



*Porsgrunds Porselænsfabrik 1895. The factory was situated close to the Porsgrunn River*

## **The Working Child - Enslaved or Privileged? Changing Perspectives on Child Labour**

*Ellen Schrumpf, Ph.D., Associate Professor in History,  
Telemark University College, Norway*

*This article is about child labour in a Norwegian historical context. Children at work in two industrial plants; a sawmill and a porcelain factory in the period from 1850 to 1910 will be in focus. It is also about how perspectives changed through the process of working with a project on child labour. Through that process I became increasingly aware of how controversial this issue is, both in a historical context and in our time. I realized that child labour implicates a wider set of cultural and political issues. It has to do with the tendency of sentimentalizing children in our time<sup>(1)</sup>. It has also to do with global and rapid economic and cultural changes and competing definitions of what a child should be. As history is a way of seeing the past through the filters of present time, we can see that the past is often used to construct and deploy historical myths to organize contemporary tensions. The ongoing debate about childhood politics and the historical debates about the concepts and interpretations of childhood history are usually very moral and emotional. Those moralistic interpretations of child labour in history make that point very clear.*

### **Introduction**

We know that in the western world childhood is defined as a period free of work and responsibilities. Within that discourse child labour belongs to a brutal and exploitive past, a historical period that has come to an end in the developed and civilized part of the world. The Enlightenment promoted the value of *educating* children and being a school child became the only norm and relevant definition of childhood in the modern

world. Very soon this perception of childhood seemed to be 'naturalized' and 'universal'. The connection to time and space of this particular construction loosened.

The title of this article challenges this understanding of the conception of childhood. It questions the hegemonic idea of the child as someone who should play and being schooled by nature. It indicates that work for children could sometimes and somewhere be 'normal' - i.e. according to the actual norms - and not a historical 'deviation'. It implicates furthermore that the working child *could* be a privileged child. To see the child worker as privileged is, however, provocative in our culture - it confronts our norms and ideas about how childhood should be.

The historian is indeed a part of contemporary discourses and I have myself experienced how different and changing definitions of childhood and child labour in past and present have had an impact on a social and cultural historical project about child labour in Norwegian history. This article will present the results of that historical study. It will also be a meta commentary of how the study proceeded.

### **From social to cultural history - changing perspectives**

The study is about children at work in a rural sawmill, Ulefos Sagbrug, in the years between 1850 and 1900, and a porcelain factory in the town of Porsgrunn, Porsgrunds Porselænsfabrik, in the years between 1887 and 1910<sup>(2)</sup>. There were in all 114 young male sawmill workers and 89 boys and girls working in the porcelain factory. These children are the main characters of this study. They are defined as children according to their age; children were persons who were less than fifteen years old. This definition is based on how that agegroup was perceived in the local societies at that actual time. Having reached the age of fifteen meant that girls and boys usually had finished school and took part in work-life as full-timers. They were accordingly considered as grown-ups. Participation in work-life was decisive for social position.

The main problem of the study was to find out why these children in Porsgrunn and Ulefoss actually worked. In the beginning 'work' was defined exclusively as wage work. Very soon it became obvious to me, however, that I had to broaden the concept of work and include unpaid work in the households to perceive the complexity of *child labour*. Another problem was to find out how work-life was constituted by age and gender divisions and how work itself shaped the child. I also wanted to understand how child labour changed throughout the period and explain why work was a central part of growing up at one time and later on became very peripheral in children's lives. A major problem was to study how change in children's work provided for a change in Norwegian childhood in general within the period of time when the *traditional agricultural society* was about to change into a modern industrialized society.

I chose to study two industrial plants, which were different but there were also similarities between them. The sawmill was an old plant dating back to the sixteenth

century. It was owned by one of the aristocratic families in Norway and inherited from one generation to another. The sawmill was part of a typical paternalist society where the owner also provided for housing, schooling, medical aid and a lot for every family where they could grow potatoes and vegetables and keep some domestic animals. The sawmill society was a 'total-providing' society; the workers and their families were provided for throughout their lifetime. On the other hand the workers were totally dependent: the millowner demanded complete loyalty of his workers. Accordingly there was no union at Ulefos Sagbrug for a long time. Concerning processes of work the production of planks and boards was simple and the workers were unskilled. Water from a waterfall kept the saw blades going, sometimes at high speed and sometimes at low speed depending on the water supply. In the winter there was no water at all - and no work. Sawmill work was typical seasonal work. There were only male workers at Ulefos Sagbrug.

The porcelain factory in Porsgrunn was a more modern plant established in 1885. The first cup was produced in 1887. It was a share holding company and the director was hired. At the end of the nineteenth century there were twice as many workers - men and women - as in the sawmill; i.e. two hundred. The production and decoration of cups was handicraft and the workers used simple technology; clay, a turner and a painting brush. The turning and decoration of cups and plates were highly skilled work requiring four years of apprenticeship. Much work was, however, additional and unskilled, simple preparing and finishing tasks.

In spite of major differences concerning ownership, management and production there were certain similarities between the two plants concerning child labour. In both places the supply of workers very often went through the workers themselves and children at work accordingly had relatives on the work place. Furthermore the children were mostly auxiliary workers in both plants. Except for the apprenticeships in the porcelain factory the children had no position in the production of the goods. The children were for the most part-timers. In both places they were in and out of the plants according to productional demands and seasons, but their work was also fitted into the schedule of schooling and household work.

The project started out as a social historical study and child labour was seen from a traditional and Marxist point of view<sup>(3)</sup>. Being aware that the following presentation is a gross simplification, the capitalist in a Marxist view is seen as a usurper who uses every opportunity to increase the profit. The use of child labour was one of their strategies. Later on, new technology made children less profitable and they were pushed out of the factories. Technology and economy were in this perspective seen as 'decisive' for whether one should use children or not. On the other hand children were pushed into the factories by poverty in working class families. Children at work endured a devastating and miserable life. They were passive objects of economic needs both in the families *and* the companies.

This was the theoretical starting point of this study, but as the study proceeded it



*A working-class family, Ulefoss 1910*

became obvious to me that the structuralistic and one-dimensional and materialistic framework was a dead end street. I could not find a technological explanation for why children worked in the two industrial plants or why child labour dramatically decreased at the end of the nineteenth century. In general it was impossible to find answers to my questions by searching within the walls of the plants alone. The perspective had to be broadened, including the families and communities in a local 'totality' in which children had an active role. Working children were to be seen as active in the building of their own and their families' lives and not just passive subjects of social structures and processes<sup>(4)</sup>. As mentioned above I needed a wider concept of work, which included both paid work in the plants and unpaid work within the families. To understand the age and gender division of work and how family members co-operated to support the family, the cultural dimension became central. I needed a closer look at mentality and traditions. Mentality was not studied as stable structures, but more as processes, which only could be understood within a wider context of social and economical changes<sup>(5)</sup>. Oral sources became a primary source. They were not studied as documents that led to facts, but rather as expressions of peoples' reflections, consciousness, norms and values<sup>(6)</sup>. Cultural phenomena became central in the study, *without* leaving the economic structures out. In an anthropological perspective the historical subject moved to the centre of the study and differences and multiple relations stepped forward. Change of perspective was necessary to get closer to the *complexity* of child labour in history.

### Hans Andersen's story

What did I then see in a wider cultural perspective on child labour? I will return to the major conclusions and interpretations later on. First I will introduce one of the children of my study. Hans Andersen will serve not as a representative of the 203 working children. His story will rather shed light on and make understandable the phenomenon of child labour in Porsgrunn and Ulefoss. The story of Hans Andersen is primarily based on his written memoirs, which are a long and very accurate story. The memoirs are used with necessary critical methodology concerning factual and psychological mechanisms in old people's recollecting and forgetting the past<sup>(7)</sup>. To complete his story other oral sources, censuses from Porsgrunn and Ulefoss and archives from the two plants are used. A protocol of young workers in the porcelain factory between the years 1893 to 1948 is an important and very rich source. Here all young porcelain workers were listed with information about names, parents, dates of birth, work, wages, working hours, schooling, hiring and firing dates and so on.

Hans Andersen serves as a micro historical entrance to everyday life for working class children in Norway around the turn of the nineteenth century. The story is unique but still very typical and ordinary. Hans was born in 1877 in a small rural place just outside

Porsgrunn. He had two sisters and two brothers and his father was a sailor as many men in Porsgrunn were at that time. His mother was a housewife according to the census, but we know that housewives in working class families were hard working members and heads of the families. Housewives had productive and reproductive tasks and were crucial for keeping the family nourished, clothed and clean<sup>(8)</sup>. The livelihood of the family Andersen was put together by multiple means and everyone in the household took part in different kinds of activities to get the economy to keep up with the expenditures. As soon as the children were capable they contributed to the family economy. They worked within the household assisting their mother in cooking, cleaning, feeding the domestic animals, harvesting grass; shortly speaking they were contributing with whatever was needed to be done in the household. This was unpaid work in which some of the youngest siblings in the family participated. As they were getting older, they eagerly looked for wage work. Hans' eldest sisters, Anna and Ida, became domestic servants, the eldest when she was eight years old, and the younger when she was around ten. His one brother got an apprenticeship as a carpenter and the other followed his father to sea ending up as a sailor after having worked for a short time at a sawmill.

The Andersen family was a common working family of the time. It had a twofold provision of the livelihood; one consisted of wage work and the other of homebased agricultural production. The family distributed child labour and it was not an option for anyone not to work. They took the jobs they were offered. At what age they left the household depended on the possibilities on the labour market and on the need for their work in the household. Gender was also decisive. Generally the girls stayed home longer than the boys, making themselves useful there, but in the Andersen family Ida and Anna left early because they were eldest and at that time the family was in need of reducing the numbers of mouths to feed. A family wage economy was practised; all wages were put together to support the family. Every family member supported the family until they were grown-ups and established families of their own.

The child workers in the Andersen family contributed considerably to the family economy. For long periods of time, when their father was at sea, the children's wages were the prime and most important income of the family. Not yet fifteen years of age Hans contributed to the economy with about five Norwegian 'kroner' per week. In comparison Hans told that to get a suit at that time one had to pay the tailor an amount of ten 'kroner'. To bring home five 'kroner' every week was then quite a support. According to the protocol of young workers at the porcelain factory the average wage for children was five 'kroner', but the variations in wages were huge. The best-paid child could earn more than fifteen 'kroner' per week. They were hired in the very first years before a norm for a 'child wage' was established. After some years children's wages were closer to the average. Calculations indicate that a child of his age at that time needed less than half the amount of Hans' weekly wage of five 'kroner' to support him/herself<sup>(9)</sup>. Accordingly Hans and the other siblings contributed with a considera-

ble surplus to the family economy. No wonder that Hans in his memoirs expressed that he was both proud and happy when he could hand over to his mother the wage at the end of the week.

As already mentioned the wages were not the family's only way of getting a livelihood. The family grew vegetables and potatoes in the garden and had a pig, a sheep and a few chickens. The busy hands of the female head transformed the wool into trousers, skirts, socks and stockings for all family members and the animals supported with meat and eggs for the meals. The production of the household was quite extensive and it was the domain and responsibility of the housewife and the children staying at home for the time being.

What we have seen here is that the children of the Andersen family were busy workers. They were flexible participants working wherever they could be useful; working either unpaid in the household or having wage work outside the household. Wage work was, however, what they hoped for, and when Hans got a job at the porcelain factory in Porsgrunn in 1891, he was the lucky one. Compared to his sisters who worked as domestic servants, his work was very well paid, the working hours were shorter and regulated, and being hired as an apprentice he was trained to become a painter and skilled worker. As a qualified worker he was guaranteed work in the factory in the future. Hans considered himself 'privileged' since it was a large demand for such jobs among young people in Porsgrunn at that time.

Hans started as an apprentice in the factory fourteen years old. In general the 'porcelain-children' started at work twelve to thirteen years old. The youngest children among them were nine years. Children starting at work on the sawmill were on average one year younger<sup>(10)</sup>. It was however not easy to tell the exact age of children at work in the two plants. The censuses from Ulefoss and Porsgrunn of 1865, 1875 and 1891 differ from one to the other concerning age of one particular child. Oral sources also revealed a lack of *age consciousness*. Hans was nevertheless certain of his age when he finished school and could attend work full-time. He was fourteen years old. At a younger age, when he still attended school, he worked in a sawmill every other day and went to school the other days. Compared to the sawmill the work at the porcelain factory was much better paid - about twice as much - even if the workdays were shorter. That counts for the working children at Ulefoss too; the sawmill-working child had half the wage of working children in Porsgrunn. Compared to the grown ups they had, however, between one half and one third of their wages in both plants. Around the turn of the century the working day was as long for the children as for the grown-ups in both plants except for the children who attended school. The school children in Porsgrunn worked either half day or full day every other day. In Ulefoss they worked in summertime when the sawmill was busy and attended school in wintertime.

For four years Hans' training was copying decorations by hand, but he told that he did a lot of additional work too; he ran errands, swept the floors and assisted the artisan with anything he demanded. At the end of the apprenticeship he was allowed to enter



the group of skilled workers. First he had, however, to prove his qualifications by decorating a plate with all the different and complicated techniques. That day when he proved his abilities and was included in the group of skilled workers was one of the most important in Hans' life. It was celebrated with a solemn ritual. He was then a member of a group of workers which had the highest esteem in the factory. He received a considerable amount of money from the factory and gave a party for his fellow skilled workers with food and drinks.

Hans got his education through work. It was 'learning by doing' and the learning process was both formal and informal. Being present on the workplace made Hans acquire a kind of "*tacit knowledge*"<sup>(11)</sup>. Taking part in work-life led Hans to a profession that placed him among the best paid and most prestigious workers at the porcelain factory.

When Hans was hired as a porcelain worker in 1891 it was the beginning of a lifelong career. He stayed there for the rest of his working life, til his was sixty-three years old. That is how child labour worked for many other children at the factory in Porsgrunn, and in the sawmill as well. Child labour was an introduction to permanent work. 20 percent of the children were still hired after ten years in the porcelain factory and 24 percent in the sawmill. Other children were 'mobile'; wandering about from one job to the other. They could stay a few weeks or months on the work place and then they left. 40 percent of the children on the porcelain factory and 26 percent of the young sawmill workers stayed there for less than one year<sup>(12)</sup>. The mobility was accordingly higher among the children in Porsgrunn than in Ulefoss. In Porsgrunn there was a labour market with more options than in Ulefoss. In general mobility in work life was much higher at that time than in later years<sup>(13)</sup>. The child workers left the workplaces for different reasons. Sometimes mobility was part of a family strategy as the children were needed at home. Sometimes children left because they got a better offer from another work place, and sometimes they simply wanted to get away from a foreman or an employer they did not like. Sometimes it was a matter of no choice; they were fired. The plants had no more work for them.

Generally the children who had relatives in the porcelain factory and sawmill stayed longest. Family relations provided for stability. A reconstruction of the child workers' families shows the fathers to a larger degree were workers in the upper strata of the hierarchy among the workers. They probably used their position and influence to get their children at work. An internal system of supply of workers was established and work was passed over from one generation to the next. It was foremen, skilled workers and heads of departments who were in a position to take advantage of that system. Accordingly, recruitment and training to a profession was family related. This was to the advantage of both the plants and the workers. The working families had access to the jobs and the plants had access to a stable working force.

As already mentioned the children's wages meant a considerable contribution to family livelihood. Still child labour was about much more than economy. As we have seen

work was about education and training for a trade in the future. What the children needed at that time was practical training because most work in Norway was to be found in industry, fisheries or in the agricultural sector. Work had a cultural and ideological meaning as well. Work was supposed to keep human beings busy and that was good for morals. According to the Norwegian piety work was supposed to keep sins and temptations away. It seems like work - and child labour as well - had a positive meaning for very many at that time; parents, employers, even teachers and the children themselves<sup>(14)</sup>. Child labour was accepted according to long traditions and mentality within the families and the local society. There existed a culture where work meant the same as life - and the other way around.

In a culture where work constituted everyday life not only as an economic activity, but socially and culturally as well, work was an including activity where everyone took part; old people and young, men and women and people who would have been excluded from worklife today. For children it was not a question of whether to work or not, but where to work. We have seen that the porcelain factory was within reaching distance for Hans and many other children in west side Porsgrunn. The Andersen family like other families lived close to the factory. People in the local society were very well acquainted with the plant. As for the children they had been there during times bringing tins of food to their fathers or brothers or they had simply used the factory yard as play ground. The sawmill society was even closer. Literally, but mentally as well, the distances to the workplace were very short.

Working hours were long for the porcelain workers; ten hours including two breaks of one hour and a half together. In the sawmill children worked twelve hours daily including two hours breaks. But Hans and other workers tell about blurred distinctions between work and leisure. Playing card and music and having fun was going on in the work place, within working hours and after. In Porsgrunn there was no hurry to get home after work, Hans said. He also told that in early years the working speed and amount of production was under the control of the artisan. They worked hard for some time till they had produced a certain amount of products and then they ended the working day or week. In the sawmill the waterfall and delivery of timber controlled work intensity. In periods when less water in the river the speed was quite slow. Still, at the end of the nineteenth century there seemed to be another conception of time, work and leisure among the workers. Work was not measured by working hours, days and weeks but by accomplished work<sup>(15)</sup>.

Hans' story from his first years in the factory indicates that the workers had another awareness of risk and security in the work place. Looking into the polluted air in the porcelain factory around the turn of the century would probably be a shocking experience to us. The factory halls - some of them were worse than the others - were filled with dust, which the workers inhaled every minute of the day. At that time they knew nothing about the danger of 'silicosis'. Without that knowledge they had no reason and therefore no possibility to protect them against that specific disease. The workers



*Young apprentices at Porsgrunds Porselænsfabrik 1891*

seemed to accept the dust the first years. After some time they learned, however, that the dust was dangerous and many wives wanted their husbands to stay out of the 'dusty' departments in the factory<sup>(16)</sup>.

Hans Andersen got a double education. He was educated at work *and* in school as well. He attended school for seven years. Actually he knew how to read before he started in first grade at school. His mother had taught him. Parents, and the mothers in particular, were very concerned about children's reading and writing abilities. Centuries back in Norwegian history that was a precondition for getting access to the Lords' table and receive the Holy Communion<sup>(17)</sup>. A concern for child education among parents was still a reality in Porsgrunn and Ulefoss around the turn of the 19th century. The hope for salvation of their children was not any longer their prime motivation. In the modern society reading and writing were unconditional qualifications for success. Still, the parents wanted a practical training for their children. Hans' parents - like the other working parents - wanted a solid education for their children; they wanted them to go to school *and* to get practical training at work. They wanted an education in which school and work were adjusted. As long as the children attended school they were part-timers at work. It was - according to the school laws of 1889 - the employer's responsibility to provide for the child workers so that they did not miss school because of work. The director of the porcelain factory seemed to fulfil that obligation. He was a member of the school commission in Porsgrunn and he was deeply concerned about schooling for working children<sup>(18)</sup>. In Ulefoss the sawmill owner provided for a good schooling for the children. The private sawmill school was better than the school in the county concerning buildings, teachers and schooling hours<sup>(19)</sup>. A good school for the children was in the interest of the children, the parents and the employers as well. They were very well aware of the advantages of having well-educated and competent workers.

Hans combined school and work till he was fourteen years old. Then he started to work full-time. He missed school, however. Schoolwork was one of his favorite activities. He could not have higher education however. At that time it was a matter of no choice, working class children had to work.

Full-time industrial work for children younger than fifteen years old became rare in Norway after the turn of the twentieth century. There were very few children left in the two actual industrial plants in the last years of this study, and according to statistics there were only 800 children between twelve and fourteen years of age left in Norwegian industry in 1916 and the number fell to 19 in 1921<sup>(20)</sup>. There are, however, many reasons not to trust the statistics concerning child labour. We know that children have worked informally throughout the 20th century and still do<sup>(21)</sup>. Anyway full-time work for children decreased. Very generally it seemed to be a consequence of a thorough modernisation of the Norwegian society. A powerful national state is one of the characteristics of a modern society. That state aimed to plan and control the day of tomorrow. Defining and controlling childhood became central because the child of today

was the man of tomorrow. A common public school for all Norwegian children should do the job. To further this aim the first Norwegian factory law was passed in 1892. This law prohibited work in factories for children younger than twelve years. Young people between twelve and fourteen were allowed to work six hours per day. On the other hand the school laws of 1889 extended compulsory school. These laws among others expressed how childhood became of great political interest. Within a wider cultural change the Norwegian working class childhood changed from being constituted by work to being included in a modern childhood constituted by school.

The modern Norwegian child became more segregated from society. The number of days at school increased by fifty percent from 1880 to 1914<sup>(22)</sup>. As school took more of the children's time and education was more of an intellectual activity children were shaped in another way. While the child worker was learning by doing within the family and work collectively, the school child was learning by theoretical activities. Learning by the books was a very personal way of acquiring knowledge and at school the child became more of an individual<sup>(23)</sup>. The schoolchild became a modern child and the characteristics of a modern child is that it is more of an independent subject making its own individual choices. Authority concerning childhood was transmitted from the private to the public sphere and from working class families and parents to professional educators. Childhood changed, but parents' wish for a safe future for their children was continuous. So when school expanded and took more of the children's time, there were remarkably few protests from the parents. Parents were deeply concerned about their children's future. In a modern specialized and more complex society school had become necessary to fulfil that wish. A general rise in the standard of living among working class families and the development of a Norwegian welfare state in the 20th century made the fulfilment possible.

Changing childhood and changes in family were closely connected. Working class families became less productive and the father was the one who was responsible for the support of his family. When Hans Andersen established a family of his own he became the one and male breadwinner of the family. In the twentieth century there was a development from a family wage economy towards a family consumer economy<sup>(24)</sup>. The family became segregated and part of the private sphere. Women and children became less productive, and gained reproductive responsibilities<sup>(25)</sup>.

### **Interpretations and conclusions**

In a broader sense: What contribution did the change of perspective from a quantitative and structural history to a cultural and social history bring to a study of child labour? Generally, I would say that I saw another history of child labour than I first expected. It was time for a history of child labour revisited. What I found was *not* a history of misery. Child labour was not a product of an uncivilized society and brutal parents who did not

care about their children. The revisited history was about children who were part of a family wage economy in which every member of the family was responsible for the support of the family<sup>(26)</sup>. Child labour was a way of making a better living for working class families at that time. Work was, however, much more than economy. Work was socialisation into certain roles and education for a trade in the future. It had a wide social and cultural meaning.

More specifically the cultural perspective on child labour moved the child, the family and local community to the centre of the study as the company and technological and economic structures stepped back to the periphery. I saw then that work was constituted by a huge variety of activities<sup>(27)</sup>. Work life was complex and there were many tasks for children to do. Child labour was paid and unpaid activities within and outside the household. In working class families in Ulefoss and Porsgrunn it was not a question whether to work or not. Work was life and life was work for everybody, children included. Depending on gender and place in the row of siblings the children started to work early in life. Generally they started to work unpaid at home. Later on they applied for wage work if possible. There was a close connection between the two spheres and continuity between wagework and householdwork. Child labour can accordingly be characterized as continuous and flexible. The children were surfing back and forth between workplaces and households making themselves useful. In seasons when demands were large there was an increasing need for workers. All hands could then be used and children, as the most flexible workers, could contribute to speed up the production of goods.

Getting a job in the porcelain factory in Porsgrunn or the sawmill in Ulefoss was at that time considered a 'privilege'. Concerning both wages and working hours industrial child workers were better off compared to children working in the agricultural sector or as domestic servants. Industrial work was, however, more risky concerning diseases and accidents. The air in the porcelain factory was thick with dust the first decades and the porcelain workers inhaled the fine porcelain dust, which caused the deadly disease 'silicosis'. The typical sawmill accident was to cut off a finger, a hand or even an arm. Children worked far away from the sawblades, however, and the sources don't tell of any accidents among children in Ulefoss sawmill in the period of the study<sup>(28)</sup>.

In this study I have found another concept of age than in later days. In the sawmill society and in Porsgrunn the concept of age differed from our modern and exact chronological age. Children were seen more as bodies or as physical sizes and their identities were constructed according to what they managed to do at work. The concept of age was *blurred*. For the modern child the exact age and birthdays became very important for the perception and presentation of its self. When school expanded that process proceeded as children at school were increasingly separated in distinct age groups. Chronological age got a wider meaning than measured lifetime. Age - more than physical strength - shaped the modern child's conceptions of identity<sup>(29)</sup>.

Child labour was part of a traditional way of life. Children were partners in a family



*Young boys at work. Ulefos Sagburg 1900*

wage economy and they did not - at least not always - work because of poverty. Actually it was not the poorest families that got their children hired in the sawmill and the porcelain factory. On the contrary it was the 'privileged' working class families that recruited their children into the two industrial plants. Even some middle class families sent their children to work. Work was 'inherited' and transmitted from father or other relatives to sons and in Porsgrunn sometimes to daughters in a very stable manner. Child labour provided for stability on the work places and in the families.

Old workers both from Ulefoss and Porsgrunn told about employers who hired children to help families in need. Still, child labour was definitely to the companies' advantage. Working children were useful and profitable to them. In the two plants there were many additional tasks that needed to be done and that children could do. Their work made the processes of production more efficient. The children were also useful because they could more easily be hired and fired. They loosened the 'bottlenecks' of the production. At the porcelain factory the children were educated in apprenticeships as well, covering the company's need for qualified workers in the future. The first years the company had to import skilled workers from Germany, Denmark and Sweden.

Industrial work was primarily for boys. In the Ulefoss sawmill there were boys only and the porcelain factory hired just a few girls below fifteen years of age. Still girls worked. They were useful partners in the households or they worked outside the households, usually as domestic servants. Household work was also training for the future. As we have seen housewives played an important economical role in working class families. Anyway, prestige and position in the family was very much a question of earning money to bring home. It was the boys in the two local societies that had access to the power that money gave.

One of the main conclusions of this project is that child labour must be studied as part of a local working class culture, it must be studied as part of a lifeway in which family life and work life were integrated in a larger web of working class culture. Children at work were part of a culture where work in general constituted everyday life. Children very soon internalized this mentality<sup>(30)</sup>.

Moving working children in Ulefoss and Porsgrunn and their families into the centre somehow provided for a democratic turn in a social historical study of child labour. The children and their families are seen as active subjects and not passive objects of social structures. That provides for a social history in which the families and their children are trusted to be able to solve their problems and use the options, which the economic and social structures made available. Economic and social structures are indeed important. They don't, however, open for the whole and complex story of child labour.

A last comment I want to add is that working on this project on child labour made me aware of my own prejudices. In the first place they had blurred my eyes and my perspective was one-dimensional. I couldn't see the complexity of child labour in history



- and in the world today. Now, I don't want to tell a romantic story about child labour. It was hard work for many children, some were treated badly and the companies also used the children for their own advantage. This is, however, only one part of the story. Still, the story about misuse and misery was, and still remains, the 'master story' about child labour. This study has opened up for other interpretations of child labour. Hopefully it will counteract a one-dimensional understanding of child labour in past and present.

- (1) L. JORDONOVA, Children in History: Concepts of Nature and Society. In: G. SCARRE (ed.), *Children, Parents and Politics*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 3-25.
- (2) The presentation of the study refers to Ellen Schrupf, *Barnearbeid - plikt eller privilegium?* Kristiansand, 1997.
- (3) L. OLSSON, *Då barn var lönsama*, Lund, 1980, one example of inspiration.
- (4) A. PROUT and A. JAMES: A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? In: A. JAMES and A. PROUT: *Constructing and Reconstruction Childhood*, London, 1990, pp. 7-35.
- (5) R. CHARTIER. In: L. HUNT, *The New Cultural History*, Berkeley, 1989, p. 7.
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