

## Book Review

– *Parenting Empires: Class, Whiteness, and the Moral Economy of Privilege in Latin America*, by Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, Duke University Press, 2020

“Children are the future” is a worn-down slogan routinely used by politicians. Moreover, many people narrowly associate discussions about children’s education with discussions about educational policies, leaving parenting practices to popular literature at best, or completely unexamined at worst. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas focuses her analysis on precisely the parenting practices of the urban upper classes in Brazil and Puerto Rico, represented by Ipanema (Rio de Janeiro) and El Condado (San Juan) neighbourhoods respectively. She argues that their parenting practices have become vehicles to provide the moral grounding to promoting, supporting, and spreading neoliberal values of austerity at the national level and in neighbourhood governance. In this sense, they complement United States imperial interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean, transforming parents into “agents of empire” (p. 4). These “parenting empires” practices assume discourses of neoliberal sovereignty and austerity to provide moral justification to inequality by putting the weight on personal decisions through projects of self-development, such as cultivating what she calls “interiority currency.” This is a particular form of inner-world cultivation that recognizes racism and racial discrimination while proposing that their eradication can only be attained through working on that inner-world. This worldview precludes the discussion of, on one hand, more radical critiques and narratives about the structural nature of social inequalities, and on the other, the privileges these elites enjoy because of their class and relative whiteness. And all that, wrapped in a discourse centred on their children’s welfare.

In chapter one, Ramos-Zayas establishes the theoretical foundations of her text, defining “parenting empires” as “a form of sociability and relatedness” (p. 10) that, having a child-centred focus, allows urban, upper-class parents in Puerto Rico and Brazil to work across racial and class lines, alter urban practices and physical environments, work on their interiority currency, and adapt national discourses of corruption and the need for austerity to the management of their neighbourhoods. Three interconnected concepts form the foundations of “parenting empire:” “child-centred nodules of urbanism,” the spaces where the adults

responsible for the care of children come together; “interiority currency,” the commitment to work on improving oneself, developing spiritually, increasing personal growth; and the “social networks of child-centred care that upper-class parents [enlist],” (p. 18) including extended family and domestic workers hired, which serve “as proxies for a broader political economy of the Global South.” (p. 18)

The second chapter examines how parenting empires in Ipanema sustained class and race hierarchies and provided the moral justifications for “policing, regulation, and real estate decisions” (p. 41) that had particularly hard effects on racial and class relations. That order of things is based, in part, on the neighbourhood’s “structure of feelings,” the emotions and affects that unite elite residents in a “common socializing project of belonging and entitlement” (p. 41). Chapter three, then, moves the focus to Puerto Rico and, arguing that “all affluent urbanism is, necessarily, child centred,” (p. 68) studies the transformation of the El Condado neighbourhood from one of doubtful reputation into a family-oriented environment.

The next two chapters investigate two forms of expressions of whiteness among the Ipanema and El Condado elites. Chapter four shows how these elites tend to psychologize society, shifting the explanations of inequalities from the material to the metaphysical. An effect of this approach is a view of lower, darker classes as less complex, evolved, or self-aware, thus, responsible for their condition in life. Meanwhile, chapter five examines the schooling experiences of these elites – as parents choosing their kids’ schools as well as the memories of their schooling – as sites in which their white privileges manifest. In educating their children, these elite parents engage with diversity and inclusion, although with apprehension, shrouding their wealth with a moral cover.

The next chapter analyses the extended-family relations, the tensions experienced between different generations, and how a moral economy of wealth emerges in their midst. Interestingly, this moral context disavowed white purity while keeping in the background whiteness as a consequential social value and form of status. The final chapter explores the relationships these relatively white elite parents establish with darker, lower-class domestic help hired to assist with the children’s care. Sometimes these parents established intimate friendship relationships with the hired help, but still, they maintained the power to render those darker bodies visible or invisible according to the circumstances. In the Epilogue, the author reiterates her argument and critique about the connection among neoliberalism, discourses of individual responsibility, and the moral justification of social inequalities.

There is no space here for a detailed discussion of the potential debates emergent from the author’s analysis. However, I want to briefly draw attention to at least two points I find problematic. First is the striking heteronormativity of her approach. All families examined, separated or still together, are heterosexual/heteronormative, thus, normalizing heterosexuality as the analytical rule for “parenting empires.” How would the inclusion of queer, non-conforming

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families have changed the findings? Having experienced discrimination to some degree, how do the parenting practices of queer, non-conforming families engage and/or promote imperial, neoliberal discourses?

The second issue is that the poorer groups surrounding El Condado and Ipanema appear in Ramos-Zayas analysis as sparse references in contrasting parenting practices, but without any detailed analysis of them. This instrumental use of those groups, combined with her intelligent and effective critique of elites' neoliberal parenting ideology, produces the suspicious impression that the author characterizes the parents in those lower-class, darker sectors as engaging in all virtuous, truly inclusive, and democratic parenting practices that are impervious to neoliberal discourses.

None of those points diminishes the fact that Ramos-Zayas has produced a highly engaging argument about how neoliberal notions of austerity have come to permeate the social fabric and have silently and unpretentiously penetrated the most intimate sphere of our lives – our homes – and with it, one of the crucial labours of that environment: parenting. Scholars in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, child and family studies, capitalism studies, urban studies, and sociology of education will greatly benefit from engaging with Ramos-Zayas' text.

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