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Feature: Historical Geographies of Moral Regulation

Scale and the moral geographies of Victorian and Edwardian child protection

David Beckingham

Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 3EN, United Kingdom

Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of child protection work in Victorian Britain, using the annual reports of societies in Liverpool, London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and newspaper accounts of their activities. Employing the concept of scalar governmentality I argue that the growth and extension of protection work was informed by and helped to rework existing moral assumptions about people, place and environment. This happened along two entwined trajectories. The first trajectory was an imaginative one, as intervention in individual cases was justified with reference to the broader social body. The second was territorial, seen in the expansion of child protection from town to town, and later to new colonial settings. I refer to these trajectories as a scaling up and a scaling out of child protection and I argue that the extension of protection work thus played an important role in challenging received moral assumptions about who needed protecting, where, by whom, and for whose benefit.

Keywords: Moral regulation; Child protection; Moral geography; Scale; Governmentality

Child protection campaigners played a crucial role in fostering what George Behlmer has described as 'a new moral vision in which justice for the young took precedence over the claims of parenthood'.[1] Child protection work saw the rise of new alliances between parents, neighbours and the police, a kind of new civic parenthood with various agencies taking increasing interest in the lives and welfare of children and the regulation of childhood.[2] Alan Hunt describes moral regulation as occurring where a social agent or agents challenge some an aspect of the conduct, values, culture, or practices of others on moral grounds and seek to impose regulation upon them. That regulation is presented as a distinctive form of discursive or political practice. Hunt points to the geographical character of moral regulation, arguing that movements form 'an interconnected web of discourses, symbols and practices exhibiting persistent continuities that stretch across time and place'.[3] Using the example of Victorian and Edwardian child protection following the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act of 1889 this article examines how that new moral vision was produced and practiced in relation to ideas of scale as well as time and place.[4]

The vision of protection campaigners was widely promoted in annual reports and pamphlets. These texts reveal not only the geography of everyday moralities towards children – the ways people in particular places conceptualised right and wrong – but also what Chris Philo describes as the geography *in* everyday moralities, being the moral assumptions and arguments that underpinned ideas about such places and environments.[5] Harry Ferguson has argued

E-mail address: djb79@cam.ac.uk

[1] G.K. Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870–1908*, Stanford, 1982, 16.

[2] I am grateful to Francesca Moore for suggesting the idea of civic parenthood.

[3] A. Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation*, Cambridge, 1999, 9.

[4] Also see L. Mahood, *Policing Gender, Class and Family: Britain, 1850–1940*, London, 1995, 151–152. Also see M. Flegel, *Conceptualizing Cruelty to Children in Nineteenth-century England: Literature, Representation, and the NSPCC*, Farnham, 2009, 3; S. Legg, Foucault's population geographies: classifications, biopolitics and governmental spaces, *Population, Space and Place* 11 (2005) 137–156; V. Bell, Governing childhood: neo-liberalism and the law, *Economy and Society* 22 (1993) 390–405.

[5] C. Philo, De-limiting human geography: new social and cultural perspectives, in: C. Philo (Ed.), *New Words, New Worlds: Reconceptualising Social and Cultural Geography*, Aberystwyth, 1991, 14–27, 16. Also see D.M. Smith, *Moral Geographies: Ethics in a World of Difference*, Edinburgh, 2000, 5; M. Huxley, Geographies of governmentality, in: S. Elden, J. Crampton (Eds), *Space, Knowledge and Power: Geographies of Governmentality*, London, 2007, 185–204, 186; F. Driver, Moral geographies: social science and the urban environment in mid-nineteenth century England, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13 (1988) 275–287; J. Kneale, 'A problem of supervision': moral geographies of the nineteenth-century British public house, *Journal of Historical Geography* 25 (1999) 333–348.

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that protection case work was 'a mobile, embodied experience of time and space'. Sights, sounds and smells played a crucial role in the identification of at risk children.[6] Each and every case had the potential to disrupt that neat discursive claim of 'justice for the young' precisely because each case was shaped by how the individuals involved experienced space. This article proceeds from the recent claim by Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel that, in framing child protection against a backdrop of industrial growth and working-class slum living, child rescuers developed 'a taxonomy of space in which geography determined destiny'.[7] Broadly speaking, in this moralised geography personal habits such as drunkenness could be used imaginatively to root problem neglect amongst the slums and the people who resided in them. At risk children could thus be identified in relation to the streets and homes in which they lived.[8] But this narrative was challenged by another framing that saw neglect less as the direct result of environments such as slums than as the result, first and foremost, of poor parenting. Such a reading of neglect placed the emphasis less on place than on people, which justified the expansion of protection because neglect could potentially occur anywhere. The place of children and the rights of parents and guardians in society, I want to argue, were reworked in and through this expansion.

Using the annual reports of the Liverpool, London and Scottish societies this article focuses on the tensions created by this extension of protection work along two scalar trajectories.[9] The first is an imaginative or discursive one, with the connection of concerns about the individual child's body to the defence of the social body. The second is the practical extension of protection work which necessarily followed, with the growth of a National Society that would promote the interests of all children. The practical and the imagined do not map easily on one another, however. Rather, the networks across which protection work was built – involving parents, police, children, case workers and campaigners – helped remake the scales over which and through which regulation ultimately operated. Protection reports frequently made reference to where children were not being protected and where, by extension, protection work needed to be taken up. Thinking through scale necessitated operating through enlarged networks: 'We have but planted ourselves in a quarter of the country', one NSPCC fundraising pamphlet in 1891 reiterated.[10] But the concern with scale was not simply reflected in the growth of operations – how 'new territory is annexed', as Benjamin Waugh, the first director of the NSPCC, put it.[11] Rather, this scalar logic was used by campaigners to connect the individual child's body to the social body of the nation, and ultimately Britain's imperial future. In the final section of the paper, I review cases involving expansion overseas and the protection of 'colonial' children in Britain. These cases tested the universality of the 'moral vision' of child protection, raising questions about where neglect might reside, how the home might be understood, who might be to blame, and how and where the consequences would be felt.

The production and operation of a scalar moral politics played a central part in developing the imaginative scope and geographical reach of child protection in Britain.[12] In his recent analysis of the stance of the League of Nations towards the trafficking of women, Stephen Legg suggests that scales should not be considered as 'pre-existing frames of actions, or planes at which certain processes can operate, but as the effects of different networking practices'. He usefully reminds us how Michel Foucault's work on disciplining bodies combined an analysis of the 'scaling-out of discipline to broader scales' such as the nation, through technologies such as the census, with a focus on the effect of the scaling-in of government onto 'individual conduct of conduct'. This relational sense of discipline is significant, but so too is the relational sense of scale that has been developed from this work.[13] As Legg notes, scale is far more than simply a 'narrative for describing the world'.[14] Rather, people relate their place and discipline their bodies in relation to broader scales of belonging such as nation, over which, as Brown and Knopp have demonstrated, they may have 'little if any direct control'.[15] As such, it seems to me, scale becomes intrinsic to the 'mobility, transformability, and reversibility' of power relations, to follow Michael Senellart's definition of governmentality, not simply some passive backdrop over which those relations were played out.[16] For this reason I want to suggest that the practices and policies of protection work be understood as products of *scalar governmentalities*, that the identification of 'at risk' children was shaped by debates about the imaginative and practical extension of protection work.

Scalar governmentalities

'Sweeping the street arab out of the gutter': the child, the street and the home

Formal child protection in Britain emerged through voluntary effort in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Harry Ferguson

[6] H. Ferguson, *Protecting Children in Time: Child Abuse, Child Protection and the Consequences of Modernity*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2004, 52, 72 and 193. Also see Hunt, *Governing Morals* (note 3), 19. L. Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London*, New Brunswick, 2006, 6; L.H. Lees, The survival of the unfit: welfare policies and family maintenance in nineteenth-century London, in: P. Mandler (Ed.), *The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-century Metropolis*, Philadelphia, 1990, 68–91, 84; B. Bellingham, Waifs and strays: child abandonment, and families in mid-nineteenth century New York, in: P. Mandler (Ed.), *The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-century Metropolis*, Philadelphia, 1990, 123–160, 137; G.K. Behlmer, *Friends of the Family: The English Home and its Guardian, 1850–1940*, Stanford, 1998.

[7] S. Swain and M. Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850–1915*, Manchester, 2010, 64 and 67; H. Hendrick, *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880–1990*, Cambridge, 1997, 11.

[8] This process of individualisation had parallels in debates around infant mortality. See J. Dyhouse, Working-class mothers and infant mortality in England, 1895–1914, *Journal of Social History* 12 (1978) 248–267; R. Cooter, Introduction, in: R. Cooter (Ed.), *In the Name of the Child: Health and Welfare, 1880–1940*, London, 1992, 1–18, 8.

[9] The London Society later became the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, or NSPCC.

[10] Insert in *Child's Guardian* (October 1891).

[11] NSPCC, *Good Hope for Children, Annual Report for 1896–97*, London, 46.

[12] E.A. Gagen, Reflections of primitivism: development, progress and civilization in imperial America, 1898–1914, *Children's Geographies* 5 (2007) 15–28, 17; C. Philo, Foucault, sexuality and when not to listen to children, *Children's Geographies* 9 (2011) 123–127. See also T. Cockburn, Child abuse and protection: the Manchester Boys' and Girls' refuges and the NSPCC, 1884–1984, *University of Manchester: Department of Sociology Occasional Paper Number* 42 (1995) 1 and 5.

[13] Adam Moore has recently distinguished between scale as a 'category of analysis' and a 'category of practice'. See A. Moore, Rethinking scale as a geographical category: from analysis to practice, *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2008) 203–225, 206. For a recent review of debates on scale in Geography see D. MacKinnon, Reconstructing scale: towards a new scalar politics, *Progress in Human Geography* 35 (2011) 21–36. MacKinnon seeks to replace the concept of 'the politics of scale' with that of 'scalar politics', to better capture the way in which processes and practices are 'differentially scaled'.

[14] S. Legg, Of scales, networks and assemblages: the League of Nations apparatus and the scalar sovereignty of the Government of India, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 (2009) 234–253, 240, 237; M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2008, 186.

[15] M. Brown and L. Knopp, Places or polygons? Governmentality, scale, and the census in The Gay and Lesbian Atlas, *Population, Space and Place* 12 (2006) 223–242, 225.

[16] M. Senellart, Course context, in: M. Senellart (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2009, 369–401, 389.