Why Children? Why Now?

STUART C. AITKEN, RAGNHILD LUND AND ANNE TRINE KJØRHOLT

Stuart C. Aitken, Department of Geography, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA 92128, USA
Department of Geography and the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 7491 Trondheim, Norway
Ragnhild Lund, Department of Geography, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 7491 Trondheim, Norway
Anne Trine Korholt, The Norwegian Centre for Child Research, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 7491 Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT In asking the questions why children? why now? we want to set stage for a discussion on the import of the global contexts of children and young people. There is significant discussion in the academic literature on this topic, and yet we feel that this discussion either does not go far enough in highlighting the role of young people in local and global processes or it is suffused with platitudes about children purported as our future. What we do here is something different. We want to challenge, in a very direct way, conventional wisdoms on both economic-development and child-development by bringing these concepts together and highlighting the ways they no longer enable appropriate understandings of our world and the place of young people in it. There is a tired inevitability to the progressive rhetoric of academics and policy makers, from local community activists to elected representatives of the United Nations, that requires energizing with new ways of knowing. This paper sets the stage for a new way of knowing couched in post-developmental, post-structural theories that are sensitive to the global lives of young people and that open up those lives to the political in new ways.

KEYWORDS: Development, globalization, young people, space, post-structuralism, political engagement

We are inspired to write about children in our contemporary globalized moment for a variety of compelling reasons. Although evoking the notions of globalization and children’s well-being may run the risk of pivoting discussion on terms that are over-used politically from both the left and right, they nonetheless suggests as a beginning a broader context for a discussion about how young lives are elaborated. As a process, globalization may have been around for a while, and yet today the term suggests rapid change and connectedness at a number of important levels. It seems that local economic, political and cultural contexts respond much more quickly to processes that arise elsewhere, market adjustments are close to instantaneous and, with regard to the ideas contained in this volume, in a world connected by flexible capital, mobile labor and transnational families, young people provide an important fulcrum of, and impetus for, change.
Adjustments in terms of the resiliencies, empowerments, oppressions, resistances and manipulations of young people in the face of social, cultural and economic structural transformation provide focus for this volume. Our writing is not about rescuing children, taking them out of labor and putting them in classrooms, or trying to raise the standard of well-being in those parts of the world that fall behind the so-called development curve, nor is it about creating a better world for the next generation; indeed, part of our dispute with these kinds of rhetorical arguments is that they are couched in problematic progressive and developmental terms that foist adult agendas on young people. Rather, the authors in this volume recognize the myriad contributions of young people to global processes and the many ways that those contributions are hidden, subverted, or contrived through adultist machinations at the global and local level. The volume is about re-setting the ways we understand these contributions from post-development perspectives, which challenge not only the conventional wisdom on how places and economies change but also how young people develop through and within these changes and how they too are agents of change.

The work that follows is based on discussions that began in San Diego, California in Fall 1998 and continued in Trondheim, Norway in Spring 2005. The focus of the San Diego discussions was on our understanding of the ways young people inter-relate with their social and spatial contexts (cf. Environment & Planning A, 2000; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Aitken, 2001; Ruddick, 2003). At that time, the influences of globalization suggested an enduring and important context for the lives of young people and the extent of a myriad of global childhoods, and so these themes were taken up in the workshop that followed in Trondheim. The current volume collects together individual contributions that built upon the global childhoods discussions. Collectively, these papers turn on its head the idea that young people are merely the recipients of global progress. Rather, new ways of understanding reproduction and geographies of economic development suggest that the lives of young people are increasingly important for understanding larger notions of change. Furthermore, it is clear that children are actors and competent arbiters of change even in situations of exploitation. These new ways of understanding children in the world are slow to penetrate the seeming wisdom of adult solutions. It is clear that despite young people’s dominance as a demographic category in the majority world—including their influence globally as a market niche and their importance as a focus of care and responsibility—they, and their voices, are still largely missing from larger academic debates on globalization. There is a tired inevitability to the progressive rhetoric of academics and policy-makers that, we argue, requires a re-setting, a complete turnaround, if you will, of the ways we come to know children and development in the world. The stark and oppressive outcomes of neo-liberal agendas and global corporate capitalism—such as the commodification of lifestyles, a global sex trade, new diasporas and wars that increasingly involve child soldiers—on the world’s young people are not inevitable.

There are a number of recent texts that explore the global contexts of children and young people (Katz, 2004; Ansel, 2005; Goddard et al., 2005), but few address directly and critically the complex agendas that propel notions of both child development and economic development. The ways we come to know the so-called development of children and economic development are now significantly changed by perspectives that are collectively known as post-development studies. ‘Why children? Why now?’ is not just about noticing young people in the full ambiguity and complexity of global and local context (to use Buckingham’s words in this volume), it is also about rethinking the global spaces of young people as grounded and lively, full of promise and surprise and, thus, open to the political.

The volume is organized into three parts. The first part, comprising essays by Gagen, Kjørholt and Buckingham, focuses on the ways that childhood is constructed in the north and then exported globally. The key issues are play, education, authenticity and representation. The second part, comprising essays by Bosco, Tatek Abebe, Punch and...
Aitken, focuses on the necessities of the global south and young people’s creation of livelihoods. The key issues are child labor, and geographies of care and responsibility. The third part, comprising essays by Nieuwenhuys, Lund and Skelton but embracing much of the intent of the other essays in the volume, furthers the possibility of children’s participation in, and construction of, a very different form of globalized (and yet intrinsically and materially local) development. With this structure for the essays set up as a pedagogic apparatus, we spend the rest of this introductory essay—Why Children? Why Now?—with the larger concepts that we believe this volume is radically rethinking, using the essays of the contributors as foils upon which we hope the current inevitability of global neoliberal progress loses its power.

**Why Children? Why Now?**

Why Rethink Development?

We argue that a rethinking of economic (and cultural) development and its relations to global spaces is concomitantly a rethinking of progress through this thing that is called childhood. Our premise is that the two literatures of post-development studies focusing, on the one hand, on getting beyond traditional notions of economic development and, on the other, challenging child development as a series of stages need to come together if we are to confront the excesses of neoliberal capitalism and the disempowerment of children. This volume represents a halting and yet passionate attempt to bring together the notions of the development of children and economic development in a critique that finds coherency in its attack against a set of academic and policy enframements that, we argue, limit possible futures. It is a radical attempt to re-imagine young people in a less bounded world. The arguments are rehearsed in contemporary social, critical and post-development theory, but this is the first time they have been brought together in one volume. Briefly, the critique is against the notion of stages of development for either children or nations, and the problematic political results when the two are equated together.

We argue that progress and development are almost always the products of teleological closure. Interest in evolution, continuum and/or movement cannot be broken down into discrete stages. And yet, as Gagen and Nieuwenhuys show, there is a long history to this kind of project and its global mapping falls on the shoulders of the academic community in problematic ways. We are concerned about opening up the political for young people, and we believe that change is only possible with movement away from static time-slices and spatial emplacements elaborated by academics and embraced by policy-makers.

For the most part, we argue, developmental theory essentializes children to become-the-same (as us) with limited possible futures. Similarly, so-called developing nations are cajoled and coerced to become—the-same (as us); and this is a fantasy that remains unrealized from their peripheral and exploited positions in the world. These positions construct children’s and nations’ contexts as no different from ours, and it denies (or at least hides to a degree) our need for their relatively cheap labor and resources. In so doing, we deny them their own trajectories, their own histories, and futures that are different, and perhaps better, than ours. We deny them the possibility of becoming-other: they are merely at an earlier stage of the fantasy that we create, which, in actuality and solely, supports our rich lifestyles. What we just offered, of course, is yet another problematic framing and the papers by Lund, Aitken, Kjørholt and Bosco, in particular, are concerned about foundational and problematically dichotomized concepts such as us/them, local/global, global north/global south. As Lund points out, when the complexities of the local are looked at closely it is difficult to find a global south.

And so we are wary of framings that are encapsulated within traditional representations. In this sense, representation is reification, a static fixing of things. In the essays that
follow—and particularly those of Buckingham, Skelton, Aitken and Bosco—there is a critique of this kind of boundedness, and an attempt to dislocate young people from spatial/historical framings that produce static representations. Instead, we introduce another set of ideas that focus on fluidity, movement, relationality, multiplicity and liveliness. It is an attempt to understand the worlds of young people as neither composed of monastic individuals, nor closed off in categories or stages. Rather, we look towards openness and incoherence as hallmarks of the radically political and the actively experimental.

Before embracing openness, it is important to understand the roots of our current framings. Child development and economic/cultural development are projects with long, complicated and inter-connected histories. In this volume, Gagen looks at development historically, taking us back to the beginnings of modernity with the nineteenth century’s elaborated hegemony of empire, to a time when colonialism and imperialism expanded the control of so-called metropolitan heartlands to a colonial periphery. This expansion saw space as something to be controlled and history as a developmental given. Peripheral colonial spheres were to be civilized with the imposition of governmental, legal, economic and educational frames from the metropolitan heart. Gagen elaborates the way that the US, in the late nineteenth century, came into the realm of imperial exploitation. The link to notions of child development is clear here. The problematic spatial framing that Gagen elaborates focuses on domestic changes propelled by psychology’s suggestion of ‘normal’ development. Of some considerable importance to the arguments that this volume makes is Gagen’s suggestion that the infantilization of so-called primitive cultures is, in actuality, a discourse derived from the normative liberal developmentalism of psychology, which finds its beginning in a western bourgeois understanding of children as inherently primitive. Progressive attitudes to child development were not only instilled at home but they were also exported from the US to its imperial protectorates through the establishment of schools, physical education programs and playgrounds abroad. Gagen argues that these two strands of development—one internal and one external—are all part of the same imperial project. Like nascent colonies of the US, children had to move along a normalized path from underdevelopment to development. In the nineteenth century, the newly introduced science of child development paved this path. Importantly for what this volume is trying to do, Gagen points out that the notion of ‘underdevelopment’ was created on a geographical and temporal plane, co-constituting foreign protectorates and children to a universal state of pre-modern, primitive and in need of protection and paternalistic guidance.

These early notions of development are elaborated in the twentieth century by UCLA economist, Walter Rostow, who proclaimed in the 1960s a systematic and progressive view of national development from premodern, traditional societies through a series of transitional stages to what he called high consumerism. The Rostovian take-off model was criticized early on for an insular and locally embedded teleology that had little to say about global inequalities in access and resources and internal social injustice. Rostow’s work nonetheless was celebrated as a tonic to Marx’s progression to communism, and as an optimistic solution for so-called undeveloped and underdeveloped economies. As such, Rostow’s work influenced a generation of economists, sociologists, demographers and geographers interested in development issues. Models such as the demographic transition theory similarly predicated development in terms a few causal variables and seemingly inevitable stages. Despite significant critiques (e.g., Teitelbaum, 1975), the demographic transition model continues to hold academic attention as a theory of world development (Dyson, 2001).

Kate Willis (2005) articulates a long chronology of approaches to understanding economic development, from modernist theory (e.g., Rostovian take-off theory) and neo-modernist/liberalist perspectives (including Wallerstein’s 1980 influential world systems theory) to post-structural and post-development critiques that focus on grassroots
activities and local level participation (e.g., Escobar, 1994), but also to the more recent post-modernist and post-colonial movements (Pieterse, 2001). In this volume, Lund tasks the appropriateness of alternative developmental models to issues that relate to child participation, which she calls an over-stretched analytical and practical term.

There are important links between the varied ways of conceptualizing development that are quite troubling. Modernist perspectives dovetail with neoliberalism, for example, in that both suggest the inevitability of globalization and the hegemony of multi-national corporate agendas and consumerist ideals. Given this logic—which we decry as positing an inevitability that forecloses upon the political—then the pinnacle of development for both children and nations is a stage of high consumerism and, as such, Buckingham’s essay provides an ironic elaboration of child/media relations with an understanding of global capital seeking to expand consumer niches globally towards the highest possible market gain. The context of the local and the global figures hugely in his concerns, and it highlights the broader concern of this volume on what constitutes the local as something more than defensible space and globalization as something inevitable and ‘out there’. On the one hand, and in relation to Gagen’s historical account of imperialism emanating from the US, Buckingham focuses on theories of contemporary cultural imperialism from Hollywood. The hegemonic rise of Disney as an icon of representations for children, argues Buckingham, is not a sufficient account, because it implies that the local is powerless to resist ideological domination. He favors a notion of a globalization that enables local cultures to flourish. The question is thus raised of children’s local cultures in the face of a global media onslaught. And yet this too is a limited view, because access is not universal. Citing the current rise of Japanese anime, the anxiety that Buckingham raises relates to possibly diminished cultural continuity and intergenerational socialization with increasingly homogenized global media for children. Importantly, Buckingham demonstrates the unpredictable and contested relationships between the local and global, and the consequences for children’s culture.

Scale, Speed and Adjustment

It is important to note that discourses on development are tricky because they may be considered at different scales and rates of change, ranging from the individual, the local community, the on-track and the speeding, the regional, the tardy, the dismissed and the globally-connected. Willis (2005) points out that Keynesian approaches, for example, are structural state interventions to help regions and groups that are disadvantaged whereas dependency theories focus on global economic inequalities that are perpetrated on the periphery as a result of exploitation from the global north. Neo-liberal agendas are based on speedy private sector interventions that offset the seeming enervation of state interventions. The notions of liberal democracy embedded in these latter agendas, notes Willis, see the state as providing a regulatory framework that enhances the speed with which corporations and non-governmental agencies (NGOs) act. Unfortunately, as Lund shows, NGOs and CBOs (community-based organizations) very much represent a status quo and their transformative potential for children is limited. That said, she argues with Aitken and Punch that children arise as important agents of change in many contexts, including those that are potentially exploitative and abusive.

Buckingham notes that a large context of the so-called ‘modernization’ of nations and children is access to global media. The ties of young people to larger global representations are also a large part of the essays by Bosco and Aitken. Bosco is concerned about the ways that local contexts for children are rapidly ‘unhooked’ and appropriated by trans-local networks of aid and solidarity. Focusing on two internet-based NGOs, Por Los Chicos and Red Solidaria, he is concerned about the ways that they try to care for others, particularly those who are distant. The Argentinian debt crisis of the 1990s
is particularly pertinent to his work. Bosco argues that diminished support for *Por Los Chicos* over the years suggests the problems of disembodied connections. Part of this is about representation and how this web site was set up, which revolved around problematic conceptions of the universal child and universal notions of care. These conceptions focus on a decontextualized child (wide-eyed and staring at the camera) who, seemingly, can be helped only by the viewer (cf. Ruddick, 2003). This is similar to Aitken’s argument, which extends decontextualization (which he terms ‘ghoulish effects’) to changes in representations of child labor to aid civic boosterism in Tijuana. Bosco likens this to Escobar’s (1994) ‘objectification of the visual’.

Aitken argues that institutionalized and sanitized child labor in Tijuana may be seen as another example of the ways local authorities clean up and modernize their space through changed representations and, at the same time, young people are tamed as they learn to labor. Aitken suggests a program whereby Tijuana’s modernization is couched in a move away from young people selling chicklet’s gum in tourist sites to young people actively serving as checkout packers in supermarkets. The creation of smart, smiling young people as grocery packers in clean, modern supermarkets is a relatively recent gambit for a border city that wants to be seen as a major a player on the world’s economic stage. Aitken uses a post-structural experimental analysis to suggest the deliberation of a modernized aesthetic; young people who are not only smart and clean, but also willing to serve a consumerist ideal.

Although Aitken’s work is tied to issues of representation it also highlights regional adjustments to global economic transformations that reflect changing labor patterns of young people. The issues of local and regional economic transformation and labor are also highlighted with the contributions by Tatek Abebe and Punch. Tatek Abebe focuses on post-development contexts of child labor in rural Ethiopia. He argues that development strategies fueled by globalization are failing the region’s young people. The main problem is an increasing focus on cash-based coffee growing over the last few decades at the expense of subsistence crops. Liberal free-trade policies do not distinguish high quality beans in his study area from cheap mixes from elsewhere. Structural adjustment programs exacerbate the problem and result in young people shouldering the bulk of local reproduction at the expense of their schooling. This context is not sufficiently complicated, Tatek Abebe argues, by an understanding of indigenous, Islamic and colonial factors. He suggests a material grounding in global space, outlining the seasonality-, age- and gender-differentiated work of young people, and pointing out important relations to global market forces.

Punch also points to global market forces using an empirical study of young migrants from Bolivia to argue for a renewed focus on the lack of consequence of education in their lives. She argues that rather than formal education, it is their movement to Argentina on a seasonal basis that enables young people to develop their global interconnections and to increase their status back home. As an empirical study, Punch’s work is important because it focuses on the stories of the young people both at home and abroad, but nonetheless in a regional context. The problem of landlessness, or waiting for land to free up, forces many young people to seek better opportunities in Argentina. The proximity of the move (less than a day’s bus journey) is important for keeping in touch with people at home. For example, first trips are often with friends or relatives, and parents can visit. In addition, the stories (and material goods) with which migrants return to Bolivia, entice other young people to migrate. Despite their storied elaborations, the life of migrants in Argentina is extremely hard, with long work hours and cramped living conditions. Punch notes the importance of material goods (particularly Argentine clothes) for these young migrants, which ties into a popular neo-liberal Latin American governmental rhetoric that consumerism is synonymous with freedom (seen also in Aitken’s work). Migration for these young people is a coping
strategy which facilitates their participation in a more consumer, and sometimes global, culture as well as enhancing their social and economic autonomy.

The relations of the local to the global in the last 40 years of development literature and policy are soundly critiqued by Arturo Escobar (1994, 2001), who points out the problematic ways that the local is linked to labor, tradition and vulnerability (including women, minorities, the poor and, of course, children). Escobar argues for the potential agency of local culture and local places in the context of neoliberal globalization. The work of Tatek Abebe and Punch (but also Buckingham, Aitken, Lund and Bosco) highlight some important contexts of local variation with the suggestion that the future of economic transformation and the wholesale betterment of the world through universal consumerism and material gain is questionable. And, in relation to this, the possible futures of young people within this context are not knowable and should not be foreclosed upon by suggesting that certain outcomes are inevitable. If we think of global space relationally then it is important to not reify it as out or up there, but rather as utterly grounded in material practices of young people in Bolivia, Ethiopia, Argentina and Mexico, and that those practices and connections, in the words of Doreen Massey (2004, p. 185) ‘may go around the world’.

**Taming Young People and Their Spaces**

Imagining space as a container of young people’s activities or as a surface across which they travel is a denial of possibilities. It is an enframing that is not only limiting, it is the kind of framing that perpetuates the gross inequalities of contemporary neoliberal globalization. Similarly, turning space into time by focusing on progressive child development denies young people new ways of configuring their lives. This is a way of taming the challenge of creating new, liberatory stories. Early work by Erica Burman (1994) and Valerie Walkerdine (1988) challenged the ideas of progressive and staged child development that became conventional wisdom with the work of Piaget and Inhelder in the 1950s (cf. Piaget and Inhelder, 1956). Like the work of Rostow in economics and despite significant empirical evidence to the contrary, Piaget and Inhelder and their students upheld the notion that children went through a series of intellectual stages that corresponded to their age. These notions held sway (and still are powerfully embedded) in the work of many educators, academics and policy makers.

The discipline of child development in the nineteenth century as described by Gagen becomes hugely indebted to Piaget’s work in the mid-twentieth century. To counter this focus on staged development, Valerie Walkerdine (1984) argued that young people develop in more idiosyncratic and nuanced ways. Her work focused on classroom behaviors and showed that a large part of the developmental studies that reified Piagetian structures emanated from the ways classrooms were designed and curriculum formulated. In short, the sense of a place (e.g., how a teacher decorates a classroom) and the construction of a space (e.g., the arrangement of desks) matters to how young people came to know the world. Eric Burman (1994) furthered Walkerdine’s concerns, arguing for a post-structural elaboration of child development that removed the problematic spatial enframing of specific stages. What all the papers in this volume attempt to do in a variety of implicit and explicit ways is to look closely at how notions of child development are not only problematic, but are also linked to the way economic and national development is conceived.

The notion of development as a series of stages through which children progress to a predetermined, normal adulthood resonates with the notion of a nation’s development in a global market economy. Like time, space becomes an expanse to cross, the promise of development, of new markets elsewhere, of the global south awaiting the arrival of global capital (from over here), awaiting an understanding of what it is to
grow up. This smacks of imperialism and sounds a lot like the creation of lands to conquer and colonize. The creation of times of childhood (for normal development) and spaces for children (for free play and schooling) are similar kinds of enframements. And there are similarly hidden agendas. Skateboarding is outlawed on public streets while at the same time a market niche is created for costly skateboard parks. This smacks of imperialism and the conquering and colonization of the bodies and minds of young people. The inevitability of a progressive form of neoliberal global capitalism with its penchant for universal individual rights (rights to education and skateboarding but only within specified institutionalized spaces where corporations are equated as individuals and given the same rights) suggests a problematic move towards inequality. An inequality is created spatially that disadvantages minority populations, such as less well off children who cannot afford market-priced education and skateboard parks.

What this comes down to is suggestive of Massey’s (2004, p. 5) point that in striving to convince us that globalization is inevitable there is a problematic sleight of hand whereby geography is turned into history and space into time in the name of progress. Neoliberal globalization as a material practice is ‘yet another in a long line of attempts to tame the spatial’ and, as such, it evades ‘the full challenge of space’ (Massey, 2004, p. 99). Ethiopia, Mexico and Bolivia are not geographically disadvantaged because they are bequeathed the hope of development. They are bequeathed a particular history (our history) that negates their particular local geography. This, of course, has social and political effects. It says that so-called developing countries are not really different from us, and it denies the need of global capital to maintain inequality. Similarly, young people are formed as fodder for a larger global enterprise within which they have few choices.

As Lund argues through a discussion of the Sri Lankan civil war and diaspora, children’s lives and situations are articulations of the global in terms of a time-space distanciation. She points out that young people’s displacement to labor elsewhere and their conscription/abduction into rebel armies represent examples of globalized ‘material practices’ that provide few choices for young people.

**The Bind of Universal Children’s Rights and Global Discourses**

The issue of more choices for young people is intriguing and hotly debated within the context of universal children’s rights. The argument that we critique here is that universal rights emanates from a progressive neoliberal individualism that assumes identities are always already constituted and fixed. Claims for equality come from a pre-given understanding of what a child is; what we want to do here is replaced this rhetoric with a politics that takes the constitution of young people’s identities and the relations through which they are constructed as a central concern. In terms of global politics, these relations are understood as embedded material spatial practices. Rather than accept the pre-given identities of young people, this politics elaborates the relational constructedness of things. It is hugely wary of claims to right and truth based on the seeming authenticity of unchanged political identities. Similarly, space too is a product of relations, and does not exist prior to identities and their relations. There is, by this way of thinking, an important connection between the co-creation of space and young people.

Spatial identities (nation, border, place) are tied intimately to political identities (adult, adolescent, student, child). The issue of contemporary spaces is forwarded by Kjørholt’s focus on the impossibility of authenticity in children’s voices and the undaunted search for it by some national and global institutions. The project of neoliberal globalization finds form for her in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which has generated heated discussion and some problematic policy making at the national level.
over the last 15 years. This is an issue that Lund takes on from the perspective of children’s participation. The UNCRC’s penchant for universal rights places it squarely in the realm of a neoliberal agenda that fixes individual categories of existence/identity. Kjørholt takes this to task from the perspective of the place of children in society as social actors in everyday life. Importantly, she argues that children reproduce life on par with adults and, as such, they are co-creators of their childhoods. The question remains as to how much license they are given in their part of the creation. And, moreover, how much this participation is hidden by liberal developmentalism. It seems also that right discourses contribute to this invisibility by universalizing the contribution of young people. Kjørholt argues that new liberatory discourses may be emerging from the UNCRC that open up space for new forms of child participation in social and political reproduction at both the national and international scale. She looks at two programs, one in Norway and one in Denmark, which suggest changing participation with a focus on children as social actors actively reproducing culture and national identities. By looking at individual stories of children, Kjørholt demonstrates the tensions between the enframing of global discourses (such as the International Labor Organization’s mandate to stop child labor as discussed by Aitken and Nieuwenhuys) and the realities of children’s lives. The global rhetoric glosses over the places of young people and suggests a problematically straightforward progress to development. As such, many children (and particularly the child activists touted by the UNCRC), are what Kjørholt calls ‘symbolic participants’ in a larger neoliberal agenda.

The Norwegian project discussed by Kjørholt suggests a shift in focus from the ‘developing’ child to the ‘competent’ child; from ‘pedagogy’ to ‘culture’. The notion, however, is that a culture made by children (children’s own culture or play culture) is rapidly disappearing. This larger discourse may not be so far removed from Gagen’s concerns. The question of how this relates neoliberal agendas to the notion of participatory democracies wherein yet another group is given so-called freedom is interesting. Freedom, as another part of the neoliberal agenda (Harvey, 2005), is highlighted in the free activities of Kjørholt’s Danish case and, in both the Norwegian and the Danish case, development is constructed as something that is politically and ideologically neutral. Once again, as Kjørholt points out, the issue relates to adult needs for a nostalgic reconstruction of their own childhoods.

Unfettered Global Childhoods

Looking at national and international discourses from a different perspective, Nieuwenhuys equates the hidden reproductive work of young people with what she calls ‘the global womb’. Her work is also about the ways representations produce static stages of development. She argues that the rhetoric of the child labor abolitionists are mythic and highlight ever receding notions of a better life. She argues that with neo-liberalism, any advantages accruing to the collapse of colonialism were lost to children in the majority world with the rhetoric of ‘the best interests of the child’, where ‘interests’ were defined as self-interest to fully participate in a market approach to development (see also Punch and Lund). Nieuwenhuys argues that, by so doing, symbolic violence is practiced against the notion of the non-consuming child and their lifeworlds, a perspective that fully endorses Buckingham’s anxieties.

Nieuwenhuys’ rethinking of child labor begins with the premise that the current need to eliminate the labor of young people is because of something that ‘development’ made problematic with regard to the production of life. Historically, people lost tenure of land and so children were no longer needed as repositories of family wealth and the new industrial wages were not sufficient to support them, so young people emerged as a ‘social problem’. This problem was solved in part by removing children (and women) from the
work-place and creating a so-called family wage for men. Reproduction was no longer at the expense of the industrialist. Like Gagen’s concern with the emergence of the science of child development, Nieuwenhuys’ story is global in scope, highlighting changes for young people’s labor in the metropolitan core and in the colonial periphery, where great pains were taken to maintain the peasant family as the locus of a self-sufficient reproduction, which was not at the expense of empire. Nieuwenhuys provides examples from around the colonial globe of the ways children’s work was redefined into an ethic that justified draconian measures of control (and continued cheap child labor). What this evidence suggests is that child labor elimination in heartland Europe and the US went hand-in-hand with new forms of child exploitation unfolding in the colonial periphery. In this sense, childhood was circumscribed territorially to the heartland and defined as ‘other’ (not really children) in the periphery. And so, as Aitken points out, concern with changes in child labor is also a concern that young people’s identities are not conceived and represented as service to a larger corporate/civic ideal. Considering child workers in Scotland and Mexico over a span of 40 years, he argues that the ‘ghoulish effects’ of global discourse such as those of development and modernization contrive an aesthetic that plays out in the lives of young people. Young people’s bodies and performative actions are bound to perceptions and representations as well as to the peculiarities of time and space.

Nieuwenhuys goes on to argue that child labor (and calls for its elimination) as a concept in the global south emerged in the 1990s as another form of labor control. As with other notions of children’s practices, global child labor is overwhelmingly interpreted as a repetition of northern history and development, and it is dealt with solely within national borders. Collective memory about the role of child labor eradication in the making of the welfare state was sufficiently alive to align political response behind the common child saving agenda articulated by Kjørholt, but no welfare state was possible in a post 1990s neoliberal world. Nieuwenhuys argues that the lack of a national solution to this problem precipitated the notion of the global child. And it was seen as inevitable and necessary that children would suffer under national economic structural adjustments. Lund makes a clear case for this with her example of the Mahaweli project in Sri Lanka.

Given the laws of the neo-liberal market, Nieuwenhuys argues, consensus about the state’s role in child labor converged around a set of practices that ritualistically celebrated children’s rights, disengaged with social justice and, finally, put in place by social and economic programs that reformed the children themselves under close surveillance of northern donors. State control was diminished in favor of families, communities and the global society. The global child who is rendered for potential donors by the institutions such as the ILO and the UNCRC typically appears younger, is autonomously determined (like an adult), and wants only the restoration of lost adulthood.

Nieuwenhuys demonstrates how processes of a global rights approach, dis-embedded from a wider context, help justify states’ disengagement from social and cultural reproduction in the direct interest of southern elites. This is the heart, she argues, of disciplining the global womb. And it is a heart which is populated by a lifeworld we know little about because much of the international rhetoric and research is focused upon what is appropriate and what is inappropriate work for children, and which dismisses their work to support families and economies through day-to-day activities as inconsequential.

In a similar vein, Skelton argues that we need to critically assess the UNCRC’s focus on participation with particular concern for one of its sponsors, UNICEF, and its practice through the 2003 State of the World’s Children report. Like Aitken and Nieuwenhuys, she is concerned with the ways that discourses from the north bleed inappropriately into young hearts of the global south. Skelton argues that the UNCRCs first set of emphases on protection and provision has of late been superseded by notions of child participation.
A large problem with these discourses of participation is that they are never used uncritically or unfavorably, and there is a presumption that child participation is always of value. Using critical discourse analysis, Skelton argues that the 2003 UNICEF report to highlight problematic focuses on child naivety, and their forward looking hopes and dreams. She shows how this rhetoric is problematically decontextualized and dismisses other avenues of participation, as noted also by Nieuwenhuys and Lund. The report is seen as a ‘deepening of democracy’, which is more inclusive and responsive but is also linked to a progressive form of development. Skelton then shows how the report shapes democratic citizenship within a tension of children ‘becoming’ adults (which is the discourse of the report) and ‘beings’ in and of themselves. This ties with the larger concerns of Aitken and Nieuwenhuys that young people and nations (their labor and their responsibility and care) are enabled to ‘become other’ in an future that is politically open rather than constrained to ‘become-the-same’ in a future that is prescribed by global neoliberal economics. The argument made here is that a large part of the globalized discourses from UNCRC and the ILO are clearly an enframing of children and an attempt to tame them.

Lund takes this a little further, positing problematically shifting discourses that certainly do enframe but whose effects are nonetheless difficult to pin down at the local level. She points out that in poor contexts, the participatory discourses of the UN and national governments are not only inadequate but perhaps also irrelevant. She uses case studies from Africa and Asia to suggest that although it is easy to document the ways participation is locally embedded, there are external structural forces related to globalization and geo-politics that are hugely relevant and much more difficult to pin down. To grasp this kind of complexity, she argues, we have to draw on more critical perspectives on the role of agency in recent developmental theory as well as insights from post-colonial scholars. Importantly, she points out that capabilities are not about what children can ‘choose’ but what they are able to achieve.

Dissolving the Frameworks

In sum, our clarion call is for a realization and re-imagining of the full challenge of young people. A central part of the questioning in this revolves around the seeming inevitability of global development (and, in particular, its neoliberal construction) and children’s development (and, in particular, their normative cognitive development). In this formulation, both globalization and child development are problematically enframed by force emanating always from ‘elsewhere’. The normative stance in the essays that follow is that the frameworks of progress and development, for both young people and nations, must be replaced with something more fluid and politically open.

And so, as a basis for the rethinking that is embarked upon in this volume, following Doreen Massey’s work on some philosophical assumptions that have stultified our understanding of the world (2004, p. 9), we approach the notion of children and globalization in three ways: (i) that we understand children as the product of interrelations constituted through spatial interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimacy of the embodied, and that relations are necessarily embedded material practices, (ii) that we understand space as the sphere of possible multiple stories of becoming-other. That a post-developmental future is a multiplicity of children’s stories-so-far in a plurality of spaces and across all scales, and (iii) that we understand that space and children are always already under co-construction, and that there is never closure. There are multiple possible futures that are not presaged by current neoliberal, academic or policy projects.

Of course, the various contributions of the book look upon globalization and childhood differently. Thus, the significance of globalization and how we understand it may vary according to what aspects of children’s lives and situations are focused upon. Children
may be directly involved in the neo-liberal (economic) project, with positive or negative outcomes. They may also be marginalized and exploited (socially, culturally and economically). Hence, what we understand as globalization (as with children and childhood) takes into account its multiple meanings and dimensions.

Geography and history, and how they come together in the notion of development, must be open in order to create a radical politics through which young people can become other than what geographic and historical frames suggest. What if imaginations are opened up to the possibility of multiple developmental trajectories for multiple storied young people? This question is the crux of why children? why now?

Note
1. For example, a special issue of the *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* (2004) on globalization focuses on economics, cosmopolitanism, commodification and so forth, omitting any mention of children or young people.

References


