

Book Review for *Youth & Policy*, 2010, 104: 119-121 by Priscilla Alderson, of Dimitra Hartas, *The Right to Childhoods: Critical perspectives on rights, difference and knowledge in a transient world*, Continuum 2008, ISBN 978 0 8264 9568 6 Price £50, pp. 205

There is a growing group of writers and others who, although their work involves child and youth rights, oppose them. Dimitra Hartas presents a range of their disparaging tactics in her book, and the following list covers some these in italics, with my comments. Although Hartas writes long sections on childhood and knowledge, this short review concentrates on the rights sections.

Tactic 1. *Dismiss rights as modern liberal abstract ideas, irrelevant to most of the world.* Actually there were feudal rights in Anglo-Saxon pre-1066 law, reinforced in the Magna Carta 1215. The aims were: to stop tyranny through specific embodied freedoms; to stop kings (or governments) being above the law if they murdered, raped and imprisoned subjects and plundered their and their children's property; to replace arbitrary misrule with due legal process, the kind of basic justice, safety and freedom valued in every society.

2. *Dismiss rights as Western imperialism wrongly imposed on communitarian societies.* This claim ignores the long history of bitter struggles for freedom, especially in 13th, 17th, and 19th century Britain, in colonies in every continent, in civil rights movements for Black people, women and other oppressed groups. 'Community leaders', while eager to exercise their own rights, often reject rights talk for others when it challenges their power. It could be more imperialist to claim that only Western people value justice.

3. *Dismiss rights as individualistic.* Law to protect each person's body is the essential safeguard against murder, rape, torture, slavery, trafficking, arbitrary imprisonment, or attacks whether by monarchs, states, neighbours or violent marauders. Children who cannot safely collect firewood in Somalia or attend school in Afghanistan need these legal protections. Far from individualism, human rights involve equal rights for everyone, whether to available health care or to a seat on a bus in Alabama. So human rights inhere in relationships of solidarity, responsibility and mutual respect between everyone.

4. *Paradoxically propose personal individual rights-making.* This tactic claims that it is more 'responsible' when people invent their own rules and rights (Hartas, pp15-119. Page numbers in brackets refer to Hartas and give a few from her repeated examples). The tactic ignores centuries of legal and political debate and struggle, which developed rights as agreed basic international standards. It misunderstands that rights are practical legal freedoms and protections that can ultimately be enforced.

5. *Do not read the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).* Refer to it only through secondary and often critical sources. Then you can misquote it and claim that UNCRC is 'abstract' (p18) and not about specific rights. You can invent things that UNCRC does not state: children's decision-making, or 'right to participate' (p99). You can blame UNCRC for omitting matters that it does cover (p115). For example, several articles refer to family and community, and there is great emphasis on children's diverse cultural rights (Preamble, articles 4, 17, 20, 23, 29, 30, 31) contrary to the claims that UNCRC imposes one universal model of childhood.

6. *Blame the UNCRC when children's rights are not honoured* (pp97-102) – instead of seeing how UNCRC is abused or misused or confused with other authorities.

7. *Imply that children's rights are disrespected because children are too weak or immature*, instead of seeing how adults' rights are similarly violated (pp108-9).

8. *Quote from a mixture of cross-referencing covertly anti-rights literature*. This obscures children's rights in ever denser fogs, by overlooking how each critical group has different ideas of 'truth' and morality, with different methods and motives for questioning the validity and value of children's rights. For example, many adults are averse to sharing power with children. Many educationalists and psychologists cannot reconcile child development theory and the steps from 'zero at birth' up to adulthood, with equal rights for all. Early years writers often infantilise all children and young people (pp109, 113). Neo-liberals and many North Americans oppose the United Nations and its Conventions as well as children's rights (p96). Feminists tend to see them as threatening women's rights. Academics (I write as one, though accurately here, I hope) like to show off with nitpicking fault finding. Anthropologists tend to oppose anything that might transfer across cultural difference - like the UNCRC. Postmodernists and social constructionists are wary of things that seem too 'real' and non-relativist (p131-7). Economists prefer measurable utilities to principled rights.

9. *Rely on jargon. Avoid giving explanations or examples to illustrate points*. I have taken care to quote the following, from many examples, accurately:

'Taking a dialectical approach to rights is likely to support young people in actively forming their own identities and negotiating crises in their life.

Moreover, a dialectical approach is likely to bridge seemingly contradictory views about the validity of knowledge as reason and knowledge and as a cultural artefact towards what Santos (1995) describes as a "new common sense" that encapsulates both logos (reason) and mythos (folklore)'(p118).

We are not told or shown how or why dialectics, or Santos's idea, like many other undigested non sequiturs through the book, are relevant.

10. *Do not systematically research children's rights*. Hartas's book is 'based' (p xxii) on a small needs analysis and an attitudes survey (pp181-3). Neither mentions rights.

11. *Assume that 'participation' equals respecting children's views and rights, and that it inevitably undermines their protection and provision rights* – as if children are invariably unreliable self-harming beings. This ignores the countless times when adults can only really protect and provide for children through listening and being partners with them.

12. *Invent meaningless new rights such as 'to an open future' or 'the right to childhoods'*.

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