

TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS AND DISSENTING VIEWS: INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION IN BRAZIL

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Abstract

Using the case of Brazil, I propose, in the following discussion, to look at the adoption of children as a human rights issue, involving the complex interweaving of local and transnational influences. I suggest that the problem of adoption, as presented here, lies at the crux of child rights and class discrimination -- two emergent themes in human rights debates in Brazil. Despite this fact, national adoption is a subject that, until very recently, has been passed over by activists. Much as domestic violence against women was once naturalized as a conflict outside the state sphere of authority, so adoption has been presented as a cut-and-dried humanitarian issue involving, at most, a child's "right" to a family.

Child activists may well protest that, on the contrary, adoption has long been under scrutiny. And, certainly, as I lay out in the first part of this article, the furor over intercountry adoption in Brazil (as well as many other Third World countries) did become a cause célèbre of innumerable politicians and activists from the 1980s on. The glaring inequality between "donor" and receiving families concerned in intercountry adoption was experienced by sending countries as an affront to their national honor. However, curiously enough the same inequality implied in national adoptions, with the disappropriation of certain families' parental rights in favor of others', did not automatically become a problem. Here, seeing adoption as a transnational issue -- involving the transference of people, goods and ideas across national borders -- I seek to understand why, and in what sort of power relations, certain elements of the process appear more scandalous than others.

Intercountry adoption has long been a concern in Europe and North America where, since the mid-nineties, the overwhelming majority of children who are legally adopted come from "elsewhere". Situated among proliferating forms of foreign immigration, the presence of mostly dark-skinned adopted children in First World countries has inspired a great deal of literature linked to the personal identity of these so-called hybrid individuals. Reflection has targeted, on the one hand, the quest for national and ethnic origins, which takes adoptees on "roots trips" back to Chile or Ethiopia for example (Yngvesson 2003, 2004), and, on the other, the national policies that encourage new sorts of diasporas -- in Korea, for example, a country that does everything to welcome "home" a prosperous generation of children adopted abroad (Kim 2003).

The personal identity of foreign-born adoptees hooks in with the concerns of many scholars rooted in the northern hemisphere whose homelands are presently witnessing immigration on a massive scale. I would suggest, however, that the concerns and therefore the angle of analysis of Third World scholars is quite different. In Brazil, despite regional migrations and ethnic diversity that create "hybrid" populations, foreign immigration is minimal. A number of people have left to seek their fortunes abroad, but these emigrants have not as yet had particular impact on local issues. It is understandable then that Brazilian scholars (such as myself), just as those based in other "peripheral" countries, approach the question of transnationalism from a different angle -- emphasizing, not people crossing borders, but rather the migration of ideas, of influence from abroad exactly on issues that appear unfailingly local and domestic.

Transnational influences, of course, are not all of a kind, as I discovered when I began to delve into the theme of intercountry adoption. An adequate analysis of these influences in the Brazilian production of adoptable children led me through an intricate network of forces, including various (and often opposing) attitudes and innumerable interest groups. It would be tempting to focus in this paper on but one of these attitudes or groups, but I have chosen rather to trace several intertwining threads of this scene. Thus, in an opening section, I will consider how Brazilian public opinion, reflected in the press, tends to present intercountry adoption as an assault on national honor. In a second part of the paper, I will discuss the "consumer demand" for adoptable children, suggesting that, even after the outward flow of Brazilian children was interrupted, Brazilian legal standards on the why's and wherefore's of child placement continued to be guided by criteria largely inspired in the interests of First World adoptive parents. Finally, I will consider a more recent phase in Brazilian child placement in which international NGOs have played a major role in publicly airing alternatives to adoption, confronting generally conservative local adoptants as their major adversaries.

My starting point was standard ethnographic research among the families of shantytowns and working-class neighborhoods of Porto Alegre (southern Brazil) where, during the 1980s and early 1990s, I first encountered women whose children had been officially given in adoption. Since then, I have branched out into other locales, following the activities of various juvenile courts, residential homes and orphanages, associations for adoptive parents, and NGOs involved in child rights. It is through this sort of "multi-sited" ethnography (Marcus 1998) that I hope to trace the relation between the plight of so-called abandoned children in Brazil and transnational processes.

As our discussion proceeds, it should become apparent how the winds of debate (as well as swings in national child placement policy) cannot be easily explained, much less predicted, in simplistic terms. It is neither (as some would have it) result of the "global forces of imperialism", nor (as others would have it) the victory of enlightened individuals battling for social justice within Brazil. It is rather the outcome of an intricate interplay between public opinion, specific interest groups and personal agency that all involve dissenting views and transnational connections.