

“The Commodification of Children through International Adoption”

Karli Knop

Hamline University, St. Paul, MN

KJKnop32@hotmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Katharine Bjork

Abstract

For the past two and a half years I have been interested in the topic of adoption, with a particular focus on international adoption in the United States and the Federal Republic of Germany. I have studied how the elaborate structures of international adoption are interwoven into the process of globalization and what effects this relationship has on the people and children involved with international adoption. In this research paper, I argue that because of the language and photographs U.S.-based international adoption agencies use to promote adoption, children are being “marketed” or “advertised”. In short, they are being turned into commodities.

Research Motivation

Within current structures of international adoption, children are being “commodified,” or turned into a product that is purchased, sold and shipped across borders from one nation-state into another. As a result of these structures, the languages that these children speak as well as their familiar cultural traditions and values are taken away, which could be devastating for the child’s self-identity. The children are forced to learn new languages, cultural traditions and values. Defenseless children become voiceless.

This topic needs to be investigated so that the best interests of the children are the focus of international adoption and so the children are not commodities to be shipped from one country to the next. This paper will look at these concerns in international adoption in the United States.

My research will also briefly cross-culturally ask the same questions about children being internationally adopted into Germany.

In order to examine whether children involved in the international adoption process are being turned into commodities, the ideas of “commodity” and “commodification” need to be further explored. The exploration of these terms will be based on definitions and theories of Karl Marx, the famous German philosopher, social revolutionary and political economist.

Research Review and Analysis

Marx defines the word “commodity” in a wide assortment of contexts. The first definition that I would like to examine states: “A commodity is something that is produced for the purpose of exchanging for something else, and as such, is the material form given to a fundamental social relation” (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/o.htm>). Looking at this definition in the context of international adoption, one can think of a baby or a child as the product that parents or adoption agencies use. The purpose of an adoption agency (according to its business aspect) is to exchange a child for money, besides trying to find a qualified and loving family for the child. This process causes the child to be seen as and used as a commodity. This creates a complex relationship, based on exchanging money for a child, which involves the child, the adoption agency and the adoptive parents.

A further definition of a commodity states that: “When one commodity is exchanged for another, *on average*, in the given society in which the exchange takes place, the two commodities exchanged for one another are of *equal value*” (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/o.htm>). In addition, the idea of commodification is thought of as “the transformation of relationships, formerly untainted by commerce, into

commercial relationships, relationships of buying and selling...the extension of commodification is a contradictory process: demeaning and dehumanizing, but at the same time liberating and progressive” (<http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/o.htm>).

It can be liberating to give a child a new home and family, but the ways in which this happen can be dehumanizing. To put it simply, children can be “bought” in exchange for a certain sum of money. Monetary value is placed on a child, and thus the child is exchanged from one country to another, in a relationship of buying and selling. In this case, the two commodities that would be exchanged are a sum of money, of at least \$25,000 (about how much an international adoption costs), and a child (International Adoption Services Informational Meeting, MN). Humans are assigning monetary worth to other humans, which is problematic in itself.

It is true that much of this money is necessary for the various fees and travel requirements needed throughout the process of international adoption. However, the ways in which the children are being “advertised” to be adopted are very problematic, largely due to the language that is being used on various international adoption websites. This language makes it seem as if children waiting to be adopted are a commodity, with a price tag that other humans have placed on their heads (see Figures 1-5).

In certain cases, a child’s cost will be reduced if the child has certain health or mental disabilities or if the child has been available for adoption for too long, even though no one has expressed an interest in adopting the child. How is it possible for one person to determine the monetary value of a child? How is this process not dehumanizing?

This dehumanizing aspect to adoption does not seem to be the case in Germany, where strict guidelines are followed throughout the process of international adoption. In Germany, it is

usually more difficult to adopt children from outside the country than from within because of the many laws and restrictions that are recognized by the legal system. Many of the laws that Germans recognize are a result of the Hague Convention of 1954 and the United Nations Convention on Children's Rights in 1988, such as: "the child's rights and wants should be considered before that of the parents; and, the child's cultural identity, language, cultural values, and worth to the nation should be considered before allowing the child to be adopted" (Klingenstein, 19). Other laws include: "An adoption within the scope of the Convention shall take place only if the competent authorities of the State of Origin have: a) established that the child is adoptable and b) have determined, after possibilities for placement of the child within the State of origin have been given due consideration, that an inter-country adoption is in the child's best interest, in order to protect the cultural identity of the child" (Klingenstein, 87).

The last issue that I would like to discuss, and the issue that I see as most problematic, deals with the fact that children are being "advertised" on the Internet as a commodity that is "sold" in one place and "purchased" in another. In certain websites of U.S.-based adoption agencies, people interested in adopting can view a list of children's photos and click on the child they wish to adopt and save the child in a "Create your own 'My Kids' basket" on-line. In addition, often websites such as the "Shepherds Crook" site, the word "NEW" in bold red print is placed at the top of the photo of a particular child, shortly after the child is added to the website. The newest "item" or in this case, child, is placed at the top of the web page to be purchased. Furthermore, in addition to "New" children there are also cases of "half-priced" children with the phrase "Reduced Fees" listed at the top of their photos, because they have either been waiting for too long to be adopted or because the child has medical issues. As discussed above, monetary value or worth is being placed on a child just like how monetary

value or worth is placed on goods like shoes or houses when buyers can purchase commodities on-line or in a store.

Conclusion

While international adoption is a wonderful option, some problematic issues are raised within the United States' current structure of international adoption. People seeking to adopt can shop on-line for their child just like they can shop for a new house or car, where there is a commodity for sale and not a human. This practice is essentially discarding the child's humanity. This is not the case in Germany, where the state is largely concerned with and restricted to several international laws, primarily as a result of the Hague Convention, that make it very difficult to adopt internationally.

It is not tolerable to treat children waiting to be adopted as products or commodities; nor is it permissible to essentially rob children of their humanity and to that with which they are familiar, especially without their consent or understanding, in this intricate process of international adoption.

Figures 1-5: Examples of children advertised for adoption.

Larissa and Sergei Cramarenko

Birthdates: July, 1991 and November, 1995

New!



Larissa is a very good student. She loves drawing and reading and even had one drawing in a student art show in an Eastern European city. She likes fairy tales and poetry as well. Larissa tries to be friends with everyone and she would like to visit America. She is shy, not very assertive, and doesn't get angry easily. Larissa loves her brother very much and likes spending time with him.

Sergei is a good student and hard working. He is friendly and social with his peers and respectful toward adults. He likes to study and gets A's and B's. He loves to read and have fun.

The children have a sister with special needs between their ages at a different orphanage. They speak of her often.

(Photo and information from: <http://www.theshepherdcrook.org>)

I - R

Birthdate: April 4, 2001

This child has \$1,000 in financial assistance to help with adoption expenses!



This little blonde haired boy has Down Syndrome. He is a good natured child, kind and high functioning. He tries to talk and participates in classes, games and is able to demonstrate a full understanding. He prefers to have things tidy. He is a favorite of one of the caretakers who often takes him to her own home for visits. Consequently he is familiar with a family lifestyle.

Picture and video available for interested families.

(Photo and information from: <http://www.theshepherdcrook.org>)

Five Year Old Boy - DFY-C

Birthdate: November 20, 1999

New!



This little boy was abandoned when he was two and a half years old. He was diagnosed with a congenital foot deformity when he was found. Both feet and hands turn inward. He is healthy otherwise, and seldom gets sick. He is an open and happy child. He eats well and is up to date on his immunizations

If you'd like more information on this child, please click [here](#). Please be sure to specify the child/children you are inquiring about.

(Photo and information from: <http://www.theshepherdcrook.org>)



Yerik

DOB: Jan. 3, 2004

Contact:
Holly Maset

International Adoption Services
4940 Viking Drive Suite 388
Edina, Mn 55435
(952) 893-1343 voice
(952) 893-9193 fax
info@ias-ww.com

This sweet little toddler Yerik is waiting for his family to bring him home. He is in an orphanage with other children. He was seven pounds at birth and he continues to have normal growth and development. Lab work shows Yerik tested negative for HIV, Hep B and VDRL. His abandonment is completed through the court and he is now available for adoption. If you are 100% paperwork ready, contact the staff at IAS at 952-893-1343.

(Photo and information from: <http://www.ias-ww.com>)



Siblings: Carlos and Pablo

DOB: Carlos 5-15-02
Pablo 6-29-95

Contact: *Holly Maset*

Carlos Roberto 5-15-02 (IAS staff however believes that this child is about 6yrs of age) and Pablo 6-29-95 are very nice little guys. Their abandonment decree has now come through and they are ready for placement. IAS staff has spent time with these little guy and they are very eager to have a family to call their own. For more information about Carlos Roberto and Pablo please contact the staff at IAS 952-893-1343

(Photo and information from: <http://www.ias-ww.com>)

Bibliography:

- Benson, Peter L., Sharma, Anu R., and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain.
Growing Up Adopted: a Portrait of Adolescents and Their Families. Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1994.
- Carp, E. Wayne. Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- Carp, E. Wayne. Family Matters: Secrecy and Disclosure in the History of Adoption. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- International Adoption Services. Informational Meeting 2004. Web address:
<http://www.ias-ww.com>)
- Kllingenstein, Katja. Kulturelle Identität und Kindeswohl im deutschen internationalen Adoptionsrecht. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Verlag, 2000.
- Leggewie, Claus and Barbara Sichtermann. Das Wunschkind: Adoption und die Familie von heute. München: Ullstein Verlag, 2003.
- Pohl, Elke. Adoption: Ihr Kinderwunsch wird Realität. Stuttgart: Urania Verlag, 2004.
- Röchling, Walter. Adoption: Das Buch zur Fernsehserie ARD-Ratgeber Recht. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000.
- Rosaldo, Renato and Jonathan Xavier Inda. The Anthropology of Globalization.

Blackwell,2002. Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "The Global Traffic in Human Organs." (270-307).

Web site: <http://www.theshepherdcrook.org>

Used for examples of photos of children waiting to be adopted.

Web-site: <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/c/o.htm>).

Used for definitions of commodity and commodification.

Author's Note:

For the full text, see:

http://www.hamline.edu/cla/acad/depts_programs/global_studies/documents/2005/index.html

Click on "Karli Knop"