

BOOK REVIEW

Haker, Hille & Greening, Molly (eds.) (2019) *Unaccompanied Migrant Children. Social, Legal, and Ethical Perspectives*, Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Lexington Books. 245 pp.

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International migration continues to be a topic of heightened attention and concern in academia, politics, in (social) media outlets and among the general public. It is an issue that is framed as being of concern to all of us, and oftentimes myths are spread that dehumanize migrants and portray them as threats to the majority populations' wealth, achievements and security. Children and young people comprise a special group within the discussions around refugees and migrants: they are either portrayed as vulnerable beings, showing the hardship, trauma and difficulties migrants are going through (often through explicit photographs of children in horrible circumstances) or they are portrayed as a group of dangerous 'gold diggers' and criminal youth who will benefit from Western wealth.

The edited volume *Unaccompanied Migrant Children. Social, Legal, and Ethical Perspectives*, edited by Hille Haker and Molly Greening, aims at countering the many myths surrounding migrant children. It does so by providing an ethical perspective on child migration, specifically engaging with Catholic social ethics. Although the vast majority of migration takes place in the non-Western world (UNICEF 2016), this volume focusses on the European and US context and addresses how unaccompanied migrant children are regarded in the public domain and treated in the asylum context. The definition of the Catholic social ethics approach remains rather opaque and all-encompassing throughout this volume, focussing on notions such as 'welcoming the stranger' and 'the right to hospitality'. Hille Haker, PhD, holds the Richard A. McCormick, S.J., Endowed Chair of Catholic Moral Theology at Loyola University Chicago. Her research focusses on moral identity and narrative, bio-, social and feminist ethics. Molly Greening is a PhD student at Loyola University Chicago in the Integrative Studies in Ethics and Theology program. Her research focusses on feminist and migration ethics.

The volume opens with a poem by Javier Zamora, a former unaccompanied minor from El Salvador who crossed the border to the US when he was nine years old, in 1999. Today, his life is still uncertain as the recent policy changes by the Trump administration allow for his deportation. It shows the topical and urgent nature of the crisis (former) child migrants and experience today. The first part of the volume revolves around the lived experiences of child migrants and legal and social work professionals working with these children. In Chapter 2,

Maria Vidal de Haymes, Adam Avrushin and Celeste Sánchez show that professionals in the US and Central America see these children as particularly vulnerable, because of their separation from a primary caregiver. Paradoxically, professionals saw young people as a social problem that needed to be controlled and at the same time presented themselves as 'the protectors of childhood' (p. 37), filling the gap that states are unwilling to address. In Chapter 3, Stephanie Arel discusses the vulnerability of child migrants from the perspective of attachment theory and experienced trauma. Throughout the chapter, examples are drawn from Gulwali Passarlay's (2016) impressive and moving memoir about his flight from Afghanistan to the UK. Part I of the volume ends with an account on how unaccompanied minors are treated in Bavaria, Germany, and specifically their access to vocational training (Chapter 4 by Philip Anderson).

In Part II of the volume, the issues of vulnerability and agency of child migrants are connected to the international human and children's rights framework. Katherine Kaufka Walts analyses the situation of unaccompanied minors in the US, which poses certain challenges, because of the general lack of political will by the US to commit to international human rights treaties, and specifically the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Chapter 5). The author points at the lack of a 'best interests of the child' determination and the double standard applied in relation to nationals (i.e. children in the child welfare system) compared to migrant children, who are released into the custody of a stranger, which would be unthinkable for the first group of children. In Chapter 6, Susan Terrio highlights that immigration detention of children is a particular pressing issue, and specific attention is given to the threats to children's physical, mental and social health and development it provokes.

In Chapter 7, some of the essential questions in human rights scholarship are posed, in relation to the treatment of unaccompanied minors in Sweden. Elena Namli and Linde Lindkvist observe the conflicting trends of tightening migration laws and the process of incorporating the CRC in Swedish law. The authors maintain a critical stance towards human rights law, claiming that strengthening the legal position of children, through children's rights law, does not necessarily result in firmer human rights protections. This boils down to the question of the effectiveness of human rights (see for example Subedi 2017), and the authors argue that with an increased juridification of human rights, the moral and political dimensions of human rights should not be underestimated (p. 122, 129).

Part III illustrates the Catholic social ethics in child migration. In Chapter 8 by Cristina Traina, the conceptualisation of vulnerability is again at the heart of the analysis. This chapter draws on another work of non-fiction by Valeria Luiselli (2017) illustrating the vulnerability of unaccompanied minors on an ontological, structural and moral level. In Chapter 9, Kristin Heyer analyses the situation of child migrants in the US context from an historical, political and moral perspective, pointing at the discrepancies between Biblical notions of 'hospitality to the stranger' and 'social sin' that dominate public and political debates. The religious norm of hospitality is further interpreted by means of the philosophical notion of 'justice as responsibility to relationships' (Chapter 10). The author Tisha Rajendra argues that this notion can contribute to explaining and convincing people of why to give support to child migrants as part of the relationships that people maintain with one another (p. 190). In the closing chapter, Haker proposes a cosmopolitan framework of human rights in which human dignity and children's rights are prioritised, but at the same time should not only be legal rights and 'paper tigers', but morally enshrined values and notions 'offering a framework for actions, policies, and laws' (p. 212).

In the year of the 30th anniversary of the CRC, proponents of the Convention celebrate the achievements, successes and advancements in children's rights at the global level. However, the 'moral crisis' (p. xv) surrounding the migration flows of children to more affluent parts

of the world shows that children's rights are not universally embraced and protected. In this volume, the effectiveness of human rights of children is scrutinised on the basis of 'legalistic reduction of human rights' (p. 129) and the underestimation of the moral and political value of international human rights standards. It is argued, for example, that the mere fact that the CRC adheres to an age threshold of 18 (see art. 1 CRC), it institutionalises and thereby justifies age determination procedures in case the age of the migrant is uncertain (Namli and Lindkvist) and restricts states' notions of vulnerability and human rights protection. This can be seen as a rather limited view on the human rights of children. With the adoption of the CRC, children were given official legal status under international law and were for the first time seen as subjects of rights (Liefgaard & Sloth-Nielsen 2017: 1).

This volume shows the importance of the moral and political values that enforce human rights, in a time of 'immigrant-hostile political stance' (p. 202). However, acknowledging the agency and capacities of children, as advocated for by the editors (p. 217), means that child migrants should be regarded as rights holders, moving beyond the perception of the child as merely a vulnerable being. Children should be enabled to claim their rights in the legal domain, have access to justice and through legal action force states, as primary duty bearers, to take responsibility and enforce and protect refugee and migrant children's human rights. As Cristina Traina puts it rightly: 'Migrant children force us to confront the fact that children are both vulnerable persons – as the US culture of protected childhood implies – and active agents of their own welfare – as their arrival here attests' (p. 141).

This volume provides a valuable source for graduate students and academics who seek a critical stance towards human rights scholarship and who would like to develop a multidimensional perspective on children in migration, beyond the more traditional legal perspective. The contributions provide interesting insights in the recent political debates and lived experiences of child migrants in the US and European context.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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