Governing Childhood

Edited with an Introduction by

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Debates of French lawmakers in the early 1870s about the regulation of child street performers and professional child beggars reveal the erosion of the public-private opposition by concerns about the ability of the family to maintain its own moral order. By collapsing the physical and moral bodies of the ‘abused’ young performer, the 1874 law protecting children in the itinerant trades would point toward the possibility of regulating the most juridically sacrosanct of all nineteenth-century spaces: the private space of parent-child relations.

Sex delinquency as constructed by the early juvenile court is presumed to reflect middle class sexual morality. The Denver Juvenile Court of Judge Ben Lindsey articulated a less traditionalist conception, indicting not the sexually precocious girl but the repressive conventions that stigmatized her. Lindsey’s constitution of the female delinquent, and complementary analysis of Denver Juvenile Court and Colorado State Industrial School for Girls records, substantiate this revisionist thesis.
III. Janet Ainsworth

Achieving the Promise of Justice for Juveniles: A Call for the Abolition of Juvenile Court

Juvenile defendants are not only denied the full measure of due process accorded to adult defendants but also are shortchanged by less effective representation. Reforms are likely to fail until the separate and unequal juvenile justice system is abolished. Just as some children are more like adults, so are some adults more like children. A unified court system would facilitate justice for all offenders, juvenile or adult.

IV. Michael Freeman

The James Bulger Tragedy: Childish Innocence and the Construction of Guilt

Two English schoolboys convicted of the abduction and murder of a two-year-old child were the centre of a moral panic politically contrived to bolster a failing Conservative government. Their trial and treatment, and the public's punitive response, stand in stark contrast to a similar trial over a hundred years before, raising central questions about legal and social constructions of childhood innocence and criminal capacity.

V. Anne McGillivray

Therapies of Freedom: The Colonization of Aboriginal Childhood

'Civilizing the Indian' was a central aim of post-colonial Canadian government. Assimilation strategies for Aboriginal childhood drew on technologies and discourses of nineteenth-century childdaving and, bypassed newer technologies of normalization until the massive post-1960s seizure of Aboriginal children. The new intertribal agencies did not resolve the tension between protecting children and protecting their culture, and childhood remains the most contested site of Aboriginal self-determination.
United States constitutional discourse on childhood projects two images of citizenship: the tractable, law-abiding citizen and the citizen actively engaged in public life. Autonomy of parent and state varies according to which image grounds a particular rule. The history of these visions of citizenship and their shaping of childhood suggests that neither is sufficiently attentive to the needs of children as children. Both err in their vision of the family’s role in creating citizens and forging social ties.

The politics of childhood and the cultures of children provide a framework for addressing children’s rights issues and evaluating constructions of childhood, child labour and child abuse. These are examined from a sociological perspective which advocates re-evaluating children’s work, advancing their cultural rights and responsibilities and promoting their participation in the community.