

## Using Adultism in Conceptualizing Oppression of Children and Youth: More Than a Buzzword?

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### Abstract

Within the field of Childhood Studies and the broader field of Social Justice scholarship and activism it is increasingly recognized that child-adult relations represent a distinct axis of oppression. This has been associated with an upsurge in use of the term adultism as a tool to conceptualize and challenge oppressive child-adult relations. It remains the case that in wider academic, political, and public discourse the question of whether children and youth represent an oppressed group is still regarded with some skepticism, and the term adultism is not commonly used or understood. This paper examines whether adultism is a useful lens for conceptualizing and interrogating oppression of children and youth or merely the buzzword du jour. The paper focuses on the intellectual underpinnings of adultism, drawing on conceptual scholarship on oppression, intersectionality, and power relations from the fields of Social Justice, Equality Studies, Governmentality Studies, and Childhood Studies to inform reflection on how the concept has been defined and used. It is argued that there is scope for greater clarity and consistency in how adultism is used and a need to ground the concept more firmly in the relevant theoretical and conceptual literature if it is to be more than a buzzword. The paper contributes to theorization of adultism by taking exploitation as a starting point for examining oppression of children and young people, arguing that the instrumentalization of childhood as a technology of subjectification facilitates regulation and exploitation not just of children and young people, but of human adults and non-human entities in ways which are always and inevitably bound up with the multiplicity of interlocking oppressive relations.

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## Introduction

This paper examines whether adultism is a useful lens for conceptualizing and interrogating oppression of children and youth or merely the buzzword du jour. Viewed as analogous to ‘isms’ such as sexism, which have been deployed to conceptualize and challenge discriminatory treatment of oppressed groups, adultism is generally defined in terms of prejudiced assumptions which underpin and legitimize adult control over the young (Alderson, 2020; Bell, 1995). The recent upsurge in use of the concept of adultism within Childhood Studies and Youth Studies and in the fields of Social Justice education and activism reflects increased interest in issues and questions related to the oppression of children and young people. This paper focuses on the intellectual underpinnings of adultism, drawing on conceptual scholarship on oppression, intersectionality, and power relations from the fields of Social Justice, Equality Studies, Governmentality Studies, and Childhood Studies to inform reflection on how the concept has been defined and used. It is argued that there is scope for greater clarity and consistency in how adultism is used and a need to ground the concept more firmly in the relevant theoretical and conceptual literature if it is to be more than a buzzword. Providing a robust foundation for use of adultism necessitates in particular: greater attention to interlocking oppressions and intersectionality, more in-depth treatment of power relations, and more comprehensive engagement with the various dimensions of oppression, in particular economic dimensions which have been relatively neglected to date.

Within existing scholarship on adultism there is understandable concern with representing oppression of children and youth as a distinct axis of oppression. While there is recognition of, and attention to, intersectionality, with some important exceptions (e.g., DeJong & Love, 2015), there has not always been adequate attention to the complexity and historical situatedness of the interrelationship between oppression of children/youth and other axes of oppression. Relatedly, in much of the adultism literature oppression of children and youth has been conceptualized in terms of disrespect, discrimination, and denial of rights, with consequent neglect of economic relations. I argue here that before we can advance knowledge on the causes, outcomes, and effects of what is referred to as adultism, there is a need for more attention to *how* and *to what purposes* power is exercised over the young by adults. These questions must be considered within the wider context of unequal power relations historically and today. Given the significance of capitalism in the constitution of systems of oppression this demands close attention to the economic aspects of child-adult relations, which necessitates using *exploitation* as a starting point for analysis.

Given both the scope and scale of the issues which could be categorized as oppression of children and youth there is much at stake in the concepts we deploy to examine child-adult relations. It could not be said that the problems and challenges of the young do not attract political and public concern or that mistreatment

of children and young people by adults is not taken seriously as a social problem. Policy responses are, however, frequently framed in ways which are individualizing and pathologizing and thus neglectful of the structural context of interpersonal relations between adults and children/youth. Indeed it can be the case that policies framed in terms of child welfare, even those with a children's rights orientation, can potentially reinforce inequalities of power between children and adults and result in oppressive practices against parents of low-income and/or marginalized backgrounds (see e.g., Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). It remains the case that in wider academic, political, and public discourse the question of whether children and youth represent an oppressed group is still regarded with some skepticism, and the term *adulthood* is not commonly used or understood. Complicating the picture are the various other terms such as *childism* and *ageism* which are used in similar ways and while it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the debates around the various meanings and appropriateness of these terms, it is important to note the conceptual confusion associated with the existence of so many 'isms'. What I want to do in this paper is to help cut through the confusion and provide a firmer footing for conceptualizing and theorizing oppression of the young.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four main sections. I first elaborate on the conception of structural oppression, drawing on the work of Iris Marion Young and the contributions of Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Crenshaw, and bell hooks to the conceptualization of the interconnectedness of oppressive structures;. The discussion in this section is also informed by insights from Baker et al (2009) on societal systems (the domains of oppression) and from the governmentality literature on oppressive power relations. I then move to the literature on *adulthood*, examining how the concept has been defined and utilized, identifying some important contributions, and highlighting issues and themes which could be addressed more effectively or in more depth. Following from this I identify a number of issues requiring attention in order to strengthen the concept of *adulthood*. The remaining section takes exploitation of the young as a starting point for examining oppressive child-adult relations. It draws on the Marxist-oriented work of Childhood Studies scholar David Oldman and more extensively on contributions from the governmentality literature to provide insights into the *particularity* of adult oppression of the young and its embeddedness in *mutually constitutive* oppressive structures. It is argued in the conclusion that the conceptualization of *adulthood* needs to be broadened to take into account *the instrumental value* of adult control over children and young people and its significance within wider relations of exploitation and control.

### Conceptualizing Oppression

According to the influential work of Iris Marion Young (1990), in the context of high income liberal democratic capitalist states, it makes sense to think of op-

pression in structural terms—the result of social and institutional arrangements, norms, customs and practices which have developed over time. These operate to produce and reproduce relations of domination/oppression between members of *social groups*, either privileged or disadvantaged on particular axes of oppression such as race, class, gender, disability, or age-position. In line with post-structuralist thought Young sees social groups as produced *through* oppressive social relations (Young, 1990). Young herself paid limited attention to children/youth in these kinds of terms but thinking about the constitution of social groups in Young's terms obliges us to question 'natural' or 'biological' distinctions and recognize the socially constructed basis of what Childhood Studies scholars Alanen and Mayall (2001) refer to as 'the generational order.' The categories of childhood, youth and adulthood are "constructed" through processes of "generationing", which, as emphasized by Alanen, should be viewed as "a practical and even material process" (2001, p. 21). What might be useful to bear in mind are insights from the poststructuralist writings of Foucault and from new materialist scholarship, that material, structural and discursive processes are inevitably and inextricably intertwined (Coole & Frost, 2010).

Although not strongly emphasized in Young's work, a long line of Black feminist scholars and activists have provided important insights into the complexities of oppressive social relations and group oppression and in particular the importance of moving away from viewing the relationship between oppressions in 'additional' or 'additive' terms (Crenshaw, 1994). Among the key lessons here is that oppressive structures are 'interlocking' and, very importantly, *mutually constituting* and therefore cannot be analyzed separately (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Hill Collins, 1990). We might usefully think of the generational order as the product of patriarchal social relations (Miller, 1998; Smith, 2014; Wall, 2022), but must bear in mind that the racist-imperialist, hetero-patriarchal and capitalist structures of oppression associated with inequalities of race, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, sexuality, generational-position, class, and disability have been produced and reproduced simultaneously and in tandem (hooks, 2000a, 2000b). The mutually constitutive relationship between oppressive structures is perhaps most effectively captured by bell hooks' concept of "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks, 2000b, p. 46). Relatedly, Black feminist writers and activists have highlighted how individual members of social groups experience oppression and/or privilege in qualitatively distinct ways due to the dynamic interaction—what Crenshaw has termed 'intersectionality'—of oppressions (Crenshaw, 1997). Accordingly analysis of oppression must *from the outset* be attentive to the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and the implications for social relations at various levels (Hill Collins, 1990; see also Carastathis, 2016). The implications are that child-adult relations and associated categories of childhood and adulthood have been produced through and with the full range of interlocking axes of oppression.

Within the social justice literature the *levels of oppression* are typically conceptualized as the individual (intrapersonal), interpersonal, institutional, and what is sometimes referred to as the societal/cultural level (Adams & Zúñiga, 2016). In conflating society with culture the latter could be said to give a misleading view of macro-level social relations. In this paper I refer instead to the ‘structural-systemic level’ and I will elaborate on this briefly here, drawing on the work of Baker et al (2009) who provide a useful overview of what they view as the four main systems through which social relations are structured at the macro-societal scale. These interconnected systems can be thought of as the domains of oppressive relations. The economic system comprises those relations, arrangements, practices, and institutions which have taken shape around “the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of goods and services” (2009, p. 58). The cultural system including educational, religious, artistic, and mass media institutions is oriented to the creation and dissemination of ideas and values. The political system is the set of relations and institutions “involved in making and *enforcing* collectively binding decisions” (2009, p. 59, emphasis added) including the executive, legislative and judicial institutions which make up the formal political system and the various other elements of the state apparatus involved in implementing law and policy. Given the importance of explicitly recognizing the regulatory (or *disciplinary* (Hill Collins, 1990)) role of political and legal systems, I prefer the term *politico-regulatory system*. Finally, also included in the schema of Baker et al (2009) is the affective system, which they conceptualize as the constellation of relations oriented towards love, care, and solidarity. ‘The family’ is generally seen as the most important affective institution and the care and socialization of children (viewed as vital for social reproduction, cultural reproduction, and civic and social order) regarded as its most significant function.

Baker et al (2009) emphasize that *all* institutions and arrangements across the four systems encompass cultural, political, economic, and affective aspects to at least some extent and that the four systems overlap considerably—“each is partly constituted by the others” (2009, p. 62). This is significant because while each is associated by Baker et al (2009) with particular structures of oppression (e.g. the economic system with capitalism and class, the affective system with patriarchy, the cultural system with racism and disablism) all four systems are viewed as important in “sustaining and reproducing ... other structures of oppression” (2009: 58). Another way of looking at this is to follow hooks (2000a, 2000b) and Hill Collins (1990) in insisting on the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and viewing the four systems as constituted by and constitutive of “imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy.” It is also important to note, that, while not strongly emphasized in the work of Baker et al (2009), the human social relations which are given expression within societal systems are embedded within the wider environmental system and encompass more-than-human relations which are highly unequal and oppressive. In recognition of this, hooks’ term

has been expanded to imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-speciesist-patriarchy by anti-racist vegan activists.<sup>1</sup> (I prefer the term anthropocratic rather than the more commonly used speciesist, as it encompasses human oppression of all non-human entities including—but not limited to—non-human animals.)

The dynamics of social relations within and across the various systems interact with, support, and reinforce each other but they are also continually subject to critique, contestation and change as part of what Foucault (1983) refers to the ‘agonistic’ dance of power relations (see also Hill Collins, 1990). For instance capitalist economic relations are buttressed by laws and policies, such as those protecting tangible and intellectual property rights; entertainment media and social media which glamourize status hierarchies and incite unnecessary consumption and compulsive online engagement; educational institutions which sort and classify the young in line with occupational hierarchies; and an unequal distribution of responsibility for care and social reproduction in the affective domain (Baker et al., 2009). At the same time possibilities for individual and collective resistance are continually being created. The factory model of production at once opened up new opportunities for oppression *and* collective action, while more recently novel types of activism—including and perhaps especially by the young—have been made possible by social media platforms even though these are heavily implicated in oppressive practices.

In conceptualizing what oppression actually looks like and how it affects people’s lives, the famous five ‘faces’ identified by Young (1990) help strengthen understanding of how formal freedoms ostensibly available to all in rich liberal-capitalist states are undercut by various dimensions of oppression. These dimensions are identified as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism/domination, and violence (ibid.). In elaborating these dimensions Young drew on various critical perspectives including Marxist, feminist, and post-structuralist scholarship. My own engagement with the ‘five faces’ is also informed by these perspectives, but most particularly by the post-structuralist theory of governmentality, which provides essential insights into the complexity and interconnectedness of power relations. This approach throws a somewhat different light on the various dimensions of oppression than appears in other work on oppressive child-adult relations drawing on Young’s framework (Dejong & Love, 2015; Medina-Minton, 2019).

Exploitation in Young’s schema is conceptualized in Marxian terms as inherent in capitalist economic relations due to private control of the means of production and the associated profit motive. Exploitation is defined as the appropriation of the rewards of work/creativity of some for the benefit of others and includes the ‘surplus value’ extracted from paid workers. It also encompasses the benefits accrued from unpaid or poorly paid domestic and care labor which is essential for ‘social reproduction’ and is generally carried out by women or by those such as migrant workers who face particular barriers in accessing the labor market. It is important to remember that unpaid care and domestic work is also carried out

by children. Capitalism puts into play a particular mode of class relations based on relationship to the means of production and position within the occupational hierarchy, but as noted above, the manner in which capitalist class relations took shape is recognized as being closely intertwined with distinct modes of imperialist, racialized and gendered exploitation, including slavery and other forms of bonded servitude (hooks, 2000b; Williams, 2022/1944).

The governmentality literature provides insights into the technologies of power which shaped and supported exploitative imperialist capitalist patriarchal relations. Disciplinary technologies (such as those given form through the factory model of production and most especially schools) target individuals, inculcating values and dispositions associated with a positive work ethic and civic responsibility (Foucault, 1977). Discipline produces *responsibilized* subjects (Rose, 1999a). Biopolitical technologies are oriented towards population-level outcomes such as enhancing fertility and reducing morbidity and excess mortality—the emergence of biopolitical programs from the late nineteenth century aimed to boost the fitness of the future workers and soldiers required to build and defend empires and—very importantly—of the mothers who would bear and rear them (Rose, 1999b). Discipline and biopolitics represent the two poles of *biopower* (Foucault, 1978). Biopower signifies an approach to exercising power guided by the imperative to ‘foster life’ (ibid.). This term was used by Foucault to conceptualize the transformation in practices of government associated with the emergence of the liberal capitalist state, in which the health and productivity of the population became viewed as the source of wealth (ibid.; Foucault, 2007). The emergence of the state as instrument of biopower thus went hand in hand with new forms of regulation over the care and socialization of the young, increasingly viewed as national *resources* (Hendrick, 2003; Rose, 1999b; Smith, 2014).

Young uses the term ‘marginalization’ in reference to another aspect of capitalist economic relations—exclusion from economic and social participation of those positioned as surplus to requirements in capitalist economies. Marginalization—in states with welfare systems—is associated with *enforced dependency*. Welfare recipients must typically comply with restrictive conditions and the level of benefits are not usually sufficient to support a standard of living equivalent to the norm in the societies in which they live. Young refers to marginalization as “the most dangerous form of oppression” (1990, p. 53) because of the dehumanization involved. From a governmentality perspective it can be seen as the underside of ‘biopolitics’ which while oriented to fostering life may ‘disallow it’ if deemed necessary to safeguard the integrity of the population as a whole (Foucault, 1978; 2007). In various direct and indirect ways the wellbeing, autonomy and very survival of those perceived as deficient or dangerous are threatened by what Foucault (2003) referred to as the ‘internal racism’ of liberal states—forced sterilization policies (in place until the 1970s in some U.S. states) represent a particularly striking example, but in more subtle ways marginalized groups are

denied access to the social determinants of health or to adequate healthcare (Sandset, 2021), while the ‘external racism’ (Rose, 1999a) of the rich liberal capitalist states restricts entry to the particularly ‘useful’ or ‘deserving’ few, resulting in vast numbers residing in marginal spaces such as refugee camps or detention centers or living a shadow life without legal status.

Children/youth as a group are sometimes represented as marginalized by those applying Young’s framework to child/youth oppression (Medina-Minton, 2018; DeJong & Love, 2015). Certainly children could be said to be marginalized politically, but it is important also to consider the economic position of children as a group. Exclusion from the labor market and enforced economic dependency are structural features of childhood/youth—explicitly set out in law and policy and a central plank of ‘children’s rights.’ Nevertheless, as I elaborate further below, the temporariness of exclusion of the young from labor market participation and, more importantly, the purpose of exclusion—the production of human capital - means that *exploitation* could be said to be the more relevant concept in thinking about those positioned as children in the context of capitalist economic systems (Oldman, 1994), which can usefully be examined from the vantage of biopolitics/ governmentality. Furthermore, young people over a certain age are typically allowed to participate in labor markets in limited ways, but employers may not be required to pay young workers the full minimum wage. Additionally the intersection of child status with other axes of oppression can result in highly exploitative—and illegal—forms of child labor.

The concept of powerlessness relates to social relations in which some have the authority to command others. Young (1990) here again focuses on economic relations, drawing on the example of low-level employees denied opportunities to exercise control or creativity in their working lives, but the concept applies to constrained opportunities for autonomy and participation in decision-making more generally, including in the formal political domain, and thus is of particular significance to children and youth. Powerlessness in Young’s framework could be said to be based on a conception of power broadly in line with what is referred to by Foucault (1977; 2003; 2007) as ‘sovereign power’—the form of power exercised through juridical mechanisms of law, contract, and rights which sanction (and de-limit) authority over subjects. Foucault’s (2007) contribution to governmentality theory make clear that the exercise of sovereign power in liberal capitalist regimes is bound up with disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms. Discipline and biopolitics are constitutive of freedom—of populations, of markets and of individual, sovereign, subjects. The rights-bearing subject of liberal government is both target and *product* of power (Rose, 1999a). The rights which protect personal and political freedoms make it possible to exercise power over agentive subjects. For this reason I prefer the Foucauldian term *subjectification* to powerlessness. In pointing to how human agency is shaped and channeled through practices of government, the concept of subjectification captures the interconnection between



'power over' and 'power to' in liberal capitalist regimes (Smith, 2023). This is of huge significance to child/youth oppression in that in liberal thought, 'despotism' over the child has been deemed necessary in the interests of promoting the self-governing capacities of the future adult (Valverde, 1996). The advent of participatory rights for the young in recent decades has taken place in the context of forms of governmentality associated with neoliberalism predicated on the agentic capacities of the child/youth in the here and now (Smith, 2014). Therefore, while children's participatory rights can offer possibilities for resistance to oppression, they can also be viewed as instruments for exercising (bio)power over the young.

The face of cultural imperialism/domination refers to relations of oppression through which the values, beliefs and traditions of the dominant group are the taken-for-granted norm leading to misrecognition of so-called 'minority groups' and/or appropriation of 'exoticized' elements of 'minority cultures' (Young, 1990). Of course the cultural system and the various sub-systems and institutions within it are sites of intense contestation and resistance. It is of interest that education and socialization of the young—viewed as vital to cultural reproduction—represents an important focus of struggle historically and today between dominant/dominated groups. Thinking specifically about child-adult relations cultural imperialism/domination finds expression in the privileging of the ideas and perspectives of adults and neglect or disregard of those of children and young people; in the devaluing of and/or adult control over and/or appropriation of the cultural activities of the young; and in treating adulthood as the default state of humanness with the corresponding assumption that children and young people are somehow 'incomplete' (DeJong & Love, 2015, p. 493). We can say that countering cultural domination over the young was a foundational focus of the field of Childhood Studies, central to which has been the insistence on children as full members of society with the capacity to express their views and experiences (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

Finally, conceptualizing violence as structural oppression highlights the risks of violence faced by members of oppressed groups. This means that acts of violence committed by and against individuals need to be viewed within the wider context of unequal social relations and the laws, policies and cultural norms and practices through which unequal relations are supported and sustained. Drawing again on Foucault's distinctions between different modes of exercising power, violence against persons is the fundamental instrument of sovereign power—conceptualized by Foucault as coercive and extractive – a form of power exercised simply to gain and maintain dominance over others (1977; 1978; 2003) and associated with patriarchal forms of rule (Jenks, 2005). A noted characteristic of the modern state has been the 'monopolization of violence' deployed either to defend territory against external threats or to counter threats from within, and part of a wider process of centralization of authority (Pearce, 2019). Relatedly, the rise of the modern state is associated with the internalization of control (Foucault, 2007). These changes have resulted broadly speaking in the gradual delegitimization of phys-

ical violence as a mechanism of control over subordinate groups (Ariès, 1962). Nonetheless violence on the part of private actors has not been eradicated and has for a long time even remained legally permissible in certain contexts, most notably by adults against children within families, schools, and other settings.<sup>2</sup>

### Conceptualizing Adulthood

According to Fletcher (2015) the concept of adulthood has now been in use for a century, but, as noted above, it has not entered common usage and until relatively recently was not widely used even in academic and activist circles. There is no fully agreed upon definition, but Alderson writes that the term is analogous to sexism and is generally used in reference to “prejudice against children and *excessive* respect for adults” (Alderson, 2020, n.p., emphasis added), which legitimizes *discrimination* against and adult *control* over the young (see also Fletcher, 2015). These elements are present in what is one of the most influential accounts of adulthood, that of Bell (1995, pp. 1-3), which defines adulthood as “systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people”:

The word adulthood refers to behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement. This mistreatment is reinforced by social institutions, laws, customs, and attitudes. ... except for prisoners and a few other institutionalized groups, *young people are more controlled* than any other group in society. ... *The essence of adulthood is disrespect of the young.* Our society, for the most part, considers young people to be less important than and inferior to adults. It does not take young people seriously and does not include them as decision makers in the broader life of their communities. (Bell, 1995, pp. 1-2, emphasis added)

Within Bell’s definition cultural beliefs ground and support oppressive control over the young at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels. Like other authors using the term adulthood such as Alderson and Fletcher, Bell emphasizes that adult authority over children is not *necessarily* problematic or inherently oppressive. Adulthood stems from dichotomizing, overgeneralized assumptions of adult superiority/child inferiority. It is thus seen as essentially a matter of cultural domination and misrecognition, which in legitimizing unequal treatment, results in constrained opportunities to exercise agency and weak protections against abuses of adult authority.

Bell acknowledges that “class, gender, or ethnic background” is always and inevitably a factor in how any young person is treated but is concerned to underline that “disrespect” on the basis of youth is shared regardless of other identity characteristics (Bell, 1995, p. 9). The consequence of thinking about child/youth oppression in this way is that childhood, youth, and adulthood are treated (whether intentionally or not) as pre-existing naturalized categories. This is because unequal power relations are viewed *as the result of* negative assumptions about

children and youth who are consequently restricted from exercising autonomy or participating in political decision-making. Inequalities of power between children and adults are thus viewed mainly from the vantage of sovereign power—as a matter of rights and limits—which does not fully capture how or why power is exercised over the young or the interlocking power relations within which generational categories and positionalities are produced and reproduced.

It is certainly accurate to say that mainstream liberal theories of rights take for granted that children should be subject to the authority of the adults responsible for them and excluded from the political sphere and that laws, policies, social and institutional arrangements as well as cultural values, norms and practices assume and demand adult authority over the young (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). However, I argue that viewing this as simply reflecting bias towards adults and disregard or disdain for the young is inadequate and that a more expansive account of child youth/oppression is required. Otherwise there is a danger that efforts to address oppression of children/youth will center on challenging normative assumptions. For instance, in her critique of liberal rights theories Moosa-Mitha (2005) draws on the concept of adultism, arguing that “adultist” norms embedded in liberal conceptions of citizenship “overlook children’s citizenship rights due to their “construction as not “not-yet-citizens”” (similar points are made in a recent paper by Tisdall and Morrisson (2022) which draws on the concept of adultism). Moosa-Mitha (2005) sees parallels between the positioning of children and that of women and racialized groups pointing to analogous assumptions regarding ‘dependence’ and inferior reasoning capacities. However, it is important to make a strong distinction between denial of citizenship status, formally or in practice, to adult members of oppressed groups and the status accorded to children in liberal democracies, which might best be described as ‘citizens-in-the-making.’ The deficits attributed to children (for some at least) are time-bound. Denial of rights to women or racialized groups was legitimized historically (and we must make the distinction between legitimized and caused) by accusations of *irrationality* (Rollo, 2021). Children—white male children in any case—were viewed as *pre-rational* (Arneil, 2022). In liberal thought restriction on children’s liberty is to ensure that they develop the attributes to become self-governing in the future—autonomy rights for the young are viewed as a threat to the autonomy of the future adults they will become *and* a threat to the proper functioning of liberal societies (see e.g. Adams, 2008; Hafen & Hafen, 1996). ‘Adultism’ in the political domain is not just a matter of embedded norms and assumptions—the institutions which comprise the modern liberal state both produce and *depend upon* a binary distinction between childhood and adulthood which is instrumental not just in the exercise of control over the young, but in practices of governmental control more generally (Rose, 1999b). This is a really important point—and one of the most distinctive aspects of oppression of children and youth—which must be centered in any discussion of adultism.

There are some important contributions to the literature on adultism which are attentive to how control over the young fits within the wider context of social control and unequal power relations. This includes recent work by Hall (2022) on the relationship between adultism and regulation of gender identity. Hall's analysis highlights that regulation of trans identities is made possible by the subordinate position of youth and further highlights how social class position mediates the experience of and attitudes towards LGBTQ parents and the particular pressure faced by LGBTQ parents to conform to middle-class parenting norms. Hall's work also speaks to one of the most insightful threads among adultism-oriented scholarship in that it attends to the relationship between child/youth-adult relations and colonialism. Liebel argues that "adultism would not only have to be understood as a form of children's subjugation to adult power and the discrimination that accompanies it but would also have to be situated in its colonial and postcolonial contexts" (2023: 3). One of the more influential papers addressing this imperative is that of DeJong and Love (2015). The significant contribution of this paper is its treatment of childhood as a "*technology* of colonialism." DeJong and Love (2015) draw on the work of Burman (1994, 2007 cited in DeJong & Love, 2015) and—to a greater extent—Cannella (1997 cited in DeJong & Love, 2015) in delineating five points of "parallel" between discourses of childhood and discourses of colonialism.<sup>3</sup> The parallels identified include: binary divisions between child/adult and colonizer/colonized; the need to save the souls of children and colonized peoples; the idea of an "essential human nature"; the notion that children and colonized nations were "in development" along a linear trajectory towards adulthood/European civilization necessitating support from the 'developed'; and relatedly, children/colonized peoples being in a position of *dependency* on adults/colonizers (DeJong & Love, 2015, pp. 498-501). I would argue that the term "parallel" might be somewhat misleading here—as DeJong and Love (2015) acknowledge in their paper, discourses of childhood and discourses of colonialism are mutually supportive and it might be more accurate to go further and describe these discourses as mutually constitutive. These intertwined discourses have been shaped by pseudo-scientific evolutionary ideas which posited, firstly, that 'development' from birth was a series of stages which 'recapitulated' the evolution of the species, and, secondly, that different 'races' were at different stages in the evolutionary development of the species, of which white Europeans represented the most advanced products (see e.g. Lesko, 2012; Liebel, 2019). These kinds of ideas, which lingered long after they were scientifically discredited, legitimized colonial and neocolonial practices, which as DeJong and Love (2015) describe, treated colonized peoples as 'child like' and unfit to self-govern as well as 'civilizing' interventions which aimed to erase the cultural identity of colonized peoples by assimilating children into the culture of the colonizers.

The framing of childhood by DeJong and Love (2015) as a 'technology' which upholds unequal power relations resonates with insights from the govern-

mentality literature on the government of childhood. The modern Western conception of protected, dependent childhood can be said to be an invention of the bourgeoisie (Ariès, 1962; Cunningham, 1995). What has been referred to as the ‘universalization of childhood’ (Cunningham, 1995) within Western states in the long nineteenth century is recognized as having been largely motivated by concern to ‘improve’ the working-classes (see e.g., Rose, 1999b; Smith, 2014). The civilizing mission of colonial elites was not confined to their colonial possessions but was directed at the ‘dangerous elements’ within the borders of colonial states. Here I am thinking of how in the context of early industrialized capitalism and the emergence of the urban working classes in countries like England and the United States, there were parallels drawn between the racialized ‘others’ who were targets of intervention in the colonies and the classed “street Arabs” seen as running wild in the cities of colonizing and settler-colonial states (Swain & Hillel, 2017). Among the most significant of the ‘civilizing’ mechanisms adopted in response to the perceived threat posed by working-class children was mass and compulsory elementary schooling, but important also were institutions such as reformatories and industrial schools for those removed from ‘unfit’ parents, as well as interventions instructing parents in appropriate sexual, gender and generational relations (Rose, 1999b). We could say that childhood can be viewed as a technology of *capitalism* as well as of colonialism, but it is probably more useful to refer to childhood as a technology (and arguably the most important such technology) of subjectification. An important point made within the adultism literature is that it is during childhood that individuals are socialized to accept relations of subordination and privilege as ‘normal’ (see e.g., DeJong & Love, 2015; Fletcher 2015). Drawing on the Foucaultian idea of childhood and youth as technologies of subjectification, another way of thinking about this is that childhood and youth are key mechanisms for the production of (privileged or subordinate) classed, racialized, gendered, sexed and/or dis/abled subjects.

### **(Re)considering Adultism in Examining Oppressive Child-Adult Relations**

There are many useful insights within the relevant literature and the concept of adultism has been effectively deployed to signify and draw attention to *structurally oppressive* relations between children and adults and provides some insight into the relationship between oppression of the young and other axes of oppression. Nonetheless, based on the discussion above, I argue that there are some important issues to be attended to in order to strengthen the concept as a tool for examining the causes, effects, and outcomes of child/youth oppression.

Firstly, there is the issue of conceptual confusion. In addition to adultism there are several other essentially competing concepts (including ‘childism’ and various other ‘isms’ such as ageism and youthism) to conceptualize oppression of

the young. Furthermore, adultism is used in slightly different ways by different authors. This can be said to be an issue more generally in the use of 'isms' to conceptualize oppression. The meaning of much longer established terms such as sexism and racism in academic, political, or everyday discourse is by no means fixed, reflecting different disciplinary perspectives and social locations of those deploying the terms. That many of those writing on child/youth oppression refer to their preferred term, whether adultism or childism or another, as analogous to sexism, racism or ableism could therefore be said to adding to the confusion. Furthermore, contra to Alderson (2020), adultism could not accurately be said to be to children and young people "as sexism is to women" – adultism would seem to be more akin to a term like andro-ism or white supremacy rather than sexism or racism.

Secondly, following on from this I argue that the tendency to draw analogies between adultism and other isms is misguided in a more fundamental way, in that it can imply sameness in the experience of oppressions or that oppressions operate 'in parallel.' Again, I believe that this is an issue with the use of 'isms' more generally. Oppression on the basis of class, gender, race, disability, and generational position are *distinct* forms of oppression (see e.g. Kaufman, 2016) *and* these distinct oppressions have taken shape through temporally and spatially situated structural relations which are in dynamic interaction with and are co-constitutive of each other (hooks, 2000a; 2000b). The use of simple analogies between oppressions can serve to obscure these two important insights. Furthermore it inhibits analysis of how analogy is *deployed* to uphold and legitimize oppressive relations (Rollo, 2021). Thinking about the distinctiveness of oppression of children/youth there are important points to make, which, while obvious, have implications which are sometimes underexplored in the literature. Oppression of the young is distinctive in that every individual human experiences it in some way, and, most significantly, as that it is *temporary*. Childhood and youth have been *socially constructed* as temporary states of preparation for adulthood (law, policy, custom and material conditions are all significant in this regard). Within the discursive frameworks associated with the construction of modern Western childhood those assigned to this state of temporariness are viewed not simply as deficient but as *malleable*, i.e., endowed with future potential, although, significantly, not all to the same extent (Cunningham, 2005; Smith, 2014). What we might think of as the 'hegemonic adult' is White, Western, male, middle-class, abled, cis-gendered and heterosexual (on this point see e.g., Calasanti, 2007). The deployment of the analogy 'child-like' in reference to 'non-hegemonic' adults does not point to a *likeness* between oppression of children and oppression of other subordinate groups, but to the particular significance of child/youth oppression within the broader interplay and interdependence of structural oppressions.

This leads me to a third point which is that in much, although certainly not all, of the literature deploying adultism to examine child/youth oppression, the concepts of interlocking oppressions and intersectionality are used as an 'add

on'. What I mean by this is that for some authors the strong emphasis placed on establishing that child-adult relations represents a distinct mode of oppression is not accompanied by adequate recognition that relations between children and adults at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels are embedded within the wider constellation of *mutually constitutive* social relations. Accordingly there is a failure to recognize that childhood/youth and adulthood are *inherently* racialized (see Rollo, 2019 on this point) and classed, gendered, sexed, and ableized.

While again not true of all the literature, it can be said that a fourth issue relates to an inadequate conceptualisation of power relations in the conceptualisation of adultism. As discussed above the way oppression of the young is understood in at least some of the literature could be said to be based on an understanding of power as 'power over' resonant with 'sovereign power.' This I argue, following Foucault (1978; 2003; 2007), is inadequate for conceptualising *how* and *why* power is exercised in the context of modern nation states, taking into account the role of disciplinary and biopolitical mechanisms in the constitution and regulation of political, economic, and social relations within and beyond nation states, and associated with this the enormous political, economic, and social significance of children and childhood. The relations of power/knowledge within which modern childhood and adulthood were constituted cannot be explained simply as denial of rights resulting from deficit 'discourses' of childhood—the construction (and reconstruction) of childhood and adulthood is bound up with wider discursive, material, and social processes and therefore cannot be reduced to cultural norms and assumptions.

Finally, is the issue of neglect of the material and economic aspects of oppressive child-adult relations. As I have discussed above, oppression of the young in much of the adultism literature is regarded as primarily 'cultural,' a matter of disrespect, with the implication that justice for children/youth is essentially a matter of recognition. The social justice theorist Nancy Fraser (2020) has famously argued that most real world forms of oppression encompass an economic as well as a cultural dimension (we might add here following Baker et al [2009] that they also involve politico-regulatory and affective dimensions). It is important to recognize that this involves forms of economic injustice that are distinct from, although closely related to, those associated with class relations. In the next section of this paper I want to briefly explore what can be gained from taking *exploitation* rather than *disrespect* as the starting point for analysis of the oppressive child-adult relations signified by adultism and how this can provide insight both into the distinctiveness of child/youth oppression and its interconnectedness with other modes of oppression within the wider context of unequal power relations.

### Taking Exploitation as the Starting Point for Examining Oppressive Child-adult Relations

In thinking about oppressive child-adult relations in terms of exploitation, one point of departure is the Marxist-inspired analysis of David Oldman, interest in whose work has undergone somewhat of a revival in the last few years in light of concerns about the neglect of political economy within Childhood Studies (see e.g., Spyrou et al, 2018). Oldman's contribution explicitly responds to a question posed by Jens Qvortrup as to whether there are "objective, socio-economic grounds for the general attitude of adult society towards the young" (Qvortrup, 1987 quoted in Oldman, 1994, p. 154). Responding in the affirmative, Oldman argues that "children constitute rather more than a minority group defined by an absence of rights" but instead can be viewed as akin to a class with *economic interests* which conflict with those of adults as a group (Oldman, 1994, p. 154). Taking this point seriously would require that the use of adultism to examine oppressive child-adult relations must attend to the material benefits to adults from control over the young within the broader context of unequal structural relations (ibid.).

For Oldman, writing from a British perspective, roughly three decades ago, child-adult relations are conceptualized in terms of adult control over the maturation process, which in the context of 'advanced' capitalist societies generates employment for a significant proportion of the adult population (ibid., p. 155). Drawing on a Marxist political economy lens he provides an innovative analysis of child-adult relations using the concept of 'childwork'. This he defines as work performed *on* children by adults, but which also necessitates work by children. It is labor performed upon the labor of children (ibid.), a point which resonates with Foucault's conceptualization of power as "an action upon an action" (1983, p. 220). While children are therefore "active subjects" in the production of "human capital" they are positioned as "in development" (Oldman, 1994, p. 155) and this Oldman sees as a defining aspect of the relations put into play through childwork. Notable examples of childwork identified are the tasks carried out by schoolteachers and early years educators aimed at promoting academic and social development of the young. Childwork is seen as exploitation by Oldman if and to the extent that the benefits derived by adults as a group from it being carried out are greater than those gained by children and youth. Oldman concludes that to a large extent this is in fact the case. He is, however, careful to represent this in the wider context of capitalist structural relations, arguing that the limited resources allocated to education and care of the young means that the material interests of childworkers such as teachers can generally only be promoted at the expense of the young. A key example provided is how ensuring adequate remuneration for teachers necessitates large class sizes, seen as inimical to ensuring that the educational needs of individual children are met.

Oldman's account could be said to be attentive to the interlocking oppressions



shaping the organization of childwork in that it is concerned with how unequal class and gender relations are implicated in the distribution of the benefits and burdens of childwork. He makes important points about the professionalization of certain forms of childwork which have a high status and are well remunerated. These forms of childwork are viewed as the most exploitative of children in that the benefits accruing to the adult childworkers are that much greater. On the other hand it is recognized that much childwork is low status and poorly paid—childcare is the main example provided here—and mainly carried out by women (we might add by women from low-income backgrounds, a category shaped by the intersection of class, race, and migration status). These childworkers can be regarded as highly exploited in many countries and Oldman argues that advancing their material interests would likely result in less resources accruing to children placed in childcare services. This is contra to arguments commonly advanced to support professionalization of childcare which positively associate ‘quality’ with staff qualifications and remuneration. While it might be argued that there is no necessary conflict between the interests of childcare workers and the children they care for, it could also be said that this only holds if childcare is provided other than on a commercial basis and there is political commitment to high levels of funding to support provision which *genuinely* meets the needs of children.

Related to these issues, an important point made by Oldman is that childwork is predominantly of benefit to the middle classes.

It is the middle-class’s own attempts to reproduce its advantages for itself through the generations that produces much of the childwork that allows the exploitation of children’s self capitalization. Childwork is predominantly middle-class work and, at the same time, its benefits are expropriated disproportionately by middle-class families. (Oldman, 1994, p. 165)

What I would like to add to this is that much childwork is carried out not to support human capital development of middle-class children, but to *regulate* less privileged children and their parents in accordance with middle-class norms. Childwork performed for the purposes of regulation and social control has tended to be more professionalized and more highly rewarded (e.g., social work and child psychiatry) than childwork carried out to support parental employment. The middle-classes—and it is important to recognize the intersection between economic and racial privilege in the category middle class—thus benefit disproportionately from the hierarchical occupational structure in which childwork is situated. It is possible for the economically and educationally privileged middle classes to outsource responsibility for caring for their own children at low cost to those less privileged, while members of the middle classes also capture the most lucrative and esteemed ‘childwork’ roles—those involving the guidance and regulation of “troubled” or “deviant” children and parents.

I believe that further insight into these issues can be obtained through the

application of a governmentality lens. As touched on in the preceding sections, the concept of governmentality has been deployed fruitfully to examine how transformations in child-adult relations were instrumental to and shaped by the changes associated with the gradual emergence of liberal capitalist political economies. A key observation from Foucault (2007, p. 105) in this regard relates to the shift from the family as the *model* for government under the explicitly patriarchal early modern European regimes to an *instrument* for government under liberal democratic capitalist regimes. In the former the authority of the political sovereign was viewed as analogous to that of the father, who as head of household had the right *and responsibility* to rule over women, children, servants, apprentices/workers, and slaves—all those who had not or could not attain the status of ‘master’ and therefore were deemed unfit to govern themselves (Miller, 1998). In the latter the exercise of power has become more depersonalized and diffuse (Foucault, 1977; 2007; 2008; Rose 1999a), and all those who have attained the status of adulthood are formally at least regarded as autonomous “subjects of freedom” (Rose, 1999b). This transformation occurred in the context of the reconceptualization of the purpose of governmental authority—now vested in the abstract entity referred to as ‘the state’ (Foucault, 2007). Foucault (1983) writes that the authority of the state must be seen as “superstructural”—reliant on institutions such as the family. Unlike the early modern patriarchal family, the modern family—privatized, nuclear, and centered on child-rearing functions (Ariès, 1962)—is called upon to inculcate *self-mastery* rather than to simply exert mastery over its members (Miller, 1998).

Building on the theoretical insights of feminist scholars such as Carol Pateman and drawing on an extensive body of empirical literature, Pavla Miller (1998) insists that these changes in political, economic, and family organization in Western states should be viewed not in terms of the elimination, but of the *transformation of patriarchy*. Key developments examined by Miller include the creation of the private domestic sphere, the rise of the “male breadwinner” family, and the introduction of mass compulsory schooling. These developments were linked to the interrelated goals of “civilizing the poor,” “making women more womanly” and “making children more child-like” (Miller, 1998, pp. 261-264). Imposing the norms of the bourgeois family on to the laboring classes would promote prudence and ‘responsibility,’ inculcate a strong work ethic in the men who would serve as foot soldiers of industry, while sanctification of women’s role within the home legitimized exploitation of a different kind. Ensuring that all children conformed to a *version* of the bourgeois model—dependent and innocent was a key aspect of the work of pioneering child welfare activists (Cunningham, 2005; Hendrick, 2003) and this was essential to the deployment of childhood as a technology to produce ‘governable subjects’ and to the development of professional ‘childwork.’ In the European context the ‘universalization of childhood’ through the passage of protective laws and compulsory schooling did not only formalize the boundaries

between adulthood and childhood (Cunningham, 2005), but was implemented in ways which supported and maintained hierarchies of class, race, and gender. In colonial contexts, schooling and ‘welfare’ interventions were used to facilitate control over colonized peoples, such as the residential institutions aimed at forcibly assimilating First Nations children in settler-colonial states (DeJong & Love, 2015).

No longer confined to the ‘sovereign’ objective of control over territory, as discussed above, the emergence of the modern state came about in the context of a reorientation of governmental power towards the ‘biopolitical’ goal of “the administration of life” (Foucault, 2007; 2008). Represented as the ‘future,’ children and childhood were key targets—and products—of biopolitical regulation (Rose, 1999b). As national security and prosperity came to be viewed in terms of the ‘fitness’ and productivity of the population, the young came to be viewed as “raw materials,” “resources,” and “national assets” in the political discourses of European states at the turn of the twentieth century (Hendrick, 2003). Shaped by imperialist and capitalist logic, there are early traces of the ‘economization’ of childhood (Millei & Joronen, 2016) associated with the notion of expenditure on the young as an ‘investment’ which will pay dividends in the future (Hendrick, 2003). From a public policy perspective, there was a strong emphasis on potential long-term savings (e.g. on prisons and poor relief) if children of the “dangerous classes” were properly socialized (Hendrick, 2003). Hence investment in services for children and families was mostly targeted at those who did not conform to middle-class, Western, Christian norms of family, sexuality and child-rearing including the urban working-classes, nomadics, and all those characterized as in some way deviant or deficient (Rose, 1999b).

Biopolitical government was made possible by and stimulated advances in the ‘human sciences’, including economics, political science, sociology, and psychology, which Foucault’s work suggests are inescapably bound up with the exercise of power. Developmental psychology had emerged as the dominant form of knowledge about children and childhood by the early decades of the twentieth century, its purpose to understand *and optimize* the transition to mature adulthood (Rose, 1999b). The rise of developmental psychology was facilitated by and in turn strengthened the model of staged progression implemented in schooling systems. Gathered in age-demarcated groupings school-children represented a convenient study population and the statistical data obtained from the multitude of individual tests and examinations was used to measure and monitor individual development (Hendrick, 2003; Rose, 1999b). Sorting and ranking the young based on conformity to ‘norms’ of age-appropriate development permitted separating out those who fell outside the ‘normal’ range (more commonly the children of the poor and/or of racialized minority/migrant background due to impaired access to resources and biases embedded within tests) (Hendrick, 2003; Au, 2013). There is thus a strong interconnection between ableism and the constitution and regu-

lation of “normal development” in childhood (Carlson, 2017; Emery et al, 2022) and this can be viewed as linked to concerns to promote greater ‘efficiency’ in the cultivation of governable—and productive—subjects (Rose 1999b). Also of significance is that ‘the child’ of developmental psychology is the Western child—developmental norms are based on study of a relatively privileged sub-group of the world’s child population while claiming universal applicability (Nielsen et al, 2017; Walkerdine, 2005; Woodhead, 1999).

What we might think of as the intensified biopolitical *instrumentalization* of childhood made possible by developmental psychology went hand in hand with what various scholars have referred to as the *commodification* of childhood in emergent consumer capitalist societies (Rose, 1999a; 1999b). Two significant modes of exploitation of the young under capitalism can thus be viewed as mutually dependent. Dan Cook’s work demonstrates how from the early twentieth century psychologists played an important role in the creation of a market for children’s clothing and consumer goods in the United States and beyond. The deployment of increasingly refined age-differentiation to boost sales and profits involved the ‘invention’ of new stages of development and subjects of development (e.g., ‘toddlers,’ ‘teenagers’ and more recently ‘tweens’) (Cook, 2004). As the range of ready-made consumer goods expanded, parents—especially mothers—were encouraged to view expenditure on their children as an expression of ‘love’ (Cook, 2004). Roughly contemporaneously within the field of developmental psychology ‘love’—or attachment to the primary (maternal) care—was rationalized and instrumentalized as the means to produce “well-adjusted subjects” (Rose, 1999b). As public welfare services expanded in Western states in the period following the second world war, developmental psychology provided the expertise necessary to shore up the professional standing of ‘childwork.’ In the context of the broader ‘psychologization’ of Western culture, the language of developmentalism served to buttress the authority of the ‘parenting’ experts dispensing guidance through commercial channels and to add credibility to the claims of those hawking ‘educational’ toys and services (Rose, 1999a.; Ogata, 2004).

Within the ‘advanced economies’ the advent of mass post-compulsory education in the latter decades of the twentieth century and in the last two decades of mass pre-compulsory education has brought about a significant increase in level of public ‘investment’ in the young. The category “young people” now encompasses those in their mid-twenties, while “early childhood” has been constituted as a distinct domain of biopolitical intervention within national and global policy discourse (see e.g., Millei & Joronen, 2016; Smith, 2019). State expenditure on education has come to be framed—via a lens derived from behavioral economics—as investment in “human capital” which is grounded in the assumption that the earlier the investment, the greater the returns (Foucault, 2008). The rise of the human capital paradigm has occurred in the wider context of the political, economic, and social transformations associated with the application of ‘neoliberal’

policy prescriptions since the 1970s, the emergence of what has been described as ‘footloose capitalism’ and the rise of transnational corporations, financialization of economic systems and weakly regulated technological ‘innovation’ (Foucault, 2008; Peters, 2016). While creating new opportunities for employment including increased opportunities for female labor market participation, these developments have been associated with a variety of interconnected ills. These include greater concentration of wealth, more precarious labor market conditions, rising greenhouse gas emissions, species loss and environmental degradation, in particular in countries in the Global South, due to aggressive extractive policies and environmental ‘dumping.’ A marked feature of neoliberal inspired policies has been how intensified individualization of responsibility for navigating social, economic, and environmental challenges (Peters, 2016) has been associated with the “pedagogization of social problems” (Úcar et al, 2020), which places particular responsibility on the young. It is against this background that there has been a transformation towards more ‘democratic’ child-adult relations (Beck, 1998) at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels, associated with discourses and practices oriented towards recognition and support of the capacity of children—even the very youngest—to exercise agency. This has given rise to concerns about how the instrumentalization of children’s agency is making possible new forms of control over and exploitation of the young (associated with new forms of ‘childwork’).

Within the field of Childhood Studies questions concerning the agency of children and young people have been the focus of much discussion and debate in the last decade (Spyrou et al, 2018). While the representation of children as social actors and agents can be viewed as emancipatory—and was generally framed in this way within foundational Childhood Studies and children’s rights scholarship - what has been viewed as the “fetishization of agency” (Balagopalan, 2023, p. 45) has been critiqued on various grounds (Spyrou et al., 2018). Of particular relevance to this discussion is that attribution of ‘agency’ to children as a basis for elevating their status to ‘human beings’ (rather than ‘human becomings’) has been challenged as reproducing not just “adultist” norms of human-ness but norms which ascribe full humanity only to hegemonic adults (see in particular Rollo, 2018, but also Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Sundhall, 2017; Wall, 2008, 2022). An important point here, familiar from the feminist literature, is that the agency and autonomy of the hegemonic rights-bearing adult subject has only ever been possible on the basis of exploitation of the time, energy, and resources of subordinated others (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Related to this, within contemporary Childhood Studies there is concern to emphasize that agency is performed or practiced rather than possessed and is made possible only in the context of interdependent relations— human and more-than-human (Taylor et al, 2012; Weldemariam, K., & Wals, A., 2020). The other particularly relevant critique stems from the governmentality literature which points to the association between the discourse of the

agentive child and what Foucault (2008) has referred to as the ‘entrepreneurial subject’ of neoliberalism. The entrepreneurial child subject has the desire and capacity to *self-govern* and make *responsible* choices (Nadesan, 2010; Smith, 2012, 2014). From a governmentality perspective attribution of agency to the young facilitates strategies of responsabilization—that is modes of exercising power which place the burden of responsibility on the young for addressing challenges created by older generations, in itself a form of exploitation.

While, as noted above, the idea that intervention in the lives of children and young people can promote positive future outcomes is not new, the novelty of neoliberal government of childhood is seen to lie in the expectation that children and young people not just actively, but *reflexively* (Fendler, 2001), contribute to what Oldman (1994) refers to as their ‘self-capitalization’, but also to their ‘self-mobilization’ (Lessenich, 2010) as socially responsible ‘agents of change.’ Responsibilization of the young is evident, for example, in policies and programs as diverse as childhood obesity prevention and school recycling initiatives—which arguably obscure and reinforce the structural inequalities which underlie social and environmental challenges (e.g., the power imbalances which permits the agri-food industry to produce, sell, package and market goods which are harmful to human health, involve the gross exploitation, ill-treatment and killing of non-human animals, destroy habitats and harm the physical environment). Within the domain of international development, programs aimed at “empowerment” of adolescent girls have been subject to criticism for the manner in which the personal choices of young women have been linked to broader biopolitical goals (Potvin, 2019).

It can be said that contemporary practices of governing childhood are oriented towards cultivating and channeling the “right kind of agency” (Edmonds, 2019, p. 203). Within neoliberal governmentality the young are called upon to invest their time and energy prudently in the expectation that this will result in positive individual and social outcomes. In the context of increasingly polarized labor markets, heightened competitiveness and ever-increasing credentialism, individual investment in ‘human capital’ has assumed even greater importance than in the past. The children of the racially and economically privileged learn early that academic achievement is the foundation for successful adulthood and that sacrifice of present pleasure will reap future rewards. As Hall (2022, p. 290) notes, this makes their (temporary) subordination during childhood more acceptable. These of course represent only a tiny proportion of the world’s children and it is an open question as to whether the work performed on and *by* this sub-group in the production of human capital can be viewed as exploitation. (We might argue that the growth globally of a highly lucrative shadow education ‘industry’ such as English tuition for young children in ‘emerging economies’ and the increased demands this places on the young could be viewed as highly exploitative). For those from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds competing for academic and career opportunities alongside their more privileged peers the rewards from making the

'right' choices seem much less promising and thus the extent of exploitation is that much greater during—and after—the childhood years.

The world's most marginalized children are of course vulnerable to the most egregious forms of exploitation and there is little by way of investment in their 'capitalization.' This group includes, for instance, those engaged in what is referred to as "the worst forms of child labor" in countries of the Global North as well as the much greater numbers so employed in countries of the Global South. Debates on child labor throw up widely diverging views on how best to safeguard children against exploitation and maltreatment (see Bourdillon, 2006; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Morrow, 2010; Liebel, 2015; Liebel & Invernizzi, 2019), generally conceptualized as protection versus prohibition (Van Daalen & Hanson, 2019; White, 2005). 'Protectionists' (including representatives of working children) argue for regulation rather than abolition—fair wages and conditions of employment which are compatible with health and education. Some advocates of protection/regulation have critiqued assumptions that "school is the best place to work" which underpin advocacy and campaigning, given serious under-resourcing of education in the countries with the highest rates of child labor as well as the (neo)imperialist logic embedded in schooling policy and practice (Wells (2021) provides an overview of debates). Nonetheless, law and policy have been more greatly influenced by calls for abolition, in which can be found an echo of the imperative to make children more child-like which informed intervention in the past. The danger here is that the most exploited children are viewed either as passive victims to be rescued or if their capacity for exercising agency is recognized that it is problematized as the 'wrong' kind of agency (Moosa-Mitha 2005; Morrow, 2010). This can mean that they are viewed as not 'really' children and denied support and assistance and/or subjected to interventions aimed at controlling—or even eliminating—populations perceived as dangerous (Liebel, 2014).

The forms of exploitation discussed here are of course by no means exhaustive—there are innumerable and diverse ways in which adults benefit materially from the energy, time and capacities of children and young people to a greater extent than do children and young people themselves. Exploitation of the young is evident at the interpersonal, institutional, and structural-systemic levels of social relations, but what is important to keep in mind is that this takes place within the broader context of interlocking oppressive and exploitative relations within and beyond the borders of states. This entails recognition that some children and young people—however unwittingly—may themselves benefit from exploitation of others, including non-human others, (e.g. in the short-term through access to cheap consumer goods or from the longer-term benefits accruing from education and care services provided by low-paid workers).<sup>4</sup> While not possible to address in depth within the confines of this paper, child-adult relations must be examined as embedded within capitalist relations which are *inherently* heteropatriarchal, imperialist, racist, ableist *and* anthropocratic and which are supported and sustained by the 'technology' of childhood.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that inquiry into the causes, effects and outcomes of adultism necessitates grounding the concept in a comprehensive account of child/youth oppression which considers all of the systems within which oppressive relations are embedded and the mutually constitutive relationships between oppressions at the structural-systemic, institutional, and interpersonal levels. Adultism has emerged as the preferred 'ism' for conceptualizing oppressive child-adult relations, but it tends to be defined in terms that locate the causes of oppression in generalized assumptions of adult superiority which represent control over the young as necessary. This has resulted in inadequate attention to why and how power is exercised over the young, which inhibits analysis of the interaction between child-adult relations and other axes of oppression.

It has been argued in this paper that while child-adult relations represent a distinct axis of oppression best conceptualized as patriarchal, they cannot be understood without examination of the historically contingent relationship between patriarchy and capitalism and the broader interplay of mutually constitutive oppressions including colonialism, white supremacy, ableism and speciesism, and anthropocracy. While it would not be possible to carry out such a task in the context of a single paper, by taking exploitation as a starting point for exploration—and framing exploitation in biopolitical terms—this paper has advanced the conceptualization of child/youth oppression beyond discrimination and denial of rights. While these are important aspects of oppressive child/adult relations, we need to also think about adultism as a form of oppression in which the interests of those positioned as children/youth are subservient to the interests of those positioned as adults and how this has been associated with the instrumentalization of childhood. Of importance here is that the instrumental value of childhood as a technology of subjectification facilitates control over and exploitation of not just children and young people, but of human adults and non-human entities in ways which are always and inevitably bound up with the multiplicity of interlocking oppressive relations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term is used by activist Omawale Adwele. (Mercy for Animals, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> As of November 2023 65 states worldwide had banned physical violence against children in all settings. (End Corporal Punishment, n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that these discourses emerged in the context of the later more



“enlightened” phase of colonialism in which the logics of extraction, appropriation and annexation were supplemented and legitimized by a “civilizing” mission (Scott, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> While it is not possible to explore these issues here, some very interesting and important points have been made by the German-based I.L.A. Kollektiv (Kopp et al., 2019) about the role of schooling in rich capitalist societies in socializing children into high consumption lifestyles.

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