Intersectional Tensions in Theorizing Adultism

Manfred Liebel & Philip Meade

Abstract

Adultism is a manifestation and a result of unequal power relations between older and younger people and in turn contributes to reproducing inequality between them. In this paper, we argue that adultism is more than the relationship between age groups and can only be adequately understood through a comprehensive historical materialist theory of social power relations. Only such a theory allows us to discover the material and ideological reasons that produce an unequal generational order and make it a problem. To do this, we draw in particular on contributions from intersectionality research and social reproduction theory leaning on thoughts of Karl Marx. Based on our understanding of these theoretical research perspectives, we examine the preconditions for the emergence of adultism in contemporary capitalist societies based on domination and oppression, ask about the tendencies inherent in these societies that make adultism questionable, and conclude by outlining possible paths towards countering adultism in society.

Introduction

The term adultism was coined in order to have an appropriate word for the oppression, disadvantage and discrimination of children and youth by adults and to be able to better criticize and combat this phenomenon. It is most often under-

Manfred Liebel is emeritus professor of sociology at Technical University Berlin and a lecturer in the M.A. Childhood Studies and Children's Rights at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam. Philip Meade is also a lecturer in the M.A. Childhood Studies and Children's Rights at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam. Email addresses: manfred.liebel@gmail.com & philip@kinderrechte-konkret.de

stood as the abuse of older people's power over younger people (Flasher, 1978; LeFrançois, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Bell, 2018), raising the question of whether it is not the abuse but the (unequal) power itself that is the problem (Alderson, 2020; Liebel & Meade, 2023). In this paper, we want to advance the thesis why adultism can only be adequately understood within the framework of a historical materialist theory of societal power relations. This requires looking at more than just the relationship between age groups, but also exploring the material and ideological reasons that produce this generational order and make it a problem. To do this, we draw in particular on contributions from intersectionality research (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; Collins, [1990]2022; Davis, 2008; Bohrer, 2019) and social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2022) leaning on thoughts of philosopher, economist and political theorist Karl Marx.

Based on our understanding of these theoretical research perspectives, we examine the preconditions for the emergence of adultism in contemporary capitalist societies based on domination and oppression, ask about the tendencies inherent in these societies that make adultism questionable, and conclude by outlining possible paths towards countering adultism in society. First, we begin with a historical classification of the concept of adultism.

The Historical Context

The concept of adultism is of recent origin and is closely related to today's capitalist societies.[1] We see the most important reason in the fact that it is only in these societies that a strict social and legal distinction is made between 'adults' and 'minors' and that specific phases of childhood and youth have developed. Although caution should be exercised in applying concepts that have emerged in a particular historical context to other contexts, it may be useful to look at earlier and non-capitalist cultures and societies as well. In them, we may find practices that resemble, and may even have helped produce, contemporary adultism. However, some of these societies also show that adultism is not a natural necessity and that quite differently structured age orders are possible. In such societies, we may even find intergenerational forms of relationships or conceptions of being a child and being young that serve as an example and can challenge contemporary societies to critique adultism. This double gaze can contribute to a better understanding of both the preconditions of adultism and the possibilities of overcoming it.

Practices with children that are similar to adultism have always been part of ruling orders and were intended to ensure the continuity of these orders, which, as far as we know, were always based on the domination of men, characterized by aggressiveness, and focused on military discipline (Stearns, 2006). Examples of this type of societies and cultures can be considered, on the one hand, absolutist ruled feudal systems and, on the other hand, the practices of enslavement and slave trade that accompanied colonialism. Their common feature was that

they were built on centrally conceived state structures in which the power of a ruling group (nobility, estate, caste) was embodied. They served the subjugation and exploitation of people whose labor made the reproduction and 'development' of these societies possible in the first place. Social relations similar to adultism at first sight can also be found in social orders in which (a part of) the elderly were granted special (material) authority and prerogatives due to their experience, without these being secured by aggressive violence and military discipline. We suggest to consider such structures in their respective contexts and not to categorize them sweepingly as adultist, since these authorities were often recognized by mutual group consent.

Practices of domination of the older over the younger in societies and cultures that are non-capitalist in character, sometimes referred to as 'pre-modern,' may thus be formally similar to what we now call adultist. But we propose to use the term adultism only in reference to societies in which 'being adult' is dichotomously and unequally demarcated from 'being young', and in which specific patterns of childhood and youth have emerged and become institutionalized. In this sense, philosophers Megan Lang and Becky Shelley speak of 'maturity-based dichotomy' and of children as 'potential-filled adults-in-the-making' (Lang & Shelley, 2021, p. 2).

We can use the term adultism in a critical sense only when this relationship becomes recognizable as a problem and can be questioned. This is only the case in the capitalist societies of modern times. In them, specific stages of childhood and youth have emerged that exclude children and youth from social life and turn them into 'outsiders' (Zeiher, 2009). They have produced 'child' and 'childhood' as a metaphor for 'irrationality' and 'immaturity' in contrast to the 'rationality' and 'maturity' of the adult (Mills & LeFrançois, 2018; Gheaus, 2015; Hannan, 2018; Burman, 2021). 'In any case, historically and transculturally, the sharp distinction we normally make today between adults and children seems reserved for Western societies' (Schweitzer, 2007, p. 41). Such processes of exclusion result in specific dynamics that can appear as generational conflicts or protest movements and are perceived by adults as a threat to the existing (generational) order. They result not least from the contradictions between the promises for the future associated with these phases of life and the actually limited opportunities for young people to shape their own lives and futures. In this context, adultism can be understood as an attempt by adults to ward off the emancipation efforts resulting from these contradictions and to maintain the state of a society determined solely by the elderly.

In this sense, we understand adultism as a critical concept that encompasses two basic ideas. On the one hand, it takes up emancipatory and resistant tendencies that result from the emergence of specific phases of childhood and youth that are separate from the 'seriousness of life' and the contradictions inherent in them, and makes them its own. On the other hand, it recalls certain age orders

of non-capitalist cultures that show that being young need not lead to separation from adulthood, but can be associated with shared responsibility and mutual respect and recognition. In this sense, philosopher Enrique Dussel (2002) would have spoken of a 'trans-modern' concept in order to emphasize that it is neither about a blanket rejection of European Enlightenment and 'modernity' nor about an idealization of 'traditional' and non-European societies and cultures, but about thinking together different experiences and traditions of thought.

Intersectional and Reproduction Theory Perspectives

The analysis of adultism must always keep in mind that the unequal relations between adults and young people can never be derived from age alone. Due to the anthropologically conditioned dependence of young children in particular on adult caregivers, a 'generational asymmetry' (Alanen, 2011) does indeed result, but this is always co-determined and shaped in specific ways by the fact that young people find themselves in different life situations. They are each involved in particular ways in social circumstances or institutions that help shape their experiences, attitudes, and actions and influence the relationships between people of different ages. We therefore find it necessary to speak not only of one childhood or youth, but of many childhoods and youths.

Childhood sociologist Sebastian Barajas (2021) rightly criticizes the fact that even today, even in childhood research, age is often neglected and disregarded as a variable of the social order of power. And the authors of a recent international scoping review state: 'Unexpectedly, the effects of ageism against younger people have largely been understudied' (De la Fuente-Núñez et al., 2021, p. 12). So, when we use adultism as a concept, we always have in mind that age, while an important and widely underexposed variable, is never the sole or compellingly dominant variable in the emergence of social subordination and oppression.

In order to focus on the various dimensions and causes of adultism and age-based discrimination, we find it helpful to draw on the approach of 'intersectionality', developed primarily in the United States. In its broadest understanding, intersectionality is a term that encapsulates a variety of positions on the relationships between forms of oppression and identity in the contemporary world. It was developed primarily by Black women and women of color who found previous anti-racist, feminist, and anti-capitalist theories insufficient to explain and struggle against their oppression. While there is broad consensus that the term was first used by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), the metaphor of intersections to describe the workings and experiences of various modalities of oppression had been circulating in African-American feminism for at least a decade before Crenshaw's formulation. Of particular note here is the *Combahee River Collective*—which emerged in the 1970s—whose activists felt left out of the analysis of 'white' feminists (see, e.g., Keenaga-Yamahtta, 2017). An equally

influential contribution came from civil rights activist Angela Davis, who published the seminal work *Women, Race and Class* (Davis, 1983) in the early 1980s.

Since then, various theories have been developed under the term intersectionality, which can hardly be brought to a common denominator (for an overview, see Winker & Degele, 2009; Bohrer, 2019). They are occasionally criticized by Marxist-oriented authors for being fixated on individualist, bourgeois, or postmodern identity politics, for their political perspectives being essentially reformist and/or liberal, for misunderstanding the fundamental nature of class relations, for lacking a causal explanation of oppression, or for intersectionality being an inappropriate metaphor for understanding oppression. According to philosopher Ashley Bohrer, who has written extensively on the relationship between Marxism and intersectionality, 'many of these criticisms are misplaced, generated from a failure to engage substantively with intersectionality as a vibrant body of scholarship and activism' (Bohrer, 2019, p. 101).

We do not refer here to a specific theoretical version of intersectionality, but take up only the idea that discrimination must be seen multi-dimensionally and as the result of interdependent causes. It is particularly important to us that characteristics such as disabilities, gender, skin color, social origin or class situation are not simply added up as reasons for discrimination and that the person affected experiences double or multiple discrimination as a result. The intersectional perspective, as we understand it here, instead, makes it possible to see the different mechanisms of discrimination as if through a magnifying glass. However, we also believe it is necessary to view the individual dimensions of discrimination not as predetermined and independent criteria, axes, or vectors, but as dialectical and processual in the larger social context as 'intersecting relations with a vision of interlocking ones' (McNally, 2017, p. 96). In this sense, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins had already proposed in the 1990s to think in terms of interlocking systems of oppression that form a 'matrix of domination' (Collins, [1990]2022). Psychologist Ann Phoenix summarizes this idea as follows:

> A key point is that the categories are mutually constitutive. They do not just add together but help to construct each other. They also stand in power relations to each other, with the possibility of producing contradictory and complex positioning. (Phoenix, 2022, p. 26; see also Collins & Bilge, 2020; Collins et al, 2021)

In our view, such complex analysis is performed by Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2022), which is also feminist in orientation and emerged through extending Marx's thoughts on the processes of production and reproduction in capitalist society. In contrast to dogmatic Marxist approaches, it understands capitalism not only as an economic system but as a historically changing social power structure in which not only class antagonism but also many other contradictions equally shape people's lives.

Capitalism as a structure is highly dependent on many forms of exclusion, mar-

ginalization, domination, and disempowerment. If we are to take one lesson from these discussions, it should be that no account of race, gender, sexuality, imperialism, or colonization could ever hope to be complete without a systematic understanding of how capitalism operates, not only as an economic system, but as a structuring field of life with ramifications far beyond the workplace. (Bohrer, 2019, p. 157)

While Bohrer admits that 'a critique of capitalism must include a political-economic critique,' she emphasizes that 'any analysis that avoids interrogating the social, cultural, familial, psychological, and intimate domains will lose the ability to track some of the most important formations of capitalist modernity' (op. cit., p. 204).

The focus of Social Reproduction Theory is on the meaning of work in its broadest sense as a basic condition of human life. Such an understanding of work goes beyond what is commonly called 'gainful employment' or, in an even narrower sense, 'wage labor.' It encompasses all types, forms and areas of activity that are in some way useful or significant for others. It can be located in one's own household as well as in other areas of society. It thus also includes activities that are commonly referred to not as work but as 'help,' 'care,' 'volunteerism,' or whatever. This understanding of work is also opposed to a view of work that sees it per se and exclusively as a burden and toil. The emphasis is rather on the fact that it is meaningful (not only productive in the classical economic sense) and that it can be shaped, i.e., it can also take on other forms and take place under humane conditions.[2]

In capitalist society, the main purpose of labor is to produce monetary values and commodities, and labor assets are not judged by their significance for life, but are measured as labor power by hours and become commodities themselves. The counter-concept to this reduced understanding of labor is referred to by Marx in the *Grundrisse* of 1843/44 (Marx, 1973) as '*lebendige Arbeit*' (living labor) and is regarded by him as a force that resists the coercive character of labor relations in which people are used and exploited by others. Marx understands living labor as the sensual-objective relation between human beings and external nature, in which neither side can exist without the other. This interdependent being is also expressed in Marx's ideas of an economy of the common.

> The exchange of human activity within production itself as well as the exchange of human products with one another is equivalent to the generic activity and generic spirit whose actual, conscious, and authentic existence is social activity and social satisfaction. As human nature is the true common life [*Gemeinwesen*] of man, men through the activation of their nature create and produce a human common life, a social essence which is no abstractly universal power opposed to the single individual, but is the essence or nature of every single individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirt, his own wealth. (Marx [1844]1967, pp. 271-272; see also Saenz, 2009)

According to Marx, the worker is separated from his *true common life*, by

which he means the totality of the potentials and forms of expression of the human essence. That means, the worker is alienated from this common life, from the development of the possibilities of life, from 'life itself' by having to carry out his or her work under conditions in which he or she cannot be 'at home' (for Marx's conception of alienation, see Ollman, 1971; Jaeggi, 2014).

This idea becomes the basis of the critique of capitalism in Social Reproduction Theory. By highlighting the embodiment of labor activities in concrete socio-spatial relations, it shows how the totality of practices that reproduce social life are simultaneously organized through multiple relations of domination and power. According to philosopher Nancy Fraser,

> (o)ne essential epistemic shift is that from production to social reproduction – the forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and sustain human beings and social bonds. Variously called 'care', 'affective labor', or 'subjectivation', this activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the socio-ethical substance, or *Sittlichkeit,* in which they move. Central here is the work of birthing and socializing the young, building communities, producing and reproducing the shared meanings, affective dispositions, and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation (Fraser: 2022, p. 9; emphasis in orig.)

Neither in Social Reproduction Theory nor in intersectionality research have children and childhoods received significant attention. At best, as is evident in the quote from Nancy Fraser, they occurred as objects of care and affective labor by women, but age of life was not included as a possible dimension or axis of discrimination for a long time. Sociologist Doris Bühler-Niederberger (2019, p. 159), for example, criticizes that intersectionality research has so far 'not attempted a more comprehensive description of childhood(s), but has focused on specific groups of children'. Within childhood research itself, different views can be found on the attention and relevance of the concept of intersectionality. Leena Alanen (2016, p. 158), for example, laments in an editorial in the journal *Childhood* that 'in social studies of childhood, it seems, the notion has not yet taken root'. But she also reminds us that Barrie Thorne (2004) had already introduced intersectional analysis as a possible way to theorize age and other differences in an earlier editorial of *Childhood*. She suggests asking 'how new or useful "intersectionality" is as a concept, perspective ("lens"), method, or even theory for the theoretical-conceptual advancement of childhood research' (Alanen, 2016, p. 158).

Childhood geographers Kristina Konstantoni and Akwugo Emejulu (2017) explicitly emphasize that there are many similarities between Childhood Studies and the intersectionality approach: 'Childhood studies has strong connections with intersectionality, such as a focus on agency and structural implications, power relations, embodiment and emancipation' (op. cit., p. 10). They explain it this way:

> If the starting point of understanding childhood is not necessarily a homogeneous and universalising notion of 'age' but, rather, 'difference', as structured by the particular dynamics of race, class, gender, geography and other categories of difference, this creates a powerful link between intersectionality and childhood studies that does not deprioritise race but put age in the context of race and other axes of difference (op. cit., p. 11)

Phoenix (2022, p. 23) also shows how the intersectionality approach can enrich Childhood Studies. She argues 'that intersectionality enables a holistic perspective on children's lives, allowing analysis of how they are positioned and treated, the ways in which intersectional positioning is (re)produced and their agency'. Referring to recent examples such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the *Black Lives Matter* movement, she argues for the consideration—alongside age, generation, gender, social class, and racialization—of place, space and nation as important intersectional structural categories (see also Rodó-de-Zárate, 2017).

Crenshaw herself, along with female collaborators, has also shown in an empirical study (Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015) how the repressive experiences of African American girls differ from both the repressive experiences of African American boys and the experiences of 'white' girls, and how differently they cope. Their findings suggest that adults sometimes have different expectations of Black girls and intervene on different occasions than they do with boys. Black girls are perceived as intentionally defiant and precocious, and their behaviors are interpreted as aggressive, dominant, loud, unruly, unmanageable, unfeminine, or criminal. One consequence is that teachers and police over-discipline Black girls because their behaviors do not conform to those associated with 'white,' heterosexual, middle-class femininity. For children and youth, this results in other forms of marginalization and discrimination, some of which are new, depending on affiliations and positionings, such as educational attainment, citizenship, or sexual orientation, to name just three references (see, e.g., von Benzon & Wilkinson, 2019).

One of the few reflections on Social Reproduction Theory that refers to children and childhoods comes from philosopher Susan Ferguson (2017). In it, she explains how children and childhoods are subjected to capitalist logic, but also what potentials there are in children to resist 'capitalist subjectification'. According to her,

> Capitalist children and childhoods are engaged in a constant negotiation between a playful, transformative relationship to the world and the more instrumental, disembodied state of alienation required to become laborers for capital. This negotiation occurs throughout the entirety of children's everyday lives, be they at home, at work, at school, or at the mall. (op. cit., p. 114)

Without explicitly referring to adultism, the author thus gives indications of how a tension between power-holding adults and their power-subjugated children is repeatedly built up in capitalist society. However, we see a problem in her analysis in the fact that she mystifies childhood in an ahistorical way by identifying it with

'play,' while she can only imagine 'work' as an alienated activity of adults. She thus does not do justice to the fact that the separation and opposition of play and work only emerges with capitalist society and is reproduced in it, but also increasingly problematized (Liebel, 2004, pp. 176-193).[3]

We see a challenge of Social Reproduction Theory in relating its comprehensive understanding of labor as a basic condition of human life also to children as social subjects and thus contributing to questioning childhood as a subordinate status of 'becoming' and of mere preparation for the 'seriousness of life.' This also means imagining childhoods differently than they are conceded in capitalist society and tracing corresponding tendencies in contemporary societies. In the following sections, we will explore these questions, which are equally important for the emergence and critique of adultism, in more detail.

Preconditions and Development of Adultism

As shown above, the term adultism is used to describe an unequal power relationship between older and younger people to the disadvantage of the younger. This relationship is expressed in interpersonal relationships as well as in social structures and institutions. In our view, adultism and the debate about adultist relations are essentially characterized by three moments:

◆ A strict distinction is made between 'adulthood' and 'childhood/youth' in the sense of a dichotomy.

◆ Between age groups there is a hierarchical relationship or a relationship of unequal power (which is usually legitimized by ideologies of development, maturity, rationality and reason).

◆ This hierarchical/unequal power relationship becomes a problem in social reality as well as delegitimized in political and scientific discourses critical of domination.

These elements are found or emerging in most contemporary societies. They mean that the age phases we call childhood and youth have been constructed in historically specific ways and internalized by most people regardless of their age. This internalization, however, has to be constantly renewed among the younger generations, something that has become more difficult today, and increasingly problematic and uncertain, for reasons we will outline below.

Childhood and youth in the sense presented here have emerged with capitalist society in Europe since around the 17th century (Ariès, 1962; Gillis, 1981), but they are already based on concepts dating back to ancient Greece. In his most important work on State philosophy, *Politics*, for example, philosopher Aristotle asserts that

[…] almost all things rule and are ruled according to nature. But the kind of rules differs; the freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which

the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature. (Aristotle, Politics, Book I, Part XIII, pp. 20-21)

Since then, childhood and youth have been understood as life phases that have an inferior status compared to the life phase of adulthood. The young people assigned to these life phases are considered immature and underdeveloped. Consequently, they must be subjected to a socialization process that leads them to the higher stage of a functioning adult. According to this view, which philosopher Anca Gheaus (2015) traces back to Aristotle, children are merely 'unfinished adults,' or they are ascribed—as has been critically noted in constructivist childhood research for more than three decades (e.g., James & Prout, [1990]1997)—to be in the stage of 'becoming', while adults are considered to be finished 'beings.'[4]

Adultism results from the fact that childhood is socially categorized as an age stage considered inferior and incapable. In this sense, legal scholar Gabriela Magistris and sociologist Santiago Morales (2018) refer to as *adultocentrismo* the analytical point of view from which the biological fact of being born, growing and developing is considered in a straight line (chronological time) and in ascending order. Thus, the development of the subject is hierarchized not only according to age, but also according to the characteristics and values assigned to growth. From this, they see hegemonic notions of childhood and adulthood emerging that

[…] reaffirm a natural and desirable way of being a child; as a social representation assimilated as natural for children, it is the annulment and pathologization of all other ways of being a child, adolescent and young person. Thus, children and young people from popular sectors and/or from non-Western cultures, who do not fit into this model of child, are the target of a set of policies deployed by the States aimed at their control and normalization. (Morales & Magistris, 2018, p. 27; see also Morales, 2022)

This cultural practice of assigning age as a universal and natural fact is also a practice of temporal power, which philosopher Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls 'chrononormativity'. Here, the body is bound to a socially significant embodiment through the management of time. Such binding—embodiment through time—is, in the author's view, where the process of chrononormativity is established, as 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity' (op. cit., p. 3). The individual body thus simultaneously becomes a collective body to which certain properties are ascribed. Chrononormativity, according to Freeman, consists in the intertwining of 'biological time', which is seen as natural, and 'national time', which is understood as a series of gears that move the nation toward progress. Biological time, as a universal and natural category, has become a key institutional category of contemporary nation-states throughout recent history.

According to the prevailing bourgeois pattern of childhood, children are dependent on adults in the sense that adults provide for them, while they do not have to worry about anything themselves. This is sometimes referred to as the 'privilege' of childhood and youth, which children and young people can enjoy before 'the serious side of life' begins. But the supposed privilege is bought—similar to women who are fixed to the role of 'housewife' or 'mother'—by the fact that they have nothing to say and are excluded from public life. Childhood and youth are privatized and infantilized. However, the bourgeois pattern of childhood has by no means fully prevailed, neither in the regions of the Global South, nor in the Global North. As intersectional analysis underlines, due to unequal living conditions and corresponding discriminations, many young people continue to have, and may even have growing reason to worry about what their future lives will be like. Their current situation between climate crisis, Covid-19 pandemic and war(s) accelerates this process worldwide.

Anthropologically, age orders are inevitable, since physical life has a beginning and an end, but they are not necessarily related to numerical age, nor are they necessarily associated with hierarchical relationships and unequal power. In some historical cultures and societies that existed until European colonization (and some of which are being revived today), there were various ways in which relationships between older and younger people were regulated. In them, special weight was usually given to the life experiences and resulting wisdom of the elders. This was expressed in the respect for the elders that was expected from those younger than them. But younger people were generally not strictly separated from older age groups, and the abilities attributed to them and the tasks assigned to them were not tied to fixed chronological ages. In today's sense, there was no such thing as 'childhood' and 'youth,' but different age phases were understood as complementary and were not necessarily organized hierarchically. Life and the abilities necessary for its preservation were not assigned linearly to progressive ages in the sense of growing maturity, but were present in them simultaneously. Younger people were sometimes ascribed skills that older people no longer had, and they took on tasks that older people could no longer perform or for which they considered themselves unsuitable. For this, in turn, the younger ones received respect and recognition.

This can be illustrated by an example from South America. In a comparative study between the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the conceptions of childhood in Andean and Amazonian cultures, for example, fundamental differences are pointed out. The preamble of the Convention emphasizes that 'the child, by reason of his lack of physical and mental maturity, needs special safeguards and care [...].' In contrast, in the lifestyles and cosmovisions of Andean and Amazonian communities, 'the child is not considered a person in evolution', but children are perceived as 'persons with attributes and responsibilities in their family as well as in their community and the natural environment' (terre des hom-

mes, 2014, p. 11). The Quechua word *wawa* is not synonymous with the term child, 'since in communities the body of an old person includes the child and the body of the child equally includes the old person' (ibid.). In festivities and rituals, childhood is not equated with a specific age:

> At the age of 7, the child already 'knows how to spend his or her life,' that is to say, he or she already knows how to make a *chacra*, how to raise livestock and as such 'already knows how to converse with the deities and nature.' So that the child at 7 years of age 'defends him/herself in life,' the parents, the *ayllu*, the community, have a vital contribution, they educate him/her not only to have 'good heart for the chacra,' 'good heart for cattle raising,' 'good heart for weaving,' 'good heart to be a leader or authority' etc., but also to 'improve the temper' or character of the children and thus contribute to the harmony of humans, nature and Andean deities (op. cit., pp. 11-12).[5]

The separation and hierarchization of the phases of life, which we trace back to Greek antiquity, was sharpened with the European Enlightenment. The now developed conception of reason led to a strict separation and hierarchization between maturity and immaturity, rationality and irrationality and their assignment to childhood and youth on the one hand and adulthood on the other.

> Reason and thought were idealized and attributed to adulthood; childhood was the antithesis and appeared primarily as a time of shortcomings and mistakes, much like 'the savages' recently 'discovered' in America. When humanism celebrated 'man,' it meant the white, male, adult human being. Children, on the other hand—along with women and the indigenous population of the Americas—formed only the foil on which this ideal was constructed: they constituted 'the Other.' (Winkler, 2017, p. 43)

Adults were juxtaposed with children and adolescents as the embodiment of perfection, while the latter were expected to first be trained to become functional adults. This process was and is still understood today as a kind of 'civilization' and emergence from the raw state of nature. It is reinforced by capitalist efficiency thinking based on absolutized and instrumental rationality. Adultism is based on the idea that children are wild, imperfect beings who must first be tamed and civilized in order to become adults. This process received a special imprint from the patriarchal structure of society, which granted special power to the father as the breadwinner and head of the family. We can also consider adultism as an intrinsic feature of a society fixated on 'productionism' in the sense of a permanent increase in the abundance of goods, whatever the cost (Weeks, 2011). In this society, only those count who are considered 'employable,' have purchasing power and fuel the consumption of goods.

Adultism is closely interwoven with what sociologist of law Matías Cordero Arce calls 'the hegemonic childhood,' in which 'the child is "the other," observed, supervised, regulated, oriented, and in sum made into the adult—as the native of

civilization—who observes, regulates, orients, and guides' (Cordero Arce, 2015, p. 128; similarly Rollo, 2020). This reflects the civilizing myths of colonization with its unequal and despotic power relations that continue to operate today under the conditions of capitalist globalization. The process of civilization between age groups corresponds to the pattern of colonization of 'foreign' territories and communities, which was understood as the civilization of 'primitive peoples' and justified as the 'white man's burden' (Kipling, 1899). For their part, the people subjected to colonization were devalued as children in the sense of the 'modern' pattern of childhood and degraded to objects of education, insofar as they were not subject to brutal violence or outright murdered (see Liebel, 2020).

Adultism is thus based on the strict separation of being child from being adult. In capitalist society, this has to do with the fact that the production and reproduction of life takes place in forms that make personal skill and capacity development for the majority of people almost impossible. The idea of the 'seriousness of life' is characterized by the fact that this is localized in the 'world of work,' which in turn is separated from the rest of life and takes place according to rules that are not based on human needs but on the exploitation of human labor power and the maximization of profit. This circumstance makes it considerably more difficult to imagine the world of work as a place where young people, too, have their place and can test and train their abilities. It suggests nailing childhood to places—mainly pedagogic institutions—where no important, life-fulfilling activities are carried out. These institutions are primarily confined to preparing young people to later become economically exploitable 'human capital' (Qvortrup, 2001) for national market competitivity. Pupils are measured by their contribution to future prosperity, which is considered necessary for the continued existence and further development of society. Children have thus been condemned to a life characterized by lack of autonomy and passivity or, at best, by a pre-limited and purposive autonomy or participation. The idea of childhood as a protected phase of life, separate from, subordinate to and in preparation for adult life, thus has not only ideological but also material-historical preconditions. The exploitation of colonized territories and communities first created the material resources to separate part of the children from the responsibility for the production and reproduction of human life and to assign them to a special social space. This social space is privatized within the framework of the bourgeois family ('family childhood'), institutionalized and pedagogized within the framework of bourgeois society ('school childhood').

School and other educational institutions are deeply embedded in capitalistically organized social formations. On the one hand, they enable parents to take on work outside the family sphere (the problematic absence of which recently attracted attention during the pandemic lockdowns). Secondly, they aim to pre-sort pupils (the future workforce) for the hierarchy of the labor market. In capitalism, only a few high school graduates are required, but enough material for the low-wage sector and the industrial reserve army. The failing of a large proportion

of pupils and their premature exclusion from higher education is a fundamental function of the education system (see Huisken, 2016). Schools achieve this selection by implementing an adultist teacher-student relationship (Liebel & Meade, 2023, pp. 76-86) and hereby organizing lessons as a competitive event. Learning performance is not measured individually, but always in comparison to other classmates, who are perceived as competitors and, to a limited extent, as potential opponents. Knowledge transfer is one-directional. The teacher sets the tone, but she or he is also subject to the directives of the Curriculum and the requirements of school authorities. School takes on the civilizing task of educating people to become well-behaved citizens that accommodate a certain economic agenda. It does not matter whether the cane, grades, time pressure, humiliation or other, seemingly more humane, means of assessment and discipline (e.g., classroom management) are applied, whether more or less ostensible freedom is granted or whether student participation models are implemented. The 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968) exerts subtle control over pupils and reinforces the fundamental purpose of the institution. Failing of students in the education system is, furthermore, attributed to alleged laziness, stupidity or immaturity and thus individualized. Ideologically, this systematic discrimination is cloaked in a specific idea of social justice: inequality between people is considered just if the better-off person has gained an advantage in a supposedly equitable competition, also a basic principle of the capitalist labor market.

The simultaneously emerging capitalist mode of production with its destructive tendencies made it necessary to separate children from detrimental factory labor with the aim to preserve and prepare them as future workers, soldiers and mothers. The prohibitions of 'child labor' introduced not least for this reason since the 19th century went hand in hand with the emergence of nation-states that regarded the following generations as national development potential and institutionalize them in the social form of *development-related childhood*, mostly mediated by the introduction of compulsory education. The ideal background for this is the notion, objectified in bourgeois law, of the self-responsible, autonomous, rational individual who controls and dominates himself (Foucault, 1980). This thinking is fundamentally different from the notion that all individuals are social beings from birth, interdependent and interrelated (Vygotsky, [1934]1986).

The connections between adultism and the treatment of children's work have been little studied. In her now classic theoretical study of the 'differentiation of child labor in the capitalist labor market', feminist economist Diane Elson (1982) had traced the 'dominant' forms of work that disadvantage children to three 'authority sources' which, according to her, mark the 'seniority system' of contemporary capitalist societies: (1) the authority of the adults in the family; (2) the requirements of the educational system, which is also governed by adults; and (3) the 'needs' of capitalism for the easy and profitable utilisation of labour power.

> The seniority system obviously encompasses a range of gradations, not simply the division between children and adults, but children are at the bottom of it. And this means it is extremely difficult for them to secure full recognition in monetary terms for the skills they possess and for the contribution they make to family income. Only when they have passed over to adult status can they be recognised as 'skilled' or 'breadwinners'—or rather, only when the boys have passed over to adult status, for the girls the problem remains. (op. cit., p. 493)

The low status of children has the result that (a) the children's abilities are poorly regarded; (b) children are primarily given tasks that are considered economically less valuable, especially so-called 'reproductive' jobs; and (c) despite the large quantity of work that they do, children are not recognized as workers with their own rights (op. cit., p. 491; see also Nieuwenhuys, 2000, p. 287). However, it is also questionable whether the prohibition of child labor, which became the prevailing legal norm in capitalist societies from the mid-19th century onward, in turn reinforced adultism. In any case, Cordero Arce (2022) puts forward the noteworthy thesis that it was not hegemonic adultism that promoted the exclusion of children from work, but rather the opposite: this exclusion paved the way for adultism, since the prohibitions on child labor, which were quite profitable for adult workers and rulers, required moral justification.

However, even in capitalist societies, these exclusions are again in question, and there is an increasing search for possible ways to connect abstract learning in educational institutions separate from life with the real world or with vital tasks. Here lies an opportunity to learn from the way the lives of young people are shaped in some non-capitalist societies, rather than continuing to make the childhood pattern that has dominated the Global North absolute and imposing it on societies of the Global South.

Certainly, it must be kept in mind that life in such cultures and societies is itself affected by the postcolonial constellation. This constellation not only leads to the fact that the childhoods there are disdained and invisible, but are also damaged and impaired in a material sense. This is expressed, for example, in the increasingly precarious living conditions and lower life chances of children of the Global South. In order to put an end to the colonization of childhood, which could also be called *postcolonial paternalism*, it is therefore particularly urgent to continue the decolonization of postcolonial societies (Liebel, 2020; 2023).

Adultism Under Pressure of Justification

Adultism tends to lose ground as the power that older people have over younger people loses credibility. This is a process that began at the latest in the 1960s, when young people in many parts of the world rebelled against the authoritarian dominance of adults and began to dream of a world in which power over others would come to an end. But this process is full of contradictions, does not proceed in a straight line and is far from having reached its end. In this section,

we will show why and in what ways adultism has been delegitimized and shown to be inconclusive, outdated, inappropriate, or even harmful. In doing so, we will draw on a variety of readings.

One interpretation comes from anthropologist Margaret Mead, who published a book in the early 1970s in which she diagnosed a fundamental cultural shift that she believed was sweeping the world (Mead, 1970). Central to her thinking is the question of who has what knowledge and who can learn from whom. For this purpose, she distinguishes three categories of cultures that existed simultaneously in the world at her time, i.e., about 50 years ago, but to which she attests different prospects of success. Mead calls these cultures postfigurative, cofigurative, and prefigurative. She calls postfigurative a culture 'in which children learn primarily from their forebears,' cofigurative a culture 'in which both children and adults learn from peers,' and prefigurative a culture 'in which adults also learn from their children' (op. cit., p. 1) and in which 'it will be the child—and not the parent and grandparent—that represents what is to come' (op. cit., p. 68). She sees the world in her time entering a 'period, new in history' (op. cit., p. 1)—in which 'the secure belief that those who knew had authority over those who did not had been shaken' (op. cit., pp. XVI-XVII).

> Today, nowhere in the world are there elders who know what the children know, no matter how remote and simple the societies are in which the children live. In the past there were always some elders who knew more than any children in terms of their experience of having grown up in a cultural system. Today there are none. It is not only that parents are no longer guides, whether one seeks them in one's own country or abroad. There are no elders who know what those who have been reared within the last twenty years [from today's point of view, that would be seventy years; ML/PM] know about the world into which they were born. (op. cit., pp. 60-61)

Mead is obviously still under the impression of the 'anti-authoritarian' protest movements of the late 1960s, which were driven by young people, and tries to derive prognoses for the future from them. Applied to the question of adultism, it would no longer have a future, because 'as long as any adult thinks that he, like the parents and teachers of old, can become introspective, invoke his own youth to understand the youth before him, then he is lost' (op. cit., p. 63). But, as we know from today's perspective, adultism is far from gone. The confidence that speaks from Mead's words is based not only on the fact that the author formulated her prognosis more than 50 years ago, but also on the fact that she understood the relationship between older and younger people as a matter of knowledge and learning (from each other). But the mechanisms that keep adultism alive are not limited to knowledge and learning; they are also a matter of access to power. Mead had an inkling of this when she saw 'the freeing of men's imagination' as depending on 'the direct participation of those who, up to now, have not had access to power, and whose nature those in power cannot fully imagine' (op. cit., p. 73). Therefore,

the young must have more opportunities to gain influence in society, i.e., to have corresponding means of power.

Another interpretation of the dwindling moral legitimacy of adultism comes from sociologist and media researcher Neil Postman. Unlike Mead, however, he does not see a problem with children not having the influence they deserve; rather, he laments that childhood as a whole is 'disappearing' (Postman, 1982). In this, he, like Mead, has in mind the growing importance of audiovisual media, but he does not see them, as she does, as an indication of the knowledge advantage of younger generations, but as a danger to childhood because the dwindling importance of acquiring literacy skills is eroding the threshold to adulthood. Postman's view of childhood itself springs from an adultist motif: a special sphere of protection should be preserved for children that does not expose them to the 'seriousness of life' understood as a danger. Read against the grain, Postman's fear shows that adultism as a manifestation of adult power and prerogatives is indeed losing its ground. Again, however, it would be rash to infer from this diagnosis that adultism is already a thing of the past. Moreover, current interpretations show that Postman's thesis that young people acquire more power than older people due to their increased media use in digital worlds is not correct (see Jørgensen & Wyness, 2021, pp. 69-72).

The moral legitimacy of adultism is also undermined by recent research in neuroscience. It shows that children have different cognitive and moral capacities than adults, not inferior ones. Psychologist Alison Gopnik points out that in recent decades there has been a major shift in scientific knowledge about the abilities of very young children:

> We used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking and experience were concrete, immediate, and limited. In fact, psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that babies not only learn more, but imagine more, care more, and experience more than we would have ever thought possible. In some ways, young children are actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring, and even more conscious than adults are. (Gopnik, 2009, p. 5)

Not only are children spontaneously able to formulate (basic) philosophical questions, but according to Gopnik and co-authors, they can also spontaneously adopt a scientific way of thinking when they look at the world. Babies and young children 'think, draw conclusions, make predictions, look for explanations, and even do experiments' (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 2008, p. viii). It is generally known that mental plasticity is much higher in childhood than in adulthood, meaning that children are particularly capable of learning in the face of new experiences. Obviously, children almost always enter uncharted territory, since they still lack necessary experience to do so. They have not yet had time to learn how to build on the acquired knowledge of previous generations. According to Gopnik et al., however, children proceed more comprehensively and creatively in their thinking experiments than adults. They investigate causal relationships, make predictions

and generally search for explanations if they find opportunities to do so and are supported in doing so if necessary.

Gopnik and her co-authors explain the outstanding cognitive abilities of children with the special characteristics of their brains. The prefrontal cortexes of children are not yet fully developed, and therefore they lack strong prefrontal control. This is necessary, they say, to block out information that is not essential for performing a particular task, which is especially useful when trying to accomplish such a task. At the same time, however, prefrontal control limits focus and makes it difficult to use the imagination freely. The absence of prefrontal control explains why children learn quickly and have greater mental flexibility, adaptability, and creativity—necessary for philosophical and scientific inquiry—than adults. According to these authors, we as a species owe our evolutionary success precisely to this mental flexibility, adaptability and creativity, which enable us to constantly improve our environment.

Following Gopnik and co-authors, children generally have cognitive and creative abilities that have been lost or significantly diminished in most adults. These skills are not trivial: they give young people access to important assets, such as philosophical and exploratory thinking. Being such a person can be valuable even if one does not have much use of these skills, such as when, as a child, one does not find many adults willing to engage in philosophical discussions or attempts to explore the causal explanation of the world. The mere intellectual curiosity of young people seems valuable, regardless of how it contributes to knowledge. It would be especially valuable in a world that allows children to live out the potentials that are inherent in them at a very young age: curiosity, ease of learning, and a propensity to ask existential questions. In such a world, adultism would no longer have a place.

Contrary to previous conceptions of children as immoral and self-centered beings, psychologist Paul Bloom (2013) and his team at Yale University's Department of Infant Research have shown that infants have a rudimentary sense of justice from about three months of age. Bloom demonstrates how infants, even before they can talk or walk, judge the 'good' and 'bad' in actions of others, feel empathy and compassion, and act to calm people in distress. He thus contradicts earlier theories of developmental psychology, which assumed that children cannot acquire these qualities until they are about 10 years old. Nevertheless, Bloom points out that other (external) influences play a role in whether children actually act empathically or morally. Since this is equally true of adults, this research also points to the de-legitimization of adultism, which sweepingly attributes a lack of moral competence to young people. Similarly, family therapist Jesper Juul (2011) taught a new generation of parents how children cooperate with adults on a practical level from an early age. He was thus able to encourage many parents to trust their children more.

Those empathic and cooperative skills are of particular importance when it

comes to the question of equal participation and involvement of young people. This is because participation is usually associated only with older children or adolescents. In order to strengthen self-esteem, improve self-protection and achieve a self-determined life, a participatory approach that sees participation as a right and not a concession should be self-evident in all communication and community with young people. The theory of 'salutogenesis' by health sociologist Aaron Antonovsky (1979) provides a psychological underpinning for this thesis. Antonovsky, beginning in the 1960s, conducted the first large-scale research on what keeps people healthy (instead of asking what makes them sick—pathogenesis—, as in traditional medical approaches). The results of his research indicated that childhood experiences have a significant impact on the development and maintenance of health, well beyond childhood. A central aspect of the theory of salutogenesis is the *sense of coherence*, for the emergence of which, in addition to the comprehensibility and meaningfulness of one's own life, the development of 'control beliefs' is also necessary. Again, experiences of *self-efficacy*—i.e., when one's own commitment to a cause actually leads to the fulfillment of desires or the satisfaction of needs—represent an essential resource for this. However, self-efficacy is also important in stressful situations and after setbacks in order to counteract learned helplessness (usually a generalized loss of control). Theories of salutogenesis underline the need for active, comprehensive and sustainable child and youth participation and empowerment of young people.

However, psychological research and theoretical developments that question centuries of negative and deficient knowledge about 'infants,' 'toddlers,' 'children,' and 'adolescents,' can also stumble into adultist pitfalls. This is the case when they attribute exclusively positive characteristics to children in an essentialist manner, thus encouraging stereotyping of childhood images. Study findings and theories that attribute certain skills, knowledge, qualities or performance to young persons never apply equally to all children. In order to avoid adultism in research, cautious restraint in generalization is required, and individual young people must be considered in their respective specific social and cultural contexts, as it is emphasized by the intersectional approach. This is also valid for all research mentioned above.

From a sociological point of view, other social trends in today's world make adultism obsolete and deprive it of legitimacy. Among these, we count that the adolescent phase as a 'psychosocial moratorium'—according to psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson (1994) a phase in the human life cycle—is in question. For many young people, the transitions into adulthood have become not only longer, more unstructured, and more uncertain, but also more individually consequential. 'The previously narrowly time-limited free space in which one could let off steam before entering the working world is dissolving' (Kirchhöfer & Merkens, 2004, p. 17). Thus, 'the relationship between education, work and leisure, as defined by the youth moratorium, is losing its power to shape life phases' and must be replaced

by a different 'youth model' (Schröer & Böhnisch, 2006, p. 46). The moratorium previously attested to this age phase no longer corresponds to reality, since the development of young people today is fraught with biographical risk that exposes them to economic competition at an early age. Educational scientist Heinz Reinders (2016) sums up that the 'educational moratorium' has turned into an 'optimization moratorium' since the turn of the millennium. Under the pressure to optimize one's own educational acquisition at school in the most (time-)economical way possible, the 'free spaces of the moratorium' for children and young people have been considerably restricted. This raises the question of whether it still makes any sense at all to hold on to the figure of thought of the moratorium.[6]

For partly similar reasons, other authors preferred years ago to speak of the adolescent phase as a 'psychosocial laboratory' (Eisenbürger & Vogelsang, 2002). According to them, it is (also) in the affluent societies of the Global North 'no longer a question of being allowed to be a youth in order to be able to grow up. Rather, the general problem seems to lie in [...] wanting to "grow up" and having to remain "youthful" (i.e. dependent)' (Schneider, 2003, p. 56). With the de-standardization and flexibilization of normal biographies, the 'social constants' of the youth moratorium are 'evaporating' (Zinnecker, 2003, p. 17) and it is increasingly losing 'the identity-forming and meaning-securing reference pillars of adult society' (Schneider, 2003, p. 57).

Such 'normal biographies' have never existed in societies of the Global South in the same way and to the same extent as in the economically prosperous Global North, and they could therefore not become the yardstick of a successful life. The lives of most children and young people here have always been 'de-standardized', and they have been dependent on being able to adapt flexibly to changing life situations and necessities in order not to perish prematurely. This circumstance is perceived by young people as anything but satisfying and does not give any reason to be idealized. But it does make the assumption, also widespread in youth research, that young people are primarily concerned with setting themselves apart from adults and stylizing their own triviality seem absurd or at least marginal.

It remains to be seen whether a new type of childhood and youth is emerging in the societies of the Global South that will also spread to young people in currently privileged regions. But there is no doubt that with the growing uncertainties and risks, promoted by migration movements, new life constellations are also emerging in the Global North, which are even more difficult to grasp with the figure of thought of the moratorium than before. This also includes the consideration that, at the latest with the rapid progress of globalization processes and the spread of electronic media, young people in different parts of the world no longer live isolated from one another, but can or must come to terms with standards, expectations, threats and promises from other regions of the world.

Nor can it be overlooked that within societies 'the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are becoming blurred and de-differentiated' (Jostock, 1999, p.

88). Children's spheres of life and experience are no longer continuously demarcated from those of adults, but are intermingled. Pedagogical institutions geared to children have long since lost their monopoly claim on shaping, molding and planning children's lives and are in—often helpless—competition with the worlds of experience of the media, consumption and even, increasingly, work. It is no coincidence that children today are granted a 'right to participation', and countless models are being designed and tested to give children the feeling that they can 'have a say' and 'help shape' their lives. The child's world, sealed off from adult life, which until now served as a model for a 'happy childhood' in bourgeois European societies, seems to be a thing of the past. In the recent sociology of childhood, this is addressed as a conflicting tendency between 'caring access' to children and their 'social participation' (Bühler-Niederberger, Mierendorff & Lange, 2010).

At the beginning of the 21st century, children's work in particular is 'more suitable than any other topic for sensitizing people to the changed relationship between childhood and adulthood' (Hengst, 2000, p. 73), and the question arises as to what place young people will occupy in the future social and generational division of labor. Certainly, it is not to be expected that a social condition will be established quasi automatically in which children can act and find recognition as independent shapers of their present and future lives with equal rights vis-à-vis adults. In order to achieve and secure this, it will be necessary that neither the lives of children nor those of adults remain fixed on and dominated by gainful employment, which is under the dictates of capitalist exploitation interests. One possible way could be to intertwine 'gainful employment, education, subsistence, domestic work and civil society' (Böhnisch & Schröer, 2001, p. 190) and to integrate educational institutions into 'social and economic networks of new work' (op. cit., p. 191). This cannot be imposed solely on working and job-seeking children and young people, but remains a task for all those who hold the lives of the coming generations as dear as their own.

These changes go hand in hand with the fact that young people have become more aware of their generational interests. They are no longer easily fobbed off with the idea that they have 'a future' if only they work hard enough and acquire the necessary frustration tolerance, or that they are even the 'future of society'. On the contrary, a growing number of young people blame the functional elites of the older generations for stealing their future. The destruction of the foundations of human life by the overexploitation of non-human nature, which is becoming clearer year by year, is perceived by many members of the younger generation in particular as a threat to their own future and that of future generations. The criticism of the powerful from the older generation expressed in it goes beyond the 'anti-authoritarian' criticism of the 1960s and following years. It is not only a critique of authoritarian practices, but fundamentally questions the domination of adults as a threat and negation of one's own existence. Thus, adultism is more clearly on the brink than ever before.

Paths Towards Countering Adultism in Society

An adultism-free society is difficult to imagine for most people. It is not easy for us either, but we are convinced that such a society is possible. Liberation from adultism is not about replacing the power of adults over children with the power of children over adults. Instead, it is about a relationship between different age groups and generations that is free of domination, equal, and respectful. However, here an intersectional perspective is mandatory. This egalitarian relationship will only be achievable if all other hierarchies, unequal power relations, and practices of domination are also overcome at interpersonal as well as institutional and structural levels. Thus, an adultism- and hierarchy-free society cannot be achieved overnight, but requires patience and great perseverance. What is needed are more intensive theoretical reflections and research that are not limited in a positivist sense to depicting the ways in which today's domination-based societies function; rather, what is needed are theories and research that reveal fractures and contradictions in the current hierarchies and thus reveal starting points for emancipation processes.

In view of the obstacles and difficulties that must be overcome anew from generation to generation, it would be presumptuous and unhelpful to imagine the adultism-free society in the usual sense of utopia as a perfect final state. Instead, we understand it as a possible perspective that points beyond the present reality and can be developed out of it. In their 'Invitation to rethink utopia and transformation,' sociologist Simon Sutterlütti and information scientist Stefan Meretz refer to such a concept as 'possibility utopia' (Sutterlütti & Meretz, 2018, p. 99) and emphasize that it must be justifiable. It does not simply result from fantasy and wishful dreaming, but from an analysis of the deficits of the given state of society and their connection with images of a better future. We always have such images in our minds when we are dissatisfied with an experienced situation and want to change it. To do without them (or even to have them forbidden to us) would mean to hand over our human imagination at the checkroom. Images give impulses to our thoughts and actions, indicate the direction in which we want to go. But, as we said, we cannot do without naming the preconditions that must be given or fought for in order to make the utopia imagined as possible a reality.

Accordingly, we understand utopian thinking as an attempt to imagine the possible, which points beyond the existing, and to find images and examples as well as reasons for this. In doing so, it can be helpful to look for inspiration in the past as well, without wanting to repeat or even idealize the past. But it is no less important to analyze the present in detail and to ask oneself why it is the way it is, why it is not better, and what can be done to make it better. Perhaps it helps to distinguish between small and large utopias, i.e., those that can be realized in the near future and those that require greater changes and need more perseverance.

An adultism-free society is not to be understood as a society in which everyone is kind to each other and (wants to) 'get along' better. It requires not only

egalitarian and respectful relations between young and older people and present and future generations, but also a minimum of social justice. For adults who are themselves affected by unequal power relations, especially of a socioeconomic nature, it is difficult to allow children more freedoms and provide resources than they themselves have. How are parents who work extremely long hours or pursue multiple jobs daily to make a makeshift living supposed to respond to their children's wishes without stress and allow them to negotiate their (free) time? How are they supposed to provide them with money and other resources that they themselves do not have in order to promote activities, mobility or independence for their children? Especially single parents, people with disabilities, or parents with many children experience these barriers. It is not surprising that historically the rise of child abandonment in a society usually correlates with the rise of poverty (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020, p. 95). Thus, in order to break the cycle of adultist practice, the current extreme social inequality must be ended and living conditions must be established that provide all people, regardless of their social background, personal characteristics, and age, with the necessary material and time resources for a dignified and satisfying life. Young people must also be enabled to dispose of their own resources, and the family model that makes children materially dependent on their parents must be replaced by forms of coexistence that make intergenerational considerateness and assistance the norm.

Adultism can only be effectively countered and an adultism-free society can only be achieved if the critique of unequal power relations includes all axes of discrimination in an intersectional way. We need to pursue the conditions that challenge young people and suggest them to question the unequal power relations between them and adults. In this practice of young people, what we could call the *small utopia* of an adultism-free society happens every day: taking the steps that make breaches in the daily experienced adultism, without being able to abolish it once and for all. The same applies to the actions of adults, for which we have resorted to the concept of 'critical adulthood' (ManuEla Ritz). We see the *great utopia* of an adultism-free society at work when it is possible, through fundamental changes in the structures and mechanisms of domination, to cut off the water from the continuous reproduction of adultism and thus also to dissolve the hierarchical dichotomy of adulthood and childhood. We do not see this as a perfect final state, but as a permanent challenge to concretely imagine the goal of an adultism-free society and to make one's own contribution to making this goal a reality.

Notes

[1] To critique adultism, the term *childism* is also used, analogous to the term feminism, but in different ways (e.g., Young-Bruehl, 2013; Wall, 2022). In Latin America, it is common to speak of *adultocentrismo* (e.g., Duarte, 2012; Morales & Magistris, 2018; Morales, 2022). We adhere here to the term adultism, analogous to the terms racism or colonialism, in the sense that it denotes both the social phenomenon and the critique of it.

[2] This comprehensive understanding of work is found in many cultures. In non-Western cultures, it is usually not common to subsume all these significant activities under one overarching concept such as work. The various activities are each designated by special words that express their diverse contents, purposes, and contexts.

[3] Other examples of how Social Reproduction Theory is or can be applied in Childhood Studies can be found in Rosen (2023).

[4] In past centuries, this view was occasionally opposed by the 'romantic' view according to which becoming an adult represents a loss of abilities (e.g., imagination, curiosity, mental plasticity, synesthetic perception). According to this view, adults were perceived as 'defective children' (Gheaus, 2015; on this tradition of thought, see Dwyer, 2011).

[5] It should also be noted that the presence of ancestors imagined in Andean as well as other indigenous cultures of the Americas, Africa and Asia suggests a different relationship of generations than in cultures where the world of the living is strictly separated from the afterlife of the dead. This is vividly expressed in the novel *The Fanished Road* by writer Ben Okri (1993), in which a Nigerian child returns from the spirit realm of the dead to the world of the living and observes the actions of adults in wonder.

[6] Several of the anti-'adultification' initiatives in the U.S., which seek to counter the repressive treatment of Black children and youth by claiming for them the 'privilege of an innocent childhood' as supposedly accorded to 'white' children, tend to perpetuate adultism (for critique, Meiners, 2016; Gilmore & Bettis, 2021; Patton, 2022).

References

Alanen, L. (2011). Moving towards a relational sociology of childhood. In R. Braches-Chyrek, C. Röhner, A. Schaarschuch & H. Sünker (eds.). *Kindheiten. Gesellschaften - Interdisziplinäre Zugänge zur Kindheitsforschung*. (pp. 21-44). Opladen: Barbara Budrich.

Alanen, L. (2016). 'Intersectionality' and other challenges to theorizing childhood. *Childhood, 23*(2), 157-161.

Alderson, P. (2020). Adultism. In D. T. Cook (ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of children and childhood studies* (pp. 438-542). SAGE Publications.

Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, stress and coping: New perspectives on mental and physical well-being.* Jossey-Bass.

Ariès, P. (1962). *Centuries of Childhood: A social history of family life*. Vintage Books.

Aristotle. ([330 b.c.]1999). *Politics*. Batoche Books Kitchener.

Barajas, S. (2021). Unearned advantages? Redefining privilege in light of childhood. *Children's Geographies, 20*(1), 24–36.

Bell, J. (2018). Adultism. In B. B. Frey (ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of educational research, measurement, and evaluation.* SAGE Publications.

Bhattacharya, T. (ed.). (2017). *Social reproduction theory*. Pluto Press.

Bloom, P. (2013). *Just babies: The origins of good and evil.* Broadway Books.

Böhnisch, L., & Schröer, W. (2001). *Pädagogik und Arbeitsgesellschaft. Historische Grundlagen und theoretische Ansätze für eine sozialpolitisch reflexive Pädagogik.* Weinheim & Munich: Juventa.

Bühler-Niederberger, D. (2019). Generationale Perspektive und Intersektionalität. Sozialwissenschaftliche Kindheitsforschung als Analyse. *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung, 14*(2), 155-167.

Bühler-Niederberger, D. (2020). *Lebensphase Kindheit. Theoretische Ansätze, Akteure und*

Handlungsräume. Weinheim & Basel: Beltz-Juventa.

Bühler-Niederberger, D., Mierendorff, J., & Lange, A. (eds.). (2010). *Kindheit zwischen fürsorglichem Zugriff und gesellschaftlicher Teilhabe.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Burman, E. (2021). *Developments: Child, image, nation*. Second Edition. Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (1990[2022]). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality*. Second Edition. Wiley.

Collins, P. H., Gonzaga da Silva, E. C., Ergun, E., Furseth, I., Bond, K. D., & Martínez-Palacios, J. (2021). Critical Exchange: Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory. *Contemporary Political Theory, 20*, 690–725.

Cordero Arce, M. (2015). *Hacia un discurso emancipador de los derechos de las niñas y los niños.* Lima: Ifejant.

Cordero Arce, M. (2022). *Right to vote and right to work: On the inseparability of political and material agency.* Presented at the Children's Voting Colloquium on the 27th of January 2022 [Video], https://vimeo.com.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum, 14*, 538-554.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241-1299.

Crenshaw, K. W., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced, and underprotected*. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies.

Davis, A. (1983). *Women, race, and class*. Vintage Books.

Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory, 9*(1), 67-85.

De la Fuente-Núñez, V., Cohn-Schwartz, E., Roy, S., & Ayalon, L. (2021). Scoping review on ageism against younger populations. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(8), 3988.

Duarte, C. (2012). Sociedades adultocéntricas: Sobre sus orígenes y reproducción. Última *Decada, 36*, 99–125.

Dussel, E. (2002). World-system and Trans-modernity. *Nepantla: Views from South, 3*(2), 221-244.

Dwyer, J. (2011). *Moral status and human life: The case for children's superiority.* Cambridge University Press.

Eisenbürger, I., & Vogelsang, W. (2002). Ich muss mein Leben selber meistern! Jugend im Stadt-Land-Vergleich. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, *5*, 28–38.

Elson, D. (1982). The differentiation of children's labour in the capitalist labour market. *Development and Change, 13*(4), 479–497.

Erikson, E. H. (1994). *Identity and the life vycle*. Revised edition. W. W. Norton & Co.

Ferguson, S. (2017). Children, childhood, and capitalism: A social reproduction perspective. In T. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social reproduction theory* (pp. 112-130). Pluto Press.

Flasher, J. (1978). Adultism. *Adolescence, 13*(51), 517–523.

Fletcher, A. F. C. (2015). *Facing adultism.* Common Action Books.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972– 1977*. Vintage Books.

Fraser, N. (2022). *Cannibal capitalism. How our system is devouring democracy, care, and*

the planet, and what we can do about it. Verso.

Freeman, E. (2010). *Time binds. queer temporalities, queer histories*. Duke University Press.

Gheaus, A. (2015). Unfinished adults and defective children: On the nature and value of childhood. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy, 9*(1), 1–21.

Gillis, J. R. (1981). *Youth and history: Tradition and change in European age relations, 1770–present*. Elsevier.

Gilmore, A. A., & Bettis, P. J. (2021). Antiblackness and the adultification of Black children in a U.S. prison nation. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education* (pp. 1–32). Oxford University Press.

Gopnik, A. (2009). *The philosophical baby: What children's minds tell us about truth, love and the meaning of life.* Bodley Head/Random House UK.

Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A., & Kuhl, P. (2008). *The scientist in the crib: What early learning tells us about the mind.* William Morrow.

Gregory, M., & Laverty, M. (eds.) (2021). *Gareth B. Matthews, the child's philosopher*. Routledge.

Hannan, S. (2018). Why childhood is bad for children. *Journal of Applied Philosophy, 35*(51), 11-28.

Hengst, H. (2000). Die Arbeit der Kinder und der Umbau der Arbeitsgesellschaft. In H. Hengst & H. Zeiher (eds.). *Die Arbeit der Kinder* (pp. 71-97). Weinheim & Munich: Juventa.

Huisken, F. (2016). *Erziehung im Kapitalismus. Von den Grundlügen der Pädagogik und dem unbestreitbaren Nutzen der bürgerlichen Lehranstalten.* Hamburg: VSA.

Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in classrooms.* Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Jaeggi, R. (2014). *Alienation*. Columbia University Press.

James, A., & Prout, A. (eds.) ([1990]1997). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood—— Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood.* Falmer Press.

Jørgensen, C. R., & Wyness, M. (2021). *Kid power, inequalities, and intergenerational relation*s. Anthem Press.

Jostock, S. (1999). *Kindheit in der Moderne und Postmoderne.* Opladen: Leske + Budrich.

Juul, J. (2011). *Your competent child: Toward a new paradigm in parenting and education*. Balboa Press.

Keenaga-Yamahtta, T. (ed.) (2017). *How we get free. Black feminism and the Combahee River Collective.* Haymarket Books.

Kipling, R. (1899) *The White man's burden* [poem]; https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/kipling.asp.

Kirchhöfer, D., & Merkens, H. (2004). Jugendphase in der Veränderung. In D. Kirchhöfer & H. Merkens (eds.). *Das Prinzip Hoffnung. Jugend in Polen und Deutschland* (pp. 11-23). Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren.

Konstantoni, K., & Emejulu, A. (2017). When intersectionality met childhood studies: The dilemmas of a travelling concept. *Children's Geographies, 15*(1), 6–22.

Lang, M., & Shelley, B. (2021). Children as researchers: Wild things and the dialogical imagination. *Childhood, 28*(3), 427–443.

LeFrançois, B. A. (2014). Adultism. In T. Teo (ed.). *Encyclopedia of critical psychology.* (pp. 47-49). Springer.

Liebel, M. (2004). *A will of their own: Cross-cultural perspectives on working children*. Zed Books.

Liebel, M. (2020). *Decolonizing childhoods: From exclusion to dignity*. Policy Press.

Liebel, M. (2023). *Childhoods of the global south: Children's rights and resistance*. Policy Press.

Liebel, M., & Meade, P. (2023). *Adultismus. Die Macht der Erwachsenen über die Kinder. Eine kritische Einführung*. Berlin: Bertz + Fischer.

Magistris, G., & Morales, S. (Comp.) (2021). *Educar hasta la ternura siempre. Del adultocentrismo al protagonismo de las niñeces*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Chirimbote & Ternura Revelde.

Marx, K. ([1844]1967). Excerpt-Notes of 1844. In L. D. Easton & K. H. Guddat (eds.). *Writings of the young Marx on philosophy and society* (pp. 271-272). Anchor Books.

Marx, K. (1958). Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel eines Preußen. In K. Marx & F. Engels: *Werke*, vol. 1 (pp. 392-409). Berlin: Dietz.

Marx, K. (1973). *Grundrisse* (1843/44). Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Matthews, G. B. (1994). *The philosophy of childhood*. Harvard University Press.

McNally, D. (2017). Intersections and dialectics: Critical reconstructions in social reproduction theory. In T. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Social reproduction theory* (pp. 94-111). Pluto Press.

Mead, M. (1970). *Culture and commitment: A study of the generation gap*. Doubleday.

Meiners, E. R. (2016). *For the children? Protecting innocence in a carceral state*. University of Minnesota Press.

Mills, C., & LeFrançois, B. A. (2018). Child as metaphor: Colonialism, psy-governance, and epistemicide. *World Futures, 74*(7–8), 503–524.

Morales, S. (2022). Niñeces del Abya Yala: una aproximación a las categorías de adultocentrismo y adultismo. *Revista Observatorio Latinoamericano y Caribeño*, *6*(2), 134–153.

Morales, S., & Magistris, G. (2018). Hacia un paradigma otro: niñxs como sujetxs políticxs co-protagonistas de la transformación social. In S. Morales & G. Magistris (eds.), *Niñez en movimiento. Del adultocentrismo a la emancipación* (pp. 23-47). Buenos Aires: El Colectivo.

Negt, O. (2001). *Arbeit und menschliche Würde*. Göttingen: Steidl.

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* (pp. 278-291). Zed Books.

Okri, B. (1993). *The famished road* (novel). Anchor Books.

Ollman, B. (1971). *Alienation: Marx's conception of man in capitalist society*. Cambridge University Press.

Patton, S. (2022). The children of children: Why the adultification thesis is a misguided trap for Black children and families. In C. J. Bergman (ed.), *Trust kids! Stories on youth autonomy and confronting adult supremacy* (pp. 167-175). AT Press.

Phoenix, A. (2022). Intersectionality, childhood and its global dynamics. In R. Bak & C. Machold (eds.), *Kindheit und Kindheitsforschung intersektional denken* (pp. 23-37). Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Postman, N. (1982). *The disappearance of childhood*. Vintage Books.

Qvortrup, J. (2001). School-work, paid work and the changing obligations of childhood. In P. Mizen, C. Pole & A. Bolton (eds.), *Hidden hands. International perspectives on children's work and labour* (pp. 91-107). RoutledgeFalmer.

Qvortrup, J. (2005). Varieties of childhood. In J. Qvortrup (ed.), *Studies in modern child-*

hood, society, agency, culture (pp. 1-20). Palgrave Macmillan.

Reinders, H. (2016). Vom Bildungs- zum Optimierungsmoratorium. *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung, 11*(2), 147–160.

Rodó-de-Zárate, M. (2017). Who else are they? Conceptualizing intersectionality for childhood and youth research. *Children's Geographies, 15*(1), 23-35.

Rollo, T. (2020). Child as other/stranger. In D. T. Cook (ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Child and Childhood Studies* (pp. 207-208). SAGE Publications.

Rosen, R. (2023). Childhood in and through Social Reproduction Theory. In S. Balagopal-an, J. Wall, & K. Wells (eds.). *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies* (pp. 690-725). Bloomsbury Academic.

Saenz, M. (2007). Living labor in Marx. *Radical Philosophical Review*, *10*(1), 1-31.

Schneider, W. (2003). Diskurse zum „Wandel von Jugend" in Deutschland. Konzepte, Leit-begriffe und Veränderungen in der Jugendphase. *DISKURS – Studien zu Kindheit, Jugend, Familie und Gesellschaft, 13*(3), 54–61.

Schröer, W., & Böhnisch, L. (2006). Die Entgrenzung der Jugend und die sozialbiograf-ische Bedeutung des Junge-Erwachsenen-Alters. In C. J. Tully (ed.). *Lernen in flexi-bilisierten Welten. Wie sich das Lernen der Jugend verändert* (pp. 41-57). Weinheim & Munich: Juventa.

Schweitzer, H. (2007). *Soziologie der Kindheit. Verletzlicher Eigen-Sinn.* Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Stearns, P. N. (2006). *Childhood in world history*. Routledge.

Sutterlütti, S., & Meretz, S. (2018). *Kapitalismus aufheben. Eine Einladung, über Utopie und Transformation neu nachzudenken*. Hamburg: VSA.

terre des hommes (ed.) (2014). *Convención de los Derechos del Niño (CDN). Cultura Andi-no-Amazónica y Buen Vivir. Auditoría a la CDN desde la mirada de los niños y niñas indígenas.* Lima: Plataforma peruana de co-partes de terre des hommes – Alemania.

Thorne, B. (2004). Editorial: Theorizing age and other differences. *Childhood, 11*(4), 403–408.

Von Benzon, N., & Wilkinson, C. (eds.) (2020). *Intersectionality and difference in child-hood and youth. Global perspectives*. Routledge.

Vygotsky, L. ([1934]1986). *Thought and language*. The MIT Press.

Wall, J. (2022). From childhood studies to childism: reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. *Children's Geographies*, *20*(3), 257-270.

Weeks, K. (2011). *The problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics and post-work imaginaries.* Rutgers University Press.

Winker, G., & Degele, N. (2009). Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *18*(1), 51-66.

Winkler, M. (2017). *Kindheitsgeschichte. Eine Einführung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Young-Bruehl, E. (2013). *Childism. Confronting prejudice against children.* Yale Univer-sity Press.

Zeiher, H. (2009). Institutionalization as a secular trend. In J. Qvortrup, W. A. Corsaro, & M.-S. Honig (eds.). *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies* (pp. 127-139). Palgrave Macmillan.

Zinnecker, J. (2003). Forschung im sozialen Feld ‚Jugend'. Deutsche Jugendforschung zwischen Nachkriegszeit und beschleunigter Moderne. *DISKURS – Studien zu Kind-heit, Jugend, Familie und Gesellschaft, 13*(1), 7–18.