

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپائی

JULY 5, 2018

by DANIEL DRENNAN
06.07.2018

Families Belong Together: Child Separation as a Function of Capital



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The current movements in support of immigrant children and reunion with parents is a welcome sight. At the same time, they represent a stinging hypocrisy for one group of people, whose voices raised on behalf of those displaced, dispossessed, and disinherited have often gone willfully unheard: adopted persons and those who have experienced foster care.

This jarring contradiction between the socially progressive speaking out concerning the current situation at the border of Mexico and the United States and the seen-as progressive nature of adoption/foster care as promoted along the entire spectrum of American culture ignores the political and economic history of separating children from their parents as being functional to capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. Treating this as “something new” ascribes such activism to a cynical political ploy; to examine the long history of such actions provides for the possibility of true change.

What then are the political, economic, and religio-cultural bases of current adoption practice, and how can this be compared to the current situation in the United States? What are the reasons for the shift in the mediation of adoption from these practices into one whose primary focus is one-sided family creation? The following list is not chronological or sequential, but instead can be seen as containing historical reference points which project forward to and which are reflected by today’s institution of adoption as well as the punishing separations taking place in the border region between Mexico and the United States.

This historical overview, based in a political and economic framework, calls into question the very concept of adoption and child placement as they are understood today, by equating their practice, industry, and mediation with that of other economically and politically machinated displacements and dispossessions, namely: slavery, trafficking, gentrification, immigration, land occupation, apartheid, and enforced statelessness.

Removing the normalized personal aspects of adoption—chosen, saved, lucky children; salvationist, beneficent, charitable adopters and institutions—allows for a valid discussion of the industry itself, objectively revealed as an afterthought in terms of adoption when viewed as a practice of family creation. In this light, the discussion of adoption maps very closely onto those concerning the above-mentioned infringements upon human rights and dignity, and it is with them that adoption must be categorized.

Given the current channeling of children separated from their parents at the border into a foster-care/adoption industry primed to disconnect them from their families, communities, and cultures, a review of the history of this practice will go far to reveal the bigger picture that must be addressed if we are to claim any kind of socially progressive stance concerning these children and their families.

Adopting “orphans”, the by-product of war

The fostering of children as a beneficent act of a warrior nation after the damage that it inflicts becomes a recurrent trope within American mediated history, and includes World

Wars I and II, the mediation of Hiroshima, the Korean and Viet Nam Wars, the “dirty wars” of the Caribbean and Latin America, and currently the direct and proxy “wars against terrorism” in South Asia.

Such adoptions were mediated as propaganda beneficial to the warrior nation (Hiroshima and the “moral adoption” of Norman Cousins, Operation Babylift, Harry Truman’s “Cold War” Hungarian orphan transfer, etc.), and in this light adoption provides a focus on living children as a de-emphasis on those killed during warfare; a shift from “spoils of war” to “our children”. Furthermore, this adoption represented a “baby scoop–like” projection in the “saving” of illegitimate children fathered by “fallen” foreign women.

The levels of “adoption” here can be mapped onto a spectrum of distance, ranging from sponsoring a child, to hosting a child for a summer camp or providing for surgery or medical care, to outright adoption; all are premised on the moral, ethical, and ultimately economic intervention of a salvationist entity.

“[They are] ‘street Arabs’ from the ‘dangerous classes’ ”

—Charles Loring Brace describing foundling children in New York City.

Hiring “orphans”, labor use and indentured servitude

The use of the poor, destitute, migratory, and imprisoned as a cheap labor pool is a primary aspect of capitalism, which seeks to maximize derived profit from a working population. The use of orphans within an industrial/agricultural context provides de facto slave labor; it sees its reflection in child labor as a practice premised on the power differential between adults and children, from the days before the concept of “adolescence” became prevalent.

This concept of indentured servitude has been historically imposed as a way to provide sustenance especially for the fatherless; exported or migratory indentured servitude was a function of colonial powers and the need for labor in far-flung colonies, including the United States. In later times the traffic of children would be reversed. Rural exodus to metropolitan areas resulted in appropriation of children from foreign territories to work the fields of the mother country, such as the Children of the Creuse in France, adopted from Reunion Island.

Throughout the 1850s, the annual reports of the Children’s Aid Society described its clients as “[falling] short of being fully human ... ascribing a feral or bestial nature to the poor”.

—Bruce Bellingham

Adopting scions/heirs to run companies

Still prevalent within Japanese business society and to a lesser degree India, this was a means of providing a family with an heir in order to inherit or else carry on business practices. Edgar Allan Poe serves as such an example within American society. Here the economic basis of the adoption is readily apparent, and therefore this type of “adoption” is not mediated as much as that which relates to family creation. All the same, it disturbingly maps onto American cultural tropes such as “L’il Orphan Annie”.

Removing “orphans” from their indigenous roots

The economic and political basis of dictatorial indoctrination directed toward the “blank slates” of Indigenous children in Anglo-Saxon societies (“The Stolen Generations”) is today evidenced in strikingly similar types of “children-gathering”: the semi-adoption of “summer camps” for the very children victimized by imperial forays into countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, etc. Dorothy Roberts similarly classifies the separation of children in marginalized internal populations as an attack on the poor and underclasses.

The aim of such indoctrination can be seen as a continuation of previous missionary efforts to convert Indigenous peoples, in an effort to destroy their culture: “Convert or die”. The goal was an eradication of culture, language, history, and memory, and today popular culture emphasizes and glorifies such efforts as seen in the movie *Australia*, not ironically starring adoption advocates Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackman.

Governments in the mid 20th century viewed Aboriginal people as “child-like creatures in constant need of the paternal care of the government. With guidance, they would gradually abandon their superstitious beliefs and barbaric behaviour and adopt civilization”.

—E. B. Titley

Exporting “orphans” to populate foreign colonies

Primarily used in the population of British colonies, street children were shipped out in an effort to populate the lands of the British Empire. “Home Children” as a concept goes back to 1869, but has its roots as early as 1619, and the population of the Virginia Colony. The practice was only stopped in the 1970s.

This practice was mimicked locally by the “Orphan Trains” in the United States, for example, which took children from the overpopulated eastern seaboard cities and transferred them to the western United States undergoing “Manifest Destiny”, homesteading, and the establishment of agriculture. It is at this juncture that the private agency responsible for the public good comes into being, shifting the good of the commonweal to private enterprise.

Secreting “orphans” away from their illegitimate origins

The infamous baby-scoop era of the United States and other Anglo-Saxon countries is reflected in this practice whereby the “shame” of a family is hidden and its honor protected by adopting the child of an “illicit” encounter. From 1940–1970 upwards of 4 million mothers were forced to relinquish children in the United States, 400,000 in Canada.

The women who so relinquished were disturbingly referred to as “not-mothers” by psychiatrists, in a pre-cursor to the cultural indifference to original mothers within adoption mythology. In its “third-world” incarnation, emphasis is placed on “protecting the [business] future and reputation” of the father, revealing further the patriarchal economic and political underpinnings of this practice.

Using “orphans” to project imperial power

The act of adoption is thus a crucible of the dominant culture’s view of humanity, namely, a seen-as infinite population of “wretched refuse” awaiting salvation from an exceptionalist nation. That adoption so clearly fits into this imperial mythology is witnessed by its exaltation within every part of the empire’s power structure. The legal, governmental, social, cultural, medical, religious, and mediated realms all assume adoption as the status quo, and all adapt themselves to facilitate and justify its predominant use at the expense of all other prevailing notions of legality, common law, rights, morality, and ethics.

As such, the mediation of orphans after catastrophic events and the desire to adopt them was part of the “middlebrow imagination” that fed off of American exceptionalism, as championed most notably by Pearl S. Buck. This provided a “sentimental” cover to the economic and political predation of a post-colonial Asia. It recently reared its unwelcome head after the earthquake in Japan, a pillar of the global capitalist economy; similarly it resulted in the outright kidnapping of children from Haiti, less able to defend itself against such predation.

As such, adoption can be seen as an invasive “first step”; the avant-garde of humanitarian imperialism. The nationalistic/fascistic sense of being “paternal” to lesser countries was thus echoed in the family structure in which the children of these places were literally “taken in/under the wing” against their will. The advocates for this worldview became famous for their mediation of such a view; this remains a primary motivator for adoption today.

“It can be viewed as the ultimate in the kind of exploitation inherent in every adoption, namely the taking by the rich and powerful of the children born to the poor and powerless.”

—Elizabeth Bartholet

Socially constructing “orphans” as perfectable citizens

Beyond all of the pseudo- and proto-adoption practices described so far, the ability to purchase children outright goes back to the early part of last century, and remains the logical conclusion of the mythologized underpinnings of adoption. Nationalist and fascist nations also saw the adoption of children from undesirable populations as a valid way to increase the amount of “desirable” children in the country, or else as a means to cleanse the country of the politically or economically undesirable.

For just a few examples: The Spence Agency in New York City was part of a growing industry of professional nurseries (derogatorily referred to as “baby farms”) that supplied the well-to-do. In this light, the sale of children from Quebec to rich families in New York revealed not an aberration, but simply an informal aspect of what was being performed “legally”.

The recent scandals in Spain and Argentina reflect the practice under fascist regimes that saw Church complicity in providing children to wealthy families. Similar fascist underpinnings are seen in the actions of Nazi Germany. An estimated 20,000 children—12,000 in Norway and 8,000 in Germany—were born through the “Lebensborn” program, or were kidnapped by German soldiers and placed with Nazi families. Again, fascistic governments practice in the open what “democratic” societies need formalize and obfuscate.

It was necessary to correct a history that was mythologized and which did not reflect the actual experiences of certain groups of people— indigenous people and women. This colonial aspect of the history intersects with the changing roles of women and alteration in popular conceptions of race.

—Lisa Slomon Moll

Conclusions

In reviewing the economic, political, and cultural incentives that undergird child separation as a practice, and examining the needs of globalizing capitalism that these map onto, we fundamentally shift the debate concerning adoption and foster care away from the usual arguments that center on family building. Furthermore, we expand this notion of

family from a strict binary to a spectrum of caregivers; from a nuclear family to a community; this reflects more closely the family structures of source over procuring class. The main obstacle to adoption reform remains adoptive parents who likewise believe in the mythologies ascribing them free will, ultimate agency, and supreme control of the family unit. Breaking through this mythology reveals them to be willing or unwilling pawns in an imperial project that is challenged more and more by the countries and populations whence the children temporarily in their care originate.

The secondary obstacle to adoption reform is found in adoptees who have bought into the class status afforded them by their adoption. Even among those who might preach a reformist viewpoint, the mere fact of holding on to such a class status remains an unresolvable discrepancy; an unlivable “knife’s edge” between two worlds separated not only by geography and race (often) but also by class. We might call this simply drinking a different flavor of Kool-Aid.

And so there is a choice to make here for those with the actual will and power to change things: Continue this masquerade, or join with grassroots efforts calling for justice from below. The arguments we make cannot assume that those with the ability and voice to make them are the only ones who matter in this equation; we need move beyond our “Facebook Reality”. A huge percentage of those who make up the population of those “touched” by adoption have no access to this discussion, and thus no [recognized] Voice allowed them.

All the same, their historical resistance to adoption can no longer be ignored. This call to arms requires us to join hands with them. Not just with the class/race-similar, but with those outside of our “comfort zones”: the Guatemalan mother fighting for her child in Missouri; the mothers in Central America suing to repatriate their kidnapped children; the Russian mothers devastated by the murder of their children Stateside; the women who make up the underclass of this society preyed upon by so-called religious and evangelical organizations.

For we are not really just talking about adoption, but also about the various displacements and dispossessions of which adoption unfortunately forms just one category. Breaking with one’s class identity thus reveals the world of those who similarly, for economic and political reasons, have been removed from their place, dispossessed from their family, and who are equally left longing for Return. The time has come to seek and find Home, for one and for all. If we truly believe in “Keeping Families Together”, this fundamental contradiction need be addressed. The active stance concerning families revealed by the

marches and demonstrations at the border must extend to activism on behalf of adopted persons and those in foster care.

References

Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives

Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination; Christina Klein

International Adoption Diane Marre and Laura Briggs

Outsiders Within

Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare; Dorothy Roberts

The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade; Ann Fessler

The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking, and the New Gospel of Adoption; Kathryn Joyce