

Belittled Citizens: The cultural politics of childhood on Bangkok's margins

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same, the case study project examples are useful for illustrating different ways of pulling the different methods and techniques together in particular projects from across the world.

This text is a fantastic resource with potential broad relevance and appeal across diverse policy and practice domains and contexts. With a resurgence in local cross-sector, place-based initiatives to improve the lives of children, this is likely to be a well-referenced text for years to come. It is just a shame that these approaches could not be incorporated more fully into children's education along the lines of the philosophies of Reggio Emilio or the commitment to children's learning in and from their environment that early pioneers such as Colin Ward and Roger Hart embraced and that more latter day advocates such as Alison Clark, Peter Moss and Michael Fielding argue for in the context of democratic education. We know children still enjoy being outdoors, but with ICT playing such a major role in everybody's lives now, one cannot help but reflect on the importance of children learning first-hand about their environments in these ways beyond the confines of research projects, to experientially forge the connection with the natural world and their communities. This text is hence much more than a resource book. It is a book about how we live, learn and play together across generations, how we keep research real and decision-making democratic and how we create sustainable communities for the future.

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Giuseppe Bolotta's *Belittled Citizens* is remarkable piece of work in multiple respects. Perhaps its most important achievement is that the book succeeds in using fine-grained ethnographic material of children's 'micro-geographies' to illuminate far-reaching social dynamics. Thereby, the book successfully addresses the critique that much of the childhood studies literature fails making an impact beyond the relatively narrow confines of the field (Ansell 2009). Bolotta achieves this by unravelling the relations between culture, politics and childhood. This makes *Belittled Citizens* a rewarding read for geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and scholars of Southeast Asia more broadly.

Belittled Citizens brings to the foreground the lives of some, so-called, *dek salam* (slum children) from a Bangkok (Thailand) slum area. The focus on the Thai context is insightful in and of itself. Additionally, it also makes an important contribution to childhood studies more broadly which has seen relatively few works based on research in peninsular Southeast Asia (Thailand focused exceptions would include: Baker 2007; Montgomery 2001). With regards to Thailand this is surprising because in popular media Thailand is often associated with social problems such as child labour, child trafficking and child prostitution.

Belittled Citizens is organised into two substantial parts complemented with a useful introduction and conclusion. There is also a short coda in which Bolotta reflects on the relevance of the analysis in relation to new forms of protests by youth and young adults in the post-Bhumibol era (Huijsmans 2019). Part 1 of the book is entitled *The cultural politics of childhood* and consists

of four chapters. The first chapter explains how Bangkok's slum children are easily 'construed as dangerous deviants' (47) as they disrupt the carefully cultivated image of the 'good Thai child' which is tied into key institutions of the Thai socio-political order namely the monarchy, the nation and (Buddhist) religion. This chapter also situates childhood in relation to the Thai generational order. In this, childhood is a relational position in a hierarchical social context and not just delineated by the absolute measure of chronological age. *Phu noi* (literally small people) exist in relation to *phu yai* (literally big people). These positions refer to children and adults, but also to marginalised populations more broadly and elites. Similarly, the *phi* (literally older sibling) - *nong* (literally younger sibling) relation often refers to age-based differences but can also encompass other basis of power differentials. It is on these grounds that Bolotta proposes childhood as a 'political category' (179) which is central in the reproduction of unequal relations of power affecting children (relative to adults) but also marginalised populations more broadly (relative to elites).

The next two chapters in Part I zoom in on the politics of childhood of religious organisations operating in the slum. One of these chapters looks at the activities of so-called 'development monks', whose interpretation of Buddhism and associated perspectives on childhood differs somewhat from the Buddhist doctrine propagated by the Thai state. This chapter is matched with one that concentrates on the politics of childhood of a Catholic NGO. It illustrates that *dek salam* 'are the symbolic centre' (77) of the NGO, while its interventions are shaped by the social logic of globalised constructs of childhood. The final chapter of Part 1 places the politics of childhood in the context of the slum as a transnational humanitarian field. It demonstrates how the transnational discourse of children's rights is appropriated by some adult slum dwellers enabling them to 'gain access to political mediation and financial resources through NGOs' (118). This turns Bangkok's *dek salam* into symbolic capital in a transnational humanitarian field.

Part II is entitled *Children's cultures and selves* and consists of two substantial chapters. In these chapters Bolotta examines childhood 'through the children's own eyes and voices' (118). The first chapter illuminates how the *dek salam* are 'required to embody contradictory subject positions' (121) as they traverse, as part of their everyday lives, diverse social spaces structured by very different constructions of childhood. Bolotta is particularly interested in how having to occupy such contradictory subject positions affects *dek salam*'s sense of selves. This analytical exercise is deepened in the final substantial chapter on the basis of longitudinal data – data from young slum dwellers spanning a ten year period. This life course perspective shows that children are 'inhabited by multiple selves' (177). This way they may indeed 'experience subjective fragmentation' (177) but Bolotta shows that 'it can also enhance these children's capacity to address (and competently embody) an increasingly diverse range of societal pressures and cultural influences' (177). Although the overall balance of the ethnographic material leans towards the lives of boys and young men, Bolotta also includes some interesting cases about girls and young women. This way, Bolotta is able to draw out relevant gender analysis, which is also true for Part I of the book.

Belittled Citizens stands out, too, for the vast body of research it is based on. This includes a broad and careful reading of various literatures ranging from psycho-analytics, ethnographies of childhood, area studies literature, post-colonial studies as well as relevant Thai language sources. This is woven together with an impressive amount of primary data. The seeds of the study were sown during two months of volunteering in 2008 at the Catholic NGO that also features in the monograph. The substantial ethnography was conducted between 2010 and 2016 including a six months period spent with the *dek salam* in the slum areas, 'eight months in their schools, and about one year in religious (Buddhist and Catholic) and secular child-focussed NGO contexts' (9).

The ethnography was in many ways unconventional, complex and complicated as Bolotta sought to participate in *dek salam*'s everyday lives while also maintaining relations with his diverse set of adult gate-keepers. This necessarily implied breaking some of the rules of the organisations hosting Bolotta, keeping secrets in order to maintain the hard-won trust of the young protagonists, and unsettling the strongly hierarchical social fabric through which everyday sociality unfolds in the Thai context. Bolotta writes about this openly and also usefully reflects on children and adults' interpretations

and reactions of his changing roles. The research was carried out as part of an anthropology PhD project. Yet, the focus and analysis are shaped, too, by Bolotta's 'former training and professional commitment as a clinical psychologist' (15). While all this is acknowledged and briefly discussed, I look forward to reading yet more about the methodological dimension of this research, including the many ethical dilemmas Bolotta no doubt ran into at various stages of the research.

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