Recommended Books

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The campaign against child soldiers has arguably eclipsed similar campaigns against child labor, thanks to NGO (nongovernmental organization) attention and cinematic depictions such as those seen in the fictionalized Blood Diamonds and the documentary Invisible Children. The former film, which takes place in the midst of civil war in Sierra Leone, and the latter, which depicts the desperation of children trying to elude capture by the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda, both draw attention (like the campaign against child labor) to the pandemic violation of children’s rights in third world contexts.

P. W. Singer’s book is a valiant and solid contribution to our understanding of the causes and consequences of the child soldier phenomenon, which, he argues, represents a huge normative shift away from four millennia of accepted laws of warfare. It should be of interest to students of human rights, militarism and war, third world politics, and political psychology. It is also written in a style accessible to the general public. The subject matter and the way Singer treats it, however, raises additional, perhaps unintended, questions. These questions demonstrate both the importance and potential problems of children’s rights campaigns directed from the West toward the third world.

Singer argues persuasively that the child soldier phenomenon is a result of a new type of conflict, one in which the state of conflict itself has become a goal rather than a means to another end. In other words, perpetrators have an interest in the continuation of violence and bloodshed. In such a context, the phenomenon of child soldiering has become a deliberate choice of instigators, not an unintended by-product.

Singer outlines three main reasons for what he calls the “new doctrine of war” that uses child soldiers as a significant component of its strategy. First, trends in poverty and disease, including but not limited to the rise in numbers of AIDS orphans worldwide, has created large-scale socioeconomic dislocations of children. Without adequate
family, community, or governmental support, and growing up in the midst of endemic conflict, many children are left to fend for themselves, becoming easy prey for both forced and persuasive methods of enlistment. Second, the huge numbers of small arms easily available to any group or leader with a grievance makes weaponry simple to grasp and employ. After the end of the Cold War, great powers glutted the world with guns and grenades, among other weapons, and often it was the militaries of these powers who indiscriminately sold small arms with little concern for where they would end up. Children, Singer points out, are able to use these weapons, because they are portable, the technology is simple, and they are relatively light in weight. Third, Singer argues, conflict has increasingly become an end in itself, with warring groups profiting from the continued chaos instead of seeking to gain something in an eventual settlement. This type of chaos requires the constant infiltration and terrorization of local populations, which children can be taught to do with less suspicion from local communities, and hence more effectiveness. And when something goes wrong, armed leaders view children as dispensable tools of warfare.

Singer’s quotes from former child soldiers are heart-rending. His descriptions of the cold-blooded psychological breaking down of children’s moral sensibilities as they are inducted into armed groups are difficult to read, to say the least. The fear, terror, grief, anger, and helplessness evinced by the children makes the horror of their experiences immediate and vivid. In spite of all this, however, many of the children express hopefulness for a better future, which in itself is an amazing testament to the resiliency of children and humanity in general.

Singer argues persuasively that children, and child soldiers in particular, “bear the costs of society’s failures” (126). It is worth considering, then, the scope and nature of these failures, which Singer does not go far enough in pursuing. Instead, he appears content to focus the child soldier phenomenon in the context of “failed states” and the social dislocations of third world societies.

In striving to make the case that child soldiers and the method of warfare they embody represent a dramatic break from four millennia of acceptable laws of war, Singer tends to paint war as orderly and rule-bound and diminishes its ever-present brutality and by-products, as we are currently seeing in debates about the legitimacy of using torture. Similarly, in emphasizing the recruitment of child soldiers as primarily a cold-blooded strategy of armed groups in failed states who will stop at nothing for new recruits, he misses the muddying of the moral waters by more established governments in the West. U.S. military recruiters, for
example, desperate to obtain sufficient troops for ongoing (and seemingly
never-ending) wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, regularly troll public high
schools across the country as part of the No Child Left Behind Act,
making financial promises they (arguably) cannot fulfill and often misrepre-
senting the terms of service. Their presence and tactics are so ubiquitous
and persistent that newspapers increasingly report that high school
children are enlisting without their parents’ knowledge or approval.
Children may enlist at the age of 17, and one wonders if recruiters in the
United States would not lower this age if they could—they certainly try
to make the acquaintance of younger teens and encourage them to join
the military when they are of age.

Another issue that could benefit from more thorough analysis is the
interrelated economic interests and causes involved in ongoing conflicts
over minerals and resources in so-called failed states. Singer admirably
shows how the global glut in small arms after the Cold War has provided
lethal ammunition to unscrupulous actors in many of the most remote com-
unities of the globe. But the suppliers of arms, immoral as they are in this
story, are not the only instigators of conflict. Transnational oil and mining
companies, as well as the banks that finance them, are also complicit, and
in many cases are protected by powerful Western states (as is the case for
Chevron in Nigeria, for example).

Singer does not leave us hanging by relating a horrific narrative with
no possible solution. Instead, he lists a number of concrete recommen-
dations to staunch the supply and demand of child soldiers. These
include stronger international norms against recruiting children to fight in
state and non-state militias, the criminalization of those responsible for
recruiting child soldiers under the rubric of the International Criminal
Court, staunching the global flow of small arms to non-state actors and
challenging more directly the corporate practices and governmental
policies that enable it, and especially providing real resources backed up
with stable funding to counsel and reintegrate former child soldiers into
communities so they can lead normal lives. As Singer points out, a
number of reconciliation processes have drawn attention to the problem
of addressing the trauma of children and helping them reintegrate in
post-conflict situations, but often initial programs peter out or are
simply not adequately funded. He also points out that conflict will
continue as long as the issue of endemic poverty is not addressed on a
global scale.

Singer’s analysis and recommendations are laudable. But without
calling governments, transnational companies, and societies to account—
in the West as well as in the third world—the campaign against child
soldiers may well end up like the phenomenon that produced it—a
never-ending struggle. Singer has done an important service in drawing
attention to the phenomenon and the suffering of children. Now it is up to concerned readers, NGOs, and governments to ensure that his analysis is pushed far enough to challenge all of the systemic practices, as well as all of the individuals, groups, corporate entities, and states that abet the recruitment of child soldiers, as well as the ongoing inhumanity of war.

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