

# *The decline of child labour: labour markets and family economies in Europe and North America since 1830*<sup>1</sup>

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The history of child labour is for the most part, and not inappropriately, inscribed within a framework of morality. Thompson, writing about the industrial revolution in Britain, encapsulated a dominant tradition within the literature when he concluded that ‘the exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history’.<sup>2</sup> This tendency to pass moral judgement has, however, diverted attention from some significant questions to do with child labour, questions which are brought alive for us by the enormous expansion of child labour in the late twentieth century. Fifty years ago it might have been assumed that, just as child labour had declined in the developed world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so it would also, in a trickle-down fashion, in the rest of the world. Its failure to do that, and its re-emergence in the developed world, raise questions about its role in any economy, whether national or global, and about the contribution which children can make to their family economies.<sup>3</sup> It also serves to focus attention on the explanations which are available for the decline of child labour in western economies.

The discussion which follows is built around five propositions concerning child labour in western economies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

In the 1830s and beyond, children played a crucial role in key industries in the more advanced economies, most notably in textiles and coal mining.

By the late nineteenth century children in these economies for the most part no longer participated in these key industries; they were confined to a distinct and marginalized children’s labour market—and they remain there.

Despite this shift in the nature of children’s work, working-class family

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Professor Jan Pahl for helpful guidance to the literature on allocation of resources within families.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *Making of the English working class*, p. 349.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates of the amount of child labour in the world today vary enormously. Recent figures suggest that up to 250 million children under 14 work: Lansky, ‘Child labour’, p. 243. For the developed world, see Lavalette, *Child employment*.

economies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remained dependent on children's earnings; children contributed more in earnings than did women, and the male breadwinner norm was an actuality in only one phase of the life cycle.

Married women's participation in the labour market in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries varied from country to country and within countries, but, however significant these variations, they are overridden by the marked increase in participation rates in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century children's contributions to the working-class family economy became noticeably less significant.

Cumulatively the change encapsulated in these five propositions amounts to what may be called an 'adulthood' both of labour markets and of the structuring of the family economy. Although there is a substantial literature focused on some of these propositions (not always in agreement with them), the linkages between them have rarely been studied. There has therefore been a failure to notice the importance of a change in economic roles, at global and national level on the one hand, and at family level on the other. The neologism 'adulthood' is designed to draw attention to this. The failure of the developing world to follow the same process makes it all the more important to try to understand it.

This adulthood of the labour market and of family economies is one of those changes over historical time which for the most part are simply taken for granted; outside some specialist literature it has not seemed to require elaborate explanation. The process is in some ways overdetermined; there are so many possible and plausible explanations for the decline and change in the nature of child labour that it hardly seems worth trying to place them in order of priority or to explore their interconnections. This article will argue that the process of adulthood is in fact difficult to explain, and that it happened in contradiction of what many contemporaries either feared or in some cases hoped. What they expected was that the logic of capitalist development, with its competitiveness, its drive for lower costs, and its division of labour, would increase the demand for child at the expense of adult labour. They expected, that is, to see more of it rather than less, and, rather like Malthus with respect to population, it is difficult to fault their logic.<sup>4</sup>

But, first, some problems of definition arise. There are two distinct discourses in the historical literature focused on child labour, and they use the term in very different ways. There is, on the one hand, the body of work which defines a child as anyone under a certain age, 12 or 14 or whatever, and applies 'child labour' to the work of such people (one might note in passing that ages cited are nearly always even numbers unless they are multiples of five). And there is, on the other, the work on the family economy which when it refers to child labour means contributions made by children of whatever age to that economy. For

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, *Children of the poor*, pp. 84-5.

example, a recent study of Indianapolis found that the average age of 'children' employed there in 1880 was 21.2 years.<sup>5</sup> In this analysis people still co-resident with one or both parents count as 'children' whatever their actual age. These two quite different meanings attached to the term 'child labour' have become confused in the literature. Explaining the reduction of the first is a quite different issue from explaining the reduction of the second, and involves looking closely at age of entry to the workforce.

## I

The first proposition is at one level uncontentious: no one would doubt that textiles and coal mining were key industries, nor that children worked in them. But the question of how crucial their work was to the success of those industries is much more difficult to answer. Few would now so confidently assert, as Hammond and Hammond did in *The town labourer*, that 'under the early factory system the employment of masses of children was the foundation of industry'.<sup>6</sup> But there is a danger that reaction against this tradition in the subject literature has led to an underestimation of the role of children in mill and mine. Accepted ways of measuring and weighing their contribution are lacking. It is possible to get some gauge of it by analysis of figures of the percentage of children in particular industries or firms. What becomes clear from such an analysis is that it is not possible to assume a certain proportion of child workers according to the prevailing technology: the technology will be one factor among others of equal weight, including the availability of children, the employment strategies of manufacturers, and the strength of adult male trade unionism. The outcome could be a very low level of child employment, as in the Waltham system in northern Massachusetts and New Hampshire where young women, rather than children, were the preferred labour force in the textile mills.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, however, very different figures emerge. At the level of the firm, work on the Ghent cotton industry has shown that one large firm, Voortmans, had a deliberate policy of recruiting young and female workers. The reasons for this (which may stand as reasons in many other contexts) were that such a labour force was cheaper (not only in itself but also because it would drive down adult male wages), more docile, and would reduce the need for technological innovation. Whereas 3.7 per cent of the Voortmans labour force was under 15 in 1842, by 1859 the proportion had risen to 10 per cent. But Voortmans cannot be taken as representative of the textile industry in Belgium or even in Ghent: it was the exception in the extent of its use of child labour.<sup>8</sup> And, compared with figures elsewhere, Voortmans seems to have been a low user of child labour. In Alsace in the 1820s one-

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, 'Economic necessity', p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Hammond and Hammond, *Town labourer*, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Bolin-Hort, *Work, family and the state*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>8</sup> Scholliers, 'Grown-ups, boys and girls'; Van den Eckhout, 'Family income'.

third or more of the workforce in mills were under 16.<sup>9</sup> In 1833 in a sample of 43 Manchester mills, 22.3 per cent of the workforce was under 14 and 32.4 per cent under 16; in 29 mills in Glasgow the proportions were 35.6 per cent and 48.3 per cent.<sup>10</sup> In the British coal industry in the mid-nineteenth century 13 per cent of the labour force was aged under 15 and 30 per cent under 20—and the young children were regarded as crucial to the carrying on of the industry. There were similar figures in the Belgian coal and coke industry in 1846: children under 16 constituted 22.4 per cent of the total workforce of 46,000.<sup>11</sup> Children most commonly started work in these industries between the ages of eight and 11. It might be concluded from such examples that although the technology did not always require high levels of child labour, in many cases employers or those to whom they sub-contracted employment, for example the mule spinners, had a preference for child labour; and that children in these circumstances were, in that respect at least, crucial to the success of the industries.

The discussion above merely touches on and opens up for further investigation the role played by children in the development of particular industries (and, by implication, given the importance of these industries, of national economies). The tendency in much recent scholarship has been to downplay the scale and significance of child labour, seeing it as a transitional phase superseded in due course by technological advance or substituted by the only marginally more expensive labour of those in their late teens, particularly females. There is, on the other hand, a considerable amount of contemporary testimony to the significance of the labour of children, because of their perceived skills (nimble fingers, for instance), or because of their cheapness, to the viability and competitiveness of their industries. This cannot be taken at face value, but equally it should not be ignored; it needs to be incorporated within a quantitative counter-factual study of the contribution of child labour to the technical processes and the competitiveness of the key industries of the industrial revolution.

## II

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the age structure of the workforce in the central industries of an industrial economy had changed. The age of entry had risen, and it was open to question whether those in their mid- to late teens who did work in them could be termed 'children'. Moreover, children, however denominated, played little or no part in the new industries of the period, electricity, or the chemical industries. This, however, did not mean that they had no economic role. What had happened was that a separate child labour market, 'a watertight

<sup>9</sup> Heywood, *Childhood*, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> Bolin-Hort, *Work, family and the state*, pp. 36-58.

<sup>11</sup> Church, *Coal industry*, pp. 193-9; De Herdt, 'Child labour in Belgium', p. 27.

compartment', had been created.<sup>12</sup> It is true, of course, that in textiles and mining in the 1830s children had distinct jobs (scavenging, trapping, and so on), and in that sense there was in those industries a segmented labour market; but it was a segmented labour market within a major industry. By the end of the century children had in large measure been excluded from such industries, and found a demand for their labour in sectors of the service industries, in many of which only children worked. In 1911 in Britain over one-quarter of males under 15 in employment were in the category 'transport', a high-sounding title for work as messenger boys.<sup>13</sup> It was work of a kind which was not only exclusive to children, but also, certainly in comparison with the earlier nineteenth century, was marginal to the economy. Nor was this process confined to the most advanced economies. In Norway in 1875 children worked in such major industries as agriculture, tobacco, and glass manufacture. By 1912, however, their role had been sharply restricted and, typically, they were distributors of newspapers.<sup>14</sup>

The exclusion of categories of workers from the labour market, or their segregation within it, are processes which have been much studied—but mainly from the perspective of gender rather than age. Within feminist scholarship there has been lively debate about the respective roles of 'patriarchy' and 'capitalism' in the subordination of women in the labour market or their exclusion from it.<sup>15</sup> It is now closely bound up with another body of literature, on the adult male breadwinner norm, where again the focus is almost exclusively on gender.<sup>16</sup> The exclusion and segregation of children has also been studied, and, as is shown below, there are substantial disagreements about the causal factors involved, but it has generated its own literature, unrelated to feminist scholarship, and infused with a different tone: whereas feminists, however much they disagree about causes, deplore the process of exclusion and segregation, child labour specialists, equally in disagreement about causes, by and large applaud the shift of children from paid labour to schooling. It is time that the two literatures engaged with one another.

The explanations currently on offer for the rise in the age of entry into the workforce, and the change in the nature of the work done, fall into four broad categories. First, it is argued that the explanation must be sought in the rational decisions of families. In the second category of explanation the emphasis is on state action, whether it be child labour laws or school attendance laws. In the third category the focus is on the development of the capitalist labour market wherein significant and powerful sections of both employers and employees, prompted or reinforced by technological change, had a motive for reducing child

<sup>12</sup> Dunlop and Denman, *English apprenticeship*, p. 318.

<sup>13</sup> Hopkins, *Childhood transformed*, p. 225; see also Lavalette, 'Changing form of child labour'.

<sup>14</sup> Schrumpf, 'From full-time to part-time'.

<sup>15</sup> Notable contributions in a substantial literature are Walby, *Patriarchy*; Bradley, *Men's work*.

<sup>16</sup> The literature is well surveyed in Creighton, 'Rise of male breadwinner family'; Janssens, ed., 'Rise and decline'.

labour. And, finally, it is suggested that attention should be paid to cultural change and cultural values.

The explanation which has most purchase in the literature at the moment is 'family strategy'. That there are difficulties in this term is acknowledged by some commentators who write about 'unconscious' strategies, strategies of which the families in question are unaware. This is playing with words, for the point about a strategy is that it assumes choice of action. There are other difficulties with the notion of family strategy, the most obvious and important of which is that it assumes a degree of unity within a family such that there will be one dominant strategy whereas, of course, there may be different members of the family pulling in opposite directions.<sup>17</sup>

The most whole-hearted family strategy approach to child labour can be found in Nardinelli's *Child labor in the industrial revolution*. Nardinelli's theoretical stance is derived from the work of Gary Becker who argued that families seek to maximize their own well-being, an approach known as 'the new household economics'. The maximizing of well-being comes through rational choice in face of the world which confronts the individual. For, say, a working-class Lancastrian in the 1820s, rational choice, in conditions of some real poverty, was for a family to maximize income by putting the children to work. As standards of living rose in the course of the century the rational choice was increasingly to invest in the child's education in order to be able to maximize family well-being when the child eventually went to work in a better job than he or she would have had if work had started earlier. Of course this decision might have been affected by such factors as legislation against child labour, or provision of facilities for schooling, or technology which reduced demand for child labour; nevertheless the overriding factor was parental decision. And since the decision was a rational one—and since in this perspective people act rationally to maximize well-being—then it was not surprising that thousands or millions of families made the same decision about child labour at a similar stage of economic development. The policy implications of this analysis are profound. Do nothing. Trust families to make the right decision.<sup>18</sup>

Other writers, if rather less assertively than Nardinelli, have adopted a new household economics approach to child labour, and their conclusions have tended to support his argument that rising adult male wages are the key to the timing of the reduction in the extent of child labour. In her study of Philadelphia in 1880, for example, Goldin found that 'The higher the father's wage, the lower the probability of the child's participating in the labor force.'<sup>19</sup> The problem with such studies is that, while

<sup>17</sup> Relevant discussions of family strategy include Goldin, 'Family strategies'; 'Family strategy: a dialogue'; Crow, 'Use of the concept of "strategy"'; Morgan, 'Strategies and sociologists'; Anderson et al., eds., *Social and political economy*, pp. 19-67; Robinson, 'Family economic strategies'.

<sup>18</sup> Nardinelli, *Child labor*.

<sup>19</sup> Goldin, 'Household and market production', p. 124. For further evidence of this kind, see Haines, 'Industrial work', p. 309; Horan and Hargis, 'Children's work'; for some reservations, Horrell and Humphries, 'Exploitation', p. 503; Brown et al., 'Decline of child labor', pp. 768-9.



they may be able to establish a relationship between child labour and father's wage at a set point in time, they are unable to explain how that relationship came to be established. The high wages might themselves be the outcome of effective trade union action to control the labour supply by keeping children out of the labour market. Put the other way round, on the assumption that child labour in any sector of the economy has a depressive effect on all wages, its existence will in turn reinforce the need, from the point of view of family income, for further child labour.<sup>20</sup> The new household economics tends to assume an axiomatic relationship between rising adult male wages and low child labour participation rates. A fuller understanding of the adulting of the labour market requires more investigation into the reasons why adult male wages were rising.

State action is the second major way of explaining the reduction of child labour. Reducing child labour, and in particular the age of starting, was in principle relatively simple: the supply of opportunities for child labour was cut off by legislation. Child labour laws were one way in which this could be done, and their role, enshrined in the successive editions of Hutchins and Harrison, *History of factory legislation*, was deemed of high significance in the first half of the twentieth century—and had little credibility in the second half.<sup>21</sup> The evidence against the importance of child labour laws is, on the face of it, formidable. One can point to country after country with child labour laws and high levels of child labour; it is not the passage of laws but their enforcement which is important, and enforcement was rarely effective. Laws, it is said, reflect rather than promote changes of behaviour, an argument linked to the proposition that legislation of this kind which might attract the label 'progressive' can only in fact reach the statute book if it has the backing of parties who stand to benefit materially from it. There is, further, the argument that child labour laws simply push children into the informal economy where no laws can reach them.

Laws, of course, do not appear on the statute book by sheer chance. They require an act of political will, and one would have to analyse the balance of forces which might either strengthen or weaken the will both to pass and to implement legislation. There is some evidence that they did simply push children into other forms of employment, though it has never been systematically analysed, and, bearing in mind the testimony to the lack of employment opportunities for children, it may be wrong to suppose that such unregulated jobs were plentiful.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, there is very strong evidence in the shape of employment figures to show that some child labour legislation has had a profound impact. The classic case is the 1833 Factory Act, whose impact is acknowledged even by Nardinelli, but others could be cited, notably the 1864 act in England which sharply reduced children's participation in the workforce

<sup>20</sup> Saito, 'Labour supply behaviour', esp. pp. 648-9.

<sup>21</sup> First published in 1903, there was a second edition in 1907, revised in 1911, and a third edition in 1926.

<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, 'Employment and unemployment'.

in the Potteries; the 1872 Mines Regulation Act in Britain (children under 15 as a proportion of the total labour force dropped from 10.5 per cent in 1871 to 6 per cent in 1881); the 1874 act in France, or the measures taken in the US in 1933 by the National Recovery Administration.<sup>23</sup>

A second way of tackling the child labour problem through state action was to cut off the supply of children by schooling laws. In principle, this avoided the problem of children moving into unregulated industry. There is quite considerable case-history evidence, for example from Sweden and Chicago, that one of the key motives for the introduction of compulsory schooling laws was to control child labour.<sup>24</sup> There were, of course, other motives, notably the wish to structure the time of those children who were unemployed, but in a sense the motive for legislation does not matter; its effect, if properly enforced, was to raise the age of entry to the labour force. It is true that young children might still work before school, after school, and in school holidays, and that they might play truant in order to work, but the effect of schooling laws was undoubtedly to raise the age of starting. In Bradford, for example, the proportion of 10-year-olds at work, which rose between 1861 and 1871 to reach 39 per cent, had fallen after a decade of compulsory schooling to 8.6 per cent. This evidence is taken from Ittmann's recent book on Bradford, yet he concludes that 'A significant decline in child labor occurred prior to 1870 because of parental choice rather than state intervention.' Nonsense: for all ages from 9 to 15 the proportion of children at work increased between 1861 and 1871.<sup>25</sup>

The argument for the importance of the enforcement of school attendance laws has been most strongly put by Weiner in *The child and the state in India*. Weiner asked why India had, deservedly, such a bad reputation in the field of child labour. It was not, he said, attributable to exceptional poverty in India for there were many countries with greater poverty but much less child labour. Neither did it arise from a lack of laws on the matter. It came about because India had not enforced those laws. Weiner then proceeded to survey a range of countries in Europe and Asia to see if he could find a common factor in the decline of child labour. He found it in the passage, and, more important, the implementation of compulsory schooling laws. It was much easier to enforce compulsory schooling laws than to enforce child labour laws which tended to be focused, as in the Fabian strategy, on one industry after another, and which might have the effect of simply shifting child labour into a different industry, and particularly out of the formal economy into the informal economy. The policy implications of Weiner's book were as profound as those of Nardinelli's, but they pointed in a quite different direction: rather than do nothing, authorities should pass and enforce

<sup>23</sup> Nardinelli, *Child labor*, p. 107; Dupree, *Family structure*, p. 266; Church, *Coal industry*, pp. 198-9; Weissbach, *Child labor reform*, p. 221; Trattner, *Crusade for the children*, pp. 190-200.

<sup>24</sup> Sandin, 'In the large factory town'; Hogan, *Class and reform*, pp. 57-60.

<sup>25</sup> Ittmann, *Work, gender and family*, pp. 199-200.



compulsory schooling laws. England, although late in European terms in the introduction of compulsory schooling (not until 1880 at national level), might stand as a model of what could be done by way of compulsion: between 1888 and 1916 the second most common offence (after drunkenness) coming before magistrates' courts was non-attendance at school.<sup>26</sup>

In the third category of explanation the emphasis is on the development of the capitalist labour market. In some analyses this boils down to a focus on technological change. This is invoked in much of the literature in an unsophisticated way. It is assumed both that technological innovation has its own inbuilt rationale and that it always acts in favour of adult and in opposition to child labour.<sup>27</sup> Nardinelli's 'Leave it to parents' is matched by the technological determinists' 'Leave it to technology'. This involves a highly selective reading of the evidence. Some machinery, for example, was designed quite deliberately so that it could be used by children.<sup>28</sup> Differences in the composition of the labour force in different places often cannot be explained by the level of technology. Thus the reliance on child labour in the cotton industry in the American South in the later nineteenth century was not replicated in Massachusetts, even though the same technology was used. The reason lay primarily in different management policies; in Massachusetts the employers aimed to gain control by avoiding subcontracting with its associated family employment practices; in the South labour shortages gave employers little option but to employ whole families in a culture where child labour was expected.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, there are plentiful examples of a reliance on child labour rather than a technology which would replace it, for example in the manufacture of matches by children in India.<sup>30</sup> There are, of course, examples of technological innovation which resulted in the reduction of employment of children—for example the pneumatic tube and the cash register used in US department stores which meant that there was no longer a role for the many boy messengers.<sup>31</sup> But why that was introduced could be explained only if more were known about employment strategies and labour relations in department stores.

Employment strategies and labour relations deserve further attention. Employers sometimes took the initiative in campaigning for the reduction in child labour. This was true in France in the 1840s, and in the Potteries in the 1860s.<sup>32</sup> Over and above this, it was frequently stated by employers, for example in the US canning industry in the twentieth century, that it was the employees who insisted on bringing their children with them and

<sup>26</sup> Hurt, *Elementary schooling*, p. 203.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Tilly and Scott, *Women, work, and family*, p. 178; Trattner, *Crusade for the children*, p. 159, and the summary of work done in Germany and Sweden in Bolin-Hort, *Work, family and the state*, pp. 11–14.

<sup>28</sup> Berg and Hudson, 'Rehabilitating', p. 36; Lown, *Women and industrialization*, p. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Bolin-Hort, *Work, family and the state*, pp. 270–97.

<sup>30</sup> Weiner, *Child and state in India*, pp. 23–7.

<sup>31</sup> Troen, 'Discovery of the adolescent', pp. 241–3.

<sup>32</sup> Weissbach, *Child labor reform*, pp. 23–31; Dupree, *Family structure*, pp. 215–39.

that they were a profound nuisance.<sup>33</sup> This evidence should not be taken entirely at face value, but equally it is not implausible. For employers the advantage of child labour was its cheapness; but it was only really cheap if it was productive. In the mid-nineteenth century employers began to replace extensive with intensive employment strategies. Experiments showed that more could be produced by limiting the number of hours worked, and that there were, as Marx demonstrated in a now-forgotten section of *Capital*, enormous opportunities for speeding up the pace of work—by speeding up the machines.<sup>34</sup> In these circumstances children might be a liability. It was the more progressive employers who were at the forefront of these moves, and, proud as many of them were of the industries in which they worked, they might try to raise the reputation of the industry and at the same time remove the danger of being undercut by cheap labour, by pushing for legislation that outlawed child labour. Equally, labour unions composed of adult males might fear that their position could be undercut by the employment of children, and campaign for their removal from the labour force unless, of course, the children worked as assistants to the adult males rather than as potential replacements for them.

A final possible explanation for the decline of child labour lies in cultural change and cultural values. There are two emphases to the cultural change argument. The first is that a romantic conception of the child as properly dependent and protected became increasingly widespread, and both provided ammunition for those campaigning for an end to child labour, and became internalized in wide sections of the population who might otherwise have put their children to work.<sup>35</sup> The second is that the concept of the family wage became increasingly accepted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflecting not only the self-interested beliefs of adult males, but also a wider conviction that the home was the proper territory for women and children. Those who emphasize cultural values argue that it is possible to explain different levels of child labour in different societies by reference to their value systems with respect to children and the family. A striking example is the low level of child labour in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries despite ongoing industrialization and the absence of legal prohibition of child labour. The Japanese famously indulged their children; as an American professor put it in 1917, 'Japan is the paradise for children'. Contrast this with the notoriously high level of child labour in Belgium where there seem to have been deep-rooted and almost universal expectations that children would work at an early age.<sup>36</sup>

The four approaches outlined here are not necessarily incompatible with one another. It is possible, for example, that school attendance laws might affect family decision making, that their passage and enforcement

<sup>33</sup> Brown et al., 'Decline of child labour', pp. 734-5.

<sup>34</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Custom'; Marx, *Capital*, ch. XIII, 3C 'Intensification of labour'; see also Heywood, *Childhood*, pp. 112-25, 322.

<sup>35</sup> Cunningham, *Children of the poor*.

<sup>36</sup> Saito, 'Children's work'; De Herdt, 'Child labour in Belgium'.

might have the backing of powerful groups among employers and within the labour movement, and that the change might be reinforced by cultural values. It is tempting to think that it might be possible to find a satisfactory explanation for the decline in child labour which holds good across the western world and perhaps beyond it, but the likelihood is that, as with fertility decline, the best that can be hoped for at this stage is a series of contextualized studies which will show a different balance of factors at work in different societies and perhaps within them. What is certain is that there is something which needs to be explained: a rise in age of entry to the workforce, and a substantial change in the role of children in the economy.

A key to understanding these developments may lie in some very familiar categories of analysis, supply and demand. There were enormous regional and inter-regional variations in the amount of child labour, which stemmed from the opportunities available for it. In many industries there were simply none. In the 1840s when there was outcry about the extent of child labour in the textile areas of Lancashire the Lord Mayor of the port city of Liverpool in the same county was lamenting the lack of job opportunities open to children.<sup>37</sup> In asking what determined the age of entry to the workforce, the availability of labour deemed suitable to children is the key factor, as is borne out by all the evidence. Thus in textile factories, where the opportunities for child labour were greatest, the age of starting was lower than in any other category of work. At family level, it is true, birth order and gender had significant effects on age of starting, with a general supposition that elder children and boys would start earlier than younger siblings and girls.<sup>38</sup> But differences of this kind pale into insignificance when compared with the differences by sector of the economy. The evidence suggests that parents, for very good reasons, needed the contributions which children could make to the family economy, and would use strategies to maintain the opportunities for child labour. In late nineteenth-century Philadelphia, for example, 60.8 per cent of 14-year-old boys living in households where the head had been born in Germany were in employment, compared with only 33.3 per cent of black children: the reason almost certainly was that Blacks had been excluded from access to the limited number of opportunities for child employment.<sup>39</sup>

If the supply of potential child labour was almost unlimited, then the key to its reduction rested with the curtailment of demand. The question then becomes: how was that achieved? The contending explanations in the literature have been noted above. What needs closer attention in further research is how far the segregated child labour market of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, oriented to the service sector, was

<sup>37</sup> Cunningham, 'Employment and unemployment', esp. pp. 140-6; Horrell and Humphries, 'Exploitation', pp. 500, 503; Winstanley, ed., *Working children*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Exploitation', pp. 497, 509.

<sup>39</sup> Goldin, 'Family strategies', tab. 2, p. 281, pp. 303-4.

created by the attempts at curtailment of demand, with child labour and school enforcement laws being the most important of those attempts.

### III

Whereas there is legitimate room for doubt about the significance of child labour in the macro-economy, the evidence on its role in the family economy is strong and consistent. It can, for that reason, be dealt with more briefly, but that brevity should not be taken as in any way an indication of lack of significance. On the contrary, it is crucial to any understanding of the reasons for and chronology of the decline of child labour.

For the period 1787-1865 the analysis of the make-up of family income in Britain by Horrell and Humphries showed that children consistently and in all types of occupation contributed more through earnings than did women. Children's contributions, of course, varied in amount and as a percentage of the total through the life cycle, becoming greatest after adult male earnings had peaked when the father was in his thirties.<sup>40</sup>

Another way of approaching this is to ask what sources of income a family could hope to draw on. The answers are: adult male wages, adult female wages, children's wages, or taking in lodgers. The evidence varies at the margin, but its general shape is consistent. The distribution of income from these sources varied across the life cycle, but in its later stages there was in nearly all cases likely to be a considerably greater income stream from children than from adult females. By the time the adult male was in his fifties, children were likely to be contributing about one-third of family income.<sup>41</sup> These figures are largely from the US. In Europe children's contributions were greater, about 41 per cent when the head was in his fifties, and in some cases higher than that; in Sabadell, a textile town in Catalonia, when the head of household was in his late fifties children were contributing just under half the family income, and when he was over 60, more than two-thirds. Adult females contributed very little in the way of income, implying, of course, that their contribution lay in household management.<sup>42</sup> The implications of this research for the male breadwinner norm are considerable. To an astonishing extent the literature on that subject has focused exclusively on the economic contributions of adults; if children's contributions are factored in, it immediately becomes apparent that it was only at the stage of the life cycle when the children were young that the male breadwinner norm could approach reality—thereafter children themselves became major contributors. It also becomes clear that the removal of children from the formal economy did not of itself bring an end to child labour, or of expectations that children would contribute to the family economy.

<sup>40</sup> Horrell and Humphries, 'Women's labour force participation', p. 104; Horrell and Humphries, 'Origins and expansion', p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Haines, 'Industrial work', p. 325; Goldin, 'Family strategies', p. 284.

<sup>42</sup> Haines, 'Industrial work', p. 328; Camps, 'Family strategies', p. 67.

## IV

One of the alternatives to child labour was married female labour. The enforcement of child labour laws, as in the Potteries in the 1860s, could lead to the replacement of children by women.<sup>43</sup> More generally, from the point of view of the household, with its own gendered structure, it was possible to think of mothers and daughters as able to substitute for one another: daughters could take on household tasks, releasing mothers for paid employment, or vice versa. What is significant is that at the national level there seems to be no evidence of the former alternative happening in the late nineteenth or earlier twentieth century. Thus in Belgium, in the second half of the nineteenth century, it appears that adult female wage rates increased faster than either adult male or children's rates. Families might have responded to this by putting adult females to work, but they did not, preferring instead to keep children in the workforce. This may have been the outcome of an analysis of the economic contribution women made in the home, but it seems likely that the economic component in the analysis was heavily outweighed by a cultural one: a belief that home was the place for women.<sup>44</sup> Similarly in England and Wales it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at precisely the time when children were being removed from the labour market, that married women's participation in the labour market was at a low point, with, in 1911, only about 10 per cent of married women participating, and only 14 per cent of all female employees being married.<sup>45</sup>

These figures suggest that the notion that married women should not participate in the formal labour market may have had its greatest impact in the early twentieth century. There remains considerable ignorance about this, in part because the literature which explores this process is curiously divorced from the family economy literature which has been considered in this article. Thus, when Tilly and Scott sought to trace the evolution in the twentieth century from the family wage economy to the family consumer economy, they could provide little information on contributions of different members to the family economy. If anything, they argued, the family consumer economy was marked by a sharper division between husbands and unmarried children as wage earners and wives as child carers and household managers. This may have put more emphasis on children's earnings. Tilly and Scott cite some striking figures from France: between 1907 and 1914 children's wages as a percentage of household income rose from about 10 per cent to 18.5 per cent, and wives' contributions declined from 11.7 per cent to 5.4 per cent.<sup>46</sup> Was this replicated elsewhere, and does it mark a trend whereby both the ideology of the wife and mother being in the home, and the practice, were at their height in the interwar years?

<sup>43</sup> Dupree, *Family structure*, pp. 246-68.

<sup>44</sup> Alter, 'Work and income', pp. 272-3.

<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *Women in England*, pp. 149-50; Holcombe, *Victorian ladies*, p. 217.

<sup>46</sup> Tilly and Scott, *Women, work, and family*, esp. pp. 176-7, 185, 199.

It is certainly in the second half of the twentieth century that married women's participation has increased, though in its timing and intensity it has varied enormously from one country to another. As late as 1984 the disparities were huge, Sweden's 68.9 per cent of married women aged 25-60 in the labour force contrasting with Ireland's 24.2 per cent.<sup>47</sup> The pattern in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was that married women from their mid-thirties upwards were those most likely to be increasing their participation in the labour force. In the US, for example, between 1950 and 1970 the labour force activity rates of married women aged 35-44 rose from 26.5 to 45.6 per cent, for those aged 45-54 from 23.0 to 47.3 per cent, and for those aged 55-64 from 13.1 to 34.6 per cent. By contrast, for those aged 25-34 the increase was less significant, from 22.3 to 38 per cent. British figures follow a similar pattern.<sup>48</sup> It would seem that married women were participating in the labour force at a stage in the life cycle where previously there had been heavy reliance on contributions to the family economy from children. For our purposes, this raises the possibility that the increase in married women's participation could be in substitution for that of children. Against it is the research on married women's motivations for entry into the labour market, in which the need to replace income previously contributed by children never surfaces.<sup>49</sup> This indicates that, however suggestive the timing of the increased participation of married women, it may be driven by factors other than the need to substitute for children.

## V

What is the chronology of the decline in children's contributions to the family economy? This is a vital question, with enormous implications for the understanding of family life, and yet our knowledge of it is at best patchy. One of the problems in investigating it is that the assumption that parents will be the sole economic providers has become so deeply entrenched that researchers have failed to build into their questionnaires any possibility that children will contribute either by way of wages or through household work.<sup>50</sup> The discussion which follows draws mainly on British evidence.

The progressive raising of the school leaving age, to 14 in 1918, to 15 in 1944, and to 16 in 1972, reduced the possibility of contributions from full-time earning from teenagers. But being at school did not preclude some earning. In the early years of the twentieth century the earnings of schoolchildren were handed over to their mothers; in Scotland, for example, 'it was taken for granted that earnings [of schoolchildren] would

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, 'Introduction: women, work, family', p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Yohalem, ed., *Women returning to work*, pp. 165, 226.

<sup>49</sup> Roberts, *Women and families*, pp. 124-9.

<sup>50</sup> Solberg, 'Seeing children's work'; Morrow, 'Rethinking childhood dependency'. Cunningham, 'The problem that doesn't exist', demonstrates Home Office downplaying of child labour in the interwar period. For an example of a major research project which failed to ask questions about children's contributions, see Anderson et al., eds., *Social and political economy*, pp. 2, 49.



be handed over "to the house"'.<sup>51</sup> By the middle decades of the century the evidence suggests that schoolchildren were given pocket money (a topic crying out for research), and might add to it, for their own benefit, from casual payments for odd jobs, or child care within their own families.<sup>52</sup> This tendency indicates a marked shift in expectations on the part of both parents and children.

When they did enter the labour market on leaving school, children contributed to the family economy, as indeed they still do while they live at home.<sup>53</sup> And the general rule was that they continued to live in the parental home after leaving school; in 1959, 90 per cent of English children lived at home two years after leaving school.<sup>54</sup> The interesting question for present purposes is what proportion of their earnings they handed to their mothers. The evidence suggests that both in mid-century and in the 1990s this was related to family need, to age, and to gender.<sup>55</sup> But it also suggests that children's contributions as a percentage both of total family income, and of their own gross income, declined sharply. Good evidence on this is lacking. The Second World War may quite widely have marked a turning point, as it did in Canada, where 'whatever the family circumstances, until after the Second World War, most working-class children turned their earnings over to their parents'.<sup>56</sup> On Merseyside, evidence from the 1930s indicates that those aged 14-21 on average supplied 24 per cent of total family income, and in a poor part of the same area in the 1950s some children were still handing over the whole of their earnings and receiving back spending money from their mothers.<sup>57</sup> More generally, it can be suggested that in the middle decades of the century children from working-class families continued to contribute a sum for board and lodging once they started earning and remained at home. However, given their rise in earnings, this gave older teenagers a growing margin for expenditure on themselves—the famous 'teenage consumer' identified by Mark Abrams in 1959, but for whom there is now evidence from the 1930s.<sup>58</sup> Certainly teenagers in employment and at home now contribute to their family economies, but it is in some ways a symbolic sum, and the older they are the smaller the proportion of gross earnings: at age 16 the median contribution is 30 per cent; three years later, at 19, it is only 17 per cent.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, young workers now are almost totally without a sense that they are at work in order to contribute to the family economy. A survey in the 1990s in Britain, looking at the main reasons given by young people aged 13-18 for working, found that only 1 per cent did so because it was 'essential for

<sup>51</sup> Jamieson, 'Working-class mothers and daughters', p. 58.

<sup>52</sup> Leonard, *Sex and generation*, p. 52; O'Brien, 'Allocation of resources', pp. 503-6.

<sup>53</sup> Rowntree, *Progress*, pp. 121-54; Kerr, *Ship Street*, pp. 46-8, 60-1; Roberts, *Women and families*, p. 50; Jones, 'Cost of living'.

<sup>54</sup> Roberts, *Women and families*, p. 50.

<sup>55</sup> See Davies, *Leisure, gender and poverty*, pp. 84-8.

<sup>56</sup> Sutherland, *Growing up*, pp. 131-2.

<sup>57</sup> Jones, *Merseyside*, II, pp. 28-32; Kerr, *Ship Street*, pp. 46-8, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Fowler, *First teenagers*, pp. 93-9; Osgerby, *Youth*, pp. 24-6.

<sup>59</sup> Jones, 'Cost of living'.

making ends meet for my family'.<sup>60</sup> That would have been unimaginable earlier in the century.

Leonard, studying Swansea in the 1960s, found that 'Young and grown children living at home do very little domestic work', and a national survey from the same period found that many daughters, who traditionally would be expected to contribute to housework more than sons, did very little in the way of cooking, cleaning, or washing up. Leonard, indeed, argued that the balance of economic power lay with children: 'Young people', she wrote, 'exploit their parents.' It was not that children in employment did not contribute a sum for board: they did. But this sum did not begin to represent the true costs, and it was often reduced in special circumstances, for example the perceived need to save for marriage. The exploitation was possible because of a cultural expectation that mothers should be the providers and carers.<sup>61</sup>

How can this significant change over the course of the twentieth century be explained? The simple answer is that rising family incomes reduced the need for children to enter the labour market and to contribute to the family economy. As has been shown, while this is certainly part of the explanation, it is not consistent with all of the evidence, and it does not by itself provide a satisfactory answer.<sup>62</sup>

Child labour legislation and compulsory schooling acts could only have influence on this situation at the margin, for the 'children' were mostly of an age beyond the reach of such legislation. What could influence it? Three factors besides and alongside rising incomes need to be considered. The first is welfare legislation, which by transferring resources to families with children could reduce parental dependence on children's contributions.<sup>63</sup> The second is married women's employment, as discussed above. Third, and probably most important, is the process of sanctification of childhood, identified by Zelizer, who showed how children came to be valued not for what they could contribute to the family economy but for the emotional gratification they brought to adults.<sup>64</sup> If a transformation of the kind she suggested occurred, then only in difficult financial circumstances would parents expect their children to work for the sake of the family—in the Depression years in the US there was renewed reliance on children's contributions.<sup>65</sup> The general rule, however, was that parents worked in order to provide a better life and better opportunities for their children. They also sought to reward their children, providing pocket money and presents. From being low down in the family pecking order, children rose to the top. A working-class mother in Bethnal Green in the 1950s explained how 'When I was a kid Dad always had the best of everything. Now it's the children who get the best of it. If there's one

<sup>60</sup> Hibbett and Beatson, 'Young people at work', p. 176.

<sup>61</sup> Leonard, *Sex and generation*, pp. 48, 52–60, 257–8, quoting p. 258; Roberts, *Women and families*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>62</sup> See above, pp. 414–20.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., Pedersen, *Family, dependence*.

<sup>64</sup> Zelizer, *Pricing*.

<sup>65</sup> Elder, *Children of great depression*, pp. 65–70.

pork chop left, the kiddy gets it.'<sup>66</sup> By that date the deep-rooted pressure on children to contribute to the family economy had been sharply eroded; they were now the beneficiaries of adult earnings.

## VI

This survey of the literature surrounding the five propositions put forward at the beginning of this article suggests that the adulting of the labour market and of the family economy are important but poorly understood. Where does this leave us?

There is a need, first of all, for a firmer benchmark against which to measure subsequent change. Hence, techniques must be developed for measuring not simply how many children worked in the central industries of industrializing economies, but the overall significance of child labour to economic success or failure. Only when this is more firmly established is it possible to examine the decline of child labour which, as argued above, needs to be separated into two quite different declines, the first represented by a rise in the age at which work started, linked to the emergence of a segregated child labour market, the second by a decline in children's contributions to the family economy. In neither case are these topics with clearly defined boundaries—they shade off into numerous other topics, each with its own literature. Part of the problem in the literature research is not to be deflected by these other topics. Part of the frustration in reading it is a sense of missed opportunities in the research. The overall outcome is that there are as yet no satisfactory explanations for the declines.

As far as the rise in starting age is concerned, cultural norms about the nature of childhood need to be built into the analysis. The passage and implementation of laws have been argued to be more important as an explanation than the insights provided by the new household economics. This assertion, of course, raises further questions: why were they passed, and when and why was there the will to implement them? But equally important is the fact that laws were only necessary, and could only have effect, where there were opportunities for child labour, and it is the wide variation in the range of opportunities, often in closely adjacent geographical areas, which is the key factor to bear in mind when analysing child labour: contexts are vital.

As to the second issue, the decline in children's contributions to the family economy, what is needed is a series of case studies which would begin to show when and why this happened. It is tempting to think that there will be some close connection between the decline in the contribution children made to the family economy and the rise in married women's work. Although the two processes overlapped in time, from the evidence examined in this article it seems unlikely that there was any direct substitution of married women for children. What is more plausible is a significant shift in parental expectations, and correspondingly in

<sup>66</sup> Young and Willmott, *Family and kinship*, p. 28.

children's expectations, of the kind Zelizer depicted. As I have suggested elsewhere, this amounted to an unprecedented change in power relations within families.<sup>67</sup> Certainly at some point in the middle years of the century (doubtless at a different point in different contexts) the expectation that children should contribute to the family economy diminished sharply.

With that diminution the process of adulting was near completion: children's contributions both to the national economy and to the family economy had been reduced to insignificant amounts. It was a process unforeseen and unimagined by those in the 1830s who believed that the dynamic of capitalism would have the opposite effects. Although the rise in age of entry of children to the labour market is well known and the factors which may explain it well entrenched in the subject literature, there are sharp divisions of opinion among historians as to the weight to be given to the different factors, and there has been little analysis of that creation of a separate children's labour market, marginal to the economy as a whole, characteristic of the period from the late nineteenth century onwards. Further, the study of the role of children's contributions to the family economy, well understood for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (though mistakenly divorced from the study of the male breadwinner family), has hardly begun to be examined for the mid- to late twentieth century, and may not be constant within that period. It is that role which most urgently needs to be explored.

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<sup>67</sup> Cunningham, *Children and childhood*, pp. 182-5.

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