a single authorial voice. This study of British working children in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries tries to unravel a number of different interconnected narratives that often contain contradictory meanings. Children have nearly always had a marginal place in history, despite the fact that they must have formed a substantial part of whatever society that one might study. To a certain degree, because of the arguments about industrialisation, the children of the nineteenth century were an exception to this general rule, although compared to the vast amounts of literature available on the industrialisation of Britain only a few writers have shown any great interest in the subject¹. Walvin argues, that 'the numerical presence of children in the nineteenth century is in inverse proportion to the attention devoted to it by historians' (1982:1). If we consider the fact that at no time during the nineteenth century did young persons under the age of fourteen represent less than one third of the population of Britain, then one is only left to speculate as to why it is so? For it is this exclusion that makes my task more difficult.

This point leads us to a further question, just who is a child? Many of the modern Western attributes to children never existed in the lives of poor children in the early nineteenth century. The very definition of 'child labour' is uncertain with legal, historical, comparative, customary and academic definitions all being somewhat contradictory. During the Victorian period there were thousands of poor children – some as young

¹ Cunningham, Hopkins, Horn and Nardinelli, for example dedicate complete works to the subject of child labour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Hammonds also made child labour an important part of their interpretation of life during that period, especially with regard to the movement for reform. Whereas others, such as Crouzet, Morgan, Thames and a collection of works edited by Malthais and Davis rarely, if at all, mentioned it.

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as seven or eight – living in the streets who were worldly wise and often economically independent. These children were the victims of their own economic and social circumstances. Abandoned by society they had been forced to survive by their own wits. Modern legal concepts of childhood don't help much either, as they can differ between distinct branches of the law; between tort, contract, guardianship, property, marriage, sexual and criminal matters. Nor is the distinction between childhood and adulthood provided by the current boundary between schooling and employment of much use because prior to the Education Act of 1871 few poor children went to school. Trying to conceive an adult-child distinction supports the view that childhood is simply a matter of degree and that there is a continuous and obvious path between the two. Schapiro best describes childhood as a condition in which the agent is not yet in a position to speak in his or her own voice because there is simply no voice which counts as theirs (1999:729). Even as a status concept the minimum notion of a child is that it is a person who does not yet qualify as an adult. But if we accept the view that childhood exists in greater or lesser degrees, then this cannot be the whole story. Clearly then, in trying to define the child one will frequently be confronted with difficulties. Defining at what point a child becomes an adult is arbitrary and depends on the time, the place and the context. Any unimpeachable definition will therefore always have to infringe certain rules and transgress a number of ever shifting boundaries. Therefore in order to avoid the difficulties posed in such a classification, I have avoided defining it.

There is another point that needs to be resolved before we can continue. That is, just what is "child labour"? If we define the work performed by children as only paid employment then we are ignoring the fact that most work done by them is often without pay. As Roberts points out, 'such a definition does not recognise the ways in which unpaid and paid work are connected, even mutually constitutive, as well as the ways such definitions of labour are part of wider key social constructs' (1988:5) – essentially those of gender, age and class. Is, for example, a young girl

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who looks after her younger brother a child labourer? Many children perform a range of tasks in any given day and in some cases, as Katz points out, it is hard to distinguish the difference between work and play (1991:501).

There is a huge difference, however from accepting work as part of growing up to accepting the involvement of children in work situations that are clearly harmful or exploitative. What is important to note here however, is that the old stereotype of child labour – small children dwarfed by clanking machines in the textile mills of the early Industrial Revolution – represents only a small minority of nineteenth century working children. Child labour in the nineteenth century, just as it is today, exists on a continuum of effects on children which, as White reasons, progresses from the worst to the best, that is, from the most intolerably harmful through neutral to wholly beneficial (1996:10-11) with various degrees and combinations between. Defining child labour or at least differentiating between its various forms is important because 'it is essentially political, posing an emotionally charged choice of social values and objectives' (Myers, 1999:22). Fortunately, trying to draw an unambiguous line between the more acceptable forms of children's work which are relatively not harmful and the unacceptable forms which are exploitative, harmful and a social evil usually turns out to be easier in practice than in theory². Such a definition is, as Bequele & Myers suggests, 'a question more successfully lived through in practice than intellectually agonised over beforehand' (1995:26-27). And while I believe that in this thesis it should be quite obvious – by Western standards – as to what type of child labour is tolerable and what is not tolerable the final decision is left to the reader.

In the contemporary setting, child labour continues on a global scale,

² Most attempts to draw such a theoretical line are either too general, vague and circular to be of use, or if they try to be concrete and specific, are contradictory and illogical, and out of line with the views of children. The term 'child labour' itself has such a long institutional history that over the years it has become so burdened with political and emotional undertones that the term has now become meaningless.

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only now the space is segregated within specific national contexts. But far from eradicating it, globalisation has intensified the exploitation of its child victims and normalised their plight. Hence, globalisation puts us in a position that is often morally indistinguishable from those of the Victorians who cheerfully allowed children to clean their chimneys and mine their coal two hundred years ago. Some even presume, that child labour in the poor countries of South America and Asia can be eradicated in much the same way that the widespread employment of children was eradicated in Britain in the nineteenth century. This deadly form of Rostowian Modernisation Theory³ therefore defends the exploitation of children because it is characteristic of countries which are in a stage of development that is 'behind' those occupied by the countries of the developed West. As a result its representation normalises child labour and holds out that in the future, as a country develops, child exploitation will, as it once did in Britain, disappear. Economists talk of a 'sweatshop phase' in the development of a modern manufacturing sector and speak of child labour as a 'necessary' evil (Nichols, 1993:20).

But such descriptions act to set countries on a single teleological track with some ahead and some lagging. The only connection is that the more advanced countries of the West are now the role models for the rest. Nonetheless, the images and descriptions of Britain's earlier experience are still sufficiently powerful as to create the myth that 'development is a predictable pathway and that if the creation of wealth is allowed to take its natural course all known evils will be swept away' (Seabrook, 2000:86).

³ Walt Whitman Rostow was an American economist who argued that for countries to industrialise successfully, they needed to meet certain prerequisites such as a highly productive agricultural sector, functioning markets, and a stable government. Once these preconditions are met, industrialisation could enter the 'take-off' phase – a brief period of twenty to thirty years in which the process of industrialisation is completed. In Rostow's framework, the industrialised countries of today all went through similar stages of development. According to his theory, Great Britain was the first country to manifest a take-off into industrialisation between 1780 to 1800 and although Rostow's explanation of the stages of industrialisation are accepted as a general theory, recent works on the British Industrial Revolution suggest that the British economy did not take off, but rather experienced a steady pace of industrialisation throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

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However the reality is that child labour is not one single issue or a homogeneous problem. There are many different circumstances in which children work and there are countless factors to consider when assessing any particular problem. Therefore there cannot be any universal solutions.

When looking at child labour in the third world today it soon becomes apparent that a similar situation has existed before. The erosion of rural life and the movement of people to the cities has been a matter of much debate ever since the industrialisation of Britain. Clearly, there is a contemporary relevance in the continuous and unresolved arguments over how far industrialisation raised the living standards of those generations that first experienced it, since these same issues are now being raised again in the modern context of the Global Market and the Green Revolution. In the pages that follow, I hope to show how history can offer the best chance of making sense of the world and while historical research is not the most exciting way to study anthropology, I do feel that by seeing things as they were, we are better able to understand things as they are. This study of child labour in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain, will I hope, accomplish this objective.