Punishing Childhoods: Contradictions in Children’s Rights and Global Governance

Vanessa Pupavac

The article considers childhood corporal punishment as an aspect of the global governance of childhood and raises problems relevant to global governance more broadly. The article analyses contradictions in children’s rights advocacy between its universal human rights norms and implicit relativist development model. Children’s rights research is influenced by social constructivist theories, which highlight the history of childhood and childhood norms. Earlier social constructivist studies identified the concept of childhood underpinning the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a Western construction based on Western historical experiences, which excluded the experiences of childhood in developing countries. More recent social constructivist approaches emphasise how childhood norms are constructed and therefore can be reconstructed. The article outlines problems with attempts to globalise childhood norms without globalising material development, and discusses the softening of discipline norms in Western societies historically. It indicates problems with children’s rights advocacy seeking to eradicate the corporal punishment of children globally without globalising the material conditions, which underpin the post-industrial ideal of childhood embodied in the CRC.

Keywords children’s rights; child advocacy; sustainable development; global governance; corporal punishment

Righting Punishing Childhoods

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) came into force two decades ago and provides a framework of global governance for children (Detrick 1992, UNGA 1987). The CRC—with only two non-ratifying states—the United States and Somalia—has complemented other international and regional norm-setting documents such as the Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children, and further international reports such as the UN Secretary General’s end of decade review We the Children (UN 2001) and the UN General Assembly A World Fit for Children (2002a). Additionally the United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) concerns are being incorporated into global governance through the
internationally guided national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which have replaced the previous structural adjustment programmes. Indeed the PRSPs are influenced by UNICEF’s policies to protect children in indebted countries over two decades (Cornia et al. 1987, UNICEF 1999), although the Committee on the Rights of the Child and NGOs want tighter integration of children’s rights into the PRSPs (UN CRC 2003, para. 62).

This article considers childhood corporal punishment as an aspect of the global governance of childhood and raises problems relevant to global governance more broadly. Advocates want to embed the CRC’s provisions into cultures globally to improve children’s lives. Is it possible to make children’s rights into cultural norms in different social conditions globally? I explore problems in global children’s rights advocacy as it attempts to reconstruct punishing childhoods globally, highlighting the contradictions between global children rights and international development goals.

Physical punishment has long been viewed as violent assault by children’s rights advocates and is a major focus of global advocacy. Campaigning organisations came together in 2001 under the Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, which calls for a universal legal prohibition against all forms of corporal punishment, including smacking in the home (Global Initiative). Earlier children’s rights documents do not contain specific clauses prohibiting physical punishment. For example, under Article 20 on Parental Responsibilities of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, parents have the duty ‘to ensure that the best interests of the child are their basic concern at all times’, ‘to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, conditions of living necessary to the child’s development’, and ‘to ensure that domestic discipline is administered with humanity and in a manner consistent with the inherent dignity of the child’ (OAU 1999).

International children’s rights advocates seek to extend both international and national provisions to outlaw corporal punishment globally. A number of individuals and organisations associated with the Global Initiative influenced the UN Secretary General’s Study on Violence against Children (2006) and the CRC Committee’s firmer stance, which supports universally outlawing corporal punishment, including in the home. The CRC Committee made a General Comment on the right of the child to protection from corporal punishment (UN CRC 2006a). It has criticised many states over the use of corporal punishment and recommended that states take legal and other measures to eradicate it, as this extract from its 2006 report to Benin illustrates:

The Committee recommends that the State party:

a. explicitly prohibits corporal punishment by law in the family, schools and institutions and implement existing prohibitions;

b. conduct a comprehensive study to assess the causes, nature and extent of corporal punishment as well as an evaluation of the impact of measures
undertaken so far by the State party to reduce and eliminate corporal punishment;

c. introduce public education, awareness-raising and social mobilization campaigns on the harmful effects of corporal punishment with a view to changing the general attitude towards this practice and promote positive, non-violent, participatory forms of childrearing and education;

d. ensure that an educational programme be undertaken against corporal punishment, insisting both on the child rights [sic] and psychological aspects; and

e. ensure recovery and social reintegration of victims of corporal punishment.

(UN CRC 2006b)

Paulo Pinheiro, the independent expert on the UN Study on Violence against Children, has argued, ‘Hitting or smacking children is a type of violence’ and ‘should never be viewed as legally or culturally acceptable’ (UNICEF 2005). But corporal punishment has been culturally acceptable historically and advocates highlight difficulties changing attitudes within states and among ordinary people, even where some national legal changes have been made under pressure from the CRC Committee and the global campaigns. Physical punishment of children has softened in Western countries, although what is deemed acceptable punishment among ordinary people may still clash with the views of children’s rights advocates (Schofield 2007). The gulf between the discipline norms espoused by global children’s rights advocates and ordinary people is much wider in developing countries. The next section considers social constructivist approaches towards culture, which strongly influence childhood studies and increasingly influence children’s rights studies.

**Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood**

Social constructivist theories regard the traditional protection and welfare approaches as paternalistic. They do not dispute children’s need for special protection, but they emphasise the socially constructed nature of childhood and human rights’ potential to empower children (Federle 1994, Freeman 1997, p. 344, Verhellen 1997, Donnelly 2003, pp. 16, 61). Legal recognition of children as distinct rights-holders is regarded as transforming attitudes towards children as well as children’s views of themselves and their participation in society. Conversely, international policy in the past saw legislation as only having a limited role in addressing children’s plight in poor, traditional or semi-industrial societies (UNICEF 1963, p. 23).

Social constructivist studies, pioneered by Ariès (1962), have analysed the historically or culturally contingent character of social organisation and norms. Earlier studies reflected social progressive theories emphasising the interrelationship between culture, law and material conditions. These linkages informed classic sociology and Marxist approaches, notwithstanding their important
theoretical and political differences (Weber 1954, Berger et al. 1974, pp. 29–43, 90–105, Marx 1990). Studies have examined both changing historical and cross-country cultural distinctions (Ariès 1962, Boyden 1990, Burman 1995, Cox 1996, Verhellen 1997) and complement earlier anthropological studies analysing childhood in different cultures (Mead and Wolfenstein 1955).

The CRC’s preamble sets out a universal model of childhood embodying a space in which the child develops his or her personality ‘in an atmosphere of happiness, love, understanding’. The ideal has been affirmed as a global goal since 1990. The UN’s A World Fit for Children document invokes the ideal:

We adopt the Plan of Action ... confident that together we will build a world in which all girls and boys can enjoy childhood—a time of play and learning in which they are loved, respected and cherished, their rights are promoted and protected, without discrimination of any kind, in which their safety and well-being are paramount and in which they can develop in health, peace and dignity. (UN GA 2002a, para. 9)

Constructivist approaches demonstrate that a specific history informs the CRC’s global model of childhood. The industrial history of European and North American societies made child labour a problem, but later raised family living standards allowing families to dispense with children’s labour, as I discuss below. The late industrial conditions permitted childhood to be a period of education and play free from employment and other adult responsibilities (Cunningham 1995, Cox 1996, Tuttle 1999, Hindman 2002). The CRC has been criticised for codifying a Western model of childhood and excluding the experience of children in developing countries who take on adult responsibilities before their teens (Boyden 1990, Burman 1995, Bar-On 1996, Lewis 1998). Codifying a model of childhood derived from the social conditions of post-industrial societies delegitimises the childhood norms of other societies (Boyden 1990, Burman 1995, Bar-On 1996, Lewis 1998, Hart 2006).

How do advocates see the CRC’s norms relating to children in developing countries with very different experiences of childhood and addressing punishing childhoods? Children’s rights advocates have challenged the belief that because human rights concepts historically come from Western societies they are not relevant to non-Western societies. The historical origins of an idea do not prohibit its relevance for other societies, whether Arabic mathematics or Chinese fireworks (Donnelly 2003, p. 71). Children’s rights advocates believe human rights are universally applicable, and may be translated into different cultures, while being sympathetic to relativist understandings of culture which deny a hierarchy of cultures. Culture is regarded as a core resource for global advocacy, although the meaning of the term culture is used rather loosely. Culture is sometimes synonymous with a way of life or a people’s identity, or sometimes refers more narrowly to symbolic communication. Global advocacy has picked up on anthropological and behavioural cultural models, which see cultural identity as necessary for a functional personality, while treating cultural norms as learned behaviour, which may be reformed through mobilising the CRC.
The CRC’s preamble states how the Convention takes ‘due account of the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each people for the protection and harmonious development of the child’. Articles, 8, 29, and 30 of the CRC recognise the preservation of identity and enjoyment of culture as rights. Subsequent documents like *A World Fit for Children* reiterate the importance of respecting cultural identity while condemning certain cultural practices (UN GA 2002a, para. 40(9)).

Global advocates’ understanding of culture’s social construction follows the idealist strands of sociology and anthropology, which treat culture as distinct from social organisation, society as constructed through inter-subjectivity, and social change as the culmination of interpersonal change (Kuper 1999). Thus one human rights advocate defines culture as consisting of ‘fluid complexes of intersubjective meanings and practices’ (Donnelly 2003, p. 86). Contemporary advocacy departs from the functionalist approach to culture, which strongly influenced earlier twentieth century anthropology. Functionalism understands cultural norms and behaviour as having internal coherence: customs or practices, which may alarm outsiders, are functional within that community if analysed with appropriate cultural sensibility.

Global advocates’ idea of cultural fluidity risks divorcing cultural norms from material conditions, and cultural transformation from material transformation. Historically Western social reform movements, including child advocacy, as compared to mass political movements, have emphasised moral or institutional reform and the role of professional interventions, and de-emphasised economic and social conditions (Williams 1963, Parton 1985, Boyden 1990, King 1997, pp. 7–8). UNICEF, in trying to understand the failures to realise children’s rights, states:

> Reasons range from weak political commitment and silent resistance by certain social groups with vested interests in discriminatory practices to the lack of institutional and administrative capacity and financial resources for implementing necessary reforms. (UNICEF 2000a, p. 10)

Even where resource problems are acknowledged here and elsewhere (UN CRC 2003, para. 7), they are divorced from socio-economic relations of production. Conversely earlier international research considered that a society based around household production fostered a soft state, whose ability to uphold the law impartially and secure a solid taxation basis for social services was undermined by weak productive capacity, a weak wage economy and the pressures of communal obligations (Myrdal 1956, 1957, Lipset 1959, p. 66, Galbraith 1979, p. 11). So while global advocacy emphasises the interdependence and indivisibility of political, social, and economic rights, it disregards the interdependence and indivisibility of political, social, and economic relations (UNICEF 2000a, p. 10, Donnelly 2003, pp. 27–33, UN CRC 2003, para. 6). Logically, particular historical experiences encourage particular childhood norms, and shared historical experiences encourage norms to converge. This points to a problem in global
children’s rights advocacy seeking a ‘progressive realization’ of children’s rights (UN CRC 2003, para. 7) if the historical conditions which fostered the childhood norms embodied in the CRC are not universally enjoyed. International development thinking, shared by children’s rights advocates, imagines a different destiny for developing countries, involving substantial retention of traditional ways of rural survival and not following the historical development followed by Western societies (Furedi 1996, Pupavac 2005, Duffield 2007).

The paradox of attempting to globalise post-industrial norms of childhood onto semi-industrial or non-industrial communities is linked to the recurring romantic critiques of modern society, which idealise childhood and a pre-industrial past (Sayre and Lowy 1984). Social constructivist approaches have stressed the distinction between the cultural ideal of childhood and the actual experience of childhood (Ariès 1962, Cox 1996). Significantly, a cult of childhood developed in Western culture which elevated childhood into a utopian space upon which broader political hopes and fears were projected. The next section discusses the Western romantic concept of childhood and critique of modern industrial society, before illustrating the shifting cultural norms on punishing children.

Western Romantic Concept of Childhood

The Western concept of childhood is bound up with the rise of capitalism, which broke up the feudal order and fostered individualism (Riesman 1961, Weber 1954, Fromm 1984). Cultural ideas about childhood were shaped by Puritanism in the early capitalist period and by Romanticism in its later development. However Puritanism and Romanticism, although formally opposed, overlapped with each other, and other influences, over the last two centuries (Cox 1996).

Puritan thought avowed the spiritual character of family relations, and parents’ responsibility for overcoming original sin and preparing their children for a worthy spiritual life. Stern discipline backed by corporal punishment was imperative to avert eternal damnation and the torment of hell’s fires (ibid.). Conversely Romantic thought avowed elemental nature and challenged the idea of original sin. Romantic thinkers constructed childhood as being in special communication with nature. The poet William Wordsworth helped create the romantic cult of childhood in English-speaking culture. His long autobiographical poem The Prelude re-invoked childhood memories to reconnect to nature. He depicted the innocent child of nature: ‘as if I had been born / On Indian Plains / and from my Mother’s hut / Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport, / A naked Savage’ (Wordsworth in Owens and Johnson 1998, p. 113, lines 302–305). Wordsworth believed his sensibilities were perfected through nature and ‘Not with the mean and vulgar works of Man’ (ibid., p. 116, line 436). Adulthood was often represented as a fall from grace and possessing a narrowed human sensibility. Wordsworth’s Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections
of Early Childhood proposed: ‘trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home: / Heaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy’ (Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations, lines 64–68). Romantic thought believed the child’s proximity with the cleansing power of nature could teach adult society. Wordsworth’s Anecdote for Fathers saw the child redeeming corrupted adult society: ‘Could I but teach the hundredth part / Of what from thee I learn (Owens and Johnson 1998, p. 64, lines 59–60).

Romanticism’s inverted roles, where the child redeems the adult, question adult discipline of children. The disciplined child is reconstructed as the damaged child. Romantic ideas appear in contemporary children’s rights advocacy which suggests that if the world listens to children, it will be redeemed and realise peace, justice and economic security (UN GA 2002a, para. 50). So UN Secretary General Kofi Annan spoke of how ‘we, the grown-ups, have failed you deplorably’ at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in 2002 (UN GA 2002b, p. 3). While Han Seung-soo, President of the Special Session, called upon delegates to ‘set aside adult prejudices and listen to and learn from the children and young people who are with us’ (ibid.).

If childhood was sacred and adulthood corrupt, then the child of nature needed to be preserved from corrupted adult, urban, industrial life to redeem humanity. William Blake’s poem London expressed the culturally familiar idea of childhood innocence being corrupted by urban life: ‘But most thro’ midnight streets I hear / How the youthful Harlot’s curse / Blasts the new born Infant’s tear’ (Blake in Owens and Johnson 1998, p. 29, lines 14–16). Blake’s poem illustrates how the Romantic cult of the child of nature reversed the earlier Puritan concern with original sin. The innocent moral child protagonist whose fate reproached corrupt society became a favourite theme (Charles Dickens’ Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop or other child characters).

The Romantic ideal child of nature was constructed against the background of early industrialisation’s traumatic impact on communities and its harsh forms of child labour. Child labour was the norm in pre-industrial, predominantly agricultural communities, but came to be regarded as a problem under industrialisation’s destruction of the traditional household economy. The Romantic cult of the natural child in Blake’s poems or Dickens’ novels like Hard Times attacked industrialisation’s oppression of the population. However, the Romantic cult of the child intertwined with earlier puritan anxieties over moral corruption to pathologise urban working class children, when the earlier revolutionary sentiments of Blake or Wordsworth gave way to social fears of the urban masses. Moral reforms, driven by social fears, improved children’s lives in uneven, ambivalent ways, for example, criminalising street children (Parton 1985). Ultimately, child labour became redundant and children’s lives were improved by overall improvements in family living standards and technological innovation, pushed by the successful organisation of the labouring classes. Employment legislation was difficult to enforce where mass poverty necessitated children contributing to the family wage (Marx 1990, Tuttle 1999, Hindman 2002). The
writer Elizabeth Gaskell, familiar with the conditions of the industrial labouring classes in Manchester, highlighted the gap between legislation and the imperatives of poverty. Her fictional widow implores:

‘I’m sure, John Barton, if yo are taking messages to the parliament folk, yo’ll not object to telling ’em what a sore trial it is, this law o’ theirs, keeping childer fra’ factory work, whether they be weakly or strong. There’s our Ben; why, porridge seems to go no way w’ him, he eats so much; and I han gotten no money do sen him t’ school, as I would like; and there he is, rampaging about th’ streets a’ day, getting hungrier and hungrier, and pucking a’ manner o’ bad ways; and th’ inspector won’t let him in to work in th’ factory, because he’s not right age though he’s twice as strong as Sankey’s little ritling of a lad, as works till he cries for his legs aching so, though he right age, and better.’ (Gaskell 1970, p. 129)

Middle class moral reform was slow to address the conditions of the labouring classes. Matchstick girls in Britain notoriously still suffered terrible work-related diseases at the end of the nineteenth century. They finally achieved better working conditions through their strike action supported by the working class trade union movement. In summary, early industrial conditions created child labour as a problem, but child labour was eradicated as a mass social problem in advanced industrial conditions and successful labour organisation (Hindman 2002, p. 8).

The cultural ideal of the child of nature may be ambivalent for children in the developing world today, just as it could be ambivalent for children historically. Its mobilisation may not necessarily promote better understanding of their social conditions and the social solutions, necessary to transform their lives for the better. Notably child rural labour is naturalised and made invisible as a problem in the sustainable development model, which accepts nature’s hard physical discipline over rural families, but not rural families’ physical discipline of their children within the traditional household economy.

The following section illustrates how the cultural norms of punishing children progressively softened in Western societies during the modern era as children were excluded from labour responsibilities and childhood became a period of education and play.

Disciplining Childhood in the North American Progressive Era

Earlier studies noted how discipline norms, like childhood norms in general, have a social history. Discipline over children has relaxed in advanced industrial societies only imposing minimal social responsibilities on children and lacking strong beliefs to instil in children. Children’s rights advocates’ suspicion of adult discipline over children reflects these developments, but overlooks the changing conditions of childhood in the advanced industrial countries, which allowed family discipline to soften. North American history of childhood during the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is instructive
for changing conditions of childhood in the advanced industrial countries allowed family discipline to relax. The national image as America-as-child or young uncorrupted America against old corrupted Europe makes discussion of children and social progress particularly close (Griswold 1992, p. 62). Childhood norms changed rapidly, but unevenly, across social groups in this period of westward expansion and industrialisation. The huge rural and urban divide alongside social divides meant that very different childhood experiences and cultural norms coexisted within a generation or so. Discipline softened earlier among middle class families on the developed eastern coast of the United States whose children were not expected to work. Conversely the harsh conditions of pioneering farming communities dependent on child labour maintained severe family discipline and corporal punishment.

Changing cultural norms were played out in children’s classics of the period. The development of children’s fiction was driven by the new interest in childhood and attracted social reformers championing children’s welfare and more enlightened attitudes towards children. Children’s fiction has often consciously promoted particular cultural values. Many children’s novels, especially works for girls, were expressly commissioned by publishers to be morally edifying texts for families. They therefore reveal changing cultural expectations. Louisa Alcott’s Little Women, Susan Coolridge’s What Katy Did, Eleanor Porter’s Pollyanna, Elizabeth Wetherall’s The Wide Wide World, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Little House on the Prairie all fit into this genre. Moreover, family discipline is a common theme in children’s fiction, as Tom Sawyer’s myriad scrapes and punishments testify (Twain 2003).

Little Women

Louisa Alcott, author of Little Women, first published in 1868, was brought up in a progressive, intellectual family and expressly saw a role for literature in social reform. The highly articulate family disapproved of corporal punishment, although physical restraint was used—the young Alcott was tied to a chair as punishment (Elbert 1987). Discipline in the intellectual moral reforming household was primarily through moral sanction and self-reflection towards self-sacrifice, codified in the children’s diaries, which were rigorously analysed by their parents (Ebert 1987, pp. 34–38). Her father’s expectations made this a hard psychological discipline at times. Tellingly, Little Women celebrates a mother’s gentler moral guidance, removing the problematic father figure from the novel by sending him off to war.

Alcott’s disapproval of corporal punishment in the 1860s anticipates contemporary children’s rights thinking by over a century. The disciplinary framework in Little Women is John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress: the children are to strive to live up to the ideals of the pilgrim through the loving support of their mother and her firm but gentle sanction. The book’s gentler Christian ethos compares to the earlier works like Elizabeth Wetherall’s The Wide Wide World’s harsher edicts. Little Women reproaches those who use corporal punishment, especially
towards girls, and suggests that children should be ‘governed by love’ (Alcott 1994, pp. 68–70). Symbolically the fictional mother withdraws her youngest daughter Amy from school for hitting her, although she believes that her conceit needs addressing and the punishment might have done ‘more good than a milder method’ (ibid., p. 70). Thus even the disapproving Alcott distinguishes corporal punishment and violence, a distinction questioned in today’s children’s rights advocacy, but common in earlier children’s literature. Twain’s writing, for example, sharply distinguishes violence and physical punishment, which he portrays as legitimate well-intentioned correction of misdemeanours. Huckleberry’s father’s drunken beatings are treated as violence, not simply because of their severity, but their irrational, unpredictable and ill-intentioned nature (Twain 1983).

**Little House on the Prairie⁴**

Alcott’s disapproval of corporal punishment contrasts with Laura Wilder’s endorsement in her *Little House* series, set in the 1870s–80s but written five decades later. Wilder’s writing, as opposed to the 1970s saccharine *Little House* television series, testifies to the tough, precarious lives of pioneer families, and the strong determination required in isolated rural communities to struggle on and combat demoralisation. The household economy of the pioneering homestead and their aspirations to better their lives involved strict moral and physical discipline of their children. Wilder’s books *morally* affirm corporal punishment and reproach parents for not punishing disobedient children as irresponsibly endangering lives, and their children’s character and future. The idea of corporal punishment as morally good is symbolised by Laura’s father spanking her on her birthday: ‘today was her birthday, and she would not grow properly next year unless she has a spanking. ... One spank for each year, and at the last one big spank to grow up’ (Wilder 2000a, pp. 54–55).

Children’s absolute obedience is linked to children’s early responsibilities on the homestead and regarded as imperative for their survival in the hostile environment. The following encounter appears highly unjust according to current Western norms. The young sisters were tired and cross with each other because they had to gather wood chips to kindle the fire every day. Laura slapped her sister because Mary told her that her golden hair was better than hers. Their father whips Laura with a strap, telling her that they must never strike each other:

‘But Mary said—’
‘That makes no difference ... It is what I say that you should mind.’ (ibid., p. 104)

Children’s rights advocacy would view a father striking his child for hitting another as promoting violence, but Wilder portrays it as crucial to instil absolute obedience and paramount for their survival. Their father chastises the girls for even contradicting him in thought following a tense encounter with Native
Americans, ‘you girls remember always to do as you’re told. Don’t you even think of disobeying me. Do you hear?’ (Wilder 2000b, pp. 92–93). In this light, Wilder criticises their uncle as irresponsible for failing to beat their 11-year-old cousin Charley and stopping his bad behaviour which jeopardises his life and the harvest. ‘It served the little liar right’, is the father’s unsympathetic response to her cousin’s potentially fatal wasp stings (Wilder 2000a, p. 120). Past children’s fiction showed fate punishing the disobedient, even without parental punishment. Katy in Coolidge’s What Katy Did pays for disobeying and playing on a dangerous swing with a serious back injury, from which she does not recover until she has learnt humility, self-discipline and other virtues.

Early strict discipline is portrayed as fostering the self-discipline and resilience necessary to survive tough pioneer life. As Laura says after collecting wood in a blizzard against their parents’ instructions, ‘Sometime soon they would be old enough not to make any mistakes, and then they could always decide what to do. They would not have to obey Pa and Ma any more’ (Wilder 2000c, p. 189). As the girls become older and more responsible, corporal punishment is no longer used.

Strict discipline, whether children’s absolute obedience to their parents or the discipline of religious and cultural standards and routines, is portrayed as a core resource against demoralisation when disasters strike the family. A strict cultural discipline supplements the religious framework around puritan values of duty and sacrifice in the series. Mrs Ingalls is determined to maintain her cultural values, incongruously insisting on ironing the girls’ clothes on the wagon trail in the middle of the prairie. Equally she insists on her husband not swearing and her children’s manners. Laura is told ‘You must mind your manners, even if we are a hundred miles from anywhere’ (Wilder 2000b, p. 26).

The self-discipline of the parents and their cultural resources come into play one Long Winter when they endure extreme physical hardship and the threat of starvation (Wilder, 1953b). Wilder contrasts her family discipline and harmony with the despair of another pioneer household where the wife is depicted sullenly silent or lashing out with violence, unable to endure the harsh conditions (Wilder 2004). And the hardworking, self-disciplined Laura, not the indulged neighbour Nellie, marries the eligible bachelor Almanzo. Here we see a classic theme for girls: the reward for good character is a good husband, although the heroines were allowed some scrapes along the way. Boys’ fiction historically gave boys more daring adventures and opportunities for atrocious behaviour than girls, but it also reveals how discipline softened culturally, where life was easier.

**Tom Sawyer**

Some children were released from economic responsibilities in the American south through the use of slaves—anti-slavery is a core theme in Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. Children’s household responsibilities diminish to the odd chores in Twain’s Tom Sawyer, imposed more for moral instruction than necessity. Aunt Polly’s dilemmas over disciplining Tom Sawyer capture the related changing cultural views on discipline:
I ain’t doing my duty by that boy, and that’s the Lord’s truth, goodness knows. Spare the rod and spare the child, as the Good Book says. I’m a-laying up sin and suffering for us both, I know. [...] Everytime I let him off, my conscience does hurt me so, and everytime I hit him my old heart most breaks. (Twain 2003, p. 11)

Tom’s beloved aunt still uses corporal punishment but her views are ambivalent. Tom is not intimidated by her half-hearted efforts, ‘She never licks anybody—whacks ’em over the head with her thimble, and who cares for that, I’d like to know’ (ibid., p. 21).

Tom treats discipline as competitive sport where children try to outwit adults and escape punishment. The lively comic cat and mouse game between adults and children conveys the sense of an optimistic dynamic period in American history where traditional relations were being overturned, inequitable institutions like slavery questioned, and people lived by their wits. The tensions over discipline in Tom Sawyer do not concern corporal punishment so much as the restrictions of domestication. From the boys’ perspectives, the efforts of their elderly female guardians to civilise them are more of a trial than any hidings the women give them. Huckleberry rages against being kept ‘clean and neat, combed and brushed’ and having to go to school, and how ‘whithersoever he turned, the bars and shackles of civilization shut him in and bound him hand and foot’ (ibid., p. 291). The boys’ trials echo the romantic elemental child of nature and illustrate how children might construct their schema of childhood’s rights and wrongs rather differently from adult champions of their welfare!

Pollyanna Genre

If Twain’s America was still wild and only partially tamed, later moral tales like Pollyanna (Porter 1969) or Anne of Green Gables (Montgomery 1994) reflect a sense of a secure, cosy, providential order in small North American towns, and the comforts of provincial life. Anne of Green Gables’ adopted family wanted to adopt a boy to farm the land. Their decision to keep Anne and dispense with a boy’s labour illustrates how the need for child labour was being superseded in North America. The cultural paramountcy of duty was shifting to happiness. Indicatively the story Pollyanna refers negatively to ‘a hand with “duty” written large on every coldly extended finger’ (Porter 1969, p. 24). Fictional representations of disobedience were transformed from wickedness to naughtiness and its discipline softened. Anne’s scrapes, like Tom’s, are humorous, whether dying her hair green or making her friend drunk. Anna, unlike Katy, is not forced to wait for recovery in long chapters of repentance, after stupidly jumping off a roof and predictably breaking her leg (Montgomery 1994).

Children’s disregard for adult rules in this new generation of girls’ novels was even portrayed positively. Symbolically Miss Impertinence’s impertinence in Pollyanna is represented as a generous spontaneous spirit reinvigorating the lives of those around her, counter-posed to a cold punctual reserve and sterile preparation for life constantly deferred. Pollyanna’s dutiful aunt is ‘curiously
helpless’ and her discipline crumbles against her niece’s antics and perpetual gladness (Porter 1969, p. 51). These progressive novels invert the relationship between adults and children, making the child become the main protagonist of social change.

Pollyanna’s gladness game is rather cloying for today’s tastes. Nevertheless Pollyanna’s themes anticipate the romance of contemporary children’s rights advocacy: children saving adult society and spontaneous social change as a chain reaction of personal change. The social understanding presented by the authors of girls’ fiction who grew up in earlier generations was more complex. The next sections consider Alcott and Wilder’s understanding of social progress in more detail.

Understanding Social Progress

Louisa Alcott

Alcott, like authors of Pollyanna and Anne of Green Gables, gave importance to individual growth, education and humanising the home (Elbert 1987). Alcott wrote in a sequel to Little Women, ‘If men and women would only trust, understand and help one another, as my children do, what a capital place the world would be’ (Alcott 1970, p. 348). Alcott’s father was a Transcendentalist thinker and her family circle included writers like Henry Thoreau and Ralph Emerson, whose philosophical ideas were part of the recurring American and European romantic reactions against industrial society and took up the romantic ideal of returning to nature (Elbert 1987, ch. 4). Their ideas anticipate the contemporary ideals of sustainable development and global children’s rights advocacy.

Alcott was attracted to the romantic identification with nature against the ills of contemporary society. However she was sceptical about what a return to nature would mean for women and children. Alcott’s Transcendental Wild Oat satirises her father’s failed utopian Fruitlands farming experiment as Slump Apples. The work wryly observes how the women and children end up doing the bulk of the community’s work while the idealist male leaders are off lecturing about their wonderful community in comfortable city salons. Alcott contrasts the austerity, crop failures and meagre food rations provided by male anti-materialist idealism to the abundance and comfort offered by the more practically minded women (Alcott 1975, p. xvii, discussed in Elbert 1987, pp. 73–75). She did not discount material needs and rejected her father’s anti-materialism, for all the nobility she saw in his stance. Ultimately she saw women’s rights and freedom as impossible in nature, despite contemporary society’s distortions of human nature, ‘if men return to the natural world to gain liberty, women create civilization to gain their freedom’ (ibid., p. 221). Not least, women needed civilisation to gain time for themselves (ibid.).
Her views on how nature constrains women’s personal growth are relevant to debates on the sustainable development model. While Alcott supported the idea of social progress as ‘aggregate of individual perfections’ (ibid., p. 114), she saw personal growth as bound up with one’s social experiences. But the traditional roles of men and women allowed for vastly different experiences—women and girls had more restricted lives, their domestic labour tied them to the home and they had less freedom to participate in the public sphere or travel. Alcott strongly criticised women’s domestic labour in traditional household as limiting their self-determination and argued for the importance of women having gainful employment outside the home as part of women’s emancipation (ibid., p. 173). Alcott believed industrialisation opened up possibilities for women which helped them realise their individuality: new technology freeing up women’s time for good works, new employment opportunities broadening their experiences and their networks outside the home and participation in the public sphere (ibid., p. 165). She observed how the lack of industry forced women into domestic service which required women to submerge themselves, their interests and their emotions, especially anger (ibid., p. 103). Her experience of domestic service, although considered more genteel than industrial work, led her to understand why women might prefer factory or shop work as offering more freedom to develop their individuality, although her campaign writing showed she had no illusions about factory conditions or its low wages (ibid., p. 104). Her conclusions are echoed in research on child labour today suggesting children’s preferences for waged labour over domestic labour because of the greater personal freedom it offers (Nieuwenhuys 2000, 2001). However, the ideals of sustainable development support non-industrial, non-wage family work, ideals which echo the vision in Wilder’s pioneer Little House stories and still enchant the North American imagination.

Laura Wilder

Wilder’s Little House series creates a romance of small independent family farming at the time of the New Deal, when such farming was becoming unviable, and family security was more likely to be found through work found outside farming. Wilder was opposed to the New Deal and farming failures are not dwelt on in the myths of the series. In creating a romance of farming as a way of life, Wilder goes against the grain of children’s literature at the time, which was either anti-farming or only used farming as an incidental backdrop to the protagonists’ adventures, a temporary romantic return to nature rather than a career (Dizer 2005, pp. 43–59). Invariably the hero is portrayed as leaving the farming community to make his fortune (Romines 1997). Even Wilder shows how her father takes paid work away from the homestead, railway building or carpentry as available to rescue the family finances, while Laura’s teaching or sewing contributes to the household income. Symbolically both Laura and her cousin sing about not marrying farmers, indicating their declining social
status, despite Wilder's farming romance (Wilder 1953a, pp. 48–50). Wilder's farming household was beset by financial hardships and tragedy. Neither father nor husband was a successful farmer and the family's economic security was achieved through Wilder and her daughter's writing (Romines 1997).

The Little House series celebrates the family's spiritual values and simple pleasures, whether the homemade Christmas presents or the ingenious ways Ma contrives a meal out of a bare larder, as against the showy display of more prosperous neighbours (Wilder 2000c). Nevertheless, the Little House is far from being anti-materialist, quite the reverse (Romines 1997, pp. 97–137). The Little House series is preoccupied with material security, written against the backdrop of the Depression and personal financial difficulties. Material things matter in the Little House, whether the practical value and reliable quality of new machine goods which lighten their labour—the threshing machine lightening male outdoor labour, or the new cooking stove and sewing machine lightening female domestic labour—or the symbolic cultural values of glass windows, the musical organ for a parlour or elaborate ladylike dresses. Wilder attributed her ability to develop a writing career to the availability of the sewing machine and industrially made material (ibid.).

The series links material independence, material choice and individual self-determination, and suggests how personal determination is limited in the household economy, especially for women. Decisions are not their own, but are imposed or approved by the male head of the household. Ma suppresses her wants and waits for their recognition by Pa. Laura's teaching or other work outside the home enhances her economic value and her voice in the traditional household hierarchies, while Pa's move west to seek his fortune frees him from paternal authority and its labour responsibilities and allows him to become the head of his own independent homestead. Self-abnegation of one's interests is required in the household economy, and self-sacrifice is a core value cultivated in the Little House. The girls sacrifice their Christmas presents so Pa has money towards farm horses (Wilder 2000b). Crucially the demands of the household economy clash with the children's education. Laura's mother was a teacher, and valued education highly. Nevertheless the girls are taken out of school to work on the homestead. Without expectations in a future beyond subsistence farming it is easy to see how the demands of the household economy could lead to children's education becoming abandoned.

Indicatively Wilder was opposed to women's political rights, her conservative views according with her formative experiences in a household economy based on the traditional gendered division of labour. Ma's prejudices against Native Americans also relate to women's narrower lives and traditional cultural role as guardian of the community's values. Defensively Ma clings to their cultural distinctions from the Native Americans around them as they compete for land and strive to make a living in the hostile conditions of the prairie. Pa, with his broader social experiences, is shown to be more sympathetic towards Native Americans. Both father and daughter share the romantic identification with untamed nature against civilisation's shackles. However, returning to nature is
closed to Laura as a woman. Instead women’s empowerment is identified with civilisation’s expansion and female domestication: women are able to exercise a public moral role in the town, which they cannot, isolated on the homestead (Wilder 2004). Together these works of the Progressive Era suggest how rising standards of living and widening social experiences fostered progressive values and made possible childhood as a period of play and education in Western societies.

The rest of this article explores tensions between the universalism of human rights advocacy and the relativism of economic development.

Urban Pathologies and Romantic Critiques of Universal Economic Development

International development was established after 1945 to address the aspirations of the newly independent states in a political climate of heightened post-colonial expectation and Cold War competition. Developing countries would be industrialised and living standards raised. The most urgent problem was rural poverty, because family health, education, labour and opportunities were considered worse in rural areas than in urban areas (UNICEF 1963, 1964, Black 1996, p. 119). A green revolution would transform rural labour through applying scientific knowledge and modern machinery to enhance crop yields. Optimistically, it was hoped economic modernisation and urbanisation would modernise cultural norms, and encourage cultural and political values to converge internationally, thereby helping to overcome international divisions and further international peace (Rostow 1960) However, newly independent countries experienced capital flight and had difficulty securing capital investment unless they were of strategic interest.

Moreover, Western governments and advisers were ambivalent about industrialising the Third World. They feared modernisation was destabilising traditional societies and politically alienating populations as people migrated from rural areas to growing urban slums (Mead 1953, Pye and Verba 1965, Weiner 1966, Lerner 1967, p. 28, Huntington 1968). International policy-makers were concerned that urbanisation exacerbated social problems and that parents struggled to mediate children’s experience of traumatic social change (Inkeles 1963, p. 365). Urban poverty became regarded as more harmful than rural poverty to the young (Black 1996, p. 129), although studies continued to suggest that urban migration offered poor families the chance of upward mobility not available in rural areas (Nelson 1969). Early optimism that many urban problems were transitional diminished. Fears grew that urban life eroded family ties and left the young without appropriate parental guidance (Black 1996, pp. 128–130). The presence of street children suggested modernisation strategies were endangering social community and welfare (ibid.). Shanty towns and urban slums were creating maladjusted young people at risk of delinquency: ‘social
disorganization leads to the family’s failure to ensure that the personality of young people develops satisfactorily, since, lacking the requisite norms, they are apt to indulge in all kinds of anti-social behaviour’ (Hauser 1961, p. 54). Against these fears, Western governments and advisers retreated from the goal of industrialising the developing world. Their ideas influenced international development thinking as Third World nationalism and mass political movements sympathetic to Third World nationalism declined.

International development thinking converged around the concept of sustainable development and basic needs, outlined in E.F. Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful (1973), the Brandt Report (1980) and other initiatives, which proposed that developing countries should not follow Western industrial development paths. Sustainable development approaches reaffirm Western romantic critiques of modernity, which look back to nature and non-industrial communities as the ideal (Sayre and Lowry 1984). Just as the romantic imagination thinking approached childhood as a utopian space in communication with nature, which must be kept free of adult urban corruption, sustainable development advocacy commonly imagines the developing world as a non-materialist space at risk from modern society’s corruption. Indeed many Western development thinkers and aid workers like Schumacher have been drawn to international development work as part of a personal spiritual journey and have wanted to refocus society onto spiritual well-being against materialism.

Sustainable development advocacy rarely acknowledges developing countries’ hostility towards abandoning industrialisation as a goal—developing countries reiterated their aspirations for international economic equality and industrialization in the 1974 UN Declaration on the New International Economic Order (UN GA 1974). Influential international development critiques were originally inspired by Marxist ideas against capitalist modernisation models, regarded as furthering Western interests at the expense of developing countries (Frank 1971, Amin 1976). Anticolonial nationalists like the Algerian writer Frantz Fanon argued against the Third World following Western models. But they did not mean adopting pre-industrial relativist development models: ‘there is not a question of a return to Nature’ (Fanon 2008, p. 82). Fanon wanted the Third World to transform and forge a new universal historical project:

No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men... It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man. (Fanon 2008, p. 82)

Third world nationalism was influenced by universalist beliefs, whereas sustainable development advocacy is influenced by cultural relativism, questioning economic modernisation strategies which it holds responsible for much suffering in the developing world (Rahanema and Bawtree 1997). Its non-materialist relativist development model tends to gloss over common negative aspects of traditional agricultural societies—their conservative gendered cultural
norms and divisions of labour, child labour and use of corporal punishment—or treats disturbing cultural practices as superfluous to traditional ways of life and therefore eradicable because particular cultural practices are not found in all traditional communities.

Structural Adjustment and Children’s Rights Development

Universal development was abandoned in the 1970s, but the movement to universalise human rights revived. There is not the space here to consider the international political context that fostered renewed international attention to human rights (Evans 1996, 1998, Sellars 2002). UNICEF had originally been unenthused about the initiative to create a new children’s rights convention, but changed its views, hoping a children’s rights approach might prioritise children’s welfare and mitigate the effects of the 1980s’ debt crisis and structural adjustment programmes (Black 1996). UNICEF devised selective low-cost interventions that would impact most on child survival, while UNICEF’s Children in Extremely Difficult Circumstances programme targeted interventions towards groups at risk (Cornia et al. 1987, Black 1996, pp. 18–21) The selective interventions pioneered by UNICEF improved child survival rates and represented sensible crisis management strategies. However, the ‘adjustment with a human face’ measures have become the essential meaning of material development today, which is focused on better targeted allocation of social resources as opposed to transforming the productive industrial base of society as a foundation for social progress. Today’s rights-based, human development or sustainable development approaches are sceptical about economic growth strategies. They only have the fulfilment of basic needs as their material goal, not universal prosperity (UNICEF 2000a).

International development advocacy is increasingly focused on changing norms rather than material advancement as the way of improving society. The General Assembly report A World Fit for Children contends, ‘Investing in children and respecting their rights lays the foundation for a just society, a strong economy, and a world free of poverty’ (UN GA 2002a, para. 50). Similarly, UNICEF (2000b, p. 1) argues, ‘The well-being of children is a key yardstick for measuring national development’. Nevertheless, children’s prospects are still largely determined by whether they come from advanced industrial countries or developing countries, and their country’s wealth and their families’ income. UNICEF’s Progress for Children Statistical Review shows that the Sub-Saharan Africa has either made no progress or insufficient progress towards realising Millennium Development Goals on infant mortality, hunger, access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation and schooling (UNICEF 2007a). But international child rights reports treat their goals of protecting children’s health and well-being as achievable (UN GA 2002a, para. 48). Advocates emphasise the better allocation and access to basic services for children’s well-being, rather
than a country’s position in the international political economy and its productive capacity (UNICEF 2007). Yet China’s economic growth strategies have succeeded in getting more adults and children out of poverty than international child poverty strategies (Chen and Ravallion 2008, p. 20). International children’s rights advocates do not address how the available resources and means of allocation in societies organised around basic technological household production, as opposed to advanced industrial production, are qualitatively different and inevitably entail different standards of children’s health and well-being. Children’s rights advocacy has retreated from the comprehensive development vision of 60 years ago. Not least, its rights-based development vision does not aspire to universal access to technologically advanced medical care, and offers children in the developing countries lower health prospects than Truman’s vision of 60 years ago, which aspired to universalise the benefits of science and technology to all globally.

Yet today’s international advocates want to transcend older material definitions of poverty and material income-based indicators (UNICEF 2000a). Even the World Bank has come under the influence of anti-materialist thinking. Its report, The Voices of the Poor (Narayan et al. 2000), does not have substantial material transformation as part of its development vision and even suggests that wealth and well-being may be incompatible (Pender 2002, 2007, Pupavac 2005, Duffield 2007). Multidimensional models of poverty are promoted as more advanced analysis than the older material models of poverty (UNICEF 2000a, Narayan et al. 2000). Their policy adoption is redefining poverty in more psychological terms and resurrecting the cycles of poverty models, associated with conservative moral reformers. UNICEF argues, ‘Poverty causes lifelong damage to children’s minds and bodies, transforming them into adults who perpetuate the cycle of poverty, by transmitting it to their children’ (UNICEF 2000a, p. v) and that ‘the intergenerational transmission of poverty cannot be broken unless children’s basic capabilities and skills are developed from birth’ (ibid., p. 6). The human development approach involves development strategies directed towards the individual: training individuals to realise their own livelihoods, as opposed to the macro-industrial employment schemes of the past (ibid., p. 9).

The normative approaches of the last two decades targeted at the poor or children as development actors repackage self-help strategies, and offer little material advancement (Abrahamsen 2000). They follow how moral reformers historically have seen social solutions in terms of professional interventions at the level of the individual. Even today’s basic needs approaches offer individuals less materially and are increasingly targeted towards changing the poor’s attitudes and behaviour. Basic material provision is more selectively designed to impact on general population survival rates (Duffield 2007) and contradicts the CRC, which purports to address the rights of every individual child globally. This contradiction is accompanied by other contradictions in global children’s rights advocacy.
A fundamental paradox exists in global children’s rights advocacy seeking to globalise the childhood norms of post-industrial societies without globalising the material conditions of childhood, which fostered those norms. The 1990 African Charter proclaims that children are to be protected from ‘economic exploitation’ and ‘performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development’ (OAU 1990, Article 15). Children’s worst prospects are in the poorest region of the world—Sub-Saharan Africa. UNICEF’s own statistics suggest that one in three children aged 5–14 are engaged in child labour in Sub-Saharan Africa, compared to one in six of the world’s children (UNICEF 2007, p. 45).

The children’s rights-based approach does not address how the mode of production in developing countries under the sustainable development vision will be predominantly agrarian based on small-scale family farming without advanced machinery. Setting aside romantic rural images, family farming without modern machinery involves intensive toil requiring child labour. UNICEF’s Progress for Children report highlights that ‘poor and rural children are more likely to be engaged in child labour’ (UNICEF 2000b, p. 45). This picture is presented starkly in the Kindernothilfe NGO report on Africa, extracted here:

In Ethiopia … practically every second boy works. … Almost 95 percent of working children are to be found in rural areas. Over 92 percent are unpaid helpers within their families, who pursue economic activities. Almost 68 percent of working children and young people work in small (agricultural) family businesses. Working in informal family enterprises can expose children and young people to serious violations of their rights as shown by the fact that over 47 percent of five to nine year old boys and almost 35 percent of girls work 40 plus hours a week. Added to that in the southern part of the country a share of the children are bonded child labourers. (Heidel 2005, p. 18)

UNICEF and international NGOs document child labour in the unmechanised rural economy, yet do not fundamentally question sustainable development’s implications for children. Fifty years ago UNICEF wanted to eradicate the relentless toil of traditional unmechanised rural economies as a foundation for improving people’s lives (Black 1996, p. 119). Conversely, the children’s rights framework approaches the traditional rural economy’s hardships as problems of legal enforcement and changing cultural behaviour, rather than material necessity. The Kindernothilfe report refers to the long hours that rural children labour as seriously violating their rights. But would rights enforcement address the social conditions that require rural children and their families to labour long hours? UNICEF and international NGOs have adopted a blinkered development agenda, which somehow imagines unmechanised agricultural work without hours of toil. But family farmsteads rely on children working, as Wilder’s Little House testifies.
Earlier policy saw cultural change as premised on breaking away from traditional ways of life. Earlier modernisation studies on developing countries emphasised that family discipline softened as a traditional way of life shifted to a modern way of life and individualism. These trends were strongest amongst the urban middle classes most integrated into modern society and the most industrialised nations (LeVine et al. 1967, p. 223). Yet the historical experiences, which fostered the gentler norms that advocates wish to enforce, are not shared globally. Effectively, global children’s rights advocacy aims to globalise post-industrial professional norms of childhood discipline onto non-industrial conditions. But discipline norms are part of a totality of social relations. Traditional farming necessitates children disciplined to labour because household survival depends on everybody, including children, fulfilling their allotted responsibilities. The tough conditions of traditional agriculture are a hard physical discipline over both adults and children and its high stakes make for tough discipline norms. Global advocacy disingenuously condemns people to a tough way of life and then condemns their tough discipline norms, as if they are superfluous to the physically onerous tasks demanded of children. However, global advocates, predominantly urban and middle class, are less alarmed about the hazards of rural life than urban life, haunted by the romantic child of nature intertwined with older puritan moral anxieties. As Alcott wryly observed over a century ago, idealists may happily lecture on the joys of simple living comfortably insulated from its insecurities and hardships (Alcott 1975).

Sustainable development’s tacit perpetuation of child labour needs more study, although insightful analysis exists on the global political economy impact on children and global advocacy’s ambivalence for children (Boyden 1990, King 1997, Lewis 1998, Niewenhuys 2000, 2001, Hart 2006, Watson 2006). Human rights debates over universalism or relativism have focused on Asian values, but have not fundamentally addressed whether universal human rights are realisable under relativist development policies. It is difficult to find human rights literature asking whether universal human rights require modern social conditions, as was previously presumed. Donnelly suggests that traditional communal forms of life rarely have to be broken to realise equal rights, but does not follow through the problem of how rights may be realised where development policy seeks to maintain traditional communal forms of life (Donnelly 2003, p. 76). Instead uneven development is seen as making human rights imperative rather than unrealisable (ibid., p. 85). Nor does the prevailing idealist philosophy of human rights follow through the contradictions of the international political economy that undermine individuals’ rights, highlighted by earlier underdevelopment theories (Frank 1971, Amin 1976). Prevailing children’s rights approaches are losing historical understanding of social change and increasingly confuse the expanding role of children’s rights advocates with addressing children’s plight globally. Indicatively, the Kindernothilfe report does not refer to the development of developing countries,
but the development of the PRSPs, and children’s rights organisations’ participation in their formulation (Heidel 2005).

To what extent can adult interactions with children be changed while retaining traditional economic organisation around family labour? Past international policy assumed that people’s social conditions needed to be materially eased for progressive cultural norms to flourish, and that social norms changed more slowly than economic and technological practices (Mead 1966, p. 54). For childhood norms to change, the underlying material social conditions need to be substantially transformed. Present campaigns to prohibit corporal punishment effectively sever the link between social conditions and cultural norms. Advocates seek to use culture flexibly, maintaining those traditional cultural features they like, while eradicating those features they disapprove of and deem unnecessary to cultural identity, like harsh corporal punishment. But can culture be treated in a pick ‘n’ mix way? The insecurities of traditional rural farming communities, struggling against nature, foster cultural conservativism. They rely on trusted traditional ways and kinship support networks, because they cannot rely on external welfare (Mead 1953, pp. 185–186, Galbraith 1964, 1979) Earlier development studies showed how public education programmes impacted little on traditional communities unless they saw their children’s social possibilities expanding (Mead 1953, Read 1966). More recent public education programmes within Western countries to change norms and behaviour also appear to have poor results (Hardeman et al. 2002). International development thinking of 50 years ago aspired to transform social possibilities along with comprehensive universal public welfare services. Conversely, global advocacy wants to mobilise traditional communities to change core family norms and relations according to the CRC, while they depend on traditional livelihoods and kinship networks for their material security. But when global advocacy disturbs existing patterns of interdependencies and responsibilities, it risks making children’s lives more insecure where new sources of external welfare are absent (Mead 1953, 1966). Global children’s rights advocates are sensitive about accommodating existing cultural beliefs, but tend to affirm cultural self-determination narrowly around symbolic rituals, folklore, or craftwork, distinct from social practices. Inevitably global advocacy disturbs communities’ social and economic expectations when it invites communities to compare their adult–child relations against global children’s rights norm. Simultaneously it implicitly invites people to make other global comparisons with people in developed countries, even though global development advocacy seeks local development paths (Laidi 1998). So while global advocates formally promote a basic needs development model of local self-reliant communities, their very appearance communicates messages of cosmopolitan mobility and affluence (Smirl 2008).

At the same time the old moral divisions between the deserving and undeserving, and between the civilised and the uncivilised, are reappearing in children’s rights discourse, albeit in contemporary language.
Pollyanna Advocacy Delegitimising the Developing World

International advocacy over punishing childhoods in the developing world questions the international legitimacy of developing states because it constructs populations’ problems divorced from the prevailing material conditions. International relativist development and rights-based approaches, not just earlier development models, are susceptible to criticisms of reproducing unequal relationships and reproducing ‘endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed’ (Escobar 1997, p. 93). Global children’s rights campaigns claim moral legitimacy against developing societies by isolating physical punishment from the harsh physical conditions of the developing world. Contemporary children’s rights advocacy moralises the gap between the ideal of childhood under the CRC and the reality of many children’s lives globally, rendering their societies in violation of their rights. As a consequence, developing countries are morally delegitimised as representatives of their children’s best interests and become sites of extensive intervention under evolving relationships of global governance between the North and the South (Lewis 1998). Child rights advocates are demanding that developing countries institutionalise the children’s rights normative analysis of global problems and solutions. They want European governments and institutions to enforce child rights in PRSPs, and Western NGO evaluations to be incorporated into the international reviews of PRSPs (UN CRC 2003, para. 12, Heidel 2005). Tacit international racial divisions are simultaneously recreated in global children rights advocacy against developing societies for their failure to ensure their children live up to the romantic ideal of childhood (Lewis 1998, p. 97).

The aspiration to make children’s lives better cannot be isolated from our aspirations for humanity as a whole. The normative universalism and material relativism of global children’s rights advocacy is at odds, and legitimises the perpetuation of gruelling social conditions. The prevailing sustainable development policies will maintain punishing childhoods dictated by the necessity of nature. Current social constructivist interpretations of childhood have flown from reality. Selective normative campaigns lacking historical understanding divert the development of analysis and action essential to forge a more humane world. There is something very Pollyanna-ish about children’s rights advocacy: people’s nastiness to each other is so unnecessary, if only people could be nice to each other, if only adults could stop being horrible and hitting their children, then peace and harmony could be released through innocent children. Seeking to enforce post-industrial cultural norms in developing societies, without intending to transform the material conditions of childhood substantially, is perverse, and only reinforces international inequalities. Progressive thinking and practice, to transform the lives of children and address punishing childhoods globally, needs to reassert the interdependence between material progress and social progress.
Notes on Contributor

Vanessa Pupavac is a lecturer in Politics at the University of Nottingham. She has published widely on human rights, humanitarianism and development politics. She previously worked as a consultant at the UN and is a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. (vanessa.pupavac@nottingham.ac.uk)

Notes

1  Sarah Elbert’s fascinating account of Alcott’s life and work, A hunger for home (1987), has informed my thinking on Alcott.
2  My analysis has been stimulated by Ann Romines’ Constructing the little house: gender, culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder (1997).

References

Abrahamsen, R., 2000. Disciplining democracy: development discourse and good governance in Africa. London: Zed Books.
Alcott, L., 1970. Little men: life at Plumfield with Jo’s boys. London: Collier-Macmillan.
Alcott, L., 1975. Transcendental wild oats. Boston, MA: Harvard Common Press.
Alcott, L., 1994. Little women. London: Penguin.
Amin, S., 1976. Unequal development: an essay on the social formations of peripheral capitalism. Hassocks: Harvester Press.
Ariès, P., 1962. Centuries of childhood. London: Cape.
Bar-On, A., 1996. Criminalising survival: images and reality of street children. Journal of social policy, 26 (1), 63–78.
Benedict, R., 1961. Patterns of culture. London: Routledge.
Berger, P. et al., 1974. The homeless mind: modernization and consciousness. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Black, M., 1996. Children first: the story of UNICEF. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Boyden, J., 1990. Childhood and the policy makers: a comparative perspective on the globalization of childhood. In: A. James and A. Prout, eds. Constructing and reconstructing childhood. London: Falmer Press, 184–215.
Brandt Commission or Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 1980. North–South: a programme for survival. London: Pan Books.
Burman, E., 1995. Developing differences: childhood and economic development. Children and society, 9 (3), 121–141.
Chen, S. and Ravallion, M., 2008. The developing world is poorer than we thought, but no less successful in the fight against poverty. Policy Research Working Paper 4703. The World Bank Development Research Group.
Corners, G.A., Jolly, R. and Stewart, F., 1987. Adjustment with a human face, Volume 1: protecting the vulnerable and promoting growth. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cox, R., 1996. Shaping childhood: themes of uncertainty in the history of adult–child relationships. London: Routledge.
Cunningham, H., 1995. Children and childhood in western society since 1500. London: Longman.
Detrick, S., ed., 1992. The United Nations convention on the rights of the child: a guide to the ‘travaux preparatoires’. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.
Dizer, J., 2005. American children’s literature, 1890–1940. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
Donnelly, J., 2003. Universal human rights in theory and practice. 2nd ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Duffield, M., 2007. Development, security and unending war: governing the world of peoples. Cambridge: Polity.
Elbert, S., 1987. A hunger for home: Louisa May Alcott’s place in American culture. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press.
Escobar, A., 1995. Encountering development: the making and unmaking of the Third-World. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Evans, T., 1996. US hegemony and the project of universal human rights. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.
Evans, T., ed., 1998. Human rights fifty years on: a reappraisal. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Fanon, F., 2008. Concerning violence. London: Penguin.
Federle, K., 1994. Rights flow downhill. International journal of children’s rights, 2, 343–368.
Frank, A.G., 1971. Capitalism and underdevelopment in Latin America. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Freeman, M., 1997. The moral status of children: essays on the rights of the child. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
Fromm, E., 1984. The fear of freedom. London: Ark.
Furedi, F., 1997. Population and development: a critical introduction. Cambridge: Polity.
Galbraith, J.K., 1964. Economic development. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Galbraith, J.K., 1979. The nature of mass poverty. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
Gaskell, E., 1970. Mary Barton. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children. Available from: http://www.endcorporalphatation.org.
Griswold, J., 1992. Audacious kids: coming of age in America’s classic books. New York: Oxford University Press.
Hardeman, W., et al., 2002. Application of the theory of planned behaviour change interventions: a systematic review. Psychology and health, 17, 123–158.
Hart, J., 2006. Saving children: what role for anthropology? Anthropology today, 22 (1), 5–8.
Hauser, P., 1961. Urbanization in Latin America. New York: Columbia University Press/UNESCO.
Heidel, K., 2005. Poverty reduction strategy papers: children first! A case study on PRSP processes in Ethiopia, Kenya and Zambia from a child rights perspective. Heidelberg: Kindernothilfe. Available from: http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0002048/PRSP_Children-first_Sept2005.pdf.
Hindman, H., 2002. Child labor: an American history. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
Huntington, S., 1968. Political order in changing societies. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Inkeles, A., 1963. Social change and social character: the role of parental mediation. In: N. Smelser and W. Smelser, eds. Personality and social systems. New York: John Wiley, 357–366.
King, M., 1997. A better world for children? London Routledge.
Kuper, A., 1999. Culture: the anthropologist’s account. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Laidi, Z., 1998. A world without meaning: the crisis of meaning in international politics. London: Routledge.
Lerner, D., 1967. Comparative analysis of processes of modernisation. In: H. Miner, ed. The city in Modern Africa. London: Pall Mall Press, 21–38.
LeVine, Z., et al., 1967. Father–child relationships and changing lifestyles in Ibadan, Nigeria. In: H. Miner, ed. The city in modern Africa. London: Pall Mall Press, 215–255.
Lewis, N., 1998. Human rights, law and democracy in an unfree world. In: T. Evans, ed. Human rights fifty years on: a reappraisal. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 77–104.
Lipset, S.M., 1959. Political man. London: Mercury.
Marx, K., 1990. Capital: a critique of political economy. Vol. 1. London: Penguin.
Mead, M., ed., 1953. Cultural patterns and technical change. Paris: UNESCO with the World Federation for Mental Health.
Mead, M., 1956. New lives for old: cultural transformation—Manus, 1928–1953. New York: Mentor Books.
Mead, M. and Wolfenstein, M., 1955. Childhood in contemporary cultures. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Montgomery, L., 1994. Anne of Green Gables. London: Puffin.
Myrdal, G., 1956. An international economy. New York: Harper & Bros.
Myrdal, G., 1957. Economic theory and the under-developed regions. London: Duckworth.
Narayan, D., with Patel, R., Schafft, K., Radenmacher, A. and Koch-Schulte, S., 2000. Voices of the poor: can anyone hear us? Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Nelson, J., 1969. Migrants, urban poverty, and instability in developing nations. Occasional papers in international affairs No. 22. Cambridge, MA: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.
Nieuwenhuys, O., 2000. The household economy and the commercial exploitation of children’s work, the case of Kerala. In: B. Schlemmer, ed. The exploited child. London and New York: Zed Books, 278–291.
Nieuwenhuys, O., 2001. By the sweat of their brow? Street children, NGOs and children’s rights in Addis Ababa. Africa, 71 (4), 539–557.
Organisation of African Unity, 1990. African charter on the rights and welfare of the child, OAU, Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), entered into force 29 November 1999.
Owens, W.R. and Johnson, H., eds., 1998. Romantic writings: an anthology. Milton Keynes: Open University.
Parton, N., 1985. The politics of child abuse. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
Pender, J., 2002. Relegitimising intervention: the World Bank and the voices of the poor. In: D. Chandler, ed. Rethinking human rights: critical approaches to international politics. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 97–114.
Pender, J., 2007. Country ownership: the evasion of donor accountability. In: C. Bickerton, P. Cunliffe and A. Gourevitch, eds. Politics without sovereignty: a critique of contemporary international relations. London: Routledge, 112–130.
Porter, E., 1969. Pollyanna. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Pupavac, V., 2005. Human security and the rise of global therapeutic governance. Conflict security and development, 5 (2), 161–181.
Pye, L.W. and Verba, S., eds., 1965. Political culture and political development. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rahnema, M. with Bawtree, V., eds., 1997. The post-development reader. London: Zed Books.
Read, M., 1966. Culture, health and disease: social and cultural influence on health programmes in developing countries. London: Tavistock.
Riesman, D., 1961. The lonely crowd: a study of the changing American character. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Romines, A., 1997. Constructing the little house: gender, culture, and Laura Ingalls Wilder. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
Rostow, W.W., 1960. *The stages of economic growth: a non-communist manifesto*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Sayre, R. and Lowy, M., 1984. Figures of romantic anti-capitalism. *New German critique*, 32, 42–92.

Schofield, K., 2007. Smacking vital as last resort, insist parents in ‘Growing up’ study. *Scotsman*, 20 January.

Schumacher, E.F., 1973. *Small is beautiful: a study of economics as if people matter*. London: Blond & Briggs.

Sellars, K., 2002. *The rise and rise of human rights*. London: Sutton Publishing.

Smirl, L., 2008. Building the other, constructing ourselves: spatial dimensions of international humanitarian response. *International political sociology*, 2 (3), 236–253.

Tuttle, C., 1999. *Hard at work in factories and mines: the economics of child labor during the British industrial revolution*. Boulder, CO and Oxford: Westview.

Twain, M., 1983. *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. London: Penguin.

Twain, M., 2003. *The adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Bath: Parragon.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003 *General measures of implementation for the convention on the rights of the child, general comment No. 5*. Geneva. CRC/GC/2003/5.

UN CRC, 2006a. *General comment No. 8 on the right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (CRC/C/GC/8)*.

UN CRC, 2006b. *Benin concluding observations on second report CRC/C/BEN/CO/2, 20 October*.

UN General Assembly, 1974. *Declaration on the establishment of a new economic order*, General Assembly Resolution 3201 (S-V1), 1 May 1974.

UN General Assembly, 1989. *UN convention on the rights of the child*, General Assembly Resolution 44/25 20 November 1989, Entry into force 2 September 1990. Available from: http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/crc.pdf.

UN General Assembly, 2002a. *A world fit for children*. General Assembly Resolution A/RES/S-27/2. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/worldfitforchildren/files/A-RES-S27-2E.pdf.

UN General Assembly, 2002b. *Twenty-seventh special session on children*. General Assembly A/S-27/PV.1.

UN Millennium Development Goals. Available from: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals.

UN Secretary General, 2001. *We the children: end-decade review of the follow-up to the World summit for children*. New York: United Nations. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/documentation/documents/a-s-27-3e.doc.

UN Secretary General, 2006. *Secretary general study on violence against children*. New York: United Nations. Available from: http://www.violencestudy.org/r25.

UNICEF, 1963. *The needs of children*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

UNICEF, 1964. *Children of the developing countries*. London: William Clowes.

UNICEF, 1999. *Children in jeopardy: the challenge of freeing poor nations from the shackles of debt*. New York: UNICEF.

UNICEF, 2000a. *Poverty reduction begins with children*. New York: UNICEF.

UNICEF, 2000b. *Progress of nations 2000*. Geneva: UNICEF. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/pon00.

UNICEF, 2005. Call to ban corporal punishment wraps up South Africa meeting on violence. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/media/media_27721.html.

UNICEF, 2007a. *Progress for children: a world fit for children statistical review*. New York: UNICEF.

UNICEF, 2007b. *State of the world's children*. Geneva: UNICEF. Available from: http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/docs/sowc07.pdf.

Van Bueren, G., 1995. *The international law on the rights of the child*. Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.
Verhellen, E., 1997. *Convention on the rights of the child*. Leuven: Garant.
Watson, A., 2006. Children and international relations: a new site of knowledge? *Review of international studies*, 32 (2), 237–250.
Weber, M., 1954. *Max Weber on law in economy and society*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Weiner, M., ed., 1966. *Modernization: the dynamics of growth*. Washington, DC: Voice of America Forum Lectures.
Wetherall, E., 1950. *The wide wide world*. London: University of London.
Wilder, L.I., 1953a. *By the shores of Silver Lake*. New York: Harper and Row.
Wilder, L.I., 1953b. *The long winter*. New York: HarperCollins.
Wilder, L.I., 2000a. *Little house in the big woods*. London: Egmont.
Wilder, L.I., 2000b. *Little house on the prairie*. London: Egmont.
Wilder, L.I., 2000c. *On the banks of Plum Creek*. London: Egmont.
Wilder, L.I., 2004. *Little town on the prairie*. New York: HarperTrophy.
Williams, R., 1963. *Culture and society 1789–1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.