

For the Children? Protecting Innocence in a Carceral State

Erica R. Meiners (2016)

Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 255 pages
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This is a really important book for childhood and educational researchers. Its central argument concerns how well-intentioned commitments and practices to protect children turn out to perpetuate all kinds of oppressions, especially for women, poor and minoritized populations, including children and youth. The particular focus is what Meiners calls the “carceral state,” drawing on analyses of the “prison-industrial complex.” This designation derives from Foucauldian analyses of disciplinary and regulatory institutions that have come to structure modern societies and which have now acquired intensified coercive force under widespread global neocapitalist conditions of further marketization and securitization. In a sense, this book begins where Foucault’s (1977) *Discipline and Punish* ends: Meiners unpacks the forces at play that produce what used to be called juvenile delinquency and give rise to the criminalization of children and youth, as well as their families and communities. Biometrics now play an increasing role in tracking and surveying stigmatized groups, while anxieties around security are increasingly migrating from individual bodies to families, neighborhoods, communities, and even states.

The key recurring trope that Meiners critically interrogates (especially across the first section of the book) is the so-called “school-to-prison pipeline,” mobilized by various campaigning groups whose strategies to exceptionalize or otherwise account for young people’s problematic trajectories inadvertently re-inscribe normalizations and pathologizations of various characteristics of children and childhood. Drawing on both a comprehensive critical historical review of U.S. policies and practices as well as an impressively wide range of examples, including her own involvements in various community education programs with children and youth in marginal situations, adult education initiatives in prisons, post-prison educational programs and more, Meiners systematically highlights how gendered heteronormativities intersect with classed racializations to render especially African-American children, youth and families under greater threat of intervention and incarceration.

The book is structured into three substantive sections—Childhoods, School and Prison, and Adulthoods—with a final, more utopian chapter entitled “After and Now.” While children and youth figure explicitly throughout most of the book, once the trope of innocence has been queried (and indeed *queered*), racialized, gendered and heterosexed normativities are then available to be explored: “New sites of resistance and mobilization are created by unpacking what counts as a child in this political moment and how heterogendered and racialized forms of innocence are reproduced through the use of the child in campaigns” (p. 26). Various other key myths (as in Barthes’ (1972) sense of tropes anchoring assumed constellations of social norms) are shown to be secured by “the artefact of the child” (p. 27) that

have consequences for adults, communities, professional and institutional practices and state policies. Substantive examples are discussed at all levels—history, current policy and provision, and personal practice in specific projects and settings—and include campaigns for public safety, prison reform, and campaigns for and against prison closure, educational provision for prison inmates (both juvenile and adult), and post-prison educational initiatives. On the way, restorative justice programs come in for very critical treatment as merely re-personalizing and thus foreclosing analysis of the structural and institutional conditions that gave rise to these situations.

I found the discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline very helpful in unpacking how educational initiatives collude in the perpetuation of social inequalities by limiting the domain of explanation and thus of intervention. Perhaps a particularly graphic but indicative chapter is the penultimate one, concerned with the construction and consequences of acquiring the label of being a sex offender (which, shockingly for this British reader, can arise for young people who engage in consensual sex but who are considered under-age or where certain sexual practices—oral sex, for example—are considered criminal within state legislation). The asymmetries of treatment and trajectory through the criminal justice system according to fateful intersections of age, gender, sexuality and racialization are shown through recent cases. I was appalled to read that sex workers (who are of course poor, mainly women, and mainly from black and minority backgrounds) are prosecuted as sex offenders, and that trans people are particularly vulnerable to being charged for soliciting merely by being visible.

Meiners' account includes engaging and challenging personal reflections on particular campaigns and projects with which she has been involved, including dilemmas encountered that strained her feminist and anti-racist commitments and called for critical reflection and revision of her preconceptions. The projects, programs and events are specific and named, and much of what she discusses is focused on Chicago, where she lives and works. The power of this account arises in part from the passion, power and specificity of her examples. I was impressed (and I confess a little overwhelmed) by the sheer scale of her political commitments and involvements in so many worthwhile (if also, as she discusses, problematic) community education initiatives, each of which merits separate extensive discussion beyond what I can cover here. There is also a coherence of argumentation here that challenges child campaigners, feminist activists, pro- and anti-prison organizers, and anti-racist movements to explore how commonsense investments in children's innocence come to structure classed and racialized approaches to individual and community safety, and so also work to limit analysis of how to respond to and transform the widespread social inequalities that give rise to the problems that lead people to end up in prison, including poverty, distress, and violence of various forms.

I read Meiners' account as a prescient version of the emerging paradigm, child as method (e.g., Burman, 2018a and b), which not only focuses on the consequences of the social structuring of childhood for those positioned as currently subject to that categorization but also traces how this structuring configures other key axes

and dynamics. This is no mere academic analysis. While policies and practices in the U.S. may sometimes seem a little distant from those elsewhere, they exercise considerable traction, as do corresponding academic and political debates. I am writing this in late March 2018, a few days after the massive mobilizations of school students across the U.S. demonstrating for gun control, after the latest school shooting on February 14 in Parkland, Florida, alongside an estimated 800 marches worldwide (Laughland, 2018). While Trump may have responded to the shooting by proposing to arm the teachers, the child and youth resistance and mobilization have clearly led the way to other responses.

Reviewed by Erica Burman

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Author's Response

Dr. Erica Burman's too-generous review reminds me foremost that feminist research—writing, thinking, political practice—is always collective and in relation.

Her engagement is also a needed push for me to return to why I write and publish: to motivate myself to *rigorously* engage challenges and contradictions, and to learn and to engage new tools to imagine and to build more anti-racist, feminist, and queer freedoms, leaving no one behind. While this project is in my rearview mirror

magnifying all the omissions—*Why didn't I include the chapter on child protective services? A real conclusion? Why didn't I read more widely?*—I wrote this book because of the awkward child-feelings that persistently crept into my political work in the United States.

This trouble with the child emerged because I crossed siloes: Research related to queer (and other) young people with convictions for sex offenses. Participation in campaigns that elevated the figure of the child to shame elected officials into keeping schools open or to close prisons or to eliminate punitive school disciplinary policies. Tracing how courts try and convict select 15-year-olds as adults. Learning with adults caged in a maximum-security prison who painstakingly track the emerging neurological research that supports diminished capacity arguments for “young offenders” (but locks their cell doors ever more tightly). Work in a white heterogendered teacher education program where love for the child is seemingly the central prerequisite for employment. And on and on. *For the Children?* was my attempt to trace, explain and examine the shifting political work of the figure of the child in these domains.

“Child as method,” as Burman’s important conceptual intervention suggests, requires us to consider the political work that the figure of the child does—never losing site of what the historian Anita Casavantes Bradford (2014) recognizes as the blurriness or a “tentative heuristic distinction” between “flesh-and-blood children and symbolic representations of the child” (p. 2).

Burman’s responses, and her current scholarship, should also provoke readers to ask: What is the work that critical childhood studies can do? Can we harness her framework of “child as method” to recognize new constellations of oppression, particularly forms of state violence, and therefore to support and cultivate sites for resistance? Scholarship sometimes “trickles down” and “trickles up,” and thus can shape policies and practices that impact the worlds of “flesh-and-blood” young people. However unevenly, temporally and never innocent, pockets of Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, and Queer Studies continue to both interrupt the forms of premature death the academy engenders and simultaneously reflect the forms of lived resistance that communities practice.

What of critical childhood studies? Can this disciplinary arrangement explore, as Burman invites us, “the consequences of the social structuring of childhood for those positioned as currently subject to that categorization but also traces how this structuring configures other key axes and dynamics”?

From the prison industrial complex to Brexit, the stakes are high.

Reference

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