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Edited by Catherine Panter-Brick and Malcolm T. Smith

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Abandoned Children

The situation of children in foundling homes, in exile, in refugee camps or war zones, engaged in prostitution, or sleeping rough in the streets, attracts much political and journalistic attention, but needs careful analysis by social scientists. There is not enough said about the variety of experiences summarized as 'abandonment'. Nor has enough effort been put into studying the perspectives of children themselves on their situation. Situating the discourse on child abandonment in the more general field of debate on children, both historical and ethnographic, this book argues that many presentations of 'abandoned' children tend to take for granted ethnocentric ideas about what children can or should do, and about what their relationship should be with family or society. A range of historical and ethnographic case studies illustrates the need to contextualize their position in particular cultural situations.

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Preface

Judith Ennew

The image of abandoned or orphaned children is a powerful element in Western thought, which not only occurs in myths and folktales but also is part of the currency of political discourses. Children who have been abandoned, by their fathers or mothers or both parents, or who have been taken into state care because their natal families are unable to provide for them, are frequently the rationale for campaigns designed to focus attention on some apparent decline in public morals and family values. Yet, in contrast to the rhetoric of moral panic, most children always have and still do live in families (however 'family' may be defined). This book is about the dilemmas created by, and solutions tried for, those children who do not. From different theoretical and methodological perspectives, it examines a broad spectrum of abandonments and orphanhoods, creating an implicit typology that distinguishes between parentless, homeless and stateless children. The text weaves a tapestry from many disparate threads, from different disciplines, telling different stories, in different cultures and different times. This unique combination of varied perspectives and examples results in a significant contribution not only to academic theory but also to the information available to policy and programme makers, who should be enabled to see through the veil of myth and misunderstanding about 'abandonment' that obscures the lived realities of vulnerable children.

Nevertheless, myths often hold faster and persist for longer than realities. Unlike reality, myth is infinitely mutable, and can be manipulated to legitimate almost any social and political action or interpretation. Thus, it is particularly refreshing to find so many perspectives being explored within this book. Studies of children and childhood have proved to be multidisciplinary, similar to studies of women and gender, and this explains the strength of their new insights for social science in general. In this case, the exploration of child abandonment through a combination of history and social anthropology, which are the dominant disciplines in this book, affirms the value of a multidisciplinary approach. These two disciplines, with their different perspectives on time, sometimes find it

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difficult to coexist. In this text, however, they not only coexist but richly inform each other. It is also clear that both disciplines have developed considerably as the result of making use of new research methods. The past, for example, may be another country, but it is now possible to explore it through computer modelling. Thus five centuries of records of the demography of abandonment, when subjected to rigorous computer analysis, yield up new and more precise information about why and how care of abandoned children was provided over a long period of European history.

Historical discontinuities are seldom distinct, largely because they occur at different levels of discourse, within which elements are constantly refashioned. Yet it is possible to discern by reading the contributions in this book that there has been a historical progression in ways of dealing with children whose links to the current generation of adults are not firmly embedded in structures of legitimacy, ranging from kinship to citizenship. Care of children who are viewed as outside these structures seems to have passed from a generalised societal investment in informal fostering and welfare mechanisms within kinship-based societies, to institutionalized abandonment in early modern states in which a public law solution is provided for a perceived demographic problem. With the development of modern systems of governance, though not necessarily of states and nationalities in the modern sense, the cost of an upbringing had to be accounted for, and parental investment separated from societal investment. Thus the relative costs of, duties towards and rights over children were explicitly established. Children's welfare in the early modern state seems to have been of less importance than the imperative to relieve public expenditure of the costs of their upbringing.

As long as the state consisted of an aggregation of small communities, children without parents could be assigned to the care of relatively local human and financial resources, even if this entailed shifting children around between communities and municipalities in order to balance the books. Modern, centralised states, that are part of a global system of nations, have developed different ideas of nationality, citizenship and person, within which children may be abandoned even when they remain in the day-to-day care of their parents. Their condition of abandonment is less physical than bureaucratic. Their parents are not absent, but the children experience a separation that is almost inconceivable in current global frameworks, in that, through being either exiles or refugees, they do not have, or cannot correctly experience, nationality. Articles 7 and 8 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child were drafted to prevent this situation, yet the examples in this book of what Ernest Gellner called 'diaspora nationality' are eloquent reminders of the differ-

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ent, and often confused, ways in which children and their parents may encounter separation from a distant and unreachable homeland, of which only parents (or perhaps grandparents) have memories. In view of the multiple and extended population displacements that are increasingly part of the current global system, creative approaches to this issue are a welcome contribution to understanding the experiences of children of long-term exiles.

Recognition that abandonment in its most recent manifestations may include a wider range of childhood experiences than explored in more conventional approaches is one of the strengths of this collection of papers. But the value of the book lies in the juxtaposition of historical and current examples, not only in purely empirical terms but also with respect to the discursive practices in which the concrete is embedded. Thus it is possible to see that 'abandonment' has become a kind of moral rhetoric used to justify continued policies of rescue and redemption together with their tendency to stigmatise the poor, from Renaissance orphanages to late twentieth-century non-governmental projects for 'street children'. The book appears at an opportune moment, a time for reflection in which the historical record does indeed tell us something valuable. It reveals a centuries-long welfare approach that is far from unitary, but that throws light on the process by which we arrived at the current situation in the 'century of childhood', when changes in family form, attitudes to sexual identity and reproductive technology combined to put even parenthood in question. As Marx pointed out in *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, every epoch gets the childhood it deserves. Yet, without exploring past childhoods, including the childhoods of the 'abandoned', there is no way of understanding why children's rights and the requirement to examine children's perspectives should have become so important at the turn of the twenty-first century. It is interesting to ask why the welfare approach towards children as objects of concern has recently changed so rapidly to a conceptualisation of children as subjects of human rights. The implications for policy and programme work are enormous. The approach taken by this book opens the way for wider recognition of social abandonment of children by states, and should help to lessen the stigmatization of parents who take the drastic step of abandoning their offspring as a result of policies of impoverishment. It also makes it clear that, in an increasingly anomic world, being with parents may not be sufficient for healthy identity formation. Ways may be found to help children with confused cultural identities. The next step will surely be to counteract the mythologies of rescue and redemption that make it possible for so many of those licensed by society to look after 'abandoned' children, whether orphans, street children, refugees or exiles, to abuse them systematically

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(sexually, physically and emotionally) under the cover of 'care'. It is thus important that this book is read, not only by academics for whom it provides an almost infinite range of new hypotheses, but also by those with direct influence on future provision for the children of the future.