Object Lesson
Children, Ideology, and Iconography: How Babies Rule the World

Children are generally not considered to be political citizens. Right-wing political commentator Glen Beck recently issued a telling remark on the matter, immediately after the 2011 massacre at the Labour Party youth summer camp in Norway. “It sounds a little like, you know, the Hitler Youth or whatever,” he opined. “Who does a camp for kids that’s all about politics? Disturbing.” Despite the multiple inaccuracies, not to mention mean-spiritedness, of Beck’s musings, he voiced a conventional assumption: only “totalitarians” (such as Nazis or Communists) ignore the cordon sanitaire that separates children from political realities. However, while children rarely achieve political citizenship, the world’s political posters provide an extensive visual argument that children are political subjects. Popular images of highly politicized children have been hiding in plain sight in the iconography of nation states, political parties, and social movements for many decades. “Disturbing?” People around the world, of all political persuasions, would seem to disagree.

The images, typical examples of which are represented here, are familiar. Children are almost always depicted as defenseless, cowering from ideologies or bombs or poverty or forms of racialized violence, in need of a strong nation state, or revolution, or political party to protect them. The dangers facing the sleeping child in the British Conservative Party advertisement from 1931 (fig. 1) are unspecified, but her savior is clear. Similarly, in the 1984 poster from OSPAAL (Organización en Solidaridad con los Pueblos de Asia, Africa y América), the sad-eyed South African child has little but mute appeal to deliver him from the barbed wire of apartheid (fig. 2). In both of these cases, the vulnerability of children authorizes a particular form of subjectivity, which ought to be understood as political. The baby in the arms of the Sandinista militant in early 1980s Nicaragua (an iconic revolutionary mother, gun, and child combination repeated in the iconography of national liberation movements the world over)

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plays the same role as the earnest young boy under the tutelage of the Lenin-like father figure in the Soviet Union (figs. 3 and 4). They represent the hope and pride of a marginalized class (sometimes racial) group, or a newly empowered revolutionary state or movement. In other contexts, such children might highlight the failure of the promise of prosperity for all. The common denominator is helplessness; they are as rich in symbolism as they are short on power. The real historical actor is the adult viewer.

“Men act and women appear,” wrote John Berger, famously, more than thirty years ago. In political posters, children appear so that adults can act. One of the most natural, taken-for-granted social categories for several centuries has been the distinction between adult and child. I believe the imagery of children in political posters (generally designed by and for adults) can teach us a great deal about how these relations of power are maintained. Such children do not simply absorb, experience, or represent adult-initiated political issues.
They also sustain them. When we look across national borders and political ideologies, we can make important transnational comparisons and generalizations about how children sustain political movements, causes, and events. We can also start to see the global knowledge about “childhood” which this visual archive has helped to create.

These questions arose for me as I was researching adoption and child-migration controversies in Cuba, Guatemala, and Canada. Through this research I began to see how children act as mute but powerful lightning rods for adult political conflicts and how they bear the social and political anxieties and aspirations of adults on their shoulders. I also became aware of the centrality of imagery in shaping the narratives of child adoption and migration controversies I studied. What Laura Briggs has termed “the visual iconography of rescue” has been a central trope in adoption and other child welfare systems for decades.
In *Picturing Childhood*, a rare study of children in a wide range of popular iconography, Patricia Holland argues that contemporary childhood is imagined by adults as “that space beyond conflict, . . . an optimistic universal image that smoothes over adult problems.” In her study of children’s involvement in political conflicts in South Africa, Mozambique, and Ireland, political scientist Helen Brocklehurst adds that because of this tendency to equate children solely with emotion or affect, when children symbolize a story, an ideology, a social movement, or a war, they actually explain very little. But at the same time, they can move emotional and psychic mountains.

If it is true that children symbolize the sentimental, the common hope of humanity abstracted from adult-created social problems, this is because of the particular conception of “childhood” currently dominant. Many historians have
documented how childhood in the West has been, for approximately two centuries, constituted as essentially vulnerable. Scholars of children and globalization have highlighted the role of colonial rule and subsequent interventions by Western non-governmental organizations, aid policies and international institutions in attempting to universalize this single standard of childhood. The process of what Jo Boyden has termed “setting the agenda for a happy childhood” has helped to concentrate development power and definitions of “childhood” in Western hands. The third-world children that stare forlornly from development non-governmental organization fundraising ads become abstract symbols of underdeveloped countries (or infantilized nations) that have simply not reached maturity. Yet this is not simply an imposition of “Western” values; it has not been a completely top-down process. The gap between the promise of innocent, protected childhood and the reality of most children’s lives—first and third world—has long provided an important space for marginalized groups to press their case for equitable treatment. Social justice movements, labor movements, and marginalized communities the world over have attempted to draw attention to their plight, and perhaps melt stony hearts, with the iconography of children.

Political posters have been the visual idiom of popular politics through the twentieth century. They were mass-produced and received widespread
circulation among literate and non-literate populations so much so that certain images (the clenched fist, the dove, the atomic mushroom cloud, the face of Che Guevara, to name a few) easily cross linguistic and cultural borders. They have also been collected and preserved in a wide variety of publications, archives, libraries, and museums, which permit the researcher to ask a number of questions from what I am learning is an almost endless database. Which movements, parties, nations, or events make the most use of children? How have political movements changed in their representation of children through the twentieth century? How and why do repeated images or themes migrate from one country, or conflict, or period to another? What are the social or political issues children seem most suited to represent? What are the symbolic systems the posters draw on for effect, and affect? What do these images teach us about how a global vision of a “happy childhood” has been shared, disputed, and/or imposed?

The imaginary child employed by political movements has much to teach us about the history of childhood. Visual representations of children are rarely literal depictions of actual children, but they can be valuable tools to understand the full range of histories of different kinds of childhoods at different moments. At the same time, the richness of the social and cultural histories of childhood helps me to understand the visual archive, since we have to rely on what Soviet poster historian Victoria Bonnell calls the “the repertoire of references available” in any given culture to help us interpret their meanings. Images do something, in their own right. What the iconographic global poster child does is provide a complex visual argument about the political subjectivity of children.

NOTES

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