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Review of Upon the Altar of Work: The North-South Divide over Child Labor, 1850–1939

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Work has always been a moral issue, even when we are unwilling to admit, recognize, or think about it on those terms. Children working has been one of the trigger points for debates over child welfare, capitalism, and culture since at least the rise of the factory system in the early nineteenth century. Historians of children and youth have long been interested in the nature of young people's work and especially in the campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to regulate, limit, and even eradicate it. Betsy Wood offers an interpretation of the campaign to regulate child labor that makes at least two original contributions to the long and storied historiography: extending the chronology back to the 1850s and rooting the issue firmly in the long sectional conflict that not only caused the Civil War but also shaped (and continues to shape) American politics and social welfare reform movements.

Just as the campaign against human bondage had often drawn its force from images of enslaved children, the post-Civil War debates over the nature of capitalism, government authority, and welfare reform often revolved around the role of children in the economy and the responsibility of society to

children. It was relatively easy for reformers to find new targets to blame for child labor, but an issue that to reformers in the North seemed to be a no-brainer raised hackles in other parts of the country and among other interest groups.

Wood organizes her book chronologically and thematically, as reformers altered approaches and shifted targets. They first sought state and then federal legislation; then a constitutional amendment ratified by only a tiny handful of states; then, again, federal legislation that finally led to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1938. The perpetration of child labor also evolved, from the padrone system of recruiting cheap workers from Italy to the emergence of cotton mills in the southern Piedmont, recalcitrant capitalists, and increasingly conservative politicians. Although at times reform transcended sectional divisions, northern and southern activists were increasingly divided by attitudes about the necessity of work to the development of useful adults, the slippery slope of government regulation, and the importance of free enterprise in keeping the American economy strong. In these and other cases, child labor became a surrogate for contentious larger issues. Wood effectively incorporates the ways in which abolitionist rhetoric blended into post-Civil War attacks on capitalism, on the waxing and waning of the Social Gospel idea, and on the ways in which patriotism and preparedness actually helped propel anti-child labor rhetoric after 1918. She also features rural and urban divisions, as throughout the decades covered by the book, the labor of farm children and youth was rarely addressed—except by opponents of child labor regulation, who used the specter of families not being able to control their own children's work as a kind of misinformation campaign, especially during the debate over ratifying the child labor amendment to the Constitution.

Scholars from a number of fields will find uses for this fine book. Historians of the Civil War, Gilded Age, and Progressive eras in America will find familiar markers and personages framed in new and interesting ways. Historians of children and youth might find the core material more familiar, but they will also discover new approaches and chronologies. Wood's most useful contribution, in this reviewer's mind, is the connection made between the hyper-sectionalism caused by the issue of slavery to the post-emancipation campaigns against child labor that Wood convincingly argues became central to the new sectionalism that developed over the decades following the Civil War.

Despite its brevity—the book runs about 210 pages, with nearly 30 percent of it taken up by footnotes that display the author's deep dive into primary and secondary sources—this is an ambitious text that covers a lot of ground. Having said that, it does seem that there are some contexts that would have provided further nuance to an already sophisticated analysis. The relationship between child labor reform and educational reformers' efforts to increase opportunities and establish mandates for school enrollment is almost completely missing. I would have liked to have seen at least a nod toward the notion of children's rights, especially in light of international efforts by the League of Nations to establish the notion that children should not be exploited (although they were, of course, to be trained to be able to support themselves). And although I understand why Wood stopped with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the law's shortcomings and the chronic difficulty of dealing with forms of child labor that it failed to address suggest that the traditional 1938 end point is a rather sudden and perhaps arbitrary place to end. Despite that, this is a very good book that should inspire additional research in other times and places.

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