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Majia Nadesan

Governing Childhood into the 21st Century: Biopolitical Technologies of Childhood Management and Education.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2010

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How are governments managing children and young people today, and what is likely to happen in the near future? Majia Nadesan's very broad-ranging analysis is packed with supporting examples and research references. Although she works in the United States, Nadesan takes a global view, contrasting privileged young people in wealthy countries, with their disadvantaged peers in affluent and in poor countries. After the US, the book is most directly relevant to the UK because, as the political and economic histories in the book repeatedly show, the UK is the most prompt and faithful imitator and sometimes inheritor of US policies. Grounded in detailed histories over the past century, the book is almost up to date and has much to say on how the effects of the 2007-2008 global economic crisis particularly relate to young people. Refreshingly, the book not only connects young people with 'adult world' politics and economics (which far too few authors do) but also keeps reminding us about how young people can be even more powerfully affected than many adults are by current policies.

'Biopolitics' stem from Foucault's view that people are disciplined and controlled, privileged or excluded, judged and micro-managed, through their bodies. Growing divisions between rich and poor in almost all countries are especially visible in the colour divide of the US: the 'white flight' to the suburbs while poor black families remain in hollowed-out decaying inner cities. Nadesan carefully compiles the evidence for how and why Western governments, over the decades, have blamed the effects of global transfers of employment from West to East, and growing unemployment and poverty in the West, on to the personal failings of the poor. Public opinion is led to blame poor families for their reactions to extremely hard circumstances and for their supposed 'culture of dependency'. There are mounting contempt, mistrust, hostility and controlling biopolitics towards the poor, street children, migrants, 'terrorists' and foreigners generally. Public information and debates about how we need to respond to climate change and dwindling global resources of fresh water, land, food and minerals are framed in terms of fear of rocketing birth rates and hoards of angry, unemployed black and brown youths 'swamping' the world. Concerns are seldom discussed about how the highly over-consuming families in the US and UK exacerbate these dangers. Today, justice and solidarity across the world and between older and younger generations have never been more urgently needed, to help us to meet pressing economic and resource and ecological challenges. Yet many governments are inciting paranoia, hostility and war, and are forcing the sale to private businesses of public assets: land, forests, and services relating to education, health, welfare, crime/justice, and other vital public needs.

Foucault contended that modern liberalism created two models of humanity: the rights holder and homo economicus. The two models are partly complementary. However, neoliberal markets are sacrificing the first to the second model in ruthless freedom to cut wages, taxes and public services and amenities. Children and young people are especially vulnerable, except for the privileged few who promise the exceptional success that everyone is supposed to achieve. They are seen as costs and burdens, dependent on welfare services now and potentially throughout their lives.

Nadesan's conclusions might seem extreme, until you see how carefully she builds, illustrates, and references her arguments, and connects past with present trends. She ends by quoting expert warnings that Western populations may not be able to rebuild the industries they have lost to Asia. Young people will be repaying massive debts and paying huge pension costs for the very many more old people. This will divert funds away from welfare, health and education services for young people, and therefore undermine their future employment opportunities and hopes of prosperity. The affluent few will enjoy even more separate private services, goods, transport and gated communities in a life apart. They will control government, with little concern for the lives and needs of the majority. Severe disadvantage, hunger and illness, with inability to afford essential treatments and support, increase stress in families associated with child and youth abuse. We have nearly a million unemployed young people in the UK. How do they manage each day, with constantly rejected work applications, little if any private space at home, and the police officially having to (criminalise and) 'disperse' meetings of two or more young people in 'public' spaces?

One partial remedy to economic crises could be to reduce the soaring expenditure on arms, war, police, surveillance and prisons. The US has over 800 military bases abroad to protect its trade and security. So far, however, the US and UK governments and mass media largely support expanding all these expenditures. They justify this partly by displacing blame and risk on to vulnerable groups at home and abroad, on to feckless people who 'waste' public resources and welfare instead of on to reckless bankers, for example. And until recently, censure was diverted away from the dictators who prop up Western oil and military interests, on to supposedly dangerous, volatile young protestors, economic migrants and terrorists. Official rhetoric squares the circle by insisting that more, not fewer, armies and police are needed to defend and also control everyone through multiplying the repressive security biotechnologies. This will prepare against anticipated growing domestic protests about economic hardship and injustice, as prices inevitably climb and essential supplies inevitably fall and fail.

Nadesan (195-6) quotes the 2009 World Bank report warning that, because of the global credit crunch, up to 53 million more people would join the over 1.5 billion who live in dire poverty on less than \$2 dollars a day. And that this would lead to the deaths of thousands of children and young people who are half the people in the world. Nadesan (196-7) also quotes plans by the US Department of Defense (DoD) for radical military responses to 'shocks', both abroad and at home, of natural disasters, epidemics, and 'home-grown' disorder. Eventually, the DoD expects that it might have to become the US (military) Government in order to 'ensure domestic tranquillity' and markets. Rights holders will entirely lose out to entrepreneurs. Governments, who promote public fear of risks, fear their own people it seems, especially youth. Young people who do not have the property, children and family responsibilities that older people have (although many brave young and older protestors have these) may have greater freedom to risk their lives in protest.

However, the (generally older) people at the top of US government seem coolly to plan for the possibility of young protestors fighting young police and soldiers in their own cities, just as they now send out disadvantaged young people to fight their wars abroad against mainly young combatants.

This is a dense and depressing read - unless you are already deeply concerned and welcome such powerful advocacy for younger generations. There are at least two reasons for everyone who works, researches, and plans with and for young people to read this book, and to ask their library (if they still have one) to order it. The first is to learn about many vital urgent matters to discuss with young people. The second reason is to help us all to reflect on the world we are bequeathing to the next generations. How does our own work reinforce or challenge the trends away from global justice and solidarity, and towards money, cost-cutting and private profit becoming the measure and goal for everything?

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