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## **Left in the Waiting Room of History? Provincializing the European Child**

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### **Abstract**

This essay highlights an important lacuna within critiques of infantilizing (neo) colonial European discourses: the failure to question whom or what was the 'child' against which non-Europeans were gauged. The premise is that the unacknowledged figure at the heart of these critiques is in fact the figure of the universalized European child. Not only is this paradoxical, it also opens the potential for taking these critiques further, and for shifting the analytical lens away from the racialized, infantilized Other in order to challenge the assumed universality of European notions of childhood against which the Other was, and sometimes remains, positioned. We develop this critique through a sympathetic engagement with broader postcolonial writings on the subject of infantilization and, specifically, with Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000). The essay reveals the paradoxical presence of the figure of the European child within Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentrism, arguing that this figure is present even as Chakrabarty seeks to provincialize Europe. The essay explores examples of the work that the figure of the universal European child continues to perform and concludes with some reflections on what it might mean to provincialize the European child, both for postcolonial theory and for the broader ethical issues this raises.

**Keywords:** Chakrabarty, Dipesh, child, childhood, ethics, infantilism, provincializing

## Introduction

*“Anthropologists taught that primitive societies represented cultural stages that fell short of the complete civilization exemplified by the societies of western Europe. In the phylogeny of the human race the nineteenth-century savage, together with his prehistoric forebear, was assigned the role of child”* (Russett 1989: 51–2).

Critiques of the negative representations of colonized peoples as indolent children in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European colonial discourses are by now familiar. As the quote from Russett suggests, infantilizing non-Europeans formed part of the process of defining the Other, which in turn resonated with evolutionary theories of human development, and linear notions of progress and modernity, placing Europe at the apogee. Anticolonial movements and postcolonial nation-building saw concerted attempts by colonized and newly independent peoples to assert their agency and challenge the infantilism accorded them by colonialism. Despite this, allusions to infantilism persist in popular western discourses and neocolonial imaginaries, with representations in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art and literature (see, for example, Gilman 1985; McClintock 1995; McEwan 2000; Said 1978; Stoler 1995) continuing to resonate within contemporary geopolitics and development (Baaz 2005; Burman 1995; Holland 1992; McEwan 2009).

While critiques have exposed and problematized infantilizing (neo)colonial discourses and the ways in which they are imbued in contemporary power relations, this essay seeks to highlight what we consider to be an important lacuna within these critiques. Specifically, we suggest that the question of whom or what was the ‘child’ against which non-Europeans were (and sometimes still are) gauged remains unproblematized in these critiques and that this is itself an implicit, if unintended, form of Eurocentrism. The premise of the essay is that the unacknowledged figure at the heart of these critiques is in fact the figure of the universalized European child. The failure to recognize the presence of this figure does not necessarily diminish existing critiques of infantilization in European (neo)colonial discourses, since these critiques have been significant in highlighting and challenging modes of representation of colonized and formerly colonized ‘Others’. Rather, we argue that this represents a paradox, but also opens the potential for taking these critiques further, and for shifting the analytical lens away from the racialized, infantilized Other in order to challenge the assumed universality of European notions of childhood against which the Other was positioned. We develop this critique through a sympathetic engagement with broader postcolonial writings on the subject of infantilization and, more specifically, with Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000).

Chakrabarty's thesis is arguably one of the most powerful and persuasive critiques of Eurocentrism through its careful dismantling of universalizing European norms. The central thrust of *Provincializing Europe* is to reposition Europe as one centre among many in the production of knowledge forms, rather than occupying a central position in the generation of theory and knowledge. As McEwan (2009: 72) argues, this is not intended as a rejection of western knowledge, its universalisms and its grand theories (and for this reason Chakrabarty has been criticized by more trenchant writers on Eurocentrism: see Ismail 2005; Gidwani 2008). Nor is it a call for cultural relativism or a notion that all forms of knowledge are equally valid. Rather, it requires the positioning of European knowledges within their historical contexts and challenging any tendency to universalize from these particularities. There is no doubting the significance and influence of Chakrabarty's thesis, and its call to decentre European notions of modernity and linear narratives of progress. For this reason, the fact that the figure of the European child remains a haunting presence within *Provincializing Europe* is, we argue, an important paradox. We suggest that revealing this paradox opens up the need to provincialize the European child that is positioned, undeconstructed and unproblematized, within Chakrabarty's and other critiques of colonial and neocolonial discourse. Moreover, we argue that the figure of the European child is not singular, but rather draws on multiple ideas of childhood that bear the burden of different European inheritances.

In what follows we briefly discuss critiques of colonial discourse in order to illustrate further the unacknowledged presence of the figure of the universal European child within these critiques. We engage with historiography of childhood in the colonial world, and specifically in India, as a means of demonstrating that childhood was not simply an idea exported from the colonial metropole, but rather 'an unstable element produced by a wider set of colonial conversations' (Sen 2005: 4). The essay then explores the paradoxical status of the figure of the European child within Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentrism. The final part of the essay takes up this paradox to ask this question: who is this child and what might it mean to provincialize the European child, both for postcolonial theory and for the broader ethical issues that this might raise?

### **Infantilism within Colonial and Neocolonial Discourses**

The implications of infantilizing colonial discourses are clear. If colonized peoples were perceived as permanently childlike, then it could be argued that it was natural and just that the more 'advanced' nations should become permanent guardians. If these childlike peoples were incapable of exploiting

their own resources, European countries were justified in governing and developing these places themselves. As Blaut argues:

*“Non-Europeans ... were seen as psychically undeveloped, as more or less childlike. But given the psychic unity of mankind, non-Europeans could of course be brought to adulthood, to rationality, to modernity, through a set of learning experiences, mainly colonial.”* (Blaut 1993: 96; see also Broks 1990; Nandy 1987)

The image of infantilism was thus, to a certain extent, used to legitimate colonialism and imperialism under the guise of paternalism and trusteeship. If the perceived responsibilities of the European powers were strongly paternal, however, they also had implications for unequal power relations. The preference for strong British rule in Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, sprang not only from notions about savagery, but also from ideas of infantilism and the general incompetence of the non-white inhabitants of the continent. It was intimated that the ‘simple nature’ of Africans, their ‘child-like essence’, did not ‘permit them to function well in the complexities of the modern world and predisposed them to insanity’ (Gilman 1985: 140). The extension of empire and ‘civilization’ was perceived as a duty for Britain: it was the ‘white man's burden’ to control and enlighten. As Cairns (1965: 95) argued, the child analogy was useful to Europeans for it denied to the colonized the privileges reserved for adults. It both reflected and strengthened the idea that non-European cultures did not represent worthwhile achievements and were ‘too loosely formed and inchoate to offer any significant resistance to an inrush of westernization’. The analogy also acted as a ‘sanction and preparation for white control’ (Cairns 1965: 95), since it implied a paternalism that denied the colonized the right of deciding on their own future.

These ideas revealed how colonialism rested on a core contradiction between these discourses of otherness, which needed to fix the Other as always, irrevocably different, but was justified as a civilizing mission that rested on the possibility that the Other could be redeemed and become ‘just like us’. Colonial discourses were characterized by an ‘ironic compromise of mimicry’ based on a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other (Bhabha 1994: 86). The colonized should become like the colonizer but, simultaneously, remain different – ‘almost the same, but not quite’. This apparent contradiction was a critical element in legitimating colonial expansion and in constituting the ‘white man's burden’ to civilize the Other. It also provided a justification for continued economic and geopolitical interventions in the name of postcolonial development. Thus, from the late 1940s into the 1970s, mainstream global economic theory articulated a discourse of ‘lack’ – the idea that the former colonies were deficient, should develop by modernizing and should follow the same trajectories as western economies in order to

'catch up', in terms of both economy and 'civilization'. The metaphor of unruly children being brought to adulthood through the guidance of paternalistic guardians was strongly implied in these narratives and arguably still frames the way in which global relations are often understood through western eyes (Power 2003; Baaz 2005).

What is striking about many of the explications of (neo)colonial discourses is the extent to which, in critiquing infantilization, the construction of the European child as the marker against which non-European others were and sometimes still are compared remains unproblematized. Elizabeth Gagen (2007) is one of few writers who turn a critical gaze on the construction of the universalized European child within colonial discourses. In the context of US imperial discourses, she argues that theories of child development were interwoven with ideas about foreign underdevelopment, informing not only US imperial projects, but also its thinking about itself by universally barbarizing children everywhere. Theories of human development drew on psychology, evolutionary biology and international relations to conceptualize child development. Thus, 'in the necessary hierarchicization of 'racial' development, childhood emerged as universally inferior, regardless of race' (Gagen 2007: 16). Ideas about 'underdevelopment' were both spatial and temporal and not only relegated overseas places and peoples to a premodern state, but simultaneously placed 'all children – American, European and Non-Western – in a universal state of primitiveness' (Gagen 2007: 17).

Gagen's point (drawing on Aitken 2001) about this discursive reduction is that whether the child is seen as inherently wild, evil, angelic, vulnerably innocent or incapably noble, violence is done to the competence and agency of children and their right to be valued in their own terms. While critiques of colonial discourse are concerned with the violence done to colonized peoples through infantilizing discourses, they do not reflect on the violence that is done to the child through these same discourses. Thus Gagen demonstrates how theories of child development and notions of foreign underdevelopment were interwoven. However, in making these important observations, it is not Gagen's intention to problematize the fact that the idea of childhood was essentially based on universalizing the European child. As the ensuing discussion illustrates, this is a familiar omission. Even critiques that have as their intention the decentring of European universalisms, such as Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, still leave the figure of the European child unacknowledged and unproblematized. This is notable not least because, as we discuss further below, there is a long history of colonial elites actively shaping their own binaries between child and adult, and appropriating, contesting or attempting to decolonize the figure of the European child.

## **Universals, Figuring and Historicism: Framing the European Child in Provincializing Europe**

Provincializing Europe is itself a response to a problem: how to write a history of modern South Asia and simultaneously engage with questions of 'political modernity'? Chakrabarty provides two reasons as to why this is problematic. First, the term 'political modernity', like so many others, 'bear[s] the burden of European thought and history' (Chakrabarty 2000: 4). To answer a question formulated with reference to such terms is to be confined within its premises and to take on something of the 'weightiness' of the burden of those words. Second, this is a problem for Chakrabarty specifically, since he identifies as a member of the modern Bengali educated middle classes, characterized as the 'first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West' (Raychaudhuri 1988, in Chakrabarty 2000: 4). As Chakrabarty argues, he himself has inherited universalizing concepts and something of the vision of the human these concepts entail. This engagement with universals is indispensable in his task of writing history, as European thought itself provided a foundation for critiques of European projects of colonization that 'den[ie]d its own vision of man' (Djait 1985, in Chakrabarty 2000: 5). Yet at the same time as engaging with universals, it is precisely the apparent non-universality of 'European thought' that makes it 'inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India' (Chakrabarty 2000: 6). For Chakrabarty, as discussed previously, the postcolonial challenge to provincialize Europe is not to negate the value of universalisms – human rights, citizenship and democracy – since these have been fundamental to the formation of independent postcolonial nations. Rather, it is to recognize that European models of development and modernity cannot easily be universalized, and that alternative ideas about the nature of human rights and citizenship may, in fact, emerge from places like India.

One of the universals 'forged in eighteenth-century Europe' with which Chakrabarty frequently engages is the 'abstract figure of the human ... that underlie[s] the human sciences' (Chakrabarty 2000: 5). Chakrabarty's use of 'the figure of' points to a process of abstraction, or 'figuring'. This figuring allows for an unknown person, or body, to be recognized as one instance of a group by their likeness to a set of already known and essentialized characteristics (Ahmed 2000: 3). It is these characteristics and the various 'signs' by which they can be recognized that give shape to a universalized outline of a person, that is, 'the figure of'. Thus, Chakrabarty invokes and problematizes the 'figure of the peasant' (2000: 11); the 'Indian' as a 'figure of lack' (2000: 32); the figures of both the 'labourer/worker' and 'capitalist' (2000: 56–7); the figure of 'the subaltern' (2000: 94); the 'figure of the suffering widow' (2000: 118); and the figure of 'the housewife ... as distinct

from the figure of the officegoer' (2000: 168). Figuring calls on both the one and the many at the same time, a generic individual and an imagined community, suggesting the possibility that one outline may stand in for some imagined whole without ever being required to make good on this promise.

It is worth noting that Chakrabarty almost exclusively uses the word 'figure' to refer to people or perhaps bodies. Consequently, it is of interest that the Europe he seeks to decentre or provincialize is itself defined as a 'figure'. This Europe is

*"an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in clichéd and shorthand forms in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity in South Asia."* (Chakrabarty 2000: 4, italics in original)

Thus, Chakrabarty's Europe has shape and form; it is abstracted while retaining particular characteristics; it is a body, an interloper, which embeds itself in everyday habits of thought. For Chakrabarty this process of figuring is part of the 'Europe' upon which he draws and is seeking to provincialize. The figure of the European child, however, is never rendered visible or problematized in Provincializing Europe. Rather, as we argue below, this particular figure is a haunting yet unquestioned presence in Chakrabarty's writing on Indian citizenship.

Central to Chakrabarty's thesis is the idea of historicism. He refers to this as a 'conceptual gift of nineteenth-century Europe', one that is 'integral to the idea of modernity' and, therefore, needs to be engaged with and rethought (Chakrabarty 2000: 6). Historicism is an ideology of progress or development, a story which assumes a universal linear trajectory of history and where onwards is upwards. For Chakrabarty it is figured as a story of 'first in Europe, then elsewhere'. In this way historicism is a particular form of that process of figuring discussed above, where that which occurred in Europe may be abstracted and rendered recognizable elsewhere, be that capitalism, modernity or Enlightenment, to use Chakrabarty's examples (2000: 7). The word 'first' again calls on the idea of the one and the many, but also now with the idea of inherent temporal ordering. Here, a singular 'first' event becomes programmatic and the pattern by which 'second' and 'third' instances of the same now-known event may be recognized elsewhere. A European history of 'firsts' can be constructed from which 'signs' may be elicited, allowing other instances elsewhere (non-European) to be recognized and placed along the trajectory of an already known stagist history.

Within European colonialism, this historicism was called upon to particular effect. As Chakrabarty argues, it 'came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody's way of saying "not yet" to somebody else' (2000: 8). Classic examples, cited by Chakrabarty, are John Stuart Mill's

articles 'On Liberty' and 'On Representative Government'. A vociferous opponent of strong paternalism, Mill nevertheless suggested that Indians and Africans could not self-govern as they were 'not yet' civilized enough (see also Nandy 1987). They needed preparation through civilizing education and patient waiting through development under colonial rule before they would be ready to rule themselves. Self-control demonstrated by waiting under rule would, in time, be admitted as evidence of readiness for self-government. Chakrabarty writes, 'Mill's historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans and other "rude" nations to an imaginary waiting room of history' (2000: 7). It was a powerful metaphor. Furthermore, in drawing on the language of education and development it was not simply the waiting room of history to which colonized people were consigned, but also to a classroom.

Edward Said outlines this in *Orientalism*:

*"So far as the West was concerned during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an assumption had been made that the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West. The Orient was viewed as if framed by the classroom."* (Said 1978: 40–1)

Admittedly, the classroom is not the only frame that was used, but it is a significant one because of the way in which it invokes certain roles – Orient as pupil/child/student and West as teacher/parent/tutor. Thus the child–adult binary within colonial discourse, outlined previously, could be inscribed more specifically as a benign, paternalistic child–parent, pupil–teacher relationship within the colonial imaginary. In this way, the modern child and its parent or tutor formed 'the stock in trade of colonizing ideology' (Kleinig 1983: 170). Indeed, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century 'politicians and political apologists relied on familial imagery in characterizing the British Empire and rationalizing its impositions on subject peoples' (Kleinig 1983: 170). While the classroom analogy is not rendered explicit in Chakrabarty's writings, the teacher–pupil binary is implied in his discussion of the language of development, civilization, education and waiting under colonial rule. This sets up the relationship between colonized and colonizers in parallel with the figure of the child and its specific relation to parental rule, a child that required socialization and was to 'grow up' through developmental stages. Thus the historicism of the waiting room is couched in the language and practice of infantilization.

### **The Paradoxical Presence of the European Child**

Chakrabarty demonstrates that after Indian independence in 1947, this infantilizing historicism was rejected in the way in which enfranchisement

was enacted. Indian democracy, it was decided, would be based on ‘universal adult franchise’ and breaking out of the waiting room (and, indeed, of the classroom): ‘every Indian adult is treated practically and theoretically as someone already endowed with the skills of making a major citizenly choice, education or no education’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 10). The story of modernity in India is, therefore, less a story of linear progression from a traditional society to a modern one, and more a complex entanglement of modernity and tradition. In European Enlightenment thought, peasants could not become citizens without first being educated. Thus, basic rights to education in Britain preceded universal suffrage by almost fifty years. In contrast, in India, peasants became citizens on independence despite being largely illiterate. This countered imperial notions of colonized subjects being ‘not yet ready’ for universal human rights on the grounds that they were illiterate.

This brings us to the paradox at the heart of this notion of citizenship. The paradox revolves around a question concerning the limits of enfranchisement: in what way could the franchise be said to be universal if it was qualified by the word ‘adult’. This seems to suggest that one may say ‘now’ to the Indian adult but ‘not yet’ to the Indian child, who does in fact remain left in the waiting room. This raises a further question concerning the basis for this decision. It cannot be that the Indian child is insufficiently educated, for the argument is that the Indian adult does not need to ‘grow up’ or wait under the rule of another; irrespective of education he or she may make a ‘major citizenly choice’. What discursive slippage allows for children to be excluded from the effect of these arguments? And why are children not considered to be endowed with the skills that adults somehow (but not through education) come at the age of majority to possess? In raising these questions we are not claiming that Indian children should necessarily have been enfranchised (see Semashko 2004); rather that the basis of their exclusion is neither justified nor made explicit. Our argument is that while, on the one hand, as Chakrabarty demonstrates, Indian notions of democracy and citizenship in 1947 challenged the supposed universality of European models, on the other hand, they were still based on universal distinctions between adult and child as a means for determining the limits of citizenship. This normative figure of the child, who is not yet qualified for citizenship and, therefore, remains disenfranchised, is as much in evidence in India in 1947 as it is in Europe.

Indian notions of citizenship deliberately challenged the view of the figure of the peasant, or of the Indian in general, as a figure of lack. They rejected and refuted the construction of the Oriental as ‘irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, “different”’, which enabled the European to be constructed as ‘rational, virtuous, mature, “normal”’ (Said 1978: 40). Yet the argument worked by asserting that the Indian man or woman is an adult too like the colonial ruler and does not need to prove him or herself in order to be a

citizen and to self-govern. This, however, leaves in place and intact the particular set of (oppositional) divisions and distinctions between adult and child that were long at work in the colonial imaginary. The child remains defined by the same series of lacks that had been levelled at the Oriental: an ‘immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial and acultural child’ who must be turned into ‘a mature, rational, competent, social and autonomous adult’ (Heywood 2001: 3). Chakrabarty recognizes that such divisions and distinctions between adult and child vary and may be differently conceived. For example, in his discussion of John Locke's essay on ‘civil government’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 230–2), he argues that ‘reason’ cannot begin to work until parental (that is, paternal) political authority – which is the authority to punish – ceases to exist. He recounts Locke's argument that reasoned human beings are autonomous adults and that parental/paternal authority is temporary. This authority helps children acquire reason through education, but the parental/paternal political authority must cease for the fraternal contract to become operational. Chakrabarty draws on Carol Pateman's point in *The Sexual Contract* that the Lockean story of the death of the father's authority was also the myth of modern patriarchy in the Christian West, in which the formal equality of all humans is predicated on the actual equality of brothers. Chakrabarty then argues that this death of parental authority is never imagined as part of the Bengali fraternal compact. Instead, the capacity to command belongs to the parents and specifically the male ancestral line, with no age limits: ‘Political authority in this modernity was modelled on parental authority, which never ceased to be’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 231). This parental authority, however, was not the absolute power of Lockean philosophy, but was based in devotion and adoration of the child for the father.

Chakrabarty performs a subtle dismantling of the supposedly universal fraternal contract that underpins patriarchal liberalism. However, his argument still rests upon another universal: the figure of the child. The ways in which both historicism and modern political thought informed and were informed by a particular European vision of child and adult remain unacknowledged and unchallenged. While the logic of the ideology of development is challenged fundamentally in *Provincializing Europe*, it does not proceed to dismantle the symbolic structure that this logic supports. Thus:

*“[In] the developmentalist model: childhood in relation to adulthood mirrors the primitive in relation to the civilized and the modern, the primate in relation to the properly human.”* (Archard 1993: 35)

Or, to reiterate Gagen's (2007) argument, children everywhere are universally barbarized.

Although this essay is not concerned directly with recounting historiographies of Indian notions of childhood per se, it is worth acknowledging this historiography as a means for understanding the adult–child binary at work in Indian citizenship. Between the 1850s and the 1930s, childhood in India was reinterpreted in the cultural and intellectual context of colonialism, and the ‘new children’ that emerged were deployed in various ways within colonialist and nationalist projects (Sen 2004; see also Kakar 1978). There were clear political strategies for delineating childhood by middle-class, nationalist Indians who were simultaneously challenging colonial institutions and the denial of citizenship, while responding to the demands of modernity. They reconstructed childhood as ‘the embodiment of a universal individuality’ (Sen 2005: 6). There were thus contradictory discourses of conflict with and accommodation of European universals at work in Indian articulations of how children should be treated by adults and the postcolonial state. The point we wish to make is that Chakrabarty's critique of the infantilizing effects of historicism, and of the teleology of stagist and developmental narratives, may not only be employed in his project of provincializing European notions of citizenship and modernity. His concern with provincializing Europe may also be employed in provincializing the figure of the European child, the figure that was mobilized in justifying colonial subjugation. Acknowledging the historiography of Indian childhood, and the multiple childhoods that Indians invoked for political purposes, provides but one means of provincializing this figure.

### **Provincializing the European Child**

That the figure that was so connected with the paternalistic ‘not yet’ historicism of colonial Europe has been left intact while the historicism which informs such a vision of the child is challenged and rejected is both provocative and significant. How then might Chakrabarty's project be extended to provincialize the European child? Working through some of the lines of thought, which provide an outline of this figure, we trace the nature of the European child in its appearance in the colonial imaginary, consider briefly further examples of the ways in which colonized peoples constructed childhood, and draw out some of the implications of this.

It is difficult in tracing the figure of the modern European child to avoid the influence of Philippe Ariès, writer of *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960), translated as *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). Ariès offers a history that suggests that the concept of childhood is a specific awareness of what distinguishes children from adults, that this was not a feature of previous societies and is, in fact, distinctively modern and rooted

in the bourgeois cultures of Europe. This concept of childhood emerges in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century and 'is manifested in morally appropriate forms of treatment, chiefly a certain separation of the worlds of child and adult' (Archard 1993: 20).

Ariès' work is often acknowledged as significant for the way in which it relativized the concept of childhood (James et al. 1998: 4). However, it has also been much criticized. Pertinently for this discussion, one of the charges has been that it is based in the same historicism and narrative of 'first in Europe, then elsewhere', which Chakrabarty challenges (Archard 1993: 23). This view of history places the 'modern' concept of childhood as superior and its acceptance as a sign of progress. In responding to this view, Archard distinguishes between 'the concept of childhood which requires that children be distinguishable from adults in respect of some unspecified set of attributes and a conception of childhood as a specification of those attributes' (Archard 1993: 23, italics in original). He argues on this basis that Ariès presumes that having the modern conception of childhood is to have the concept of childhood (no other conceptions need apply). Further, in the face of contradicting evidence it does not appear tenable to hold that earlier societies lacked a concept of childhood, simply that they had a different one (Archard 1993: 23).

While the notion of childhood as a modern European 'bourgeois invention' seems unsustainable, it is possible to argue that it was a bourgeois conception of childhood that was universalized in the figure of the European child that is assumed in debates about democracy, citizenship and political modernity more broadly. In making this point, we also acknowledge two further points. First, the figure of the European child, for all its pretence of temporal universality, is constructed from more than one source and different lines of thought may (or may not) be called upon. In this way the figure may appear both fluid (drawing on multiple, seemingly interchangeable, lines of thought) and yet at times very clearly defined (when certain lines of thought are called upon to take shape). That such figuring draws on multiple sources and even different (and at times contradictory) lines of thought is also evidenced in Sara Ahmed's (2000, 2004) work on the multiple discourses that purport to make knowable the figure of the stranger, the international terrorist, or the asylum seeker.

Second, such figures are not easily displaced by confounding evidence. For example, experiences of childhood differ by and between whatever categories one may think of: sex, gender, age, stage, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality, nationality, dis/ability and so on (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 1). However, this is inconsequential with respect to figuring because, as discussed, a figure is claimed to present some abstracted, essential characteristic that transcends other differences. In drawing attention in what follows to some of the inheritances that form the threads of a modern (European) conception

of the child, this conception should not be taken as reified and singular. Nor should this imply that any conception acts determinatively and alone to define and structure the relationship of any one child and adult. Further, it is not our intention to occlude the ways in which difference may be treated differently, but to point out that this is precisely what the figuring of a European child does.

James et al. (1998) offer a typology of such threads of thought about children. They refer to these lines of thinking as ‘pre-sociological’, arguing that they pre-date the sociological model, which takes childhood as an object of study itself rather than as subsumed in some other area of interest, such as family or schooling (1998: 22). Their book-length schema is detailed and worth citing at length, which we attempt to do through a play on the rhyme of the Victorian parlour game ‘The Minister's Cat’. This allows us subsequently to reveal the ways in which specific lines of thought informed the colonial imaginary (the numbers that follow each section refer to pages in James et al. (1998)).

The pre-sociological child is the *evil* child – base and corrupt bearing original sin (10).

*What must be done?* (Something must always be done!) Discipline and punish, wills to be broken, restrain the child from dangerous places (10–11).

The pre-sociological child is the *innocent* child – angelic, uncorrupted by an evil world (13).

*What must be done?* Celebrate their natural goodness and clarity of vision lost or forgotten by adults, satisfy their particular needs, give their desires room and protect their rights. Parents must be competent to do this (13–14).

The pre-sociological child is the *immanent* child – vital and charged with potential, citizens in the making (15).

*What must be done?* Reason with and teach them, recognize their capacity and lead them on to knowledge through experience (15–16).

The pre-sociological child is the *naturally developing* child – growing up is progress through stages (17).

*What must be done?* Nothing (except to measure, grade, rank, assess and intervene should someone be backward or shows signs of arrested development/ underdevelopment) (19).

The pre-sociological child is the *unconscious* child – not future's promise but adult's pasts (20).

*What must be done?* Go back, go back, for the cause of aberrant adult behaviour lies in childhood, a childhood of unfinished business or becoming.

Demonstrating how these lines of thought gave shape to the figure of the European child requires examples of how they appear in the colonial imaginary and connecting each of these children with particular writers and traditions (who are often seen as their progenitors).

The evil child is regularly connected with the doctrine of Adamic original sin, the Dionysian mythology and the writer Thomas Hobbes, with his views on the absolute power of the monarch over the populace and by analogy of parents over children (James et al. 1998: 10–11). This idea of a child's self-will being controlled and the need to protect the child from harm through discipline is in evidence in the writings of Lord Cromer, England's fin-de-siècle representative in Egypt. Cromer invokes the language of depravity (a fallen state), of Orientals as 'inveterate liars', and the need for their judgement and discipline (Said 1978: 39–41). As part of the civilizing project this view is sometimes seen as legitimizing brutality: 'the need for violence is seen in the inner waywardness of the child, a waywardness that needs to be curbed if the child is to be brought to civilization' (Kleinig 1983: 171).

The innocent child stands in stark contrast to the idea of the evil child and is often connected with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile*, and the idea of the free and noble savage (James et al. 1998: 13–14). This may be seen in the Orient's depiction as exotic locale, as sublime (Said 1978: 118–19), where people are represented as close to nature and following a more anthropological mode *fêted* as living a life of pre-industrialized innocence, unmarked and untainted by the smoky blackness of the 'machine-age'.

The immanent child is commonly connected with John Locke, the idea of the *tabula rasa* and that all knowledge comes from experience, but that the mental processes and perception needed to learn already exist (James et al. 1998: 16). This theme is perhaps less in evidence in the colonial imaginary, but can be traced in various discourses. For example, it is apparent in Mill's argument that 'universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement' (in Chakrabarty 2000: 9). It is also apparent in the argument that every Indian adult was already endowed with the skills of making major citizenly choices. The distinction between acquired knowledge and ability to learn is much debated (James et al. 1998: 6); perhaps this offers a reason why this line of thought is not picked up more and, where it might be said to appear, it does so in complex and contradictory ways.

The naturally developing child is most obviously influenced by historicism and is connected with Jean Piaget's understanding of childhood as progress through a universal, standardized and inevitable programme of developmental stages (James et al. 1998: 17). One example is the language of 'developing' and 'uneven development' (Chakrabarty 2000: 7, 12) and 'underdevelopment' (Shohat and Stam 1994: 140). This parallels Piaget's naturally developing child, where the infantilization trope is projected onto a group or geographic area such as the 'Third World', which is said to need the guidance of more 'grown up' or 'advanced' societies (Shohat and Stam 1994: 140). Furthermore, the use of the language of backwardness (Said 1978: 35) and progression fits into this story of the primitive first taking to its feet and a toddler taking its first steps (Archard 1993: 35). One example is Balfour's description of Egypt's rise 'from the lowest pitch of social and economic degradation' through colonization (in Said 1978: 35).

Finally, the unconscious child is associated with Sigmund Freud, who argued that elements of personality, stages of development and complexes are the childhood building blocks that sustain the architecture of an adult psychopathology (James et al. 1998: 19). As a more recently articulated conception than others, this line of thought appears less in the colonial imaginary. However, it can be said to find expression in views that were influenced by the developmentalism of Piaget and the romanticism of Rousseau, suggesting that engaging with the Orient was to see one's own past: 'the Other' living like 'we' once did. The unconscious child as adult's past, not future's promise, is perhaps more clearly seen in the anticolonial writing of Frantz Fanon (1967, 1982) and the engagement by postcolonial scholars, Chakrabarty among them, with the haunting legacy of colonial discourse (Chakrabarty 2000: 252).

Having laid out this survey of lines of thought and illustrated the ways in which different lines of thought appear in constituting the figure of the child in the colonial imaginary, more general comments may be made. When one reads that 'the Oriental is ... childlike' (Said 1978: 40), or reflects on Chakrabarty's use of educative and developmental language, a particular configuration of the conception of the child is called upon. Yet, who is it that functions as 'the universal child' against which to measure or compare the Orient or anything or anyone else? Of course, this is a composite and so it becomes valuable to ask of what (and from where) is 'the child' of the colonial imaginary called upon by colonialists, anticolonialists or postcolonial theorists composed? This figure is not fixed or singular, but draws its shape from one or more lines of thought, and even here the lines are less distinct than we have suggested above. The trope of the universal 'child' then is not fixedly unitary, but complex and multiple.

Historiographies of childhood in the colonial world reveal further complexity, and also the political compulsions that underpinned constructions of

childhood. As we have suggested, childhood was reinterpreted in the cultural and intellectual context of colonialism and deployed in various ways within both colonialist and anticolonialist projects. British observers, for example, asserted that European assumptions about age and childhood were inappropriate in India: ‘Indians did not become “children” or “adults” at the ages at which Europeans did, and juvenile delinquents, in particular, seemed to acquire the marks of adulthood early in life’ (Sen 2005: 67). In this same context, Indian elites shaped their own binaries between children and adults that were only partially derivative of, and in some cases actively rejected, colonial binaries (Kahn 1979; Nandy 1987). As a means of challenging the colonial denial of childhood status to Indian juveniles in order to criminalize them, and as a means of decolonizing the institutions of childhood, elite parents, writers and educators appropriated ‘the modern moulds within which the recovered child could be placed’ (Sen 2005: 2). They thus responded to British critiques of native degeneracy by seeking to ‘reconstruct the child ... as repository of imperilled, premodern and essential Indian pasts that might be regenerated in the colonial present’. In asserting an Indian childhood, Indian elites also accommodated European bourgeois notions of childhood, since these were the tools available through which to decolonize the institutions of childhood. By drawing attention to particular conceptions of the child and showing how this inheritance is manifested in the colonial imaginary, we have laboured to show that the child called upon is not the reified figure of an Indian or Egyptian child, but a European child constructed in relationship with various Others. The case of India also exemplifies the ways in which this figure was appropriated, contested and decolonized by anticolonial elites. We have not suggested that the European child of the colonial imaginary is a product of a hermetically sealed Europe and then transported elsewhere, for this denies the possibility of coevalness (Chakrabarty 2000: 8) and returns to the ‘Europe first, elsewhere thereafter’ story of historicism. Instead, the child of which Said speaks and Chakrabarty invokes through his familial imagery bears the burden of European thought and history. To provincialize the European child is in part to recognize that burden. Moreover, we wish to argue that provincializing the European child raises a number of important ethical issues.

### **Why Provincialize the European Child?**

To provincialize the European child is to recognize (along similar lines to Chakrabarty) both the indispensability and insufficiency of the European child to thinking about childhood anywhere its burden is felt. Different lines of thought about the child, as in our rhyme based on James et al. (1998), lead to particular pronouncements about what must be done, for the sake of

the child or the future of the nation, since the two are frequently tied together (Chakrabarty 2000: 224). Therefore, while some of the conceptions of childhood invoke the necessity of spatial separation, or even segregation, not all do. As we have indicated earlier, these figures are not determinative although they may go some way to constituting the everyday lives of children. In what follows, we offer some brief examples to illustrate why problematizing the (unhelpful) work done by the figure of the European child might be significant.

The most obvious point is that the European child is not merely located in colonial discourses, but persists in contemporary representations. For example, humanitarian appeals and development discourses often use images of children. These are persuasive and emotive, implying that all children share the same attributes and needs, appealing to supposed universal aspects of the condition of childhood. As Erica Burman (1995: 22) argues, while children's rights in much of the world are in need of promotion and protection, such images are problematic and contradictory: 'children are typically abstracted from culture and nationality to connote such qualities as innocence, and the quintessential goodness of humankind untainted by the cruel, harsh contaminating world'. The binary between innocence/goodness and experience/contamination is a product of the specific European philosophical legacies discussed above. The representation of lone black children in aid appeals works to pathologize their families and cultures, blaming the latter for failing to fulfil their duties to protect and care for these children (Holland 1992). Thus, colonial legacies blend into humanitarian concern, where in order to qualify for 'help' parents in poorer countries are either invisible or infantilized themselves as incapable (Burman 1995).

Development discourses also tend to globalize middle-class northern agendas by invoking the figure of the universalized European child, who is taken to stand for all children everywhere, often with unintended consequences. Although UNICEF does not necessarily define the child in universal terms (defined as any human being under the age of 18, except in countries where an earlier age of majority is recognized in law), its programmes have at times met with criticism. One well documented criticism, for example, concerned UNICEF's rights-based approach to child welfare during the 1990s and beyond (Horton 2004). This approach drew on the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which defines a set of universal rights for children everywhere. However, in focusing on rights – based on western liberal values concerning the nature of childhood – UNICEF was accused of putting lower emphasis on child survival and mortality, with the consequence that attention and resources were diverted away from escalating child mortality in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South and East Asia (Horton 2004).

Child labour is also an example of an issue driven by northern ethical concerns rather than by certain southern realities. Ethical and fair trade codes that prevent children from formal employment may, in fact, increase the financial insecurity experienced by some households. This is especially problematic where there is a high proportion of child-headed households, for example, in parts of sub-Saharan Africa where the adult population has been decimated by HIV-AIDS. To survive, children are often forced to work in less visible and unregulated areas of the informal sector because of restrictions barring their entry to formal, more heavily regulated sectors of the economy. In addition, fair trade often works with smallholder producers, many of whom depend on familial labour at key points in the production cycle, such as at harvest time. The restrictions on child labour thus ignore its potential significance in the economies of poor households and communities. Some charitable schemes (for example, child sponsorship schemes) also place restrictions on the sponsored child performing paid or unpaid labour, which might prevent their exploitation within formal and informal economies and help keep them in school, but also ignores their potential significance within the household economy. The exploitation of child labour throughout the world certainly requires attention, but also sophisticated locally specific responses rather than blanket bans to appease northern charities and consumers. Furthermore, the idealization of the European child also conveniently ignores the fact that children in the North work – for payment in the case of newspaper rounds, for example; within family enterprises; as carers within households. The consequences of initiatives in the cause of the ethical, but articulated around an unproblematized, idealized, universal European child, may have unethical consequences, not least in obfuscating the workings of global and national capital regimes by problematizing child labour in specific ‘Third World’ sites (Chowdhry 2002).

It becomes clear that it is one thing to identify a bourgeois conception of childhood, with its vision of the separation of the worlds of adult and child. It is quite another to explore the ways in which this vision is and is not worked through in the lived experiences of individuals, families and communities, which might differ according to class, gender, location and so forth. Separations according to space may be compounded in multiple ways as much by a division of child–adult as women–men, colonized–colonizer and so on. While there is a danger in an essay of this kind that so much focus is given to the figure of the European child that particular children's experiences are occluded, such an engagement can both put in place (provincialize) and open up different ways of knowing the world. This is important not least because colonial attitudes about childhoods in postcolonial contexts have not disappeared. Nieuwenhuys (2009) argues, for example, that the idea of understanding children's upbringing in India is considered of value only for the purpose of eradication and reform continues

to inform most research on Indian childhood today. The value of provincializing is in looking again at childhood in India or the UK, for example, and in asking profound questions about how to make sense of the burden of the thought inherited, but also 'how this thought may be renewed from and for the margins' (Chakrabarty 2000: 16).

## **Conclusions**

This essay has drawn attention to the unacknowledged figure of the universalized European child that is present within critiques of European discourses that infantilized, and still infantilize, the Other. It has argued that even in Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, one of the most significant critiques of Eurocentrism and of universalizing European norms, the figure of the European child remains an unacknowledged, undeconstructed and unproblematized presence. In explaining the significance of India's rejection of infantilizing colonial depictions of its peoples as citizens, Chakrabarty still leaves untouched the universal adult–child binary that provided the basis for India's delimitation of citizenship and the denial of enfranchisement to children. In pointing out this paradox, we suggest that it also opens up the need to provincialize the European child that is positioned at times at the heart of Chakrabarty's and other critiques of colonial and neocolonial discourse. We have suggested that this figure of the European child is never singular, but rather draws on multiple ideas of childhood that bear the burden of different European inheritances. Moreover, historiographies of childhood in the colonial world (e.g. Sen's studies of India) reveal the agency of the colonized in constructing multiple childhoods that both appropriated and contested the figure of the European child. Perhaps most significantly, this figure is also repeatedly invoked in problematic ways in contemporary discourses that may have unintended and unethical consequences. The figure of the universal European child thus continues to do (unhelpful) work; problematizing its presence means provincializing, which is not the same as abandoning a notion of childhood around which to advocate for children's rights and wellbeing everywhere, but an opening up of possibilities for rethinking the figure of the child. This rethinking also raises further ethical considerations.

This essay is certainly not the first to ask questions of how the figure of the child, or childhood more generally, might be thought about differently. Arguably the sociology of childhood (as distinguished from the pre-sociological models) is a history of attempts to do just this (James et al. 1998). Here it is increasingly common for children to be positioned as social actors or social agents rather than figures of lack, or defined only in

opposition to adults (James and James 2004: 25), though this risks replacing one universalizing narrative with another and occluding the multiple roles and positions different children occupy. Others, as part of their reflection on work with children (e.g. Cope 2009), write about their own personal attempts to think differently about childhoods and to note the conceptual inheritances with which they labour. One immediate implication is that since definitions of adult and child have been oppositional, a rethinking of the figure of the child would also entail a rethinking of the figure of the adult. This could mean admitting that adults may in fact retain something of the dependency, and perhaps also immaturity, irrationality and incompetence that had been previously ascribed solely to children (Heywood 2001: 3). For those who pride themselves on (and derive authority by their claims to) maturity, rationality, competence and autonomy this would be a radical departure. A strong child–adult binary offers a kind of protection from intervention or interference and a means of rejecting many kinds of external authority, as well as a means through which to assert authority. Therefore, while deconstructing the child–adult binary may challenge adult privilege it may also make some adults and children more vulnerable. Furthermore, if as Archard (1993: 35) suggests, there is a symbolic structure that presents equivalences between childhood–adulthood, primitive–civilized and primate–human, to deconstruct one is to go some way towards deconstructing the others. As the implications – both ethical and material – of this are broadly unclear, it is perhaps appropriate to conclude with this note of caution.

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