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The end of American childhood: a history of parenting from life on the frontier to the managed child, by Paula S. Fass, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, 334 pp., £24.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-691-16257-7

As a British social scientist focused on childhood, youth and education, I was very interested in the subject-matter of this book, particularly as I have recently collaborated with an American colleague to co-edit a book on the transatlantic origins of early years education (Pam Jarvis, Louise Swiniarski and Wendy Holland, *Early Years Pioneers in Context: Their Lives, Lasting Influence and Impact on Practice Today*, Abingdon, 2017). Fass however sets out her intention to document the development of a unique American culture of childhood: ‘understanding *American* childhood, *American* parenting and *American* generational relations’ (p.12) and she does manage to highlight some elements of American childhood that intertwine with the historical development of the US. For example, she details the tradition of the child as the ‘little citizen’ (p.3) and the early feminisation of childhood education in the US (pp.38-39). She points out that the universal state-funded high school was an American innovation (p.123) giving the generation born in the early twentieth century an edge over their European counterparts who were not routinely provided with a secondary education. However a point that she does not raise here is the other great difference that defined American and European childhood for this generation: while American children lived within the peaceful environment of the mainland US, European children were situated within the devastation and upheaval of pan-European war and its aftermath. She additionally documents the significant influence of American authors Benjamin Spock and Erik Erikson upon the modern construction of childhood- and while it is certainly the case that Erikson was born and educated in Continental Europe, he developed his theories on childhood and youth as a naturalised American citizen. Another element of purely American childhood that readers might expect to see in such a text, but which was not raised is the practice of sending children to summer camp (Michael B. Smith ‘The Ego Ideal of the Good Camper’ and the Nature of Summer Camp’. *Environmental History*, 11:1, 2006) to experience something of the lives of early American pioneers, which is clearly a uniquely American phenomenon.

In some parts of the book, comparisons are not drawn effectively. For example, Fass seems poorly informed about the extent of influence that the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child has had upon European nations, proposing that ‘*some* European nations have adopted the UNCRC’ (p.230). In fact *all* UN member states apart from the USA have ratified the convention. She also links the growing late nineteenth century consciousness of children’s especial vulnerability to the American Civil War, when in fact this phenomenon was also simultaneously occurring in Europe. She comments ‘this new childhood as a realm of innocence was visible in the illustrations of the period [and] in the imaginative literature of late Victorian fantasy such as Peter Pan’ (p.68). This is however a rather strange analogy to associate with a cultural construction that she defines as specifically American, given that the characters in Peter Pan are such quintessentially British creations, conceived in the mind of London-based Scottish author J. M. Barrie. She raises the American practice of sending orphans ‘out west’ to cultivate the land in newly acquired territories ‘breaking up families while allowing the labour of these children to be exploited’ (p.61); a tactic which was however also widely applied by the British, who sent their own orphans to undertake the

same type of labour in the vast untamed landscapes of the Canadian and Australian colonial territories. On p.87, Fass comments 'in 1900... one writer in the Ladies Home Journal declared that the American's vision regarding children was "absolutely unique in the world. He no longer regards his child as an animal to be tamed by beating, or as a possible saint but as the heir to all the good things of the time"'. Such debates can however be traced back to Europe in previous centuries, for example in the practical pedagogies of Pestalozzi, Froebel and Owen. Froebel in particular, through his system of teaching aid 'gifts' created the basis for the development of the child-centred pedagogies developed by early American infant educators such as Peabody, Blow and Wiggin.

Overall then, Fass does not wholly succeed in her attempt to depict the US as the hub of some kind of unique construction of childhood, and in continually attempting to do so throughout the text, she misses many chances to broaden and deepen her analysis of some very diligent research. One point that is well explored outlines the steady transformation of health advice offered to mothers during the latter part of the nineteenth century simply to help them keep their children alive into the 'pop' child psychology advisory media that first arose in the early part of the mid-twentieth century: 'The battles fought on behalf of American children by the old-fashioned (even spinsterish) women of the turn of the century ... were succeeded by male advisors... [who] spoke to the private concerns of twentieth century women eager to make sure that little Johnny or Jane... became "normal" and "well-adjusted"' (p103). Fass comments that such a development led to 'Determining the fate of children under the careful supervision of experts' (p.1.2, and this is an excellent point, detailing the origins of the current neoliberal spotlight shone by a dazzling array of media upon every facet of twenty-first century parenting, and its consequent assault on mothers' confidence. However, Fass's narrative underpinning of this topic would have gained depth if it had been supported by wider references, for example to the theories of Maria Montessori and Susan Isaacs, and the maternalist politics and practices of the McMillan sisters. Some of the points that Fass makes about the changes in the lives of mothers and children in the late twentieth century apply equally to the majority of modern post-industrial democracies - for example the movement of mothers into the workforce and consequent problems of funding high quality affordable childcare which has been recently been internationally researched by UNICEF in *The Child Care Transition Report* (2008). The falling standards of public schools, as measured by international comparisons, are also familiar to British parents. The role and penetration of new media, parenting being negatively impacted through 'a cocktail of guilt and anxiety and resentment and regret' (p.217) and parents as 'the subject and audience for a literature of complaint and disappointment' (p.217) all link back to the issue of parenting in a twenty-first century mediated neoliberal culture. I agree with Fass that there is a lack of attention paid to the history of childhood and parenting but would add that this is an international issue, particularly prevalent within the Anglophone nations.

Some of the book's narrative on modern parenting in a contemporary post-industrial, multi-cultural society is at best speculative and at worst, rather narrow minded. Fass talks of 'children as choice' as a 'consumption-based model' (p.220), unmarried parents who are in 'temporarily stable relationships likely to dissolve within 5 years' (p.223) and mothers who, it is implied, form transient relationships with the fathers of their children because 'the jobs their partners might once have had are now either transferred to other parts of the globe or

made obsolete by technology [leading mothers to]... inadequate childcare, new and unstable boyfriends... and the general hazards of...insecurity' (p.223). In the middle classes, she proposes that 'children... are over-controlled and over-indulged while mothers are run ragged' (p.240). Pages 250-51 mull over a range of ethnic stereotypes, for example: 'West Indian immigrants...insist on maintaining discipline through physical punishment... Chinese immigrants...almost all aim to maintain inherited values and expect their children quietly to defer to parental desires and traditional strictures that emphasise reverence for elders'. Fass concludes that in 'non-western societies such as Asia, the Middle East and South America... views about the roles of women and children remain deeply traditional and the patriarchal ideals stand in sharp contrast to the direction of family life among Europeans and Americans' (p.252). This narrative finally runs out of steam on p.253, with her statement that 'no simple summary here can do justice to the many facets of what can be a bewildering story'.

Overall, this sentence rather sums up the book as a whole. Some painstaking research clearly underpinned its creation, but overall, the ways in which this has subsequently been interpreted are frequently over-simplified and at times, poorly narrated. The core dissonance that arises throughout the text relates to the attempt to detect clearly drawn, simple differences between child care and education cultures in time and in geography, leading the analysis to lack depth and complexity. Fass's concluding comment is 'the needs of each generation must be seen to if the generations are to become part of a historical chain' (p.273). This appears to deny the deeply organic, indirect nature of unfolding history, which inevitably creates intricate chains, the direction of which are not immediately apparent to those forging them within particular times and places. The role of the historian is surely to look back across time as objectively as possible to painstakingly unravel and carefully debate the potential connections and disjunctures which emerge.

I learned some useful facts about the history of American childhood from reading this book, but ultimately, I felt that unfortunately the narrative in which they were encased rather spoiled the overall presentation of such carefully researched and interesting material.

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