'Women and children first'?

Priscilla Alderson

Conference on Feminism and the politics of childhood: friends or foes?
16-17 November 2015 University College London Institute of Education

Abstract

Throughout history, most violence has occurred towards and between oppressed people rather than against the oppressors. One example is Black South African violence during the apartheid era and still today. Dominant groups sustain their power through divide and rule, through stirring up complicated antagonisms, blame and guilt among the subordinate groups who might otherwise be strong allies against oppression.

Men's treatment of women and children has exploited this tactic, and feminism has had to include women shaking off the infantilised, powerless, lowly status they were forced to share with children. Just as men boosted their own higher status by denigrating women, women often seek to raise their own standing by denigrating children. 'We have fought to become real adults, no longer to be treated like children', is a common theme. That raises the questions: Should children be 'treated like children'? What does that involve? What are the likely advantages and disadvantages of being treated 'like a child'? And what does being a 'real adult' mean?

This paper considers alternatives to oppressive divisions of generation and gender, such as 'women and children first' and 'children first and always'. The divisions underlie destructive values in current politics and economics, which Bourdieu, Wacquant and others have identified as 'masculinist' workfare and prisonfare states, in contrast to 'feminine' welfare states.

Introduction

Throughout history, most violence has occurred towards and between oppressed people rather than against the oppressors. One example is Black South African violence during the apartheid era and still today. Dominant groups sustain their power through divide and rule, through stirring up complicated antagonisms, blame and guilt among the subordinate groups who might otherwise be strong allies against oppression.

Men's treatment of women and children has exploited this tactic, and feminism has had to include women shaking off the infantilised, powerless, lowly status they were forced to share with children. Just as men boosted their own higher status by denigrating women, women seek to raise their own standing by denigrating children. 'We have fought to become real adults, no longer to be treated like children', is a common theme. That raises the questions: Should children be 'treated like children'? What does that involve? What are the likely advantages and disadvantages of being treated 'like a child'? And what does being a 'real adult' mean?

This paper considers alternatives to oppressive divisions of generation and gender, such as 'women and children first' and 'children first and always', divisions which underlie destructive 'masculinist' values in current politics and economics.

'Women and children first'?

For centuries, the order 'women and children first' has invoked interdependence and solidarity for survival during shipwrecks. Shared danger and hope sharpen awareness of the vital need to struggle together for group survival, which involves extra protection for younger children, although the slogan can raise serious dangers. Claims to protect only women and children can expose men, and boys who are counted as men, to greater violence. Europe's worst mass killing since the annihilations of men and boys during World Wars I and II was the slaughter of 8,000 Muslim men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces in 1995. Bombs from drones are supposed to target only terrorists, almost always men. However, they kill women and children too, who now make up 90 per cent of the victims of armed conflict, which is largely conducted in urban areas no longer in remote battle fields (Bourke 2014). If women and children are separated from men, they can be exposed to

violence, rape and death when no one is left to protect them, and to hunger and penury in societies such as Afghanistan or Yemen where men are the main bread winners.

'Children first and always'

Although it is divisive, 'women and children first' is at least a preferable slogan to 'children first and always'. Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital's motto can force children into impersonal, oppressive systems. During much of the twentieth century, parents were mainly excluded from hospitals where countless children stayed for months or years, with little hope of having personal care, or advocacy and support if they protested about mistreatment (Oswin 1971).

Although the long-stay hospitals have been closed in Britain, many disabled children still live most or all of the year far from home in special boarding schools. Over £3million may be spent on school fees for each child, but when they leave they tend to be isolated, workless and depressed (Pellicarno et al. 2015). Particularly high numbers of minors aged 10-17 years stay far from their home in prisons in Britain (Willow 2015) and the USA (Stevenson 2014), where prison services fill in for the missing mental health services for young people, who suffer not only from mental illnesses but also from severe and sometimes lethal violence.

Child advocates say that attempts to educate or reform children by isolating them from their family and neighbourhood are harmful and ineffective in comparison with working for and with the children and their families to prevent and remedy their problems. Yet examples of separating children from their families are still highly admired. Before World War II, the much-praised Kinder-transport rescue of Jewish children from Germany to Britain indeed saved lives, but refusal to rescue the adults left many children without any living relatives.

Separating children from their families and neighbourhoods, and replacing informal intuitive care with professional supervision, is increasingly promoted through preschools and schools. The policy continues the trends of the industrial revolution to enclose adults into full time work places and children into nearly full time Gradgrindian schools. (Prisons expanded alongside land enclosures, Foster 2000). 'Child and family friendly' political manifestoes today promise ever more hours of mass childcare and schooling from the early months. We could discuss how confining children into a single, small, hyper-vigilant, over-equipped centre everyday for years infantilises them into helpless beings, who would be unimaginable to working class families less than 100 years ago. We could also ask who benefits from these systems, how and why. To restrict children's freedoms within narrowly age-banded groups reduces their ingenuity, creativity, skills and interdependence (Gardner 1993) and reduces the freedoms of adults who care for them.

The highly publicised demand for full time childcare, echoing English upper class impulses to consign children to servants and later to boarding schools, mainly comes from successful women, such as journalists, politicians, business managers and academics, who enjoy their careers and can afford to pay other women to do their housework and childcare. They do not speak for many children, or for women who find being with their own children as interesting as doing paid work, or much more so. Olga Nieuwenhuys (2011) traced a global pyramid of the labour and love of childcare, supported at its base by bereft child workers in countries such as the Philippines, whose mothers emigrate to work for families in wealthier countries.

Greater divisions and inequalities, whether of gender, generation, class, race or income, tend to hurt everyone including the advantaged (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), hence the importance of social justice and equal rights for all human beings. This involves humanism rather than a feminism that claims 'women are half the human race' (8,860,000 hits on Google) airbrushing out the one third of humanity who are children and young people. Similarly, to say that women do 70 per cent of the work in Africa (29,700,000 hits) including the childcare ignores all the work done by children, where thousands of them live in child-headed households (Meintjes et al. 2010). When feminists model themselves, as emancipated woman, on successful autonomous man, they reinforce the problems of masculinism. These include devaluing interdependence, children and 'feminine' values of intimacy and care, and sidelining them into private life and low-paid work. Success at work in the

race that most people fail becomes the prized end, instead of being the means towards also enjoying the ends of private and family life, relationships and personal fulfilment.

Problems of masculinism

There is a mixture of masculine and feminine traits and gender-attributed values (such as Gilligan's 1982 ethic of care or the ethic of justice) in everyone. Yet men and successful women are most likely to promote and benefit from the public, male-dominated System. Increasingly the System colonises the more private Lifeworld, which Habermas (1984) regarded as generating the authentic trust and moral relations on which the System depends. Although leading women who succeed in public life might be expected to support LifeWorld values, they seem to assume or be pushed into believing they must advance 'hard' neoliberal market values. For example in England, leading women MPs tend to say they have to support the austerity measures that are especially hurting children, young people, the poorest families and low-paid carers. Professor Alison Wolf (2015) criticised the 'betrayal of feminism by women in boardrooms or in parliament' who ignore 'the poorly paid female shift workers' on whom they personally depend.

The expansion of commercial childcare services is an example of the System's colonising of the Lifeworld into informal and voluntary relations, and into children's early consciousness. Sasha Engel (2014) goes beyond Nikloas Rose (1999), when arguing that we have moved well past Habermas's original theory.

> The neoliberal subject represents something far more insidious: a human being whose freedom is structured such that it subjects itself. Its ability to judge normatively is not impaired structurally, but in terms of content. The lifeworld of a neoliberal subject is not colonized by subsystemic imperatives in the sense that they have replaced the subject's ability to judge normatively. Rather, the subject is produced in such a way that its judgments, while remaining subjectively normative, cannot delegitimate the neoliberal capitalist apparatus of economic and political systems. The subject is in a permanent crisis of precariousness – but it is alone, and its normative judgments come to nothing. The capitalist economy is in a constant objective state of crisis – but it can endlessly re-establish itself as the only feasible alternative, thus precluding the subjective assessment which would turn a socio-economic crisis into an opportunity to call the socio-economic system into question.

System values include promoting the illusion of independent individualism, with competition, commercial dominance and growing inequality. The elite one percent of people will soon own more than half the wealth in the world,[1] wealth which accrues from inadequate reinvestment in industries and state services, and from the low wages with rising debt for almost everyone.

These interlocking problems or contradictions are predicted to bring the eventual self-destruction, the shipwreck, of humanity through several routes: insupportable debt and financial crises and implosions; violence and war: profligate over-use and waste of the planet's finite resources; uncontrolled climate change with mass migration away from floods, droughts and famines.

Bourdieu et al. (2006) and Wacquant (2009) recorded the growing dominance of the violent 'masculine' penal and workfare states in contrast with the dwindling 'feminine' welfare states. C Wright Mills (in 1956) noted how these values of costly violent repression at home and abroad were transferred to young people in elite US families. The generous scholarship systems in US universities have now spread the same values among leading families, politicians and think tanks across the world (Mirowski 2014). Men also suffer personally when they "lose touch with their feminine side", enjoy much less contact on average with their children than women do, and are unwilling to talk about their anxieties and other feelings. There were 4,623 male suicides in the UK in 2014, the second highest number in 15 years and the equivalent of 12 deaths a day. Three-quarters of suicides in the UK are by men, but there is little public or policy response (CALM, 2016).

[1] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-30875633

Inter-generational justice

Inequalities of power and wealth across socio-economic classes partly correlate with numerous intergenerational inequalities, when younger groups are most likely to be poor, in debt, in rented homes, and in households dependent on precarious low-paid work or benefits. Social justice therefore crucially involves redistributing wealth and opportunities between age groups. However, as Sasha Engel noted, neoliberalism erodes the values of altruism and justice necessary to such social change.

The strongly compliant, sacrificial solidarity seen during World Wars I and II is unlikely ever to return. Yet it was generated from shared fear and anger against a common enemy and passion to protect the homeland, and those incentives might partly re-emerge when prisonfare states and collapsed economies and ecologies are recognised as the ultimate common enemies (Harvey 2014; Marshall 2014; Wacquant 2009; and many others).

Hopes of justice will also rely on truly emancipated men, women and children who combine 'feminine' with 'masculine' traits. Kantian Man's rational morality detached from emotions and contingencies needs to be enriched with morality informed by contingent embodied emotions. Joanna Bourke (2014: 248-50) contends that we will not alter violence-based global politics until our illusions and comfortable complacence are replaced by realistic physical fear and horror about war. She believes that 'feminine' awareness and sensibility (shared by many men) is open to physically informed and morally informing emotions. Bourke's points could relate to the awareness of children as well as adults, and to climate change as well as the military-industrial economy.

Human nature

To take embodied moral emotions seriously involves re-theorising human nature, and overcoming crude, essentialist culture/nature divides, when nature is reduced to mindless instinct, from which culture and morality rescue us. Morality and aesthetics that value life and 'quality of life' can be seen to pervade the natural evolving world, in complex, interdependent eco-systems that can so easily be damaged and destroyed. (Birdsong obviously exceeds the mere utility of territory and mating concerns to which it is too often reduced.)

Morality is partly innate to human nature and other species. In the structural views of Durkheim and Parsons, children must be socialised into a synthetic morality, against innate human nature, by being taught that actions are wrong because they are vetoed. In contrast, humanist morality vetoes actions because they are wrong, in being cruel, deceptive or unjust (Arendt 1964; Bauman 2006). Moral judgments of empathy, kindness, cruelty and of due reward and punishment have been found in preverbal children, well before they can be taught explicitly about such concepts (reviewed in Alderson 2013, Chapter 6).

Among feminists who have long worked on rethinking gendered personal and political systems, Mary Mellor (1996: 256-64) contended that human survival depends on eco-socialism replacing destructive deregulated capitalism. The socially constructed

> 'sphere of production' does not just represent the interests of capital, it represents the interests of men. By separating production from both reproduction and from nature, patriarchal capitalism has created a sphere of 'false' freedom that ignores biological and ecological parameters (p. 256).

Deregulated capitalism exploits nature by ignoring the contradictions of capitalism noted earlier. Eco-socialism cannot simply be added on to a male-dominated socialism, such as the command economies. Instead, it must deeply take account of women's (and many men's) dependence on nature in their daily lives, which humanely unite the social and the biological, nature and culture, nurture and society. This transcends essential notions of gender. Small farmers, mainly women and

children, produce 70 per cent of the world's food, usually through organic sustainable methods. Yet so much of their work, despite producing and guarding the means of life, survival and regeneration, is an invisible, uncounted, uncosted 'externality' within the illusions of capitalism (Shiva 2013).

The private and public worlds must be reconnected if politics, industry and trade are to take realistic account of nature and human nature. This involves seeing essential human needs not in contradiction to the materialist constructions put on them, but as integral to those constructions. (This is thoroughly re-analysed in critical realism's concepts of the epistemic fallacy, the transitive and intransitive, and the three level natural necessity.) Mellor (1996: 260) believed that essentialism-materialism contradictions and dichotomies appear only when, first, 'the male construction of a social world presupposes [and ignores] its material basis in women's time and work' (such as when children and all the care and education they received are 'externalities' to industry until they arrive as young adult trained workers). And second, when women reclaim the material basis of their work and are then accused of being essentialist and their views are rejected. Yet women's 'thinking has to be feeling, intuitive, and multifaceted [like children's thinking] because this is the structure of their lives' (p. 261), which attends to physical, mental and emotional nurturing.

Mellor questioned how to explain men's destructive dominance 'without collapsing into an equally one-sided feminism' (p. 261). She believed the answer lies in reaffirming material and biological realities that do not *determine* our beliefs and behaviours but do *constrain* them. The helpful distinction between sex and gender can be misleading if it denies all differences. Men will continue to oppress women (and children) and to control their time until men take account of biological, sexual, reproductive, experiential and relational differences. To acknowledge nature's constraints, but not to see them as determining forces, over everyone's lives is part of reconfiguring human relations to one another and to the natural world and the economy. Mary Mellor and Kate Soper (1996) argue that feminism cannot change the world without socialism, which cannot address the dangers of climate change without eco-socialism (and see Foster 2000 and many others, reviewed in Alderson 2016, Chapter 12). Feminists advocate eco-feminism, which could fruitfully be complemented by eco-childhood studies. Like almost every point in this paper that could be presented in far more detail.

Conclusion

Should children be 'treated like children'? What does that mean? What are the likely advantages and disadvantages of being treated 'like a child'? And what does being a 'real adult' mean?

Children should not be infantilised by assumptions that biological growth determines their abilities, when abilities are also so powerfully influenced, expanded or stifled by their experiences. Hermeneutic dyads of the victim child and rescuing adult, or the needy child and providing adult, become exaggerated through self-fulfilling expectations. Such dyads undermine and may punish children's adventurous courage and longing for more independence. To be treated 'like a child' according to some notional stereotype is as restricting and depersonalising as being treated 'like a woman'. There are advantages in protective nurturing care early on, balanced with respect for early adventurousness. The disadvantages of micro-managing and over-confining young children are well-known stress and unhappiness, 'tantrums' and learned helplessness, which absorb energy and heavily restrict and control the lives of both children and their carers.

Yet to emancipate children and their carers would involve reshaping the public world and the System at all levels, from traffic systems to working hours to global labour arrangements. In the Global Women's strike, women stood with children when demanding a living wage for all carers including children who do caring work.[2]

In academia and policy, to confine childhood research into the semi-private semi-personal world of care and education reinforces gendered dichotomies and cements a double exclusion. First, the mainstream research and literature on the 'adult' world of politics, economics, trade, law,

[2] http://globalwomenstrike.net/content/petition-all-governments-a-living-wage-mothers-and-other-carers

agriculture and countless other topics tend to ignore children and the present and near-future interests of younger generations. Second, the childhood literature tends to ignore many of these crucial concerns, individually and in their collective effects on younger generations.

Childhood studies could do more to challenge these exclusions in three main ways. First, we can show in detail how children and young people, one third of people in the world and <40 per cent in Africa, are most crucially affected by present global politics and economics. Second, we can urge mainstream academia and public and policy debate to take proper account of children and young people, as feminism advocates for women. Third, we can research with children and young people on how they are learning and working to accept and support present policies, or to resist and change them, such as through subversive humour and nonviolent protest (Popović and Miller 2015). Childhood studies can expand the work of showing how alike children, young people and adults can be, while reasonably respecting age differences, just as feminism emphasises commonalities between men and women, while reasonably respecting the differences.

Research about how truly emancipated men, women and children can combine 'feminine' with 'masculine' and 'child-like' with 'adult-like' traits and strengths draws together many disparate topics usually separated into the academic silos. Critical realism offers approaches to this diverse re-analysis in two main ways. Across space, four interacting human social planes (bodies in relation to nature, interpersonal relations, social structures, inner being) can connect and organise numerous topics and contexts. Over time, a four-stage dialectic analyses process, change and transformation – or negative rigidity that blocks change (Alderson 2013, 2016; Bhaskar 2008). There is so much for each to gain from combining the insights of feminism and childhood studies.

References

Alderson, P. (2013) *Childhoods Real and Imagined: An Introduction to Critical Realism and Childhood Studies.* Volume 1. London: Routledge.

Alderson, P. (2016) *The Politics of Childhoods Real and Imagined: Practical Application of Critical Realism and Childhood Studies.* Volume 2. London: Routledge.

Arendt, H. (1964) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.* New York: Viking.

Bauman, Z. (2003) *Modernity and the Holocaust.* Cambridge: Polity.

Bhaskar, R. (2008) *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom.* 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P., Accardo, A., Balazs, G. et al. (2006) Trans P. Ferguson. *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society.* Cambridge: Polity.

Bourke, J. (2014) *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play Invade our Lives.* London: Virago.

CALM – Campaign Against Living Miserably. (2016) https://www.thecalmzone.net/.

Engel, S. (2014) All Quiet on the Neoliberal Front? A Reconsideration of Habermas's *Legitimation Crisis, Fast Capitalism,* 11, 1.

Foster, J. (2000) *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature.* New York: Monthly Review Press.

Gardner, H. (1993) *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*. London: Fontana.

Gilligan C (1982) *In a different voice.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Habermas, J. (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action.vol 1.* Trans. T. McCarthy. Cambridge: Polity.

Harvey, D. (2014) *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism.* London: Profile.

Marshall, G. (2014) *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change.* London: Bloomsbury.

Meintjes, H., Hall, K., Marera, D., & Boulle, A. (2010). Orphans of the AIDS epidemic? The extent, nature and circumstances of child-headed households in South Africa', AIDS Care, 22 (1), 40-49.

Mellor, M. (1996) Ecofeminism and ecosocialism: dilemmas of essentialism and Materialism, in Benton, T. (ed) *The Greening of Marxism.* London: Guilford Press, pp. 251-267.

Mills, C. W. (1956) *The Power Elite. New York:* Oxford University Press.
Mirowski, P. (2014*) Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown.* London: Verso.
Nieuwenhuys, O. (2011) From child labour to working children's movements, in J. Qvortrup, W. Corsaro, and M. Honig (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 289–300.
Newman, M. (2006) *Teaching Defiance: Stories and Sstrategies for Activist Teachers.* London: Joseph-Bass.
Omolo, A. (2015) *Violence against Children in Kenya: An Ecological Model of Risk Factors and Consequences, Responses and Projects.* Münster: Waxmann.
Oswin, M. (1971) *The Empty Hours*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Pelicarno, E., Hill, V., Croydon, A., et al. (2015) *My Life at School: Understanding the Experiences of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs in Residential Special Schools.* London: Institute of Education and England's Children's Commissioner.
Popović, S. and Miller, M. (2015) *Blueprint for a Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men and other Non-Violent Techniques to Galvanise Communities.* London: Scribe.
Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the Soul.* London: Free Association Books.
Shiva, V. (2013) *Making Peace with the Earth*. London: Pluto.
Soper, K. (1996) Greening Prometheus: Marxism and ecology, in Benton, T. (ed) *The Greening of Marxism.* London: Guilford Press, pp. 81-99.
Stevenson, B. (2014) *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption.* London: Random House.
Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity.* London: Duke University Press.
Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level.* London: Penguin.
Willow, C. (2015) *Children Behind Bars: Why the Abuse of Child Imprisonment Must End.* Bristol: Policy.
Wolf, A. (2015) Feminists today are too obsessed with their own elite, metropolitan lives, *Guardian,* 21 January.