

Book Review

Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System

The Case for Abolition

Alan J. Dettlaff

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Introduction

In *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition*, Dettlaff illuminates the historical roots, contemporary manifestations, and abolitionist alternatives to address social functioning and political power within the child welfare system. Dettlaff begins by providing a historical overview of the American child welfare system, tracing its origins to chattel slavery, and highlighting its roots in white hegemonic dominance. He points out how child separation was used as a diabolical tool to force compliance and terrorize Black families into subjugation. Dettlaff provides an in-depth exploration of the historical antecedents of the American child welfare system, illuminating its origins in colonialism, slavery, immigration, and white supremacy. He explores how policies and practices within the system have been designed to criminalize poverty based on a model of surveillance, regulation, and punishment that disproportionately targets and harms Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other marginalized communities.

The discussion transitions from slavery to the industrial revolution with emphasis on immigrants, as they became the mainstay of the industrialized workforce in the 19th century. Within this context of industrialization, immigrant parents often of European descent were frequently out of the home and children, which often meant that children had to care for and fend for themselves. Children of European descent left to their own devices were described and labeled by hegemonic groups as “social ills,” weaving a narrative that these children needed to be “saved” by removing them from their current circumstances. Dettlaff calls attention to the Orphan Train Movement that began in 1852, the “child-saving” movement, and the Children’s Aid

Society, which focused primarily on rehabilitating white European migrant children to “mold” them into “better” human beings and future American citizens.

Dettlaff explains how Black children were excluded from these movements as they were viewed as recalcitrant and unworthy of these efforts. He notes that “Black youths were rendered unsalvageable and undeserving of citizen-building ambition, while Black adults were disempowered in the deliberations of a white-dominated parental state” (p. 43). Through a systematic interrogation of data and literary insights, Dettlaff exposes the disproportionate surveillance, removal, and placement of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and marginalized children, laying bare the systemic injustices inherent in the child welfare system. Drawing upon critical race theory and intersectionality, he elucidates the structural underpinnings of racism entrenched in contemporary child welfare policies and practices.

Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition challenges the portrayal that the child welfare system protects vulnerable children from harm and helps vulnerable families in need. Dettlaff unveils the illusion of the child welfare system, exposing the pervasive biases that permeate the system from investigation and removal to placement and reunification. In his view, the child welfare system is unsalvageable and the only viable solution to address the enduring systemic injustices is abolition. At the foundation of his argument for abolition lies the reality that current policies, practices, and norms have caused irreparable harm and requires reimagining a society where resources are directed toward community-based support networks that prioritize empowerment and preservation and families’ autonomy. Grounding in critical theory and social equity scholarship emphasis is placed on liberation and emancipation from oppressive systems that perpetuate cycles of oppression, subjugation, historical trauma, and harm.

Analysis and Significance

Dettlaff’s analysis is incisive and comprehensive, backed by a wealth of empirical evidence, and informed by a deep understanding of social and human services in theory and practice. By centering the experiences of those most impacted by the system, he effectively illustrates the human cost of institutionalized racism and underscores the urgency of transformative change. Dettlaff delves into the lasting legacy of slavery—even after its abolishment. He argues that once slavery was abolished, southern industries had to reengineer slavery-like institutions and systems to replace the institution of slavery. Further, to control the movement and engagement of Black people in civil society after the abolition of slavery, Black Codes were codified and enacted into law restricting and denying access to specific public spaces. Black Codes essentially mandated segregation, prohibited interracial relationships, restricted where Black people lived and worked, and denied voting rights. Violation of Black Codes in southern states in 1865 and 1866 resulted in enslavement by incarceration as allowed by the 13th Amendment. The Thirteenth amendment allowed for criminal servitude—how else to get enslaved people then, if not to imprison those who “meet” the criteria for this—further criminalization based on race.

Dettlaff highlights continued efforts to sustain oppressive structures and systemic social control. This extended to the child welfare children, as enslavers sought legal pos-

session of Black children from recently freed slaves. By criminalizing unemployment and homelessness through Black Codes, enslavers justified their position by arguing that were better positioned to “care” for Black children, “if [...] parents were deemed unfit or unable to care for their children” (p. 3). This resulted in the legitimization of state intervention for enslavers to take ownership of Black children under the guise of “apprenticeship.” The book confronts uncomfortable truths about the American child welfare system and the exploitation of labor for capitalist accumulation.

From chattel slavery to convict leasing arrangements in the 19th century based on criminalization and incarceration of issues not formerly a crime (i.e., homelessness unemployment), the legal subjugation of formerly enslaved people was made possible through criminal law that significantly impacted Black families and fueled a new economy of the Black child labor. Through the nexus of criminal law, child welfare, and a new economy, the enslaved became an endless supply of replenishable products generated by the system—resulting in further dehumanization. Later when the child-saving movement became prominent, Dettlaff explains how this culminated in the formation of the juvenile legal system (juvenile justice or juvenile delinquency). Dettlaff noted that all but two states had established judicial systems to address issues of juvenile “delinquency” and “dependency” by 1928. The aim here was to further indentured servitude, another mechanism for the continued enslavement of Black children.

The Case for an Abolitionist Praxis

Central to Dettlaff’s argument is the proposition of abolition as the imperative response to dismantling the racist and oppressive edifice of the child welfare system. He posits, and we have seen this, that reforms in irredeemable systems do not equate to social change. In the case of the child welfare system, we saw the organization of efforts to force labor through apprenticeship or incarceration—with the primary purpose of benefitting capitalism and maintaining subjugation. He explores the limitations of white imagination based on how white elites with institutionalized and systematized ways, used the law and the legal system to restore and sustain the status quo with Black Codes.

Embracing an abolitionist framework, he advocates for redirecting resources toward community-based alternatives rooted in empowerment and self-determination. Dettlaff cogently articulates the pitfalls of reformist approaches, arguing that incremental reforms either stall or fail because there is an intentional effort to avoid addressing the roots causes and legacies of entrenched racialized oppression and subjugation stemming from the institution of slavery in America. Through his impassioned plea for abolition, Dettlaff offers a vision of a more just and equitable future where every child can thrive within supportive and nurturing communities. As calls for abolition and dismantling of oppressive systems gain momentum within broader social justice movements, this book provides critical insight, deeper awareness, and elevated consciousness to enact transformative change within the child welfare system and beyond. A disillusionment in our public consciousness is that we perceive changes as addressing systemic issues, when often they fail to address the root of the problem that are often not transformative. The abolitionist perspective focuses on radical change requiring more than tweaks at the margins. To reimagine what can be, divorced from the

shackles of what was, emphasis must be placed on eradicating the roots of colonialism and white supremacy envisioning a new way forward.

Conclusion

Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition is well organized, and the frameworks and concepts employed elucidate how social conditions, poverty, racism, and privilege deny autonomy and sustain sociological, economic, and political power, dominance, and privilege. This insightful and thought-provoking book will resonate with readers. Dettlaff's rigorous analysis challenges academics, practitioners, policymakers, and activists to reckon with the deeply entrenched structural racism endemic within the child welfare system to envision a radical reimagining of the system and alternative modes of care and support where humanity and human dignity are respected and prioritized.

This book is an essential read for anyone committed to operationalizing social equity within our systems, institutions, and government structures. One of the greatest strengths of this book lies in its direct approach and acknowledgment of the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and other axis of oppression and subjugation. Dettlaff deftly navigates complex issues of power and privilege, highlighting how intersecting forms of discrimination compound the marginalization experienced by vulnerable populations and how the system upholds and protects itself and white power. By foregrounding the lived experiences of system-impacted individuals, he compellingly elucidates the human toll and historical trauma exacted by legal, institution, and systemic racism, oppression, and subjugation.

This text was enlightening, highlighting intergenerational trauma and harm. Dettlaff did not shy away from confronting the racist nature and historical roots of discrimination that is disguised as benevolence within the child welfare system. Dettlaff's impassioned plea for systemic transformation resonates as a clarion call for all who do work on social equity (practitioners, students, policymakers, academics, etc.). He calls upon those in critical positions to unify efforts and push forward in their battles to begin the process of destabilizing systems of oppression that will ultimately lead to their abolition and envisioning new ways outside of the colonial mindset and hegemonic dominance. Dettlaff appeals to practitioners not to be passive occupants within roles but rather to work with commitment and intentionality to confront institutional racism and stop criminalizing race and poverty. This book reminds me of the Jamaican poem of Paul Bogle and the Morant Bay Rebellion, where it states, "The roads are rocky and the hills are steep, the macca scratches and the gully's deep" speaking to the terrain we must traverse that is riddled with risks and requires bravery, perseverance, and commitment in the ongoing battle for abolition of systemic racism and discrimination, and liberation from colonial and capitalist power structures.