

Anthropological Perspectives on Problematic Youth

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Review article on:

Panter-Brick, Catherine and Malcolm T. Smith, eds. Abandoned Children. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xvi + 231 pp. Including chapter references and index. Cloth. \$55.00.

Marquez, Patricia C. The Street is My Home: Youth and Violence in Caracas. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. ix + 276 pp. Including chapter references and index. Paper. \$49.50.

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Among the many volumes of research that exist today on children, it is not always easy to find analyses which go beyond clichés about their vulnerability and victimization. Especially when centered on poor children, discussions tend to revolve around the description of social problems and the search for solutions. Although these concerns are certainly justified, such an approach often confirms rather than questions common sense stereotypes, doing very little to further our knowledge of the subjects under study. It is thus a pleasant experience to discover, in two recent books, Abandoned Children (a collective work organized by Catherine Panter-Brick and Malcolm T. Smith) and The Street is My Home (by Patricia C. Marquez), contextually dense analyses of what would be viewed by many as "problem youngsters."

The two books have a common starting point: the critical analysis of the reified use of terms such as "abandonment" or "street children," often encountered in internationally-run intervention programs. Both eschew perspectives centered on the psychological dysfunction of certain families or individuals, emphasizing instead the social, economic and political factors they believe to be the major cause of problem situations. They both succeed in avoiding the pitfalls of oversimplification by weaving youngsters into the social fabric of their existence, highlighting the importance of context through the implicit comparison of each case study with other sorts of children, other sorts of childhood. Both insist on giving heed – through ethnographic field research – to the youngsters themselves, rather than painting their young subjects as eternally passive victims.

The first of these volumes is a collective work, similar in scope and depth to contemporary classics in this field, such as Children and the Politics of Culture (Stephens 1995) or Small Wars (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998). The thirteen

articles, written by European scholars on orphanages, war refugees, street kids, and child prostitutes, are prefaced by anthropologist Judith Ennew. Part-time consultant to international child welfare organizations, including UNICEF and Save the Children, Ennew sets the tone – stating the ambition to contribute not only to academic theory, but to policy and program planning as well. Frequent citation of authors linked to the critical discussion of child rightsⁱ is a sure indicator of this double objective. The second book, written by a Venezuelan anthropologist schooled at the University of Berkeley, is ostensibly geared toward a typically anthropological question: the identity of displaced youth in Caracas. How, the author asks, within a context of scarcity and violence, do these young people manage to gain material wealth and create meaning in their lives? Thanks perhaps to her mainly academic concerns, Marquez develops important points that the other authors reviewed here barely touch on: international trends in consumer markets aimed at young people and the concomitant growth of a globalized youth culture, for example. However, her major focus on poor youth, many of whom have lived on the streets of Caracas, and her clinical appraisal of two reform schools leaves little doubt about the usefulness this book will also have for program planners.

The push and pull of parental responsibility – the foundling hospitals

Abandoned Children, including articles written by anthropologists, historians, and applied psychologists studying social policies concerning child welfare, covers a broad geographic spread: Thailand, Nepal, Greece, Brazil, Mozambique, Azores, Portugal, Italy, and England. The relatively short articles do not exhaust any one line of inquiry, but the volume's genius, as Panter-Brick's introductory article points out, is in the juxtaposition of cases from different epochs and places. Presenting a critical

appraisal of state-sponsored as well as non-governmental forms of intervention, the volume steadily, if discreetly, chips away at many of the sacred cows of present-day welfare policies. Iconoclastic in the best of anthropological tradition, the articles converge toward the challenge of enlightenment models for child welfare (“the state knows all”), nudging the reader toward a consideration of informal, or at least extra-institutional arrangements based on local social dynamics.

The opening articles, centered on foundling care in pre-modern Europe, clearly pose one of the book's major themes: the push and pull, between state and family, of parental responsibilities. Foundling hospitals, the reader learns in thorough reviews on recent literature, were instituted during the early Renaissance throughout Italy, Spain, France and Portugal. Besides illegitimate babies, many children of legally constituted couples were left at these institutions as their parents attempted to avoid sinking into dire poverty. Isabel G. de Sá, in her reflection entitled “The circulation of children in eighteenth-century Portugal,” argues convincingly that babies were not always unwanted. European statesmen were beginning to conceive the nation's welfare in terms of a large population. Seeking to avoid infanticide and, at the same time, increase society's stock of young citizens ready to fight in the army or people the overseas colonies, political authorities might have actually encouraged abandonment. Thus, in 18th century Porto (a town of barely 40,000 residents), where children were accepted at the foundling hospital “without reservation, regardless of geographic origin or status”(p.34), over 60,000 foundlings passed through the system.

Parents, on the other hand, deployed different tactics – from bribing institutional authorities to leaving messages or identifying tokens with their anonymously abandoned child – to maintain contact, and kindle the hope of eventually recovering their child. Apparently, few parents ever did so. According to Sá, even in Portugal, where parents

could legally recover their children at any age without having to repay expenses, not more than ten percent of the parents took their children back. However, the widespread occurrence of identifying tokens, in other countries as well as Portugal, suggests that parents were reluctant to view their child's arrival at the state institution as a definitive break in relations.

While much has been written on state and parental attitudes toward foundlings, Sá's material joins a more recent school of analysis (repeated in other articles in the book) by focusing on the children's paid attendants. The system brought many practical benefits to the wet-nurses. Aside from monthly payments and eventual bonuses, a wet-nurse might also expect various benefits for members of her family, such as exemption from military service. It is highly probable, however, that in a context in which – because of high infant mortality, celibacy, or late marriage – many people had no children of their own, foundlings could be valued in their own right as young members of the household. In fact, as the author points out, there is evidence that, even before the development of foundling hospitals, children had long circulated, through informal circuits, from one family to another, occupying a status somewhere between servant and adopted offspring. The wet-nurse industry which sprung up with the foundling hospitals institutionalized this circulation of children, creating additional incentives for many families of modest income to become involved.

In other words, posing the question of "abandoned children" in terms of a system, involving state, parents, and substitute families, and rooted in a particular historical context, Sá develops the hypothesis that child circulation served as a sort of leveling mechanism, redistributing "surplus" children their families could not afford to feed among other parental figures (whether the state or substitute families) who were lacking in children.

The cost-benefit aspect of institutional care is considered in two detailed studies, based on quantifiable data drawn from historical files. A team of historians (Viazzo et al.) examines five centuries of archives on the foundling hospital in Florence, teasing out, from the different changes in pattern, innovative hypotheses concerning the age, sex, and legitimacy or illegitimacy of abandoned children, while the anthropologist Malcolm Smith, in his computer modeling of the dynamics of foundling care in the 19th century Azores, centers quite squarely on the local treasury's dilemma of providing financial support to the foundling system.

Documenting the steady increase of children dropped off at the state institutions from the fifteenth century on, these authors address the questions: How were public authorities to foot the bill? and, How were they to balance limited budgets and growing clientele in order to maintain a minimally efficient establishment? One plausible response, brought up by several authors in this volume, is that administrators might have tacitly tolerated high mortality rates to keep costs down.ⁱⁱ Both articles point out the paradoxical feature, inherent in the foundling system, in which administrators would alternate between euphoria at what was often only passing success in reducing infant mortality, and embarrassment about where they would find the funds to support the growing number of survivors.

Critics of this perspective might point out that, lacking modern hygiene, growth in institutional populations automatically provoked an increase in infant mortality, no matter what the administrators' attitudes. However, the statistical evidence in these articles proves otherwise: the deciding factor which generally caused a sharp downturn in infant mortality rates concerns institutional policies of delegated motherhood. Here, quantitative and qualitative data appear to converge around a central issue: the astounding importance of external wet-nurses.

Although such substitute mothers had been employed from early on, administrators were not always efficient in moving children through the system and into the countryside. Some, following enlightenment ideas on the superiority of residential care, expressly doubted the capacity of a paid wet-nurse, living far from institutional supervision, to provide adequate care. Fraud and child abuse were, of course, not uncommon, and financial bonuses paid to women whose wards reached a certain age did appear to add to a child's chances of survival. And yet, the data consistently points out that the longer a foundling remained in residential care, fed on animal milk or even by *internal* wet-nurses (who were inevitably poorer and more undernourished than their counterparts in the countryside), the worse it fared. Whether in Portugal or Italy, evidence suggests that any change in policy that might favor institutional care (whether due to deliberate avoidance or to a dearth of available wet-nurses) had negative effects on a child's chances for survival.

Paradoxically, the more consistent use of external wet-nurses, linked to the growing efficiency of the nineteenth century foundling system, may well have been partially responsible for the skyrocketing number of abandoned children: "In a regime of relatively low mortality, transitory abandonment could become part of a wider strategy worked out by needy parents to cope with difficult stages in the family life cycle" (Viazzo et al.: 88). This explosion of children abandoned to state care ended, throughout Europe, toward the close of the nineteenth century. The dramatic decline in foundlings coincided with the disappearance of the "foundling wheels"ⁱⁱⁱ which had long guaranteed the anonymity of abandoning parents. However, Smith, in his work on the Azores, reminds us of a further innovation in childcare policies of the mid-nineteenth century which could have contributed to this decline: subsidies paid to single mothers. As demonstrated by his detailed analysis, this measure, while costing the state less,

increased a child's chances of survival even more than if it had been placed with an external wet-nurse.

Finally, Kertzer, after providing a thorough overview on child abandonment and mortality in various parts of nineteenth century Europe, zeroes in on the foundling hospital in Bologna to delve into the little-studied question of what actually happened to those children who survived infancy and went on to apprenticeship situations.^{iv} Comparing data from three different periods during the nineteenth century, we learn once again that, despite administrators' consistent misgivings, external wet-nurses and substitute families made all the difference, not only for survival, but for a child's integration into society. Kertzer shows the particular interest different sorts of substitute families had in receiving children. In the mountainous regions of Turin, for example, where farming was difficult and men often emigrated to the city in order to procure an income, the cash payments that accompanied a foundling were highly valued. Not only could they furnish, after three or four years, the amount needed for a daughter's dowry, but – being an on-going source of income – they also allowed families to obtain credit for purchases in the local commerce. Sharecropping families in the hilly regions around Tuscany, on the other hand, regularly sought after slightly older and predominantly male youth to help them with the farm chores. Institution officials considered this the ideal placement as youngsters were received in what were considered good conditions (the food and lodging normally offered to farmhands), as well as being schooled in a useful profession (farming). Peasant proprietors of land also took in children, although, intriguingly, they were generally under nine and disproportionately female. Altogether, Kertzer reminds us that, during this century, after the foundling's first birthday, its chances of survival were more or less those of any other youngster from the region. Furthermore, many of these children had more or less

stable existences (an average of two placements, between the ages of one and fifteen, at the Bologna foundling home), and so, "given the propensity of poor rural families to send out their children, beginning at ten to twelve years of age, to live in other households as agricultural servants, the foundlings appear remarkably similar to their non-foundling neighbors"(p.54).

State policies and traditional coping mechanisms

In the chapter "Borrowed children in the Greek civil war," Eftihia Voutira and Aigli Brouskou make an apt transition from the historical essays to those on contemporary situations. Focusing on a phenomenon from recent history, the displacement of nearly 50,000 Greek children during the late 1940s, this article also introduces a new and highly relevant dimension to the discussion on state-parent relations regarding childcare: the state's interest in child education as an ideological tool which may, at times, mandate the child's removal from its family. The combined efforts of two researchers present a tour de force: one specialized in the "child-gathering" Democratic Army which claimed to save children from starvation, military raids, and interrupted education by sending them to safe harbor in neighboring regions (e.g., the Balkans, the Soviet Union) sympathetic to the communist rebels' cause; the other focused on the Queen's "child-protecting" nationalist forces which, in a "desperate race" to get there before their opponents, organized the massive evacuation of children in the "Northern bandit areas." In this tug-of-war for the ideological control of future generations, each camp justified its own actions ("evacuating" children to "protect" and "educate" them) while flinging accusations against like policies of its opponent (who "abducted" children to "indoctrinate" them). Ironically, as the authors aptly point out,

“In fact, the two systems were remarkably similar in terms of the contexts in which children were to be educated (e.g., camps, institutions, foster homes), the methods used (discipline, corporal punishment), the ends envisaged (to transform the children into agents of modernization and development for a future nationalist/communist Greece), and the criteria for success" (p. 99).

Exploring the multi-ethnic character of the Northern population with many Slav-speaking enclaves, the discussion brings to the fore the influence of state education (and, at times, arbitrary policies) in the forging of a child's national identity. Educational planners in the Iron Curtain countries were faced with the question of how to instill devotion to internationalist principles (fraternal solidarity with a working alliance of all communist peoples) at the same time that they motivated patriotic love of a socialist version of the children's motherland. In what language were the youngsters to study? The host country's? Greek? Slav? Were they to follow a separate, specialized curriculum centered on Greece? And what was to be the long-term fate of these "borrowed" children? When host countries were willing, at the end of the Greek civil war, to repatriate children, it was far from evident that the Greek government would want them back. The authors of this article point out that, by 1952, Greek authorities had ceased their appeals to the United Nations to guarantee the return of these youngsters: "It had come to be believed that children who had been under state socialist control for more than four years would be difficult to re-educate in the nationalist ideals of the homeland"(p.103).

Children who were gathered up by the Queen and transported to camps and "children's villages" within Greece *were* educated in the ideals of the motherland – a combination of Greek orthodoxy and national patriotism. The Queen was seen as a sort

of savior who had protected the children against the atrocities imputed to communism, and the Greek state was presented as a benevolent, competent parent, able to provide the high-quality education that a child's own parent would or could not. The authors encounter, in this policy, the basic principles of the Greek state's contemporary childcare policies – interventionist and paternalistic –which, applied to problem situations, continue to favor institutionalization of children over all other alternatives. The great irony of these high-cost alternatives, as reflected in the experience of Greece's civil war children, is that they hardly ever seem to attain their goal of creating model citizens to help modernize backward areas. Many children stayed on at the camps, becoming social workers linked to the institutional network – agents of continuity rather than change. Others, attempting reintegration into their home villages, were treated as "local foreigners" and, not surprisingly, many joined the mounting wave of Greeks emigrating to the West during the sixties and seventies.

Chief among the criticisms of the historical policies for the state institutionalization of children, presented in the first half of this book, appears the notion that, aside from being inefficient and costly, these policies may well disrupt "traditional coping mechanisms." Indeed, several authors cite Boswell's Kindness to Strangers (1988) to reinforce the hypothesis of a pre-contemporary epoch when orphaned and poor children would be informally cared for in substitute families without any state mediation. In her introduction to this volume, Panter-Brick cites cases from various parts of the developing world, as well as from European history, to point out how, in many contexts, it is a matter of routine for mothers and fathers to share parental responsibilities. In fact, there is a vast literature to suggest that, whether to guarantee a suitable education, secure useful social contacts, seal political alliances, console a childless couple, keep an elder relative company, or slough off excess mouths to feed,

there are any number of reasons for a child to circulate between different households, living a normal life in circumstances that are far removed from the Western family ideal.^v

H. Chanley, in her article on the Mozambique civil war, gives us an interesting update on such informal coping mechanisms which followed an early 1980s crisis period during which tens of thousands of children were separated from their parents. Although the author is leery of exaggerated claims about the unlimited capacity of the extended family to absorb related children, and points out that the taking in of *unrelated* children was *not* traditionally a widespread practice, she takes pains to describe the massive mobilization of informal community resources to care for children whose lives were disrupted by the war.

Members of the Mozambique government, acutely aware of the shortcomings of institutionalization, sought to promote intervention policies based on local-level dynamics. Having taken note of the large number of people who, for reasons of pure altruism, absorbed one these children into their family, they initiated research to deepen understanding of the dynamics involved. Studies showed that children in these spontaneous substitute families in general fared quite as well as those in other households. Worries, voiced by international organizations, that the children would be mistreated or exploited for their work capacities did not pan out. When, through agency efforts, children were reunited with their biological parents, they often maintained contact with the substitute family, enjoying an arrangement in which parenthood was shared between the different households.

Comparing this case to other crisis situations (involving, for example, famine), Chanley develops an interesting theoretical framework centered on "exchange entitlements" between members of kin and community groups. With its rich description

of local-level practices and the cautioning against the tendency of outside observers to measure child abuse against their own ethnocentric standards, this study's major contribution remains, however, in the realm of applied science. Before casting judgments, the author concludes, intervention agents should acquire minimum "cultural competence" on the context they are working in, including awareness of notions concerning personhood and childhood, beliefs about age capabilities and developmental stages, and the role of kin and community networks in childcare practices.

R. Hinton's article on the refugee camps for the nearly 90,000 Nepali who, expelled or fleeing from Bhutan at the end of the 1980s, returned destitute to their own country addresses a similar problem: interventionist policies dealing with children living in emergency situations. Just as in Chanley's study, here, we encounter criticism of international non-governmental organizations that conduct their aid programs according to Western notions of family and child welfare, and place high priority on providing psychological counseling to victimized women and children. Citing local religious ideologies which deny the centrality of the self, Hinton points out that most people in the camps do not see themselves as clinically traumatized. Furthermore, many women do not understand why their experiences of violence (rape, for example) should be singled out as more problematic than those (loss of home and livelihood) they have suffered together with their often less resilient menfolk.

Above all, Hinton suggests that the Western notion of childhood as a particularly vulnerable and dependent period prevents authorities from recognizing the key role children play in family and community support networks. Here, children not only show resiliency and quick adaptation to new situations, playing an important role in spreading information and aggregating neighborhood groups, they also demonstrate parenting skills, often caring for younger siblings as well as, if need be, their own

parents. The fact that women with children seek much less psychological counseling is taken as an indication of the efficacy of children's input into the system. Here, as in Chanley's study, the main thrust of the argument is against inept intervention policies based on Westernized notions of social and personal identity, and which obscure the all-important local-level support mechanisms relying on family and community dynamics.

Beyond stereotypical images to children-in-context

The article by A.Veale, M.Taylor, and C. Lineharn, a team of applied psychologists, concentrates precisely on the psychological processes that operate in the conceptualization of terms such as "abandonment." Starting with an exegesis of common-sense stereotypes (see also Hecht, Montgomery, Panter-Brick in this volume) – that many poor, and most street children are either the pathological results of family breakdown or the helpless victims of their uncaring parents – they proceed to consider the different schools of academic analysis centered on this theme. "Cognitive dissonance" theories, for example, explain the persistently negative images of street children as the observer's reaction to the uncomfortable gap between perceived reality and idealized notions of what childhood should be. That children may choose to leave home (see Hecht; Baker and Panter-Brick, this volume) or even work as prostitutes (Montgomery, this volume) raises "uncomfortable questions" about the conditions they *normally* live in. To believe that causes for such deviant behavior lie in bad or delinquent personalities (whether of the parents, children, or sex tourists) is a way of escaping anguishing doubts about society's routine organization. Rational choice, the second sort of academic analysis addressed by these authors, dwells on demonstrating how behavior that might seem strange or irrational, may in fact be quite appropriate in determined circumstances. Both approaches, however are faulted as "cognitive

behavioral models" that present individual needs and choices as separate (although in interaction with) environmental contingencies. The third sort of analysis, social constructivism, challenges the usefulness of predetermined categories (such as "abandonment" or "street children"), underlining the importance of situated descriptions of actual relations: the "child-in-context" approach that sees individual perceptions and social settings in a process of ongoing mutual definition.

It is the child-in-context that we encounter in the book's following chapters. Moving away from interventionist settings, the articles on Brazilian street children (T. Hecht), child prostitutes in a Thai slum (H. Montgomery) or Nepali ragpickers (R. Baker and C. Panter-Brick) rely on classical ethnographic fieldwork focusing on the everyday routines that confront the poor in today's so-called developing countries. It is indeed intriguing to see how much the portraits of these children from diverse points in the southern hemisphere have in common. Whether through Buddhist filial piety, or fidelity to a matrifocal ideal, children appear to think it is morally right, and so derive deep satisfaction from contributing to their parents' (and, in particular, their mother's) support. To their young minds, the moral breach arises not from being in the street or even far from home, as youngsters commonly move *en masse* to the areas where they will find work (see, especially, the research of Baker and Panter-Brick in Nepal). The problem is not even necessarily the type of work they do. As Montgomery shows us through interviews with the Thai children and their families, for a child to provide paid sexual services to someone perceived as a sort of benevolent uncle may be viewed by nearly all involved as much less violent than many of the day-to-day living conditions a youngster must endure. As the children see it, the rupture with "normal" values occurs when *they* choose to abandon their families, ceasing to make contributions or maintain

contacts, and giving in to "bad money" (Hecht), earned through illegal activities and spent on personal pleasures such as drugs.

Although finding the category of "abandoning" children useful, as it lessens the moral reprobation which regularly falls on parents and brings out the idea of child agency, authors in this volume use the term with caution. When, for example, a child "decides" to leave home because his mother (Brazil) or father (Nepal) has remarried and the new stepparent is responsible for an inhospitable home environment, it is hard to say exactly who has abandoned whom. Even more difficult is to discern what criteria to use in classifying a child. As Baker and Panter-Brick point out, there are any number of "careers" a child may follow between temporary migration to the city (in search of work), "exile," and permanent homelessness. Montgomery's study is a good demonstration of how children, even when living with their parents, may lead a life that has little in common with the Western ideal form of nuclear family, while Hecht concentrates exactly on those non-standard behaviors and attitudes of children who have (it would seem) definitively renounced family ties. Baker and Panter-Brick, on the other hand, piecing together data from diverse phases of youthful careers, manage to place the "problem" children within a broader frame of reference. Alternating between descriptions of poverty-stricken children living with their parents and those of street children, the authors dissolve the limits between "normal" and "deviant" careers. Through a follow-up study, we discover that, two years after they were first contacted, while just under half the Nepali street children included in the original study were still on the streets, over one fourth had taken "important steps" (such as returning home, finding a job, or attending regular classes) to reintegrate into mainstream society. In short, these authors turn up solid empirical evidence to support their hypothesis that, in

this setting, "neither physical separation from home, nor disreputable acts have necessarily lasting effects on the social and moral careers of Nepali children" (p. 175).

From children in danger to dangerous youth

Patricia Marquez, in The Street is My Home, takes up where Abandoned Children leaves off: when appealing waifs begin to turn into what many see as intimidating thugs. Her emphasis on pre-teen and adolescent youngsters on the streets of Caracas, however, expands on many themes reviewed in the first volume. For example, Marquez provides a good illustration of Veale et al.'s social constructivism, playing back and forth between society's images of these youngsters, as reflected in soap operas, popular music and newspapers, and their own subjective perceptions of self and others. Incorporating a judicious dose of postmodern subjectivity (Marcus and Fisher 1986), the author convincingly uses her own pre-conceived notions, as a middle-class Venezuelan, to illustrate some of the stereotypes she seeks to challenge. Her deft analysis of certain scenes – the time she takes a boy named Gilson for a spin in her car, for example, and discovers his "imaginary topography" of Caracas, or the afternoon she visits her own grandmother in the company of an ex-street kid who astounds his hostess by asking if the elderly woman has a copy of the book Magic Mountain at hand – shows an inside knowledge of both sides of the complicated process addressed in this book.

Although the author addresses many elements noted in studies on hard-living youth in other countries (Aptekar 1988, Bourgois 1995, Lepoutre 1997), she ceaselessly underlines the specificity of the Venezuelan context – from the prosperous early 80s of the oil boom, which left many frustrated aspirations in its aftermath, to the pot-banging marches against poverty, and other less polite forms of popular protest such as the 1989 food riots and looting of shops ("el caracazo"). The youngsters are also shown as

integral parts of a complex network of social relationships that include not only occasional visits to members of their own families, but also a variety of intense friendships and pseudo-kin ties, including everything from paternal oldsters with dubious intentions to NGO workers. Their experience of urban violence extends from psychological and physical torture inflicted by the police to deadly duels of honor fought with street-wise competitors.

The central chapters of this book are devoted to the Venezuelan juvenile law (which, although amazingly progressive since the 1930s, appears to have brought few, if any, real improvements) and reeducation centers. The author's fieldwork in two of these centers holds few surprises. We encounter administrators operating on a shoe-string budget who, whether out of indifference or ineptitude, appear more concerned at pinpointing causes (with highly moralistic evaluations – mental deficiency, delayed development, family breakdown – heading the list) than at planning feasible programs for reintegration.

A particularly original feature of this study, however, is that Marquez places her major subjects (the street children) side by side with other, less problematic youth, taking care to include detailed descriptions of these different "sub-cultures."^{vi} Cruising down a downtown boulevard, the author visits the different territories, going from glue-sniffing urchins in rags, to the mostly working-class *monos* or *malandros* wearing spiffy brand-name clothes (floppy Nike sneakers, Chicago Bulls shirts, and designer jeans), and, finally, the generally better-off *woperos* who cultivate a different look: long hair, baggy pants, thick belts and boots. Particularly attentive to the notion of youth culture, Marquez observes not only haircuts and dress, but also the music that inspires enthusiasm and marks the barriers of each group: the European-style *woperos* listen to

reggae and English language pop songs whereas the youth from the popular classes groove on the rhythm and words of salsa stars.

But it is especially on the poorer youth, the street kids who don't quite have the wherewithal to produce the *mono* look, that the author dwells with tremendous sensitivity. Thus, we come to know the glue-sniffing Gomes brothers who lead a scraggly pack of pre-teens organizing pranks (such as stealing the clothes a rival gang shed before jumping into the public fountain) and robberies with equal ease; the Prince of Dreams who, despite his deformed legs (the consequence, probably, of an untreated case of polio), becomes quickly stuck on street life, progressing in a short time from beggar and petty thief to selling books on the sidewalk; Edison, a self-anointed street "warrior" covered in scars who, after stumbling onto a stolen pair of round, wire-frame glasses, begins to cultivate a new image – less the dangerous tough and more the organic intellectual; Benjamin, the can collector, hooked on *bazuko* (processed cocaine) cigarettes, who, after becoming an evangelical, edges onto the more respectable activity of selling pencils to the passengers on the public bus; and Wilson, an oversized black teen living on the street, who, despite being an obvious target for police violence and discrimination, eventually manages to land a job at an ice cream parlor and negotiate a bed in his grandmother's shack. The stories, anything but linear, are open-ended tales of social process which respect both structure and agency.

Child rights and adoption in an anthropological perspective

A final comment on these two books brings us to a consideration of their relevance to the discussion of child rights. As Panter-Brick points out in her introductory article, although the International Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates intervention in a child's best interests, it purposely leaves open the sort of

intervention called for (see also Alston 1994). In practice, however, social agents directing the intervention tend to reduce the Convention's spirit to their own ethnocentric values. Material such as we have reviewed here, illustrating the notion of "plural childhoods," is a first step toward remedying this dilemma. I would, however, like to push the implications of this line of research a step further, using as springboard a subject strangely missing in these two volumes and one on which I've centered my own studies: adoption.

Adoption is certainly a theme that policy-makers dealing with child welfare generally hold dear. In the perspective of some, it would be a sort of cure-all for the problems of abandoned, street, and even delinquent youngsters.^{vii} In this age of international migrations in which the great majority of children adopted in North America and Western Europe come from overseas, plural childhoods should be more than ever an issue. And yet, certain insights that can be drawn from these two books do not seem to have been included in the mainstream discussions on this subject. Here, I mention but a few.

As most authors reviewed here point out, it is important for analysts to frame children within a system that includes relevant adult figures. The great objection to conventional notions of abandonment is that they tend to present the children as isolated from their social relationships. The biological family is discarded as uncaring or nonexistent, and other informal caretakers are considered of negligible importance. This abandonment trope is extremely strong in the adoption field where, as J. Modell (1994) points out, hegemonic values reject any connotation of shared parenthood.

Adoptive parents who, because of their generally superior economic and social status, have the political upper hand classically narrow the focus of discussion to problems concerning their relationship to the adopted child. The trans-racial and

intercountry adoptions which gained impetus during the 1980s somewhat modified this picture. By taking in dark-colored children, white adoptive parents were forced to deal with the question of "origins" on a more routine basis. However, even then, such concerns were often channeled toward folklore and the various impersonal symbols linked to ethnic and national identity, rather than toward social relationships with the child's original social universe (Ouellette 1995, Yngvesson 2000). Still today, the Western notion of the child's right to a family with a single set of parents appears to dominate the field, precluding the institutionalization of shared parenthood.

Analytical perspective that recommend emphasis on systemic connections inspires inquiry into the present-day trend of phasing out substitute or foster families in favor of adoption. Although awareness of the negative effects of residential care, (underlined by various of the authors in discussion) coincides with contemporary trends in policy planning, recognition of the benefits resulting from the use of substitute families, an equally persistent theme in the volume on *Abandonment*, has undergone considerable amendment. In fact, whether in mass media or scholarly literature (Bartholet 1999), it would appear that foster families are constantly under suspicion of abusing or neglecting their wards. In common sense terms, the only adequate substitute household is that produced by legal, plenary adoption. The application of a cost-benefit analysis of this preference (such as that used by Viazzi et al. and Smith) might well yield interesting results. (After all, unsubsidized adoptions cost the state virtually nothing, while foster families may represent considerable financial onus.) But the two volumes reviewed here also raise other aspects relevant to this issue.

Both tacitly challenge, for example, the hegemonic system of age classifications, provoking hard reflection on the limits between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Those dealing with "street children" (Hecht, Marquez) give particular attention to this

issue, as they encounter groups of mixed age who themselves have no clear cut-off criterion. Such considerations bring inevitably into focus the arbitrary nature of Western classifications, often embedded in state legislation, which dictate special measures for certain categories and not others. Just as Hinton points out that, in running the Nepali refugee camp, Western forms of intervention single out women to the detriment of men, so I would suggest these same forms of intervention tend to favor "children" (however defined), in detriment to their slightly older peers or even parents.

Panter-Brick suggests that the insistence on images of "innocent" babes and child "victims" may actually disempower those these images seek to protect, by passing over children's potential for creative response. I would go further to suggest that these images may serve to discriminate against the adults these children are soon to become. In many cases of contemporary adoption, just as in post-War Greece (Voutira and Brouskou), the state, acting in name of the child, intervenes in families considered inadequate, disfranchising adults of their parental rights. The fact that birth parents are often themselves under the legal age of adulthood (Modell 1994, 1997) merely reinforces the basic issue of where to draw the line between the rights of the "more and less human" (see Fonseca and Cardarello 1999).

The different articles in Abandoned Children consistently criticize the top-down approach of internationally-inspired relief programs for children and families in need. In like spirit, one might look beyond the scattered cases of intervention to the forms of national and international legislation, even in developing countries, which appear to promote exclusively Western values. For example, I would hold that, at least in the Brazilian case, ethnocentric notions based on the "modern" nuclear family have expurgated practically all connotation of shared parenthood from adoption legislation (see Fonseca 2002). The "secret of a child's origins" in most cases is not an option,

voiced by the birth or adoptive parents, but rather a rule imposed by the adoption services and national legislation. The 1993 Hague Convention,^{viii} in its Article 29, reinforces the exclusivity of adoptive parents by prohibiting any contact between them and birth parents prior to the execution of a complicated series of state-supervised measures. This restriction is evidently aimed at protecting birth families against overeager adoptive parents or other entrepreneurs of the baby trade. Nonetheless, the fact is that, even after the adoption is completed, many (if not most) adoption services, whether in the "First" or "Third" Worlds, do nothing to facilitate contact between the parties involved. Such policies raise doubts as to just whose interests and whose family values are being respected.

Finally these two volumes raise the typically anthropological quandary of "radical alterity" (Ramos 1991, Turner 1994) – children who are not "sweet," for example, and youngsters we may not even like, but who, nonetheless, remain representative of a certain sort of childhood. Here, the problem of marrying anthropological analysis with policy recommendations runs into well-known snags. The authors of these volumes offer no pat solutions, but they do furnish key insights to aid in crossing the rough terrain that separates "variant subjectivities" (Geertz 1986). In recognizing other lifeways in the contemporary world, some of which the reader may find distasteful, they not only remind us of the human agency – intelligence and emotion – mobilized in even the most problematic of situations, they also prod the reader to reflect upon the structural causes that dictate chasms between one way of life and another.

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Notes:

ⁱ Key references would be J.Boyden (1990) and S.Stephens (1995).

ⁱⁱ The hypothesis of desired death is also common in earlier studies on abandonment such as Badinter (1980) or Flandrin (1976).

ⁱⁱⁱ The foundling wheel was a rotating compartment located in the orphanage wall in which people could anonymously deposit a baby. By ringing a bell or other device, they would alert orphanage personnel who would swing the compartment around and withdraw the baby.

^{iv} See Meznar (1994) on Brazil and Neff (1996) on Canada for comparative data on poor youth and apprenticeship during the late nineteenth century.

^v See Bledsoe (1990), Fonseca (2000), Lallemand (1993), Modell (1994), Collard (1988) for examples.

^{vi} Here the author makes explicit mention to the British school of cultural studies, citing such authors as Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, and Dick Hebdige.

^{vii} See, for example, Jaffe 1995.

^{viii} *Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of
Intercountry Adoption* (Hague Conference 1993)