Falling angels? – the material construction of children as sexual citizens

DAVID T. EVANS
Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow, U.K.

In late twentieth century capitalism, hooked on the Sexual Fix (Heath 1982) in which sexuality is the lubricant of consumerism (Greer 1984) and “the medium through which people seek to define their personalities and . . . to be conscious of themselves” (Foucault and Sennett 1981: 183), “innocent” children have emerged as at least proto-sexual citizens (Evans 1993). Their sexual status and attendant civil, political and social rights (Marshall 1950) have become more specifically formalised within the law and machineries of state, whilst in market relations, they increasingly participate as commodity-consuming sexual subjects as well as consumed objects. Behind the forceful reiteration of children’s immutable-because-innate asexuality and the need for enhanced protective vigilance in an invasive corrupting world, children are being socialised from a variety of sources into elaborate sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon 1986), colonised by forms of sexual knowledge, and encouraged to pursue rights claims through the courts and to purchase their desires, identities and lifestyles. This essay seeks to explain how and why.

Grave objects of concern

The construction of children as grave objects of concern, as vulnerable to all manner of seductions, has been a remarkable feature of the sexualisation of modern societies. This pedagogisation of childhood (Foucault 1981), initially as a distinct idyllic and asexual stage in pre-adult personal development (Krafft-Ebing 1965), and later as a period of undirected latent sexual energy under siege from innumerable exploitative others, became broadly established with the bourgeois elevation of the domestic realm to a haven of privacy, serenity, comfort and health, within which this precarious innocence could, it was believed, be safely ensconced (Donzelot 1980).

Embellished negatively through facts on abuse incidence (Baker and Duncan 1986; NSPCC 1989; Finkelhor 1984; la Fontaine 1988 etc.), clinical studies

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1 Here child will be used to describe all those pre-adults otherwise distinguished as infants, children and adolescents. See Ruddick (1989).

2 Given the current reconstruction retrospectively of child sexual abuse, and inherent problems
of “victims” (Gagnon 1965; Finkelhor 1979; Burgess et al. 1978; Rush 1980; Weiss et al. 1955), and abusers (mainly male (Groth et al. 1982; Peters 1976) but also female (Hunt 1990; Sharpe 1992; Elliott 1993)), feminist and professional welfare critiques and manuals to instruct the abused and aid those employed to save them (Blagg et al. 1989; Blagg and Stubbs 1988; Bentovim et al. 1988; Butler-Sloss 1988; Creighton 1984; MacFarlane 1986; Miner and Blythe 1988), and prominent media panics about extra- and intra-familial abuse (Summit 1986; Finkelhor 1980; Elliott 1993), childhood sexuality has largely been taken for granted as a “paradigm of the natural” (Jordonova 1989). However, the escalation of abuse scripts, pleas on behalf of children’s rights and liberation in general (Cohen 1980; Holt 1975; Harris 1987; Farson 1974a; 1974b), and, more controversially, pleas on behalf of their capacity for self-determined sexual relations (PIE 1978; O’Carroll 1980; Kincaid 1993), means that it is no longer possible to either confidently claim that children and childhood are unambiguously pre-social, asocial, pre- or asexual (Jordonova 1989), or to reify the inner family world as unquestionably the moral superior to that outside.

Cross-cultural and historical evidence demonstrates clearly that the customary separation of childhood and sexuality and the protraction of childhood well beyond adolescence is socially constructed, despite normative justifications expressed in absolute terms of “God”-given natural, physical and emotional maturation. As the data collated by Ford and Beach (1951) demonstrated, even in the most “primitive” and restrictive societies, some

in measuring current incidence, estimates vary widely, but all agree that abuse has been and is more widespread than official records show, and that it is on the increase in all socio-economic groups (Finkelhor 1984). Baker and Duncan (1986) e.g. report “substantial increases’ in Europe, the USA and Australasia; the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (quoted Search 1988) claim incidence in England and Wales increased 12-fold in between 1983–7; Blagg et al. (1989) estimate that 1 in 10 children are sexually abused.

Studies of victims address the effects or consequences in terms of subsequent adult sexual dysfunctions: frigidity, neuroses, guilt, inhibitions, anxiety etc., causing adolescent and adult prostitution (James and Meyerding 1977; Silbert and Pines 1981); disturbed personality development (Bender and Grugott 1951) which could recycle in abuse of previous victims’ own children (Goodwin and Geil 1982) and even suicide (c.g. Goodwin et al. 1981).

Numerous studies include Mohr et al. (1964); Cook and Howells (1981); Groth and Birnbaum (1978); and Burgess et al. (1981) which focuses on “sex rings”. Rossman (1976) identifies 5 types of organised paedophilia: acquaintance networks operating under cover as e.g. sports clubs etc.; pederast “apologists” who collect information on paedophile sub-culture; photographers and pornographers who collect material substitutes for the “real thing”; the pederast underworld proper and pederast rings. Taylor (1981) identifies 8 types.

See also Conte and Smore (1982); Glase and Frosh (1987); Jehu (1988).

Jordonova (1989: 13) refers to such expressions as “pure”, “innocent” and “plantlike”. Common sense assumptions of children as in all ways “incomplete” compared to adults has limited the study of children qua children.

One of the most commonly adopted definitions of which being “... the involvement of dependent developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activity they do not truly comprehend to which they are unable to give informed consent, or that violate the social taboos of family roles.” (Kempe and Kempe 1978)