

BOOK REVIEW

## Feminist Reflections on Childhood: A History and Call to Action

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*You will never understand children if you belittle their qualities*  
— Janusz Korzack, (quoted in Weiss, 42)

Penny Weiss has written an honest book in which she demonstrates how embracing meaningful discomfort contributes to the transformation of Western feminist projects. The meaningful discomfort that Weiss courageously embraces, and the honesty of her scholarly and social project, lies in grounding her work in a self-critical awareness of adultism in the foundations of our social and moral lives. Although Weiss does not use the word *childism*, her work can be characterized as childist in the transformative-childhood studies sense of the term (Hulqvist 2018; Biswas 2021; Sporre 2021; Mattheis 2022; Wall 2022). This will be my reading of the book, which can add to readings from within solely feminist frameworks (see Locke 2022). Consequently, I use the language of adultism and childism, even though Weiss herself uses a different vocabulary. Adultism refers to the marginalization and oppression of children and youth, whereas childism refers to efforts aimed at overcoming adultism by transforming social and scholarly norms.

The standpoint of the author's intellectual approach recognizes that Western feminist theory is built on excluding concrete voices of children and youth (54). Here, Weiss engages with childhood studies scholarship, for example, the work of anthropologist Alison James to highlight the pertinent point that "What counts as problematical is defined or presented in a way that tends to maintain the injurious status quo in families, schools, and communities" (53–54). By calling to include voices of children and youth, Weiss is calling for more authentic, self-reflective ways forward for Western feminist scholarship.

At the same time, and this is the core argument of the book, Weiss shows that Western feminists have also evolved by acknowledging the young as agents despite their oppressive circumstances. The analogy between adultist and sexist systems of oppression is presented as a significant tool to deepen our understanding of intersectional marginalization, and how it could be overcome. It is as if Weiss is communicating that any feminist project is incomplete until it has examined, confronted, and attempted to overcome adultism. On a relevant, related note, she demonstrates that Western feminism does in fact have a history of learning from and building upon children's

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experiences of oppression—but that this pertinent detail has been left out in how the history of Western feminism is told. Flagging and elaborating these two interrelated notes seems to serve two purposes for those interested in addressing adultism as part of the development of Western feminist theory. First, it points to an accurate horizon and shows a meaningful direction for any feminist project. Second, it presents historical examples to argue that pursuing this direction would in fact be a continuation of Western feminist projects that have taken adultism into fair account. Weiss holds that the problem lies with readings of Western feminists that ignore the adultism-critical lens in their works, not the works themselves.

Following this route, I read Weiss to mean that Western feminism expands through childism. Or to say the least, Western feminism expands by integrating adultist dimensions of oppression into its analysis. Patriarchy, after all, is about an adult *pater* or father (Wall 2022), so the intersection of sexism and adultism seems indispensable for any feminist project to examine. And vice versa—especially as it becomes evident as Weiss weaves contemporary theory into her argument—Western feminist theory can contribute to promoting more respectful adult-child relations that constitute more just societies for children.

*Feminist Reflections on Childhood* makes a significant contribution to conversations on the tensions between feminism and childism (for example, Transnational Childism Colloquium 2022; see also Rosen and Twamley 2018).

### Structure and Tonality

In the preface, the author begins from standpoint, wherein they acknowledge the contribution of children to their own self-development. In this sense, I interpret this book as a feminist project that takes on a childist point of departure.

The book is structured through four broad sections that lead the reader through introducing the problem to navigating a historical context in continuity with a contemporary theoretical landscape. The transparent manner in which the author handles their positionality through “interludes” is especially impressive. Each section begins with an engaging “interlude” that sustains the reader’s transition from section to section. The author’s positionality and life experience are key entry points into the intellectual project presented in the book. Their motivation, insights, and critical self-reflexivity are grounded in life experience that is transparently included as a legitimate part of this intellectual body of work. The manner of structuring the text enables the passage through the text, presenting potential self-reflexive questions that arise in “little,” mundane, everyday moments. In turn, the reader is prepared to enter the theoretical analysis and argumentative thread of each section.

The tactfulness, care, and precision of communication the author has achieved through their language use is also worth mentioning. Writing about adultism in order to open directions for scholarly and social transformation can be a tedious challenge because the recipients of this communication are adults. I thus suspect that confronting personal and structural adultism is perhaps the toughest of all axes of marginalization. Weiss hits just the right linguistic tone to convey a pertinent message, which touches both the heart and mind, without potentially compromising the reader’s sense of intergenerational integrity. What I mean by this is that Weiss employs a high degree of humility in her scholarship, which drives the message home in the least painful way possible. This quality is essential for addressing adults in order to support them to find the scholarly and social courage that is evident in Weiss’s work.

## Wrestling with Adult Perceptions of Childhood

One of the essential attributes of childist and adultism-critical perspectives is that a significant part of the problem is located in adult perceptions of childhood. Weiss gracefully and efficiently resists the intellectual and social tendency to place the burden of adult-led institutional failures on children. The questions that Weiss's standpoint affords are pertinent in cultivating the adult capacity to take children seriously as political actors, facilitating their participation and inclusion in matters that affect them. For instance, Weiss asks, "What is so frightening to us adults as to preclude our listening, no less adapting ourselves, to youngsters?" (39).

Even an attempt to find an answer to such questions could contribute toward cultivating adult capacity to "protect" present and future generations from structural abuse. One example of structural abuse is the climate crisis, which Weiss also refers to. The climate crisis is a particularly strong example of the temporal scope of structural adultism insofar as present adult generations live off resources borrowed from future generations. Present generations are fighting for climate justice and protection of children's rights, and a recent study by Caroline Hickman and colleagues shows that there is a globally shared sense of moral betrayal in children and youth that is directly related to their perception of inadequate action by adults and governments (Hickman et al. 2021). Such instances show that "silencing" also occurs through the incapacity to listen. Weiss writes:

As clear as the mandate to object to silencing sounds, learning to listen to children requires retraining on the part of adults. Adults have to become skillful at hearing the young, rather than hearing what they want to hear (something they accuse young people of doing —listening selectively). (59)

On November 10, 2021, a transnational group of sixteen children and youth filed a petition to the UN to declare a level 3 climate emergency globally. This means treating the climate crisis on par with how the Covid-19 emergency and the Iraq war emergency were declared. The group has repeatedly asserted that the climate crisis is a children's rights crisis. In 2019, the same group of sixteen children had filed a case against Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany, and Turkey for violating children's rights (Sacchi et al. 2019). The specific child rights violations within the scope of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child highlighted by the petitioners are: Article 6 (the right to life), Article 24 (the right to health) and Article 30 (the right to culture), which is particularly the case with the indigenous petitioners from vulnerable island nations like Palau and the Marshall Islands. In addition, the respondent states they are also accused of having violated the petitioners' rights under Article 3 (best interests of the child), since children's best interests have not been made a primary consideration in omitting their commitments to curbing climate change. Such cases point to macro-level, structural concerns that are at the forefront of global problems concerning intergenerational sustainability. Drawing upon works by feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Weiss also devotes a fair share of attention to micro-level, everyday norms of adult-child interactions to wrestle with adultism.

Explicating mundane habits such as the attention paid to children interrupting adults or the pedagogical obsession with "obedience," Weiss points out that most feminists would not endorse such adultist norms, if only they were aware.

### Childist Undercurrents of Western Feminism

Weiss engages with feminists from various Western traditions to address the possibility of respectful adult–child relationships through a range of themes from participation, democracy, justice, resistance to inclusion, and not least, being self-critical as adults. To name a few, one is introduced to the contributions of Suzanne La Follette, Emma Goldman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Shulamith Firestone, Barrie Thorne, Erica Burman, Jane Helleiner, Jackie Stacey, Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ellen Key, Frances Wright, Miranda Fricker, and others. Furthermore, they also include contributions to adultism-critical and childist agendas from disability theory and queer theory. Weiss seems to agree that Western philosophy has paid poor attention to children and childhood, but they contest that Western feminists have not understood or addressed children’s oppression.

Western feminism, as Weiss clearly presents, has been flowing with childist undercurrents insofar as “Listening to and learning from those younger, as we expect them to listen to and learn from those older, have long been part of feminist praxis and require sustained and creative attention” (104).

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