In November 1925 Margaret Mead set sail from the US for Samoa in order to undertake what is commonly seen as the first anthropological fieldwork with children outside Europe and North America. While her findings have been keenly contested, the deliberate focus of her study and the early popularity of her writing secured for Mead an enduring reputation as pioneer of the ethnography of children and childhood.

At roughly the same time – September 1924 – on the other side of the world, the General Assembly of the League of Nations meeting in Geneva unanimously adopted a Declaration of Children’s Rights. This Declaration was drafted and championed by a British woman, Eglantyne Jebb, who five years earlier had founded the Save the Children Fund. The 1924 Declaration stands as a milestone in the efforts of governments and humanitarian institutions to protect children from the adversities occasioned by war, famine, disease and deprivation (see Marshall 1999).

Mead’s departure for the South Pacific and the adoption of the Declaration through the efforts of Jebb were both symptomatic of an ongoing process through which the ‘child’ in Western Europe and North America came to be constituted as an object of study and concern. The historical significance of these two events is that they marked a point at which the Euro-American gaze began to open out from children at home (especially the poor and ‘deviant’) towards children across the globe.

Mead’s departure for the South Pacific and the adoption of the Declaration through the efforts of Jebb were both symptomatic of an ongoing process through which the ‘child’ in Western Europe and North America came to be constituted as an object of study and concern. The historical significance of these two events is that they marked a point at which the Euro-American gaze began to open out from children at home (especially the poor and ‘deviant’) towards children across the globe.

Yet there was an important contrast in the outlook of these two pioneering women. Mead was explicitly concerned with the differences between children in the US/Europe and their peers in Polynesia – differences that may be ascribable to the cultural setting in which they grow up. For her, children’s lives and experiences were worthy of the closest investigation, offering evidence of the intrinsic worth of distant cultures that could serve to challenge ethnocentric views back home about ‘primitives’. In contrast, Jebb was motivated by a vision of the kind of childhood that children everywhere should be enabled to enjoy. The role of research was to develop a better understanding of how the conditions of children’s lives could be improved. While Mead was interested in learning from and about children, Jebb’s concern lay in saving them.

Jebb died in 1928 but her legacy is more powerful than ever today. The 1924 Declaration was subsequently expanded into the 1959 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which in turn was replaced, in 1989, by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This latter document has been ratified by all but two member states – the US and Somalia – making it by far the most fully endorsed product of UN efforts to establish global standards for human life. Meanwhile, Save the Children has grown to become an alliance of national organizations in 28 countries, and is now the world’s leading child-focused non-governmental organization, working with UNICEF and other agencies to promote a particular vision of childhood based on the CRC.

In comparison, the aim of Mead’s project to enhance appreciation for the diversity of children’s lives and childhood experience is being realized far more slowly. Although sporadic ethnographic accounts appeared in subsequent decades (e.g. Fortes 1976[1938], Raum 1940, Schildkrout 1978), detailed study of the lives of children in the South has become a common subject of research only since the 1980s. Moreover, anthropologists interested in such study have tended to focus on situations of relative stability. As a result, discussion of children’s lives in the midst of extreme adversity – as occasioned by war and societal upheaval – has been predominantly informed by the representational practices of child-focused humanitarianism in the tradition of Jebb.
The essence of humanitarianism is neutrality: the conscious effort to operate in accordance with human need rather than political affiliation. Jebb, who devoted herself to assisting German children suffering starvation and disease as a result of the Allied blockade immediately following the First World War, and exhorted others to do the same, demonstrated this in very practical terms. However, despite all the efforts of humanitarian actors to maintain neutrality, their project is often intricately related to political processes. For example, the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies have been partly justified by reference to the abuses inflicted upon certain sections of the population construed as especially ‘vulnerable’—notably children and women. Humanitarian accounts of life in those countries—accounts that focused narrowly on human needs with little or no reference to wider political events and causes—provided invaluable ‘evidence’ to support the claims of politicians.

This article is motivated by concern about the representational practices of child-focused humanitarianism on the grounds not only of the influence they wield over popular understanding of children’s lives, but also of the political uses to which such representations may be put. I seek to encourage further consideration of the role that anthropologists might play in challenging the current dominance of humanitarian representation by providing accounts that locate young people in the midst of ongoing political and economic processes, local, regional and global. I shall focus my discussion around ‘child soldiers’ since this is currently a priority issue for child-focused humanitarians and rights activists. As I shall argue, careful ethnography could do much to elevate debate around this subject, helping to locate military recruitment among a range of sources of risk to children’s lives and thereby challenge an overly simplistic (but politically expedient) attribution of blame.

The challenge involved in countering the depoliticizing effects of current representational practice and discourse is not to be underestimated. Contemporary child-focused humanitarianism is nourished by a trend of thinking and sentiment that has grown powerfully over more than a century. I refer to this as the ‘project of saving children’, and begin with a brief overview of some of its key characteristics.

The project of saving children

The origins of this project may be traced, according to social historian Hugh Cunningham, to the philanthropy of the 19th century. It is not that people of previous centuries were uncaring about the fate of children. However, until around 1830, policies for child welfare were primarily motivated by concerns either for children’s souls or for ‘the future manpower needs of the state’ (Cunningham 1995: 134). Victorian philanthropists, unlike their predecessors, were additionally concerned to save children ‘for the enjoyment of childhood’ (ibid.) – a notion that relates directly to the romanticism of Rousseau. On one hand, childhood was construed as a phase of life that was special, carefree and distinct from adulthood; on the other, adults were held responsible for protecting children and ensuring their unfeathered enjoyment of this period of grace prior to their entry into the harsh realities of the grown-up world. As well as being seen as innocent and natural, children were deemed inherently dependent and helpless. Such a view pre-empts consideration of children’s active engagement in the social, economic and political life of their societies.

Agencies at all levels—from the transnational and governmental to the most local—are now engaged in the project of saving children as a distinct category of persons defined by age (that is to say, under 18). As I shall discuss later, the discipline of psychology has played a powerful role in framing popular understanding of childhood, and most particularly in shaping interventions aimed at children living in the midst of armed conflict. The influence of psychology is also evident in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides standards for children’s lives that all ratifying states are obliged to ensure for their young population. Failure to meet the standards set is often attributed to misguided attitudes on the part of state authorities or parents. As Vanessa Papavac has commented, ‘the discourse of children’s rights suggests that the plight of children in the Third World is due to the moral failings of their societies’ (2000: 6). Alongside the ‘child labourer’, the ‘street child’, and the ‘child prostitute’, the figure of the ‘child soldier’ has been deployed as a powerful symbol of morally bankrupt societies. In this way humanitarian concern fuels ethnocentric disdain. In spite of Mead’s pioneering work, the labelling of certain nations and peoples of the South as lesser ‘primitives’ is gaining fresh respectability.

‘Child soldiers’ and the project of saving children

In his recent book Children at war (2005), political scientist Peter W. Singer relates the fact that the first US soldier killed in Afghanistan fell victim to ‘a fourteen-year-old sniper’. A tone of indignation at the adults who encourage children to take up arms to such effect pervades this prime example of humanitarian discussion of ‘child soldiers’. Noting that technological developments and socioeconomic conditions combine to make the employment of children as combatants attractive, Singer remarks that ‘[t]he only remaining ingredients required are groups or leaders without scruples[...]. As the payoffs can be huge, many take this moral plunge’ (2005: 56). This statement is typical of a book in which the moral landscape extends only as far as the borders of the state. Developments beyond the state’s borders, including, for example, the massive growth in arms sales, and trade practices that impoverish and thereby destabilize many countries of the South, are not interrogated in moral terms. While outside actors, including the author’s own (US) government, are encouraged to do more to help prevent underage recruitment, their contribution to creating conditions within which the young become combatants is never meaningfully considered.

Children’s own accounts—including that of the 14-year-old Afghan boy facing soldiers of the invading US army—are not allowed to disrupt the careful moral bookkeeping in this volume. Their experiences appear as little more than decoration: a series of brief quotes from sources identified solely by the speaker’s initial and age. Abstracted from context, without reference even to the child’s location on the planet, we are given a generic account of ‘child soldiers’ in which the appalling experience of one individual stands for all: children’s lives are reduced to a level at which the life of, for example, a girl in Colombia is interchangeable with that of a boy in Nepal. The historical role of outside forces in the destabilization of these societies and the exacerbation of conflict is thereby obscured.

Singer’s book offers ammunition for those who would seek to argue that certain societies are so deviant in their employment of children as combatants that military or political action against them may be justified. The overriding message is that ‘we’ are different from ‘foes who ride to war’. Such a view pre-empts consideration of children’s active engagement in the social, economic and political life of their societies.

I take the emergence of a mainstream literature of outrage about child soldiers as a challenge to develop a more
Children’s capacity for choice

Much of the discussion about children’s engagement in combat and other activities seen as particularly detrimental to their well-being has focused on the issue of choice. The authors of global accounts of ‘child soldiers’, such as Singer, have little time for the idea that children may be capable of exercising any real measure of choice about recruitment. Indeed, the very notion of voluntary recruitment is largely an illusion.

The title of Rachel Brett and Irma Specht’s recent book Young soldiers: Why they choose to fight suggests a willingness on the part of the authors to accept that under-18-year-olds may join armed groups voluntarily rather than through coercion or abduction. However, their view ultimately proves to be quite different. Focusing particularly on older children, these authors draw on ideas about adolescence (‘...a time of vulnerability with the uncertainties and turbulence of physical, mental and emotional development’) derived from psychologist Erik Erikson to account for their susceptibility to recruitment. They acknowledge that environmental factors such as poverty, lack of educational opportunity, difficult home life and violence within society also play a vital role, but seem to believe that it is only once past the eighteenth birthday that these lead to recruitment that may be called genuinely voluntary. In assuming that certain problems come with the territory of puberty, Brett and Specht suggest that younger people are inherently incapable of true choice.

Margaret Mead’s fieldwork in Samoa was motivated by the conviction that ideas then current in Europe and North America about adolescence as a time of ‘storm and stress’ were culturally specific and therefore likely to prove unjustifiable when applied elsewhere. In contrast, the kind of developmental thinking employed by Brett and Specht, Singer and others is indicative of a universalist impulse that sees biology as the primary force shaping the young. The legacy of Piagetian ideas of development, popularized in the discourse and practices of the child-saving project, has helped to naturalize the link between chronological age and individual capacity, with the consequence that certain actions appear unquestionably inappropriate for certain age groups.

As Singer puts it: ‘[i]n the end, children may join such groups simply because they are kids, and the slightest of whims or appeals may suffice to impel them to enter war’ (2005: 67). This statement is illustrative of the assumptions of humanitariansm as a whole. It obscures the complex interplay of factors that result in young people’s engagement in armed conflict. In a recent paper about children’s role in El Salvador’s civil war, Kay Read (2001) raises important questions about such normative views, relating military recruitment of the young to local understandings of evolving competencies and moral agency. As one former combatant suggests, children may display motivations for military recruitment that may be genuine and independent of the discourse of child-focused humanitarianism, are actually the preserve of adults: ‘We didn’t think that we would be happy in parties, but rather we thought about a better future, with [our] participation, a future we would forge, a future to fight against weaknesses and vices’ (Telechea 1982: 78, cited in Read 2001: 397). Without denying the dangers to children’s well-being of their engagement as combatants, Read’s account prompts the reader to reflect upon the use of age as an arbitrary and universal index of agency or competence, and thus counters prevalent assumptions that the young can only be made to fight through coercion or duress rather than through their own political conviction, social frustration or economic need. As Read suggests, the experience of oppression or marginalization may be well understood even by the young and motivate them to critical debate about children in the South and their relationship to the conditions of armed conflict. Anthropology has a potentially vital role to play in situating this debate within its proper political and historical context, through empirical accounts of children’s everyday lives amidst conditions shaped by both local and global forces. To illustrate the potential contribution that anthropology could make, I shall consider two particular points of entry into the debate: the first relates to children’s environment, and the second to the perception of their capabilities.

The context of children’s lives

The vision that lies at the heart of the project of saving children is of ‘a safe, happy and protected childhood’ (Boyden 1997: 192). Such a vision implies that children can and should be shielded from the effects of societal processes. However, it is demonstrably the case that the lives of children are often subject to the same forces as the rest of their societies. Rather than reinforce romantic ideas about the space of children’s lives, anthropologists would do well to challenge the seemingly naturalized boundary between ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ by illustrating that such separation depends on material, social and cultural conditions that are absent in many settings.

In challenging this and other assumptions of the project of saving children, anthropology must contend with the influence of psychology, a discipline which has been central to this project since its inception. The study of children by psychologists – commonly undertaken in clinical settings – has tended to focus on the individual to the exclusion of the social, promoting an over-emphasis upon psycho-emotional well-being as an internal process and a relative lack of attention to social relationships and political systems and structures. Notions of childhood ‘immaturity’ and adult ‘maturity’ have also reinforced the separation of childhood and adulthood that is imposed by the military. In addition, apart from the primary care-giver (typically assumed to be the mother), adult society is generally seen to have little relevance or value to the young (Woodhead 1997).

It is apparent, however, that current developments in many countries of the South, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic, rapid urbanization and the impact of international trade tariffs and structural adjustment programmes, are greatly increasing the pressures on the young to assume roles and responsibilities that, in the global North, commonly characterize ‘adulthood’. As a result they are coming more and more to engage with and experience broader economic and political processes.

Ethnographic study that explores children’s negotiation of these roles and responsibilities may help us to situate the risks commonly ascribed to involvement with military groups within a broader field of adverse circumstances, the consequences of which for children’s survival and well-being might be just as severe. This view runs counter to much of the current commentary on ‘child soldiers’, which takes engagement in conflict as the sole defining feature of (damaged) childhood. The singularity of risk associated with military involvement is neatly captured in the title of another recent book: Innocents lost: When child soldiers go to war (Briggs 2005).

The folly of such a reductionist, ‘single-issue’ approach has already been witnessed in efforts to end the employment of children in factories. Particularly in the early 1990s, many young workers in the South were thrown out of factories to meet the demands of politicians and rights activists in the global North who focused on this issue in isolation, failing to look at wider economic and social considerations. Denied access to a common source of income, many children in countries like Bangladesh were exposed to even greater risks through work such as prostitution and rag-picking.5

risk their lives in combat. Such a proposition challenges the normative assumptions of the child-saving project and calls for engagement with young people as socio-political actors in a manner at odds with the broad thrust of humanitarianism. Indeed, by suggesting that children may be intellectually and morally capable of engaging in political violence, Read’s account calls into question two basic premises of child-focused humanitarianism: (a) that the young in situations of war are to be approached solely as victims, and (b) that efforts to represent and assist them can be pursued in a neutral and apolitical manner.

The challenge for anthropology

Amongst anthropologists, there is a need to question the assumption of distinctiveness and separability between childhood/childhood and adults/adulthood. To date ethnographic study has often been motivated by fascina-
tion with children as inhabitants of a society somehow separate from that of ‘the adult world’ (James et al. 1998: 215). Influential theoretical discussion has endorsed this assumption by suggesting that children inhabit ‘cultures’ that are at least semi-autonomous (Hirschfeld 2002) and are ‘worthy of study in their own right’ (James and Prout 1997: 8).

This view, which forms part of the so-called new para-
digm of childhood studied articulated most explicitly by Allison James and Alan Prout, has served, in its own way, to reify the separation between ‘childhood’ and ‘adult-
hood’. If anthropologists are to furnish popular under-
standing with a more relational view of the interaction between children and adults that reflects the reality of many young people’s lives in the global South, we may have to overcome a certain romanticism of our own.

A recent article by anthropologist Alcinda Honwana demonstrates the pitfalls of naturalizing this separation between ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’. Writing about child soldiers in Angola and Mozambique, Honwana character-
izes their situation as follows:

Children are to be defended. Soldiers defend. Children are to be protected. A soldier’s mandate is to protect. Therefore, the combination of the two words child and soldier creates a para-
dox as these children of war find themselves in an interstitial space between these two conditions. They are still children, but they are no longer innocent; they perform adult tasks, but they are not yet adults. The possession of guns and a licence to kill places them outside of childhood. But at the same time such attributes do not constitute full-scale incorporation into adulthood given, among other things, their age and physical immaturity. Therefore, they are located in a twilight zone...” (2005: 32).

The text that follows, which includes many quotations from former child combatants, entirely fails to justify the author’s claim about the ‘interstitial positionality’ of their lives. Rather, this metaphor appears to be the product of an uncritical engagement with the discourse of the project of childhood and ‘adulthood’. Writing about child soldiers in Angola and Mozambique, Honwana characterizes their situation as follows:

Ethical concerns

Challenging the conceptual boundary between ‘children’ and ‘adults’ – now drawn so consistently by humanitarianists and child rights activists at the age of 18 – raises its own ethical questions. Are all children who engage in military activity to be considered as rational social actors acting on the basis of clear motivations? And, if so, can they be held culpable of their actions to the same extent as any other combatant? What value can ethnography bring if it is to reject standards intended to protect the lives of the young? After all, it may be argued that construing all under-18-year-olds as the innocent prey of unscrupulous warlords yields advantage when it comes to demobilization, reconciliation and social reintegration, enabling children to escape the punishment meted out to other former combatants. These are issues that must be treated with great seriousness. As Veena Das and Pamela Reynolds have cautioned, ‘[t]here is a fine line between suggesting that Western models of childhood are not applicable cross-culturally and the care-
less assumption that somehow people in other cultures are immune to the sorrows and travails of losing children in warfare or seeing their children become fearful embodi-
ments of violent rage’ (Das and Reynolds 2003: 9).

While carefully treading this fine line, we need to give attention to the ways in which different societies attribute moral responsibility to the young. Often there is no simple equation between moral responsibility and chronological age. Normative ideas about the divide between childhood and adulthood can therefore be of limited use or even obstructive to programmes of demobilization. Instead, processes that involve the negotiation of local values may be essential for communities to deal with the culpability of former combatants and enable their reintegration.’ Furthermore, as Alex de Waal has noted, in situations where the young have engaged with military groups for social, economic and political reasons, being subsequently ‘deluded or wayward children’ will prevent their original grievances from being addressed (de Waal 2002: 22). This has obvious implications for long-term peace and stability.

Conclusion

As Jo Boyden, among many others, has observed, the 1990s witnessed ‘an unprecedented rise in enthusiasm for children’s issues around the world’ (1997: 194). A mood of moral panic lies behind much of this enthusiasm, fuelled by the advocacy activities of international organizations at the heart of the project of saving children. It therefore seems likely that efforts to protect and control based on a particular vision of childhood will grow, with the consequence that the world’s children will become targets for humanitarian and developmental projects more than ever before. This has direct implications not only for children themselves (such as the Bangladeshi factory workers men-
tioned above) but for the wider societies in which they live. In the post-Cold War era, certain governments have displayed a tendency to tap into this moral panic in order to demonstrate their own legitimacy, discredit other sovereign nations and justify belligerence abroad.

With respect to children’s involvement in armed con-

cflict, this tendency is supported by accounts like Singer’s which ignore context and interconnection. Careful eth-


ography, on the other hand, should enable us to learn about the inequities and injustices of the current global order as encountered in the everyday lives of children and gain greater clarity about the multiple sources of threat. Anthropologists may thereby serve to challenge the eth-


nocentrism that is now being justified by reference to the ‘child soldier’ and other symbols of ‘deviant’ childhood in the global South. They may also help to discredit the use of children as objects of humanitarian concern to justify questionable military intervention.