Women and Children in social reproduction and the global womb

Comment on Newberry and Rosen

Olga Nieuwenhuys

Having worked on children's labor of reproduction from the very beginning of my career as an anthropologist, Jan Newberry and Rachel Rosen's piece, which engages with the complex and thorny issue of "women and children" from a feminist framework, intrigued me. The piece is interesting because it contributes to resuscitate social reproduction theory, a conceptual framework that has only recently been rescued from the academic limbo to which it had been relegated since the 1980s under the influence of postmodernist critique. This influence has resulted for children in an overstated focus on the individual child's agency that evades altogether addressing children's roles in the wider political economy. But can returning to the notion of social reproduction fill the gap? I suggest that, though Newberry and Rosen enrich the theory with such notions as "temporality" and "financialization," the conceptual framework remains too abstract to account for children's role. I begin describing my personal experience with social reproduction, which started in the 1970s, to then discuss Newberry and Rosen's proposal to revive the notion. I argue that the proposal overstates the role of women in social reproduction and suggest three lines of enquiry that may help better acknowledge what children, among others, contribute. I finally discuss why I feel social reproduction theorizing may benefit from

thinking in terms of a "global womb" in which children and women find themselves, both socially and geographically, locked.

Let me begin with the influential role of social reproduction in my anthropological monograph on children's work and unaccounted for domestic tasks in a village of Kerala, which was written in the 1980s and published in book form at the beginning of the 1990s. I found French Marxist anthropologists' theorizing on social reproduction helpful in uncovering crucial linkages between the children's seemingly banal everyday tasks and the wider political economy, and this formed a substantial part of the argument in my book (Nieuwenhuys 1994: 153–197). However, with Marxism losing much of its authority in academia soon after publication, that part failed rather completely to resonate in Western academia. Subsequent attempts at pointing at the importance of social reproduction, to which I returned later (Nieuwenhuys 2005, 2007, forthcoming) did little to improve the notion's afterlife among childhood scholars. I had depicted in the first chapters of the book the working children in the village as subjects conscious of their actions and of their choices in life and this fitted well into the upcoming new sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1990), which was heavily influenced by postmodernist deconstructionism.

Despite my Marxist leanings, my careful ethnography of children's lifeworlds in the village earned me therefore in the course of the 1990s some academic credit as a specialist on the childhood issues that were being formulated for the Southern part of the globalizing world. These issues were stamped with the new global policy agenda that invested Northern-funded NGOs with the responsibility to address the consequences of the devastations economic restructuring brought to bear on children's lives in the Global South. Funding for research being geared toward addressing newly formulated policy issues such as street children, child labor, and children's rights, the link with the wider political economy became even more difficult to make—so much so that the new policy agenda found strong support in what became known as “childhood studies,” a school of thought that put the agentic, individualized child at the center of analysis and focused on his or her complex relationship to “childhood” (see, for a critique, Nieuwenhuys 2010). Even if often critical of the idea that children in the Global South were victims of their own societies and needed to be rescued by NGOs, childhood scholars remained locked in the belief that recognizing children's agency was the answer. Failing to address the wider political economy in which children's actions are embedded resulted in a tacit endorsement of the new policy agenda.

I believe that, and this is my second point, the recent interest in social reproduction and in particular Newberry and Rosen's attempt to articulate children's roles to those of women signal that the very narrow confines of childhood studies may at last begin to give way. Basing themselves on casework on early childhood education in Canada and Indonesia, the authors share a feminist perspective that stresses the complex tensions that exist between women (as mothers) and children (as their dependents). This tension is best understood, they argue, when taking “temporality” and “financialization” into account, since these play out differently for women and children. Children's lives would be mostly geared to their future, while

women face the burden to attend to their immediate needs, something they find increasingly impossible to do without incurring debts. These debts impact however also on the future of children, since, on growing up, they must contribute to their repayment in some form or other. The authors refer hereby to Silvia Federici's (2014) argument that financialization, often in the form of microcredits, saps into the hidden reproductive labor of women, but fail, in my view, to properly account for the reproductive roles of children. Child labor laws condemn de facto children to unpaid domestic work or work on the family's land or enterprise. For this reason, children's everyday work that is done unpaid is even more than women's “for free” and can therefore be sapped into ad libitum. Financialization may therefore not by chance be accompanied by worldwide, ever-energetic efforts to ban the *paid* work of children.

The official justification for promoting microfinance on a global scale is of course not that it is an excellent instrument to tap into children's unpaid work. It is rather the opposite: women would take loans to run small businesses and invest, out of love and a sense of responsibility, their earnings in children's well-being and schooling, freeing them from labor exploitation—a reasoning that is defensible only if one adopts the official definition of child labor that quite paradoxically equates remuneration with exploitation. Children who work as domestics in the homes of nonrelatives are according to this approach, even if paid, considered exploited, while those who work unpaid for relatives or in their own homes are not (see Jacquemin 2006). As if staying at home to look after the small ones and the elderly while mother is out working, or helping a self-employed mother meet production targets to repay a microcredit would be less exploitative than working for a third party against some sort of wage. Though the empirical evidence on the role of children in microfinance is slim and inconclusive, Gautam Hazarika and Sudipta Sarangi (2008) contend that in rural Malawi, children replace adults busy in credit-stimulated household enterprises,

in the shouldering of domestic chores. For rural Bangladesh, Asadul Islam and Chongwoo Choe (2013) maintain that children are pulled out of school in order to engage in work in a household enterprise established with the support of microcredit. Likewise, Thi Thu Tra Pham and Kien Son Nguyen (2019) argue that in rural Vietnamese households that are recipients of microcredit, the demand for child labor increases, while the quality of schooling lowers. The success of microfinance is then not only on account of women's selfless love for their children and superhuman capacity for work and financial efficiency.

There are, third, at least three possible lines of inquiry to account for the role of children in social reproduction. The first is about the role of children in care work. As it stands, the literature is generally biased in favor of the dyad mother-child and obliterates the role of siblings, which is particularly crucial in families of the Global South. Particularly in large, poor families, women are not the only caretakers: they share this role with the older children of the family and particularly, but not only, their teenage daughters, the latter becoming often the main caretaker when mothers are either ill, deceased, or working far away from home. In many parts of the world, women's paid employment entails such long hours that little time is left for care work. The second line of inquiry is about the temporality of the debt that both women and children may find themselves responsible for. Since, for most people in the world, children remain the main carers in sickness and old age, while taking loans women (and other carers) not only pay for their own immediate needs but also invest in their own future. The issue of temporality should therefore not be limited to relations between the mother-child dyad but placed, as I have argued elsewhere, in a wider, long-term intergenerational perspective, with people of all ages and gender roles caring for each other, children being born with an original debt to be repaid later in life (Nieuwenhuys 2005).

This brings me to the last objection, which is about the monetary basis of financialization.

When seen through the lens of social reproduction, monetary debts, even if growing and sapping into social reproduction, represent but a small part of the debt incurred during the life course. Social reproduction is about creating life, and the goods and services that circulate in this realm are therefore not only difficult to quantify but escape purposefully the logic of commercial exchange. Though for anthropologists they belong to the realm of the gift, it would be a mistake to believe they are for free. Their "enigma," to use Maurice Godelier's (1997) term, is their rootedness in the creation of life, which, while being given for free, forces the receiver to acknowledge them as a never-ending debt, the gift of life being of course the most vital example thereof. Newberry and Rosen's suggestion to link financialization to the temporalities informing the relations between women and children is a useful way of laying bare that reproductive relationships are conflict ridden, which the monetization of the intergenerational debt may exacerbate. Their analysis would, however, benefit from a critical scrutiny of the inequalities and tensions arising from children being condemned, by law, to perform unpaid work, both in schools, at home, on the family land and in the enterprises created through microcredits. While monetary debts are subjected to law-enforced repayment schemes, care work and, more generally, obligations arising from the intergenerational debt, are not. Tensions in temporalities arising from differences in the nature of debts would therefore need to be included in the analysis.

Finally, the relation of women and children in social reproduction cannot do, in my view, without accounting for the existence of a Global South which functions as a "global womb," a metaphor for the largely invisible socio-economic spaces inhabited by a majority of women and children (Nieuwenhuys 2007, forthcoming). Depending on whether the focus is on North/South relations, the status of children, and the nature of life in societies in the Global South, the notion "global womb" apprehends three different aspects of social reproduction.

First, when the focus is on North/South relations, the notion captures the South's role in producing abundant life for free, to provision the North, shielded behind walls of bureaucratic procedures, security guards, and concrete, with a steady stream of cheap products and workers. With respect to the status of children, second, the notion intimates that people in the Global South live beyond borders that make it very hard to claim or realize their human rights. Their lives are, as it were, in suspense, as if not yet born. Third, the notion also refers to life in societies in the Global South as being of a fundamentally different nature than life in the North. While self-realization and freedom in the North underpin the myth of the self-made individual, in the Global South, life is subordinated to the womb, the source of the endless cycle of life reproduction. The womb informs the prevailing moral economy, with intergenerational commitment to the collective in its widest possible sense and such values as reciprocity, sacrifice, and responsibility, guiding daily life. Both old-age security and repositories of the collective's endeavors and hopes for the future, children are born with a debt to be repaid rather than a right to entitlements. These three dimensions inform the sociopolitical study of children and childhood in the Global South and work as an antidote against their routine representation as victims of their putatively ignorant families and failing societies. Positioning children in the global womb helps illuminate how children create value *because* their work is socially constructed as valueless and, by the same token, their crucial role in social reproduction.

Olga Nieuwenhuys lives and works in Amsterdam and is Guest Researcher in the Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She is currently writing a book on the anthropology of childhood and, with Karl Hanson, on children's living rights.
Email: O.Nieuwenhuys@uva.nl

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