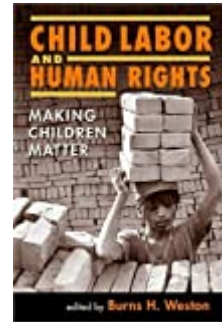




Burns H. Weston, ed. *Child Labor and Human Rights: Making Children Matter*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005. 539 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58826-324-7; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-58826-349-0.



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A Human Rights Approach to Child Labor

The purpose of *Child Labor and Human Rights*, as explained by its editor Burns Weston, is to “explain why, how, and subject to what conditions a human rights approach to abolishing child labor can and should be pursued” (p. xviii). The book is premised on five interrelated assumptions: child labor is a stain on humanity; both morally responsive and pragmatically attuned persons would seek its abolition; child labor is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires both coextensive and singly focused methods for its eradication; no level of society is exempt from transformation; and any authentic change will be slow and intermittent unless it is applied with persistent dedication and commitment. In order to pursue the rather daunting task of explaining how a human rights perspective can be used to eradicate abusive and exploitive child labor practices, Weston organizes the seventeen chapters into 5 parts. The volume’s contributors are an impressive interdisciplinary group of lawyers, social scientists, practitioners, and activists. Weston’s decision to include a diverse group of authors is driven by his desire to produce a work “intended for teacher, student, government official, international civil servant, nongovernmental activist, and concerned citizen

alike” (p. ix). Thus the chapters in the volume range from theoretically complex essays to historical and descriptive case studies. The combination of methodologies makes *Child Labor and Human Rights* ideal for use in the undergraduate classroom. Indeed, Weston has done a commendable job in selecting essays that can explain and elucidate the fundamental concepts and theories behind child labor and human rights through illustrative historical and country examples.

The three chapters in part 1 provide an introduction to the concepts associated with child labor. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the importance of using the human rights approach to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. One of the more important chapters in the volume is chapter 2, which develops a definition of child labor that is subsequently adopted by most of the book’s contributors. In this chapter, Judith Ennew, William Myers and Dominique Plateau problematize the many seemingly similar uses of the term “child labor.” The authors point out that different organizations and agencies use the term “child labor” to fit their institutional agendas. Certainly, before child labor can be eradicated, it is cru-

cial to know what it is. Not all child labor, even hard work, is harmful to the child's well-being. Chapter 3, by Cunningham and Stromquist, follows with a historical narrative of the development of child labor and its connections with the capitalistic West.

Part 2 of the book explores the evolution from standard setting to practice. What is considered child labor (versus chores, family obligations, or just helping out) varies from culture to culture, and campaigns to eliminate culturally acceptable forms of child labor will often be met with resistance and charges of ethnocentrism. The adoption of child labor standards and their implementation require not only widespread state acceptance of international legal and quasi-legal child labor norms, but it must also overcome transnational obstacles (such as weak enforcement mechanisms or bureaucratic politics) and national resistance (by business elites, government leaders, and also families that benefit from child labor). Of note, even the children themselves are identified as a source of resistance by some of the contributors. Using a child-centered approach recognizes that work is a practical reality in the lives of millions of children. Working children can and often do take pride in their work and their ability to contribute to their families' well-being. However, the feelings of pride and satisfaction in work apply normally to the older, more autonomous child. A crucial question left unanswered by the volume is whether it is possible to assume that child labor (work that is harmful to the child) is an absolute concept when referring to the work of a young, dependent child who is unable to understand selflessness.

Part 3 turns to country-specific case studies. The case studies of Tanzania, the Philippines, and Brazil relate the theoretical materials on a rights-based approach to child labor provided by previous contributors to the concrete world outside of textbooks. Child labor will not be eliminated by scholarly interest alone but will require joint efforts by the state, civil society, and working children, too.

Part 4 focuses on strategies which could be used to move toward progressive change for the betterment of

children's lives. It should come as no surprise that an extremely diverse group of contributors would advocate a varied, and sometimes contradictory, assemblage of strategies to abolish abusive and exploitative child labor practices. The strategies range from using United Nations and regional human rights systems, to broadly based grassroots movement efforts, to NGO influence, to international trade laws and sanctions. Again, despite some of the efforts provided by several contributors, the reader is confronted with the difficulty of defining child labor. In this case, the reader starts to understand that not all light work, even simple household chores, is benign to the child's well-being. Thus, a harms-based determination of child labor seems to be desirable. The contributors point out that culturally acceptable light work can be injurious to an exhausted, overburdened, or ill child.

Finally, quite surprisingly given the diverse group of authors, there emerges a consensus in the volume that the best approach for coping with child labor is based on human rights. The human rights approach to child labor recognizes the rights and realities of children's lives. Children in many parts of the world work. Although the work ranges from compensated formal employment to family agriculture to household chores, a human rights approach based on the best interests of the child can protect and empower working children. A human rights approach recognizes the child as a rights-holder and places duties on parents, governments, and the international community to secure these rights.

In sum, *Child Labor and Human Rights: Making Children Matter* makes an important contribution to the growing academic and strategic efforts to abolish child labor. The book's strength rests in its comprehensive multidimensional approach, and in particular its inclusion of theoretical, pragmatic, and empirical scholarship, to make sense of the multifaceted issue of child labor. The shortcoming of the volume is the lack of gender analysis and maturity considerations. Certainly, the cultural acceptability, demands, and burdens of work and labor have a different effect depending on the age and sex of the child.

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