

## CHAPTER 19

# Family versus the Logic of the Market

*Robert Cabanes*

Are there any societies or social formations left today whose articulation with the market economy remains settled enough not to have deprived them of control over their own reproduction processes? Or any societies with a specific social organization keeping the goods and labour market in check and – albeit each with its own methods and procedures – allowing every man more or less fair access to land and production, marriage and reproduction? Societies where, even if inequalities exist between families, groups, castes or lineages and correspond to the degrees of social hierarchization, age-related inequalities continue to operate according to the principle and cycle of inter-generational investment: children supplying their labour today being repaid by other children's labour in the future as a sort of advance payment redeemable once they themselves become parents (Mbaye, Nguéyap), an exchange deferred from one generation to the next and one of a number of different forms of socialization (gender inequalities being different as they are fixed and unbending: young girls are regarded in terms of gender rather than age)?

As long as access to land is unrestricted, any growth in the labour force will be warmly welcomed by societies such as these for it comes with the promise of both higher levels of production and enlarged or more sophisticated family and/or social organization. The child-as-benefit or child-as-wealth (Ravololomanga) belongs to an order of social reproduction where the concept of exploitation is alien to that of socialization through work. It is only in the event of a break in the inter-generational cycle and lack (or uncertainty) of accession to land and women that the problem of free, non-recouped labour arises, beginning within the domestic group.

That is when 'child labour' comes into its own as a specific term denoting a form of labour inextricably linked to the notion of exploitation, which is what I mean by the term when it is used in the text that follows.

### The Household within the Framework of the Market

Upheavals created by joining the market economy are generally regarded as the root causes of child labour. The market economy undermines the very

foundations of original social formations by initiating a direct relationship between households and the goods and labour markets. It destroys the organic interrelations between households both vertically (balanced reproduction of access to land) and horizontally (exchanging women; human reproduction). This direct relationship creates inequalities between households that crystallize and grow over generations and lead to the emergence of social classes. It is equally responsible for the changing nature of divisions of labour within the domestic group as the goods and labour markets exert pressure on it to adapt its organization of work and to create new forms of labour and new inequalities.

These upheavals first appeared in agricultural production in the shape of cash crops introduced within the framework of the family farm; it can safely be said that not a single rural society today has remained untouched by the process. But the deepest-seated upheavals have occurred in urban societies whose economies are non-agricultural and therefore not governed by the inter-generational cycles of exchange; urban exchange cycles are shorter, more fragile, making the least productive act into an act of vital necessity. Lest we forget it, the urban population as a percentage of the total population now ranges between 30 per cent (India, China) and 80 per cent (Latin America); with 35 per cent in Africa and 43 per cent in other parts of Asia.

### Child Labour and the Disadvantaged Social Classes

Child labour spreads most in the least advantaged social classes to whose weakened or crisis-hit households it begins as a means of subsistence: the child is put to work 'in the midst of the family', 'outside the home' or employed as a 'wage-earner' (Morice); when the domestic group loses control over it, the work then proceeds 'independently'; as it does in the case of underage wage-earners, street-workers and children working and living rough on the streets (Mérienne, Taracena). Most prominent of the very varied forms of household crises is that of the general spread of child labour and deteriorating working conditions. We shall take just one example, first of all because its brutality is so commonplace and second because it is apparently already rather widespread: households keeping only one or two children while placing the others into the care of a distant relative or even a friend. So only one or two 'heirs' will be able to go to school and have the opportunity to make a better life for themselves than those 'placed' with families where their status is lower, and they are inevitably steered straight into work and excluded from school (Labazée, Poirier).

Exploitation does exist within the household (Nieuwenhuys) and easily borrows from the language and ideology of family relations (Verlet). The opportunities and means for this kind of exploitation depend upon the household's structural position within the social system as a whole, i.e. its isolation in the face of an omnipresent market which can drive it into a

universal and cumulative form of dependency: bonded labour (M. Bonnet), whose cycles are adaptable to every situation. It is in order to keep its position on the market that a household exploits its own young; it is in order to maintain the access of adults to paid work outside the domestic group that the labour of the young is confined to within the domestic group (Nieuwenhuys). It is in order to guarantee the physical upkeep of the domestic group alone that children are made to pay their parents rent for a place to sleep (Ravololomanga). There are countless examples of exploitation within the household that are just as hard and violent as anything found outside. When the debt factor is added – as is often the case after years of being ground down and dominated – the circle closes and the household finds itself completely in the grip of the market economy. Some regard international debt between nations as a mere extension of the original debt, a further link in the chain (in both senses of the term). At any rate, the umbrella of a universal moral duty – paying one's debts – paradoxically harbours the most shameless forms of exploitation, outside the domestic group as much as (at times) within, between nations as within each nation.

### Exclusion and Public Order

In his broad historical tableau, Alessandro Stella shows how a sort of natural reproduction of outcasts, exclusion and marginality is established over generations and perfectly integrated into every society. He observes that even in the Middle Ages the periods when the use of child labour was proliferating in urban areas coincided with a simultaneous rise in delinquency and greater vigilance on the part of the authorities concerning issues of public order. Another outbreak occurred during the period of industrialization in the nineteenth century. For the children 'entering service' or an 'apprenticeship' had generally been deprived of any social status, abandoned or orphaned and there was every chance of them spawning a generation that would reproduce their own predicament. There is all the more reason to stress the link between child labour and 'public order' because it is being consolidated and aggravated by the interdependency of nations which in turn increases the exploitation of the dominated nations.

For its radically original and indisputably modern feature is the accompanying, massive-scale expansion of a form of work parallel to the (legal and illegal) work done within a climate of exploitation or violence, but which does not as a rule destroy children or prevent them from continuing on their albeit uncertain road to adulthood. The form in question is explicitly rooted in violence and employs children as the actors and stakes in what amounts to a form of urban warfare: that which stems from the drugs trade, and which in turn relies upon the existence of outrageous inequalities; that perpetrated by organized guerrilla groups using overwhelming numbers of children (Uribe); but, more often than not, that between gangs, between gangs

and the police, and between the different police forces backing different gangs – with drugs relieving the misery like a noose to a hanged man. The consumption and dealing of drugs by the children and the political use made of it by the police and leaders enable the physical as much statistical elimination of a good many young and adolescent children via a varied range of almost ritualized incidents (denunciation, traps, gangland killings, acts of intimidation).

Given the future inequalities the world seems to have in store, this warfare is a far cry from a passing epiphenomenon. It could well assume some quite unexpected forms if the police continue playing sorcerer's apprentice by sparking gangland killings in the hope that the 'misfits' and 'bandits' will wipe each other out. Several articles (Alvim, Fukui, Lange) highlight the perverse device used to obscure child labour: the sense of propriety gained from recognizing its existence combined with silence on the matter of children's rights. This device is even further reinforced here as it is still more difficult to accept that the world is ravaged by urban warfare and that underage children are marked out as the actors and frontline victims (be it just the single monthly death in France or the dozens daily in Brazil); hence, the exploitation of child labour – which we can always manage, notwithstanding the difficulty, to discuss – will be presented as a phenomenon that is separate from 'delinquency', which is very easy to talk about as long as it is disassociated from questions relating to work, and solely for the purposes of condemning it (Fukui). Or else it is poverty which, contrary to all the evidence yet with stubborn perseverance down the years, will be stigmatized as leading to crime while work is endlessly presented as an alternative to crime (Alvim).

In fact they all come from the same discriminatory mould and each really does boil down to a matter of labour and survival. Reproduced here, in this street work, which is far more illicit and violent than ordinary forms, is an old pattern of division of labour: in a war, far more boys pay with their lives than girls. And if received wisdom immediately associates delinquency with poverty, making the association appear natural, working-class families are so well aware that poverty can easily lead to delinquency that they are just as likely to stigmatize it in front of their children as middle-class families; even if they do not, of course, actually manage to believe it themselves.

### Continuing Exclusion

Many chapters underline the fact that household crises are aggravated by the free-market policies of structural adjustment: growing numbers of single-parent families and, moreover, female-dominated families, children 'of the street' or children 'in the street'. If the official and legitimated prospects of globalization and the single market can only sustain and intensify urban warfare, there is just as much of a commitment to paving the way towards

a more rationalized (from the point of view of exploitation) use of child labour. What has until now been but a trend – strong, though at times contested by organized social forces – is in danger of becoming a self-enforcing rule: the deskilling, underpayment and overexploitation of any labour force which may, for any reason, be weakened.

This has already come to our attention when observing how child labour is used at every level from the household to the multinational company (Temgoua) and in any economic climate, growth or recession (Banpasirichote, Bigou, Liao). The deskilled group should include so-called ‘international’ migrants, newly urbanized country people, women; it is also, broadly speaking, the case of any other labour group which may, under local or individual circumstances, be weakened. In the context of an increasingly flexible global labour market and a growing upwards or downwards diversification of labour groups, it seems perfectly clear that the weakest groups will continue to be more easily crushed than others, regardless even of each country’s position in the world economy: ‘newly industrialized countries’ or ‘least developed countries’, but developed countries as well. Their weakened position can only encourage the development of exploitative relations within the households concerned that will eventually cause many of them, as in the past, to fall apart. In the current world ‘order’ enforced by the rich countries and ‘their’ international institutions, we see hardly a hint of any fundamental change on the horizon (Meillassoux). And the odds are that, in the decades to come, India and the Far East are where urban populations will grow to 80 per cent of the total while the level in Latin America looks likely to fall to 30 per cent.

So, if it is theoretically true that paternalistic exploitative relations work best within the privacy of the family home where no law has the right to enter uninvited and, more often than not, as the final link in a chain of exploitation, we must not lose sight of the fact that this process is initiated from above and that it will splinter family groups prematurely as young children leave home early and, very often, die young. When, however, this process reaches its conclusion through a more normal split at the child’s coming of age, it starts all over again at a macro-economic level by ‘force of circumstances’ rather than a sort of spontaneous self-sufficiency which sustains itself within the domestic sphere.

Hence, knowing the dangers of decline and developing forms of slavery brought on by child labour, we must now and in the future tackle the very roots of the evil – i.e. the ruling economic system and market logic – not the resulting social effects as far as patterns of family behaviour in the milieux affected are concerned. Otherwise, social measures aiming at reinforcing the family unit and legislative measures aiming at regulating child labour can only ever act as a certainly useful but, in the long run, feeble stop-gap.

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In : Schlemmer Bernard (ed.). The exploited child. Londres :  
Zed Books, 263-267

Exploited children : child labour and proletarianization, Paris  
(FRA), 1994/11/24-26. ISBN 1-85649-721-6