HARD WORK

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in different parts of the world often re-quires them to do an equally diverse range
of work. According to the International Labour Organization, 218 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 work in the developing countries, of whom a little more than 122 million are in the Asia-Pacific region, followed by gradually declin-ing numbers in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin Ameri-ca and the Caribbean. So, 'child labour' has to be understood and dealt with by paying a carefully localized attention to the living conditions and prospects of specific children. Consciences formed by the material certitudes of the affluent West would naturally feel ethical relief to hear that Primark, a cut-price fashion chain in Britain, is about to drop three Indian suppliers for subcon-tracting work out to companies, some which use children as young as 11 for stitching and embroi-dery. Such a boycott may result in easing the qualms of the British importers and consumers. But will it rescue the children from the nexus of poverty and labour (often forced upon them by their own families)? By depriving them and their families of the money they earned from stitching and embroidery, Primark may be throwing them into kinds of work the hazards of which may be quite beyond the pale of the appalled ethical imag-ination of the North.

This is the problem with wanting to form ab-solute and universal standards for the definition of both childhood and trade. The United Nation's 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, in defining what childhood is and what a child can-not be allowed to do, confines both to the assump-tions of the North rather than making them adaptable to the actualities of the South. Similar-ly, when European foreign ministers contemplate various forms of trade embargo on 'offending' ex-porters, then the values inflexibly enshrined in the UNCRC begin to constrain the equitable prin-ciples of free trade as well. Primark, together with Tesco, Gap and Nike, all of which have had to deal with the issue of child labour, should look at how RugMark has been managing, since the mid-Nineties, to rehabilitate South Asian children res-cued from carpet-making into education, good health and livelihoods, while certifying the export of carpets produced without child labour. Good ethics should lead beyond mere conscience-soothers towards more radical solutions.

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