

Abstract: Childhood and Politics

Our culture's attitudes towards children are ambiguous – as found also in the relationship between children and politics. The protective mood that has befallen children over the last two centuries entails their separations from adults – and from the serious business of economics and politics. How do we deal with the dilemma, which as a consequence makes it difficult to have a discourse about children and politics? This article nevertheless makes some reflections over the theme and suggests that one can, as far as politics is concerned, in principle talk about (a) children as subjects, (b) children/childhood as a non-targeted object (i.e. in terms of structural forces' impact), (c) children/childhood as targeted objects (political initiatives having children in mind), and finally as (d) instrumentalised objects. The thorny question raised in each case is to which extent children are beneficiaries or if that is the case primarily as a side effect of gains to adults/adult society. Would public investments in children have been made to the current extent, if expectations of a surplus return were not an option?

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The Swedish poet and singer, Beppe Wolgers, rightly deserves fame for his beautiful ballad about *Det gåtfulla folket* – The mysterious people. It is full of magics, metamorphoses and other enigmatic charms which are all alien to adults. In my translation each of its three verses begins “Children are a people and they live in a foreign country,” and ends like this: “All are children, and they belong to the mysterious people.”

No one can doubt for a second that Wolgers’ ballad is a declaration of love to children and no one should be allowed to subject the poetry to a dissecting analysis with its risk to jeopardise exactly this impression and the poet’s intention. The wording cannot help though to prompt in the mind of a childhood researcher associations in terms of an interesting triple portrayal of children each of which portrait is symptomatic for current discourses about children: as sentimentalised, as irrational and as being separated from the adult world.

Sometimes the three portraits run together, as it actually does in Beppe Wolgers’ ballad. Sometimes one would rather say that they send divergent messages. In any case, it is hardly exaggerated to suggest that our culture’s attitude to children is ambiguous. This ambiguity is clearly found also in this article’s theme about the relationship between childhood and politics.

It is not too difficult to find representatives for Wolgers’ views among researchers dealing with children. James Garbarino, a well-known US-psychologist, may serve as an example, when he many years ago suggested that in our modern era to be a child is

to be shielded from the direct demands of economic, political and sexual forces childhood is a time to maximize the particularistic and to minimize the universalistic, a definition that should be heeded by educators, politicians, and parents alike. (Garbarino, 1986, p. 120)

This view underlines the observation made by Viviana Zelizer, the Argentinian-US-sociologist, whose remarkable book *Pricing the Priceless Child* convincingly revealed a profound change in our culture’s attitudes towards children – a change in the direction of a much more emotional attitude captured

¹ This article is slightly adapted from my plenary talk at the conference Citizenship Education in Society: A Challenge for the Nordic Countries, 4th – 5th October 2007 at Malmö University, School of Teacher Education. Its original preparation for an oral presentation may still be too noticeable, for which I apologise.

by Zelizer (1985) in notions of sentimentalisation and sacralisation. This direction is of course in complete harmony with Garbarino's protective mood. At the same time – and this is imminent also in Garbarino's definition – the historically changed position of childhood was one, which created a distance between age groups. This is an observation made also by other scholars with partly different stories to tell than Garbarino. Ruth Benedict, a renowned US-anthropologist, put it in this way in the 1930s:

From a comparative point of view our culture goes to great extremes in emphasising contrasts between the child and the adult' and she commented that 'these are all dogmas of our culture, dogmas which ... other cultures commonly do not share. (Benedict, 1938, p. 161).

The famous French historian, Philippe Ariès apparently shared Benedict's view, even if he applied it in an historical context where Benedict compared contemporary cultures at the beginning of the 20th century. Ariès thus observed the beginning of

a long process of segregation...which has continued into our own day, and which is called schooling' and he talked in this connection about 'this isolation of children, and their delivery to rationality. (1982, p. 7)

There is, though, an important difference between Garbarino (and Wolgers for that matter) on the one hand and Benedict and Ariès on the other. While Garbarino is *advocating* the separation of children's worlds from that of adults for reasons of protecting children against a dangerous world and thus advocating a small family setting as an ideal one for children, Benedict and Ariès are rather *sceptical to* the new state of affairs. They regret what they believe to be observing, namely that children have lost their position as participants in society.

This debate between various positions is still with us: should we do our utmost to protect children at the cost of setting them outside 'society' or should we acknowledge them as persons, participants, citizens at a price perhaps of exposing them to economic, political and sexual forces – seen as dangers by Garbarino?

I believe that both Garbarino and Ariès/Benedict have a good case. Nobody is really ready to sacrifice the necessary protection of children in order to expose them to any risks of a modern society; on the other hand, nobody should accept children's exclusion from experiencing themselves as contributing persons in society. The question is now if these various positions have bearings for our discussion today about childhood and politics?

Children as subject in politics

There are these days much scholarly considerations and public debate about children's rights and children as citizens. These discussions have much to say in general and also in more particular terms about children's status in society and about what children can legitimately expect as members of society. The UN Convention on the right of the child (CRC) contains quite a few articles which colloquially are often divided into one group of articles dealing with protection, another with provision, and a third group of articles with participation rights, the so-called 3 P's.

In terms of children's subject status, their participation rights are most relevant. Participation is here primarily understood in terms of rights that bear many similarities with human and civil rights in the Human Rights Declaration. Article 12 of the CRC thus speaks of assuring the child who is capable of forming his or her own view the right to express those views freely in *matters affecting the child*; in article 13 the child is given freedom of expression; in article 14 freedom of thought, conscience or religion; in article 15 freedom of association and peaceful assembly; and in article 16 right to privacy.

These are all articles giving the child subjectivity – but there are a number of limitations. Most significant in my view is the limitation in article 12 which states that only in matters affecting the child, he or she should have a right to express views freely. This is a severe limitation but one which is probably symptomatic for the child as a political subject in our societies.

In discussions not only of children's rights but also in general terms about citizenship researchers and politicians are leaving us a kind of wilderness, and demonstrating that children have not really been thought about. Thus Marshall (1950), the British political scientist who wrote a seminal book after the Second world War about citizenship, did not find a place for children; the US philosopher of law John Rawls (1971) was equally perplexed, and the German/British sociologist, Ralf Dahrendorf (2006), directly talk about children as “a vexing problem” – in other words an irritating and annoying problem disturbing serious discussions among adult people about mature persons.

It is in this connection, and highly relevant for my theme *Childhood and Politics*, remarkable that the academic discipline which has shown least interest in the new strands of childhood studies is political science. If it takes any curiosity at all for children, this interest concentrates exclusively on political socialisation; i.e. how children are best brought up to become a responsible political person, which is supposed to require a certain level of political activity, and in any case sufficient to fulfil a democratic system's minimum expectations: to cast the vote.

This expression of citizenship – the demonstration of the real sovereign, the people as a voter – is one which the CRC does not mention at all as an option. One reason is perhaps that such an expression would transcend what is said about the child's own affairs, which is apparently understood in a very narrow sense. The idea that larger structures might influence the child quite directly seems to be beyond the purview of the CRC. Another reason is clearly related to that, namely that the child is not supposed to hold the competence to vote. The child is simply politically immature.

I do not want to discuss this contention as such; it may be true, but in this case three questions have to be asked: (1) If competence is the main criterion for voting, have we then made sure that *all* politically incompetent persons are prevented from voting, irrespective of age? (2) Would society be incurring any harm if children were voters? (3) Would the child or children be experiencing any harm, injustice or unfairness by not having access to the ballot?

In response to the first question one might make reference to Hilary Rodham – now better known as Clinton – who many years ago as a child lawyer made the provocative suggestion “to reverse the presumption of incompetence and instead assume all individuals are competent until proven otherwise” (quoted by Lasch, 1992, p. 75). What she is suggesting is thus that one cannot take for granted that persons under a given, arbitrary age, is politically incompetent. It is not difficult to find someone under that age who has that competence, as it is fully possible to find quite a few above the age who is not politically competent. If this is so one has a problem of fairness, which is not solved but merely glossed over with reference to expediency, while assuming that everybody under 18 years of age is incompetent. Nobody would contest as a fact that it would be extremely impractical to test not only children's competence, but also that of each and every member of the society. I do not think it is a trivial problem, and much thinking and writing has been invested in it, but I will nevertheless leave it here.

With regard to the second question it would probably be hard to prove that society as such will be running a risk if children were given suffrage. My assumption would be that the distribution of votes would not deviate grossly from a normal outcome. I will not dismiss the claim that it might be highly disturbing for any conventional wisdom, but on the other hand it might be a way of emphasising responsibility for communal values.

With reference to the third question it is much more important to ask – given their disenfranchised status – if children have got a proper political representation. It is worth the while to bear in mind that we in European countries as a matter of fact are talking about some 20 to 25 per cent of the population (those under 18), in other parts of the world the percentage is even higher for those who cannot claim to be directly *represented* politically.

Now, it could be and is often argued that they have good representatives in their parents.

Let us look at this argument. The main assumption as far as voting behaviour is concerned is that people vote in accordance with what they assume to be their own interests. Thus adults without children, among them the elderly, are not supposed to have children's interests in mind when casting the ballot. One cannot be sure even that parents support children's interests when voting, but in this argument I assume that they actually do that. In this case, then, children will be represented merely by parents currently living with them. We know that for instance in Scandinavian countries there will be children in merely one fourth of all households; we also know that an ever larger group of persons are more than 60 years of age and that this share of the population will increase. We can calculate that within relatively short time more than half of the electorate is over fifty years of age ... and we could continue. In a sense, much of it is speculations, but the demographic development does not work in favour of children's interests.

If we refrain from considering the possibility of letting children vote, there is the final possibility of furnishing parents with additional ballots – one for each child. A couple with two children would therefore receive four ballot papers at each election – whether they should all be given to the mother or to the parent of the same sex or opposite sex as the child is another matter. The proposal may cause constitutional problems which I would, in case, leave to political scientists, lawyers and politicians to deal with – with an eye also to negative effects that may accrue from it.

The point is in any case that children arguably are not well represented currently and given the demographic development, there are no prospects that this imbalance will change. We can therefore conclude our deliberations on children as political subjects by suggesting *that our system does not leave channels for children to act as such and a growing ageing population is not likely to establish such channels.*

Children/childhood as a non-targeted object of politics

Turning now to my next section, which I have called children/childhood as a non-targeted object of politics, one has to be aware of the fact that quite a lot of politics have unintended consequences, i.e. consequences that were neither foreseen nor necessarily wanted. We must in other words make a distinction between politics, which aims at impacting children or childhood on the one hand and politics which does not have this aim, but nevertheless may have considerable consequences – for better or worse.

One might argue that since this kind of politics is not directed towards childhood there is no reason for us to consider it. This is, however, an unten-

able argument – in fact I would suggest that much of what happens to childhood, towards forming and transforming childhood and much of what influence children and their daily lives is in fact instigated, invented or simply take place without having children and childhood in mind at all. If this is true the means to either prevent the negative or promote the positive of such politics must follow a diagnosis as far as children and childhood are concerned. Why is it that many children are poor? How come that children, more often than other groups are densely housed? The reason is not likely due to a conspiracy against children. Rather, it simply happened that way – due to inattentiveness, structural indifference or whatever.

It is not difficult to find examples of the kind of politics – or, indeed, socio-political or political economic events – that could be defined in terms of an unintentional influence on childhood or children's life worlds. It can be any societal, political or economic event or development of a certain magnitude. Let me mention an example with which we will be familiar.

As we all know, during large stretches of at least the second half of the 20th century there has been a dramatic increase in women's participation in the labour market. This was a development which was not directed towards meeting children's needs – many would even say, on the contrary, although this is far from certain. Irrespective, it was a development which has had an enormous impact on childhood and on children's lives. In many countries it has drawn with it in its wake the establishment of kindergartens, crèches, after-school arrangements and the like, where children are forced to stay during a considerable part of their childhood. The latter will be an example of a policy consciously targeting childhood, but the former – women's entry into the labour market – did not in the first place include reflexions about children or childhood but rather made such reflexions necessary in the second place.

If we look a bit further back in history – to for instance the beginning of "the century of the child," as it was labelled by Ellen Key – we will observe quite a few events, which were characteristic for the transition towards modern, industrial society.

We observed phenomena such as industrialisation, mechanisation, urbanisation, secularisation, individualisation, and democratisation. These headings, as it were, represent transformations in society at large and were answers to demands to make economic growth continue. If we would ask: where are the children, the answer would in the first place be that they were not considered; they were not the target as such. However, if we nevertheless go on to look for children we shall soon find out that they were impacted dramatically of the transformations that did not have them in mind. This can be seen on another list of simultaneous events: abolition of child labour, the child savers movement, mass schooling, fertility reduction, sentimentalisa-

tion and new scientific interest – to mention the more important and conspicuous among the new variables.

The point made here is that the transformation of childhood was not really the result of a deliberate politics set out with this explicit purpose in mind. Nevertheless one can hardly underestimate the range and significance of the impact on childhood of macro-economic, macro-political and macro-social parameters. Childhood never became the same again after its passage through the industrialisation period.

The first lesson from this is that childhood is inadvertently – whether we like it or not – part of society and of societal politics. Any effort to exclude it or to keep it aside is wishful thinking. Therefore the second lesson is that one has unremittingly to be attentive to consequences for childhood of all kinds of politics – inclusive that, which does not have childhood in mind.

In some countries ministries for childhood has been established. This is where, one would suspect, childhood politics and policies are made. No doubt about it. Nevertheless one might assume that decisions made in ministries for finance, for housing, for transport, for urban planning, and similar overarching ministries are of much larger impact on childhood than children's own resort department.

Children/childhood as a targeted object of politics/policies

There are obviously political initiatives, which directly target children and childhood. We may go through a country's legislation or we may look through the CRC and find quite a few pieces of legislation which actually focus on children, whether in terms of protecting them, providing for them or enabling them to participate – the 3 P's as we mentioned. One could also imagine, by the way, that such initiatives may aim at protecting adult society. When in some countries like the USA and UK curfew bills are enacted, this is partly, at least, likely to be the case.

Often, however, it is not so easy to determine if certain initiatives or bills are targeting children, the family, parents, mothers or somebody else. Is a kindergarten for instance for children or for parents – or for the state and the trades? At the end of the day it may well be that kindergartens will be an advantage for several parties, even if it is also likely that someone will benefit more than others from them.

In Diagram 1 below I make two distinctions: one between childhood and children (or the child) and one between politics and policies. The notion of childhood does not have the individual child in mind but rather the legal, spatial, temporal and institutional arrangements available for children in a given society. We may talk about childhood as a social phenomenon, a social construction or the like. Its form or architecture depends on parameters

such as economy, technology, culture, adult attitudes etc and the interplay between them. Since these parameters change and continuously assume new configurations, childhood is never the same – even if it is of the same nature. You may compare childhood in Sweden in the year 2007 with childhood in Sweden 1907 and you will realise in your mind that you keep talking about childhood but also that it has changed. It has changed due to the fact that society and its industry changed – but also because the state may have intervened to correct unintended changes.

If we use the notion of “house,” of course children, literally speaking, live in their parental apartment or house. But you might also metaphorically say that children live within the house of childhood – as it has come to look like as a result of both intended interventions and unintended consequences. They live there for a certain period only; then they move out of the house of childhood and first into the house of adolescence and then into the house of adulthood which likewise constitute cultural institutions with a certain permanency.

The notion of politics is an answer to questions of orientation, of where to go, and it includes ideological questions. Policies on the other hand are more responses to practical problems and will result in piecemeal decisions.

Diagram 1 Political initiatives in relation to children/childhood

| | Childhood | Child(ren) |
|----------|-----------|------------|
| Politics | 1 | 2 |
| Policies | 3 | 4 |

If we thus talk about *politics of childhood*, as in cell 1, we will have in mind political decision about what we as a society want with or for childhood, i.e. decisions about the framework of childhood, about the place of childhood in an adult-dominated society, about children’s rights to vote, about mainly large scale or macro issues dealing with children’s life world in general terms. How childhood looks like depends on historical period or civilisation, and politics of childhood is about how to structurally design childhood and how to consciously change the architecture of childhood. We are interested in the situation of and the *development of childhood* as a structural segment of society.

If on the other hand we look at cell no. 2, *politics for children*, we have in mind long term national initiatives aiming at *development of children* as a group. “Politics for children” will encompass several cohorts of children and is thus independent of individual children.

Cell no. 3 – *policies for childhood* – might focus on what Bronfenbrenner (1979) called the ecology of childhood and would typically be introduced at the municipality level.

Finally, cell no. 4 – *policies for the child* – would typically include special programmes for individual children, for instance children at risk.

How the measures mentioned in the diagram are balanced against each other will probably vary from one political regime to another. In very family oriented systems, initiatives are likely to be fewer than in for instance Nordic welfare states.

Children/childhood as an instrumentalised object in politics

I have now dealt with the issue of children as subject and children and childhood as a non-targeted and a targeted object of politics and policies. The last major part before my conclusion will be children or childhood as an *instrument* for politics or policies.

Children have always assumed a particular role – namely that of being raw material for the production of an adult population. This is why we incessantly talk about them as our future or as the next generation. This way of talking gives an inevitable suspicion that childhood is not our main target but merely an instrument for vicarious purposes. It is an answer to all adults' question to all children: what are you going to be when you grow up? Typically, adults are not interested in what children are while they are children.

Children's role as raw material or as a resource is historically, I will argue, the most enduring and the most dominant view on children, but despite the enduring view, the arguments in its favour may change completely. So, for instance, it was once common knowledge that children should be smacked or spanked with the argument that it was necessary for a successful future adult life. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" is only one among many proverbs or expressions to this effect. Now, however, as we have become wiser, we have found out that one should not punish children physically. Interestingly, however, our goal has not changed: we *still* want to produce a better adult. The new version, though, has the advantage of establishing a win-win situation: children are supposed to be happy while developing into ideal adults. A crucial question would in this situation be: how would we act towards children if the winds once again changed and new insights proved that prospects for a successful adulthood were unambiguously in favour of smacking them?

Actually, I think we know that, for in most countries in the world children are spanked, and even in certain social classes in countries where it is forbidden by law and thus known to the public, many people do not run the

risk not to punish children physically. In case of doubt, in other words, these people opt for a situation where children lose and adults win or children are instrumental to producing a good adult (see Diagram 2).

Similarly one could reason about current initiatives concerning *social investment strategies* from both the British New Labour and from the European Union – underwritten by notable figures like Tony Blair, George Brown, Anthony Giddens and Gøsta Esping-Andersen. Arguments in favour of these strategies are almost entirely phrased in terms of human capital development and quality of a future labour force. In general terms, a coincidence of societal interests and quality of adult life is suggested. As the abolition of corporal punishment of children, they postulate a win-win-situation and take for granted that we are all having the same interests. But do we know that this is the case? Do we know that what is good for state and corporate society is also good for children? And do we know what that good adulthood is that we aim at producing? The social investment strategies have the citizen worker in mind, but we may also have in mind the good and caring partner and the loving parent. Do we know that what it takes to produce the worker is the same as what it takes to produce the partner and the parent?

Diagram 2 From favourable to unfavourable options following degrees and/or types of social investments (or corporal punishment of children)

| | Childhood/Children | Adulthood/Society |
|----------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Option 1 | Win | Win |
| Option 2 | Lose | Win |
| Option 3 | Win | Lose |
| Option 4 | Lose | Lose |

In any case, it is the postulate of the investment strategists that the futuristic and productivistic perspectives coincide with what they believe to be a good life for the child. Even if we accept that, the crucial question again remains: what happens if this connection is shown to be much less evident? In principle we have, as before with corporal punishment, four options or situations (see Diagram 2): win-win, lose-lose, win-lose and lose-win.

Win-win is best and lose-lose is worst – these are trivial statements. If we have any influence we will reject lose-lose, but we cannot be sure for that to get a win-win. We may then be left with a win-lose and a lose-win. Can we imagine the outcome to be win-lose, i.e. an outcome where children win and adults lose? Yes, in particular families, perhaps, but in the long run adult society will not allow this option to prevail. I therefore suggest that second

to win-win in the ranking order is lose for children and win for adults. This is suggested primarily because adults as a matter of fact have the right and the power to choose. It is part of the logic of all conventional arguments, supported by Esping-Andersen (2002) for instance, that in case of doubt, adult society or adults will get the best of it.

For the time being we are witnessing new discussions about schooling and to some extent we have the same debates about kindergartens. The interpretation of current results of for instance PISA is that discipline has become too loose and teachers have become too pupil friendly. These are features which are supposed to be in the interest of pupils – at least in the short term. However, these arguments do not count as long as the results demanded by adult society are not delivered or questioned. Therefore we have these European wide discussions about tightening the rope, about re-introducing tests, discipline etc. In general terms Gordon Brown in 2001, while Chancellor of the Exchequer, made the investments in children contingent on their return:

Child poverty is a scar on the soul of Britain and *it is because our five year olds are our future doctors, nurses, teachers, engineers and workers* that, for reasons not just of social justice but also of economic efficiency, we should invest in ... all of the potential of all our children. (quoted by Jenson, 2006, p. 39, italics mine)

In economic terms, experience shows what may happen if a slump replaces a boom in the economy: in so well-reputed welfare states as Sweden and Finland in the early 1990s public expenses on children and child-related issues were disproportionately cut back. As we already knew and as was confirmed: children do not have a claim on societal resources, and besides: their strengths and negotiating powers are negligible.

The two examples mentioned here demonstrate a basic unanimity about the goals – and indeed, how is it possible to disagree in a wish for having good adults? At the same time we also realise that the means to the end may vary over time and between countries or perhaps rather between classes or religious groups. In the case of the USA, Philosopher Lakoff (2002) has for instance shown how the country in terms of attitudes to spanking is divided in a fundamentalist religious South and a more liberal North.

Conclusions

It is obvious that childhood and politics are inherently connected. It is equally obvious that we all wish to protect children from the worst effects of politics and economics. To keep children apart from economics and politics is however unrealistic. If not for other reasons, this is proven by the fact that

children are part of a project which forces them to be material for constructing a future.

If one were to sum up, I would suggest that children are caught between two strands: on the one hand a *sentimentalisation*, which seeks to separate children from and protect them against the adult world. On the other hand a *structural indifference* or heedlessness (Kaufmann 2005, pp. 152-153), which in reality may run out to the same. Economic and political developments happen behind our back and takes place without giving children and childhood sufficient consideration – not necessarily of bad will, but simply because we have got used to children as a highly privatised phenomenon.

I have sought to demonstrate that even if politics and policies to some extent are deliberately targeting children and childhood, perhaps the much more dominant influence on children's lives come from the non-targeted and the instrumentalised actions against children and childhood. It therefore remains important to target children directly, but we should perhaps be much more attentive to all the influences on children which we did not plan and which we are not informed about.

The idea of *children as political subjects* is now as before a fairy tale.

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