

Summer 2008

# Race, Gender, and the Elusive Child

Lisa Kirschenbaum

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, LKIRSCHENBAUM@WCUPA.EDU

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist\\_facpub](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_facpub)



Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kirschenbaum, L. (2008). Race, Gender, and the Elusive Child. *Journal of Women's History*, 20(2), 155-164. Retrieved from [http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist\\_facpub/12](http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_facpub/12)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact [wcressler@wcupa.edu](mailto:wcressler@wcupa.edu).

---

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Race, Gender, and the Elusive Child*

Heide Fehrenbach. *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005. xiii + 263 pp.; ill. ISBN 0-691-11906-6 (cl).

Ping-chen Hsiung. *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005. xvi + 351 pp.; ill. ISBN 0-8047-4164-6 (cl).

Lisa Jacobson. *Raising Consumers: Children and the American Mass Market in the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. xiii + 299 pp.; ill. ISBN 0-231-11389-7 (pb).

Peter N. Stearns. *Childhood in World History*. New York: Routledge, 2006. ix + 146 pp. ISBN 0-415-35233-9 (pb).

#### **Lisa A. Kirschenbaum**

“Young children,” as Barbara Beatty notes in her study of American preschool education, “are the most silent and silenced of historical actors.”<sup>1</sup> Because children, especially preliterate children, “leave relatively few direct records,” they are, as Peter Stearns points out in *Childhood in World History*, exceedingly “elusive” (2). Historians often resolve this problem by dealing with children in the aggregate: how many siblings were they likely to have, how many were likely to live to age two, to go to school? Moreover, historians have easy access to adult narratives and institutions that articulated and attempted to implement adult understandings of what children ought to be. But such approaches often tell us more about socioeconomic structures and “adult fantasies” than about the experiences of children themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Reminiscences of childhood pose problems of their own. By the time children are able to control the recording of their words they are usually no longer children, and their memories reflect both the child’s and the adult’s explanations and emotions.<sup>3</sup> Thus while histories of children, “flesh and blood human beings of a certain age,” and histories of childhood, the largely adult “cultural construction of ideas” about children, may be separate endeavors, they rarely exist independently of one another.<sup>4</sup> This interdependence and the resulting sense that children’s voices and viewpoints

can never be recovered—that accretions of adult words doom children to silence—have worked to push children to the margins of history.

How, then, can historians move children and childhood to the center of the story, and what sorts of stories emerge as a result? The answers, unsurprisingly, vary. Stearns, whose brief and wide-ranging book begins with hunter-gatherers and ends with global consumerism, understands childhood as a component of “big history.” He is interested in how, with the shift from agricultural to industrial societies, “the basic purpose of childhood was redefined” (5). Childhood, he asserts, “depends first and foremost on economic systems” (131). By contrast, Lisa Jacobson’s *Raising Consumers* and Heide Fehrenbach’s study of black occupation children in post-World War II Germany and the United States concentrate on the “great symbolic significance” (Fehrenbach, 2) of children, their roles as emotionally charged and therefore politically powerful “cultural icons” (Jacobson, 2). Here adult ideas about children and sometimes children themselves are not merely dependent on great historical changes but are central actors in political and cultural contests over race, gender, and consumption.

In her book on children and childhood in late imperial China, Ping-chen Hsiung likewise draws in substantial ways on adult representations of childhood, but she approaches “the lives of children and the discourse of childhood, which formulates and presents” children’s lives as part of the “same sociocultural ecosystem” (247). She is interested in how the “voice of the young” (242) can be heard in the mediated sources available to historians of children, and in how listening to children “requires a fundamental reexamination of historical outlook” (15). She counters the notion, derived from “examinations of European and American families,” of a linear development from authoritarian and “traditional” childrearing to more permissive “modern” childrearing by demonstrating that in China “both strands of thought and practice existed side by side” (20). Echoing Virginia Woolf’s ironic call for a “supplement to history” in which “women might figure . . . without impropriety,” Hsiung also advocates, and makes a start at supplying, histories of children and childhood that are “not just complementary or supplementary” but that “illuminate the importance of ‘age’ and ‘phases of life’ as categories and subjective construction blocks for individuals and society” (252–53).<sup>5</sup>

Peter Stearns’s *Childhood in World History* is less concerned with re-writing history than getting students excited about it. Part of Routledge’s “Themes in World History”—a series of slim books on big topics meant to supplement textbooks in world history courses—*Childhood in World History* is hardly a definitive accounting. Spanning eleven millennia and five continents (there is no coverage of Australasia), the book is perhaps best understood as an invitation to explore a field that may be “more meaning-

ful" for students (who, by some definitions, are still children) than "more standard historical subject matter" (5–6). As is inevitable in any book that aims to cover so much ground so quickly, specialists are likely to find oversimplifications and errors of fact in the areas they know best, and they may be irritated by the lack of footnotes. (Each chapter concludes with a well-selected list of suggestions for "further reading.")

Leaving aside the difficulties inherent in the genre, however, Stearns's book provides an engaging, clearly written introduction to the history of children and childhood. If Stearns's typology of three successive "models" of childhood—the hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and "modern"—is overly schematic, it is useful as a means of guiding readers through a dizzying array of examples, comparisons, and exceptions. Moreover, his frequent reminders that "modern" childhood is not necessarily better nor exclusively Western help to loosen what threaten to become rather rigid, deterministic categories.

The first third of the book (about forty-five pages) examines the emergence and development of "childhood in agricultural societies" from the dawn of agriculture through the ancient civilizations of China, India, and the Mediterranean, the rise of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, and early modern Europe. Unlike earlier hunting-gathering societies, Stearns points out, agricultural societies depended on child labor. This "reconsideration of children's utility in work" (11) shaped other characteristics of childhood in agrarian societies: a rise in birth rates, an emphasis on obedience to parents, and a protracted period of "youth," during which the family retained its claim on the child's labor. Gender does not emerge as a central category of Stearns's analysis, but he emphasizes that agriculture "encouraged new kinds of gender differentiations among children" and that rising birthrates intensified women's work as mothers. Stearns tempers such generalizations with reminders that agricultural childhoods varied in different places and cultures, but concludes that "the basic imperatives of agricultural civilizations . . . overrode the impact of different belief systems, different politics and even some aspects of family structure" (29).

The rise and development of the "modern model" of childhood from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries receives more coverage. Here again the emphasis is on the determinative role of economic change, particularly industrialization and to a lesser extent colonialism, although Stearns also notes that in the West, changing attitudes toward children predated economic changes. His "modern model" of childhood has three defining characteristics: "school, less death, fewer children in the overall population and in individual families" (57). In subsequent chapters, Stearns complicates these generalizations as he addresses exceptions to this new model of childhood (particularly slave childhoods); the Japanese adoption of the modern

model; childhood and communist revolutions (particularly in Russia and China); childhood in affluent societies; childhood and twentieth-century wars; and the impacts of globalization.

The value of this whirlwind tour lies in its ability to make an enormous topic accessible and, more importantly, to raise big questions that students and scholars may want to pursue further. For example, Stearns argues that in industrial societies the "objective need for gender distinctions declined" (57). Nonetheless, "the particular Western take on modern childhood" was "highly gendered" (63). The book's structure and size make it impossible for Stearns to explore such paradoxes, but he effectively demonstrates that the history of childhood raises tantalizing and important questions.

Lisa Jacobsen's and Heide Fehrenbach's studies emphasize precisely the situated cultural analyses that Stearns's "big history" necessarily minimizes. Both focus on contested cultural representations of childhood and both employ intriguing and ingenuous combinations of sources to get at the political, cultural, and (less fully) personal meanings of childhood in times of social and political change. Moreover, both studies emphasize that transformations of—and anxieties about—gender, race, and class shaped and were in turn shaped by shifting conceptions of childhood.

For Jacobson, the child consumer—at once corporate dream, potential parental nightmare, and social reality—provides insight into how in the 1920s and 1930s, "marketing strategies converged with permissive childrearing philosophies, new theories of psychological adjustment, and transformations in the national political economy" (215) to facilitate Americans' increasingly widespread acceptance of consumer culture. To get at the "child consumer's cultural resonance" (3), Jacobsen traces how advertising aimed at children and expert advice aimed at parents both reflected and accelerated emerging social trends toward smaller, "more egalitarian" (30) families—at least among the middle class.

The predominantly middle-class men who developed juvenile advertising in the early twentieth century thus emerge as key actors in Jacobson's story. Middle-class admen "readily grasped" that the emerging ideal of democracy within the middle-class family gave children, "with their infinite powers to badger and cajole" (31), increasing power to spur and direct adult consumption. Moreover, the ideal child consumer constructed in advertising—the white, middle-class boy, whose consumption of the "new and improved" affirmed his "modernizing zeal"—offered "psychic rewards" to the middle-class admen themselves and perhaps to middle-class men more generally. Not only did the progressive boy consumer who populated advertising copy offer a "justification for the trade's claims to professional legitimacy" (105); he also worked to "desissify" (107) consumption, which had long been associated with "feminine vices" (94).

Contemporary childrearing authorities, ranging from nursery school educator Elizabeth Cleveland to self-proclaimed experts such as *Parents' Magazine's* Happy Goldsmith, sometimes challenged advertisers' efforts to train children in brand loyalty and in the art of pestering their parents. More often, however, they tried to domesticate consumerism, advising parents to create well-equipped home playrooms to compete with mass entertainments or, as Goldsmith suggested, to tell "their children that celebrities enjoyed spinach" (177). Rather than rejecting the child consumer as an advertising fantasy, parents, educators, and other experts constructed and worked to realize their own competing vision—the child who spends wisely. Jacobson's discussion of the fall of thrift education and the rise of consumer training provides a fascinating example of how changing conceptions of childhood dovetailed with a consumerist, middle-class ethos.

In the early twentieth century, school banking programs aimed to limit children's consumption by requiring them to participate in the weekly public ritual of depositing their pennies and nickels; withdrawals were discouraged or strictly limited. Jacobson shows how these programs intersected with and therefore illuminate broader concerns about class, ethnicity, and, during the Great Depression, national economic recovery. Ostensibly aimed at children of all economic backgrounds, by the 1920s thrift programs were most often associated with efforts to Americanize immigrant children and properly socialize the children of the poor. At the same time, child experts began to advocate allowances as the best means of training middle-class children to spend wisely and of encouraging middle-class parents to set reasonable limits on their children's demands. Paradoxically, the allowance along with the idea of including children in the family's financial decisions took root in middle-class families during the Great Depression, when childrearing experts "envisioned financial candor as a means to subdue feelings of resentment over limited" family resources (77). The new consumerist approach also squared with the New Deal's emphasis on spending as an economic and social good. "Evocative symbols of historical change" (7), child consumers offered multiple means of envisioning and perhaps enacting social control and national renewal.

Fehrenbach's *Race after Hitler* similarly focuses on children—the roughly 5,000 children born of African American soldiers and German women in the decade after World War II—who acquired a "disproportionately great symbolic importance" (2) in postwar West Germany. (She uses the terms "black German" and "biracial" interchangeably to identify these children; contemporary Germans used the terms *farbige Besatzungskinder* [colored occupation children], *Mischlingskinder* [mixed-blood children, a term the Nazis had used to denote the offspring of "mixed" Jewish-Aryan marriages], and *Negermischlingskinder*.) Although biracial children constituted

less than one percent of all occupation children, the so-called *Mischlinge*, Fehrenbach argues, became the focus of interrelated anxieties about the social effects of occupation, the process of democratization, and postwar "definitions of ethnic German-ness" and German masculinity (2).

Fehrenbach establishes the dimensions of these anxieties in two nuanced and sophisticated chapters that trace the politics of race in a post-Nazi Germany being "democratized" by a still-segregated U.S. army and the politics of gender in a defeated nation, where both mass rape and consensual sex between German women and occupation troops gave rise to a crisis of masculinity. Women who fraternized with African American troops were deemed particularly unacceptable by both German officials, who attempted to deny their biracial children public support, and the U.S. military, which rarely permitted African American troops to marry their German girlfriends.

In these circumstances, black occupation children, despite their small numbers, became central to the postwar reformulation of categories of race and gender in West Germany. Earlier German understandings of race, which the Nazis had taken to murderous extremes, "drew fine distinctions and valuations among European 'races,' paying particular attention to Slavs and Jews" (77). After 1950, by contrast, West German officials "explicitly constructed the postwar problem of race around skin color and, even more narrowly, blackness" (78). Indeed, black occupation children were singled out for the sorts of anthropological studies that, in post-Nazi Germany, would have been unthinkable had the subjects been Jews, Slavs, or Roma (Gypsies).

At the same time, German anthropologists, educators, and youth workers began to borrow and adapt other aspects of American understandings of race, emphasizing the social, as opposed to predominately biological, factors that shaped racial difference. Racial liberals who made a "self-conscious effort to renounce racial hierarchies" increasingly attributed "any apparent moral, intellectual, or behavioral lapses detected in the children to their maternal source, rather than to black biological inheritance" (105). Biological racism did not entirely disappear, but "the focus on women expanded from an obsessive interest in the biology of interracial reproduction to include the sociopathology of mothering" (106).

By the mid-1950s, Fehrenbach argues, the limits of racial liberalism had been reached. Here she uses popular culture, particularly films featuring black occupation children, along with debates on international adoptions to illustrate how for many Germans segregation and emigration replaced integration as the preferred solutions to the "problem" of biracial children. It is telling that both filmmakers and policymakers tended to focus on the minority (less than ten percent) of black occupation children who lived

in institutions rather than the majority who lived with families. Certainly popular culture and adoption policies affected the lives of actual children, but the public prominence of black German children in the 1950s had more to do with defining the postwar German nation than in addressing the children's "deeply felt sense of damaged self-worth and social isolation" (102).

As the children of the occupation reached late adolescence and early adulthood, constructions of black occupation children shifted once again, emphasizing the success, particularly in comparison to the United States, of West German efforts to integrate schools and the workforce. That most black German young people filled manual, menial jobs went largely unremarked. Although the "tendency to stereotype and sexualize Blacks in German cultural and media representations persisted," by the 1960s, "official reference to blackness gradually disappeared from social policy" (178). Black occupation children, and black Germans more generally, were "rendered invisible once their value for the democratizing nation had dissipated" (185).

Jacobson and Fehrenbach make strong cases for understanding childhood, broadly defined to include preschoolers and young adults, as a key arena in which crucial political and cultural issues are debated and social policies enacted. What children themselves made of the changes, contests, and policies that they came to symbolize is, as both authors recognize, more difficult to tease out of the sources.

Jacobson finds clues to children's experiences in a wide variety of sources. The diaries of two American high school girls suggest the reality of the "obsessive concern with physical appearance [and] peer approval" (136) that loomed so large in contemporary advertising. A 2001 interview with a former participant in a school banking program suggests that students may not have internalized desired lessons about thrift: "I wanted a bank account because everybody else had one" (83). Spotty, sometimes contradictory, data suggests that by the mid-1930s, perhaps almost half of middle-class children received allowances—a substantial increase since 1900.

The fullest portrait of a real child in *Race after Hitler* is of child star Elfriede Fiegert. Better known as Toxi—the biracial child she played in the eponymous 1952 West German film—Fiegert stands as a powerful, if extraordinary, example of how black occupation children became symbols in postwar Germany and how their status as symbols had real repercussions. The movie *Toxi* made five-year-old Fiegert the emblematic biracial child. Indeed the "name 'Toxi' entered the German language as a generic term for black German children" (130). As the "real" Toxi grew older, she went from leading roles as a black occupation child to bit parts as an "exoticized, sexualized beauty" (129). Fehrenbach concludes that cultural

constructions of childhood can have "deeply and devastatingly personal" (188) consequences; however, a full accounting of those consequences lies beyond the scope of her project.

The challenge, identified by Jacobson, of "accessing children's perspectives and experiences" (7) is a central concern of Ping-chen Hsiung's *A Tender Voyage*. A self-described "patchwork" (xiv), the book is a collection of eight revised lectures. As is often the case with such collections, the essays are sometimes repetitive, and the organization rather loose. Such quibbles aside, Hsiung's command of a vast array of sources, the sensitivity with which she approaches her sources, and her engagement with the "simultaneously alluring and unattainable task" of locating "traces of life" (258) in the discourse of childhood make *A Tender Voyage* compelling reading for historians of childhood—and of gender—in any time or place.

Hsiung begins with the argument that "the very modern definition of 'children' and 'childhood'" is itself a cultural construct "based primarily on biophysical understandings and the Freudian psychological scheme" (5). She emphasizes that in Chinese, "child" may denote not only a phase in the lifespan, but also inferior (or junior) social status as well as "existentially 'childlike' characteristics" (22), and that these meanings always coexist and interact with one another. The case studies that follow allow Hsiung to apply this conceptual perspective to rich, varied, and complex sources.

The book's first section, "Physical Conditions," comprises three essays that focus on the precocious rise, development, and popularization of pediatric medicine in China. Chinese doctors began to develop pediatrics as a distinct specialty in the eleventh century. By the fifteenth century, when the earliest European treatises on treating children appeared, Chinese doctors, supported by the state, had already popularized significant improvements in newborn and infant care. Hsiung handles nearly one thousand years' worth of pediatric manuals and clinical case studies as both data and discourse. On one hand, she mines doctors' descriptions of their child patients for unique and detailed information on the "changing patterns of childhood diseases and Chinese children's health" (29). Hsiung traces, for example, changing umbilical cord cutting practices that, beginning in the twelfth century, reduced the incidence of neonatal tetanus. On the other hand, she understands these medical texts as part of a broader cultural discourse that included both "the Confucian emphasis on posterity" and the "Buddhist compassion for life" and that worked to promote the value of "special concern for infants and children" (53).

In the second section, "Social Life," Hsiung draws on hundreds of chronological biographies from the late imperial period (sixteenth through nineteenth centuries) as a means of exploring boys' upbringing, mother-son relations, and the emotional world of children. She is primarily interested in

what these texts can tell us about the everyday lives of children in the past, but never loses sight of the fact that they must be read with and against normative texts that idealized, for example, the child who preferred study to physical play. After all, biographies written long after the child became an adult "resulted from, but were also part of, contemporary cultural vogues" (123). Men's recollections of their mothers emerge as especially problematic sources, as they rely on a relatively small number of stock motifs, notably the virtuous and suffering mother. Hsiung finds in such images reflections of both the often-painful "objective facts of the lives of Chinese women" and "the subjective wishes of both women and their boys" (151). Men, Hsiung argues, remembered their mothers as their mothers wanted to be remembered, a fact that may obscure or overstate the realities of mothers' lives but that nonetheless underscores the intimate emotional bond between mother and son.

The essay on "Girlhood" is among the most interesting and wide-ranging in the collection. Here the sources are particularly challenging, as girls and women rarely wrote about their own childhoods. Hsiung relies on numerous accounts by fathers and other male relatives as well as the pediatric literature that provides case studies of the treatment of both boys and girls. She finds that both the normative literature and biographies describe early childhood (up to about age seven) as largely gender neutral. Except in times of crisis, girls generally received the same level of nutrition and medical care as boys. Class and region affected a girl's life chances more than her gender. Indeed parents often indulged young girls "as a private compensation" (201) for the miseries they were likely to face as young women. Chinese culture constructed early childhood as a "temporary escape or respite" for girls who "faced a future of increased gender differentiation" (218). Thus girls in traditional China had something like a "modern" childhood.

In a final chapter on "Concepts and Realities," Hsiung makes a case for the significance of childhood for Chinese history and for history in general. Her argument relies in part on appeal for historical justice: "The kind of history that has no space for children is similar to that which neglects the lower classes, women, workers, and popular or folk religion" (252). But her call is not only for children to become more visible in history. A really significant history of childhood, she argues, would change our historical thinking by handling "age" and "phases of life" as "concepts" rather than "realities." Such an approach has clear affinities with Jacobson's and Fehrenbach's emphasis on children themselves as "concepts" or "symbols" or "icons." But Hsiung is more adamant in her insistence that children's experiences not be forgotten in the process. She offers the helpful and welcome reminder that "'Being brought up,' as seen and told from the position of those who were supposedly forming the social environment, is quite different from the experience of those on the receiving end" (127).

Hsiung's wide-ranging essays succeed in demonstrating how a historian of the elusive child might follow Virginia Woolf's advice to would-be historians of women: "think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with the fact . . . but not losing sight of fiction either—that she is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually."<sup>6</sup> The challenge for the historian who wants to tell children's stories is attending to representations of childhood without allowing the representations to swallow up and silence the child.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Barbara Beatty, *Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), x.

<sup>2</sup>Nicholas Stargardt, "German Childhoods: The Making of a Historiography," *German History* 16 (February 1998): 11.

<sup>3</sup>Psychoanalyst Dori Laub describes his childhood memories of the Holocaust as "the memories of an adult." Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony, and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 76.

<sup>4</sup>Hugh Cunningham, "Histories of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 103 (October 1998): 1195, 1196.

<sup>5</sup>Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; repr., New York: Harvest Books, 1989), 45.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.