

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Child Labour in Historical Perspective 1800–1985. Case Studies from Europe, Japan and Colombia.** Ed. by Hugh Cunningham and Pier Paolo Viazzo. UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Florence; Istituto degli Innocenti, Florence 1996. 105 pp. Ill. \$9.00.

In their introduction to *Child Labour in Historical Perspective*, Cunningham and Viazzo state that “recent studies” have “done much to modify and deepen understanding of the history of child labour” (p. 11). I disagree. The children who worked in the earliest manufactories are scarcely visible in mainstream economic histories of industrialization despite the lessons for today’s developing countries which a historical perspective provides. There are some valuable studies of child labour, testifying both to the scholarship and humanity of their authors, but these are either classics which need updating or social histories of childhood generally. Thus Per Bolin-Hort in *Work, Family and the State* (1989), could justly claim that “[. . .] very few serious works have been written in Britain on industrial child labour”.<sup>1</sup> There has been no upsurge of interest since then with Cunningham himself providing the most important exceptions. This collection is much needed.

Why have child workers been forgotten in mainstream accounts of industrialization? One reason is that modern economic history is guided by neoclassical economics which interprets outcomes in terms of rational decision-making by free agents. History’s child workers did not trade-off leisure for income when they sought work. They were commandeered by poor law officials and directed by parents. Moreover, modern economic history is quantitative. Like women’s employment, children’s work was under-recorded, inconsistently measured, and buried in the family economy. But an economic history which emphasizes what is readily theorized and easily measured may be unbalanced. Perhaps the neglect of child labour has produced a too benign interpretation of the industrial revolution’s welfare implications along with ignorance of how compulsion lurked within its labour markets.

The essays collected here cover diverse cases in time and place. Fortunately for coherence, the editors are clear about the main issues: first, the extent of child labour during industrialization, and particularly whether it increased with the transition from protoindustry to factory production; and second, the identification of reasons for the decline in child labour, the usual suspects being compulsory education, protective labour legislation, rising working-class standards of living, and defensive trade unions.

Several contributors, including Cunningham on Britain and Cecilia Munoz Vila on Colombia, use national census data to gauge the extent of child labour. Not only do census data confine attention to inappropriate time periods (for example, the earliest British data is for 1851, the end of the industrial revolution), but also the definitions of work and the procedures used to measure participation lead to underestimation. Occasional surveys, like the 1879 pilot census of Yamanashi

<sup>1</sup> Per Bolin-Hort, *Work, Family and the State: Child Labour and the Organization of Production in the British Cotton Industry, 1780–1920* (Lund, 1989), p. 10.

Prefecture, well used by Osamu Saito, help to illuminate the pre-census experience, but they too are likely to underestimate child labour. Researchers must probe the extent of under-reporting just as Edward Higgs has gauged the underestimation of women's participation in the Victorian censuses.<sup>2</sup> Linking industrial and regional data from firm archives or government reports with the nearest local or national census can reveal inconsistencies. For example, David Gatley has compared the evidence from the Royal Commission investigating child labour in Victorian Warrington's pin factories with the census enumerators' books to identify significant underestimation in the census.<sup>3</sup>

Less direct evidence can be used to supplement censuses and employment surveys. One approach focuses on children's contributions to household incomes. Sara Horrell and I have used this approach to identify a pattern of child labour force participation which, as Cunningham and Viazzo note, gives new weight to the traditional interpretation that it was in the central period of the British industrial revolution, in the 1820s and 1830s, that children's participation rates were highest and ages at starting work were lowest.<sup>4</sup> By locating children in particular families, the approach enables participation to be related to family income, family life cycle and household structure; witness Enriqueta Camps i Cura's rich study of how children's contributions enabled families to balance resources and needs through their life cycle in industrializing Catalonia.

The essays testify to the widespread importance of children's work. In Europe they were more important contributors to their families' incomes than were their mothers. Culture was important. Children were never so widely employed in Japan as they were in Belgium or Britain for example. (It is interesting to ask how China's experiences would fit into this range.) But some questions are left unanswered. Despite attention from Saito and Cunningham, the age at starting work, a key feature of child labour, remains unclear. Nor do we know whether child labour peaked in factory production or protoindustry, probably because they overlapped. Factory production often provided a boost to protoindustry with ancillary processes remaining domestic, and when symbiosis became antipathetic rather than advantageous this may well have promoted a competitive intensification of child labour within protoindustry as several authors imply.

Not surprisingly perhaps, these studies do not identify a single cause of the disappearance of child labour. The idea that rising real wages for working men were most important takes a beating, and along with it any complacent *laissez-faire* attitude to child labour in the Third World, but so too does faith in compulsory schooling or factory legislation as simple remedies. Effective policy must be based on national and regional assessments of where children work, why employers prefer them, why their families collaborate, and what would be the likely response to various institutional and legislative measures.

The studies identify new features of child labour with important policy implications. First, by comparing the participation rates and age at first participation of

<sup>2</sup> Edward Higgs, "Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth-century Censuses", *History Workshop*, 23 (1987), pp. 59–80.

<sup>3</sup> David Gatley, *Child Workers in Victorian Warrington: The Report of the Children's Commission into Child Labour* (Stafford, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Sara Horrell and Jane Humphries, "The Exploitation of Little Children': Child Labor and the Family Economy in the Industrial Revolution", *Explorations in Economic History*, 32 (1995), pp. 485–516.

pauper children with those of Yamanashi children generally, Saito shows that wards of the state bore the brunt of early industrial labour, a finding confirmed by the systematic use of pauper apprentices in early British mines and factories. In an era when the family provided whatever protection there was, children without parents were destined for deprivation. Laslett's "nuclear hardship" is part of the child labour story. For those poor countries where migration, war and famine have left many children alone in the world, the prognostication is gloomy. Child labour also has a political dimension as De Herdt notes. Where the employers of children wield political power, as in nineteenth-century Belgium, the struggle against it may be protracted.

Although this is a timely and important book, I remain uneasy about reducing children's contribution to industrialization to the extent of their labour. In Britain, child labour played a pivotal role in the development of a technology (mechanized production) and an industry (cotton) which are recognized as of enormous strategic importance. The earliest rural, water-powered mills could not have overcome their recruitment problems without pauper apprentices. Nor was child labour readily phased out despite cotton's capitalist image and "free" labour market. When the industry migrated to the towns and used steam power, urban mills employed relatively more children than their rural counterparts. The argument need not stop with cotton. Children were important workers in another foundation industry of European industrialization, coalmining, as De Herdt reminds us. Thin seam pits could not have been exploited without the diminutive labourers who stopped a gap in transport technology. A perspective which sees children's work as essential to establishing industry on a modern technological and organizational trajectory would, at last, rescue child workers from the condescension of economic historians.

*Jane Humphries*

BERGAD, LAIRD W., MARÍA DEL CARMEN BARCIA [and] FE IGLESIAS GARCÍA. *The Cuban Slave Market 1790–1880*. [Cambridge Latin American Studies, 79.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1995. xxi, 245 pp. £35.00; \$59.95.

In the last few decades historians from various countries have researched the history of Cuba, but many of its fundamental aspects have not yet been fully explored. *The Cuban Slave Market* is an outstanding contribution that investigates a key issue in nineteenth-century Cuba: the price of slaves from the boom in sugar exports in the 1790s to the passing of the emancipation law of 1880, which instead of abolishing slavery established an eight-year transitional period for its definitive elimination.

The core of the book is econometric history. It analyses in depth the slave markets of Havana (in western Cuba), Cienfuegos (on the south-western coast of the island), and Santiago de Cuba (in eastern Cuba). By choosing these three cities, the book provides an accurate analysis of the slave market throughout the island over a ninety-one-year period in which around 780,000 African slaves were brought to Cuba and slavery was the key feature of the Cuban economy, society and politics. The book is based on a complete price series for Cuban slave sales