The class-based roots of adoption and adoption mythology

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Center for Study of Working Class Life | SUNY–Stony Brook
I. Adoption in an economic and political context
THE DOMINANT cultural mode paints adoption as an act of charity and beneficence as well as family creation, despite the growing elaboration to the contrary by adoptees who have come of age, as well as their mothers, families, and communities from whom they go missing.

This runs counter to the popular cultural understanding of adoption, in which implied absence of filiation remains prominent, the act is seen as coercive, and “blood” is seen as “thicker than water”.

This disparity in terms of class-based understanding makes sense when the historical roots of modern-day adoption are understood as stemming from a variety of societal impositions directed against the poor and indigent.

As I will elaborate, these impositions include: indentured servitude, the emptying of poorhouses, the eradication of Indigenous populations, the population of foreign colonies, and the procurement of cheap labor from abroad.

These impositions are premised on classist concepts of a universal nuclear family, the economic basis for familial lineage, and the exaltation of the individual over the community.
To better understand this discrepancy, it will help to examine historically speaking the rapid rise of a suburbanized middle class after World War II.

Racially motivated, this economic, political, and legal shift necessitated that the mythology of adoption move to one primarily concerning family creation, and a catering to perceived-as upper classes.

As we will explore, this required that adoption as an industry practice manifest a class-based economic and political expression of domestic control, as well as colonial and imperial power.

The ignoble origins of the institution are carried forward in current adoption industry practice, and domestic populations as well as those of targeted nations continue to reflect the class disparity that has always been at the core of this transfer of children and rupture of filiation, even those that take place in so-called “open” adoptions.

This transfer maps readily onto other practices of dispossession, displacement, and disinheritance, namely: slavery, trafficking, gentrification, immigration, land occupation, apartheid, and enforced statelessness, similarly based in economic/political class disparities.
Adoption in an economic and political context

Hiring “orphans”, labor use and indentured servitude

CASE STUDIES: Reunion Island, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, The Antilles; United States

France’s lost children fight back; Hugh Schofield, BBC
Empire of Capital, Ellen Meiksins Wood
Adoption in an economic and political context

Exporting “orphans” to populate foreign colonies

CASE STUDIES: United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, Ireland, Scotland, Wales.
Children’s Friend Society, Children’s Aid Society, The New York Foundling Hospital,
Charles Loring Brace

SOURCE(S): Adoption in America, E. Wayne Carp
The Orphan Trains, PBS
Adoption in an economic and political context

Removing “orphans” from their indigenous roots

CASE STUDIES: United States, Canada, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Australia.

SOURCE(S): 
Racisme: entre exclusion sociale et peur identitaire, CETRI
Outsiders Within; Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, Sun Yung Shin, editors
Native Children and the Child Welfare System, Patrick Johnson
Western Colonization as Disease: Native Adoption & Cultural Genocide, Wesley Crichlow
Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare, Dorothy Roberts
Adoption in an economic and political context

Secreting “orphans” away from their illegitimate origins

CASE STUDIES: United States, Ireland, Australia, Canada.

SOURCE(S): The Girls Who Went Away, Ann Fessler
Adopted or Abducted, Dan Rather Reports
Gone To A Good Home, ABC [Australia]
Adoption in an economic and political context

Adopting “orphans”, the by-product of war

CASE STUDIES: Spain, Hungary, Greece, Germany, Austria; Japan, Philippines, China, Korea, Vietnam; Nicaragua, Guatemala, Colombia, Haiti; Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon.

SOURCE(S): International Adoption, Diane Marre and Laura Briggs
Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, Christina Klein
Adoption in an economic and political context

Using “orphans” to project imperial power

CASE STUDIES: Harry Holt, Pearl S. Buck.

SOURCE(S): Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, Christina Klein

Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice, Kirsten Lovelock; International Migration Review

Après l’empire, Emmanuel Todd
Adoption in an economic and political context

Socially constructing “orphans” as perfectable citizens

CASE STUDIES: Argentina; Spain; Canada; United States; Germany, Norway, Ukraine.

SOURCE(S): The Paradoxical Rationalization of Adoption; Ellen Herman, Journal of Social History
Der Spiegel
The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Frederick Engels
Adoption in an economic and political context

Adopting scions/heirs to run companies

CASE STUDIES: Japan, India

SOURCE(S): Adoptive Expectations: Rising Sons in Japanese Family Firms, Vikas Mehrotra, Randall Morck, Jungwook Shim, Yupana Wiwattanakantang
II. The aims of globalizing capitalism as manifested within adoption practices
Contradictory super-mediation/inversion

1) Obfuscation of the economic compulsion;
2) Economic basis of coercion;
3) Collusion of mythic narratives;
4) Expansion of privatization.
Eradication of history/culture

1) Ascendancy and supremacy of ahistorical narrative;
2) Shifting of narrative: foregrounding the dominant/personal;
3) Mediated reality replaces actual historical references.

IMAGES: The Red Thread (Ann Hood and Grace Lin)
The aims of globalizing capitalism as manifested within adoption practices

**Creation of the Other**

1) Imposition of a comprador class;
2) The Other as targeted entity.

**Image:** Sheikh Amadou Bamba Praying on the Waters [Mor Gueye, Senegal]
The aims of globalizing capitalism as manifested within adoption practices

Dispossession, displacement, disinheritance

1) The concept of migration as normative;
2) Necessity of the nation-state to impose citizenship;
3) Impersonal aspect of enforcement: hegemony;
4) Creation of a universal ideal;
5) Establishment of the concept of nuclear family;
6) Non-arbitrary fixing of the notions of property and exchange;
7) Destruction of resistance.

IMAGE: Detroit Public Schools Book Depository, *Detroit in Ruins* [Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre]
Reification of the adopted child

1) Children viewed as ‘saved’;
2) Children treated as property;
3) Children looked upon as future workers;
4) Children seen as a ‘return on investment’;
5) Adoption normalized; historical facts minimized and exceptionalized.

IMAGES: Magdalene Asylum [photographer unknown]
The Adopted Break Silence [Jean Paton]
[They are] “street Arabs” from the “dangerous classes”.

— Charles Loring Brace, describing foundling children in New York City.
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