

# **Childhood and Societal Macrostructures**

## **Childhood Exclusion by Default**

**Jens Qvortrup**

# **9**

“Childhood and Societal Macrostructures”: The development of the new social studies of childhood seems to be attracting scholars from mainly disciplines preferring ethnographic methodologies. While welcoming this strand, the paper argues that it is indispensable to employ structural approaches as well. The target of such studies is childhood rather than the child; it is however important to understand the consequences for all children of structural developments. The thesis is thus sought substantiated that childhood develops as a structural form more or less irrespective of children themselves. In the end, though, a dialogue between the two approaches must be established.

“Childhood Exclusion by Default”: The title of the paper refers to the paradoxical appearance that on the one hand children as individuals through this century have been encompassed with a growing concern by their significant others as well as psychological sciences, on the other hand exposed to an increasing indifference as a collectivity on the side of society. This did not occur as a result of a deliberate plan but rather by default, i.e. as one of the structural side-effects of societal development.

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Childhood Exclusion by Default

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# Childhood and Societal Macrostructures

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1

The diversification of the new sociology of childhood is a sign of its good health; despite its young age, discussions about both theory and methodology prosper and impressive efforts are done to produce new empirical results. There are to be sure differences between countries as to main orientations, and the definition of sociology of childhood has not (and will not) come to a close as determination of delimitations to border disciplines is not (and never will be) agreed upon. Though it seems to me that there is a basic agreement about the salience for sociology of childhood of two main pillars, namely a structural approach and an agency approach. At the same time, as practitioners of the field abound, it appears empirically as if adherents of the agency approach are gaining the upper hand, at least in quantitative terms. This is hardly a surprise if one considers from which disciplines scholars were expected to be recruited, such as pedagogical or anthropo-

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logical ones, whereas it is probably much harder to convince researchers from disciplines such as economics, political science, geography and sociology to join - in particular those with a macro-orientation. This impression has been supported by observing the nature of papers from both the Sociology of Childhood sessions at the International Sociological Association's congress in Montreal, July 1998 and the Sociology of Children sessions at the American Sociological Association's congress in San Francisco, August 1998; moreover, the support awarded to projects in national research programmes in for instance UK, Norway and Denmark is confirming this picture of a rather strong orientation towards studying children as agents.

That was the reason why, when asked, I proposed to talk about childhood and societal macro-structures. This choice is not dictated by any reservation towards studying childhood as an agency or children as actors; on the contrary, I have found this strand most constructive, I have even done it myself, although not by using ethnographic methodology. No, the choice is simply made because I want to make sure that the structural perspective does not end up in oblivion; I must at the same time admit that my own orientation is more towards structure than agency, which is I believe more due to my background than to considerations of relevance or pertinence.

Therefore, to put it bluntly at the outset: while I find it extremely relevant to ask children about their own opinions and to ascertain their competencies, it is far from sufficient. I do believe it is true, as it has been said, that people make their own history, but I'm also convinced that Marx was right in adding that they don't do that under circumstances of their own choosing. It is mainly these circumstances I will be addressing.

2

It is customary to talk about childhood as a social construction; I have used that phrase myself several times, but dis-

cussions with and my reading of among others British colleagues have taught me that I may have misunderstood this concept. The proper understanding of it seems to be that childhood is constructed in discourse; something which is negotiated or constituted while we are talking about it. Within this discourse children are partly admitted the role of contributors. I fully agree that this view is relevant, but again - it is not enough. My own understanding of childhood as a social construction is much more straightforward and simple, namely that childhood is constructed by a number of social forces, economic interests, technological determinants, cultural phenomena etc., inclusive of course the discourse about it. In this construction work childhood has mostly been a reactive rather than an active part; by and large it has not been thought of in this construction and development of childhood as a historical or a modern phenomenon.

It is beyond doubt that if one were to go deeper into an analysis of children's every day life during this longer or shorter period of childhood's construction, one would have detected a role of children as actors; children have been present all the time and they have influenced both their significant and insignificant others as well as the environment they were a part of. As other minority groups in history they cannot help having had an influence - by means of their mere presence either as workers, helpers or as a nuisance. The research which is now being done in order to reveal their actual role in history and society is very important and must be continued with vigour and hard work, but it would in my view be a capital mistake if we were to believe that children had a decisive influence in changing societies, and thus in constructing childhood.

In this respect children are even worse off than most other minority groups; due to their - per definition - suppressed status, these groups have been forced to adapt to prevailing power relations - but for instance the working class or women eventually acquired some power. What I am going to argue, therefore, is, that irrespective of children's enormous level of

activities, societal changes have occurred over their heads or behind their backs. It is therefore of utmost importance for childhood research to deal with macro-societal forces which willy-nilly construct and reconstruct childhood. A sociology of childhood which ignores these forces to the advantage of primarily studying how we talk about childhood or how children react in a number of circumstances, will have failed its task.

3

I'm afraid that I will not be able to tell you much new; my suggestions will be too obvious to surprise you; but I believe it is sometimes worthwhile to be reminded of the obvious which often for the very same reason is forgotten. Childhood for example belong to the obvious, almost to the natural. Nevertheless, Ariès was able to surprise the academic world with his contention that 'in medieval society childhood did not exist' (Ariès, 1962, p. 128). He did not say that children, 'the little ones' or those of young age, did not exist, even if we were informed that the very word children was a late invention, exactly as the notion of family was. It would not have made much sense to say that there were no children around in a period when they relatively speaking were much more numerous than today. What Ariès meant was that at this time of our history - and perhaps this was still the case until recently in some developing countries - people had no awareness of childhood; that, if you like, there was no discourse about childhood.

But if there was no discourse about childhood, there must have been some reason for it; it was not merely a whim of some intellectuals, the clergy or whoever, that children began to be talked and thought about. When Rousseau took an interest in this topic, this was not just an original idea of his own; rather he was clever enough to give voice to changes in life conditions that were already under way, as described by Ariès - for instance in terms of incipient needs for education,

as it happened in the transition from the Middle Ages to Enlightenment.

I am not going to present an interpretation of the history of ideas; I simply want to underline the importance of the concept and the phenomenon of childhood as distinct from the child and from children. Perhaps slightly exaggerated, childhood developed as a structural form more or less irrespective of children. The concepts are difficult to deal with, in your language as well as in my own. Listen for instance to Postman (1982), who claimed that childhood had disappeared. This might appear as if we have come full circle from the time Ariès said it did not exist. But this is not the case; on the contrary. Postman is not claiming that childhood is disappearing as a structural form, but merely that it is disappearing as an embodiment of a particular meaning that was given to it in a dominant discourse; as for instance, when we say that children are deprived of a childhood, meaning an individual childhood.

But again this discourse was not a prime mover in the development of childhood; when for instance Zelizer (1985) talks about children as sentimentalised and sacralised she is obviously expressing a certain mood or attitude which became more and more widespread around the turn of the last century. Children were sacralised and sentimentalised - the organised expression of which was found in the child savers movement (cf. Platt, 1977) - not because adults all of a sudden became nicer - that would be deMause's interpretation which I personally find rather flawed (deMause, 1974); nor because the new child specialists suddenly made their voices louder. No, they were sentimentalised and sacralised because it for some reason became an interest to have them sentimentalised and sacralised (cf. Ariès, 1962, p. 119).

4

The examples to be mentioned shortly will begin at the historical stage I have set. There is a good reason for that, which is not historical, but methodological and of course has, as it

should, much to do with my topic. Paradoxically, it seems as if we are perceiving childhood much more accurate at a distance than if it is close to us. On the other hand, children are easier to see at a short distance. In reality, this is not surprising. Using a historical perspective is a way of mapping childhood as a pattern. Childhood is a pattern, and research is mapping. Not much is more abstract than a map, and yet one can hardly think of anything more concrete and useful for our orientation in the world. But just as we are unable to see the pavements or the gates or even the roads in any detail on our travel or city map, no children are visible on our historical childhood map; on your city map, you are unable to exactly figure out the poor areas from the more wealthy areas, but the map is of course no less valid for that. A map is the macrostructure of a landscape, whether it is a geographical or a childhood landscape.

If we want to perceive the historical landscape of childhood we are therefore forced to gloss over the details of individual childhoods; if you are lucky you may be able to make some reconstructions based on archival or memoirs, but in general you will be left with childhood's macrostructures. What about contemporary childhood? In principle, you are able to make a macrostructural map of the landscape of childhood in modern society, but for some reason such a map is believed to be too generalised a picture of children's lives; most researchers apparently prefer to make a study of a small group of children's lives; they will meticulously collect data about these lives and their local circumstances; they will observe, talk with and ask children themselves, perhaps they will be studying children's drawings and observe their reactions to a diversity of happenings and events, etc. As I said to begin with this is not wrong; it is fine; but it is not enough. For by doing so you will be too close to the reality to grasp other essentials, indeed, to the extent that you are merely using such myopic methodologies you will be cutting yourself off from launching some of the potential explanatory proposals for children's everyday life. To come to terms with this other

essential reality you are forced to step somewhat back from children, i.e. from the real children of blood and flesh, sometimes so much that you lose sight of them. You are in other words forced to abstract - not from the reality of childhood, but from the everyday life of particular children. The benefits - from the point of view of particular children's everyday life - of the process of abstraction is your enhanced ability to see the broader landscape of childhood, that cannot be seen from a close distance. But to reiterate: this abstraction is not necessarily less real or less concrete or less useful than the study of living small children; exactly as you need the big city map in order to find the gate of a particular house, you may need the big map of childhood in order to open the door to the lives of particular children.

5

Some years ago I formulated a number of theses among which I want to mention one: 'childhood is in principle exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood, although in a particular way' (Qvortrup, 1993). Answering the question of how childhood developed historically until our own time, we will therefore do well in asking how society developed. I'm asking this question because it will illuminate the transition of childhood as a structural form from pre-industrial to industrial society, and the period I'm starting out with is late-nineteenth century, which by most historians are understood as dramatically important for changes in childhood, and the reason for that is obviously that it was dramatically important for changes in society. In other words, we are able to empirically verify that macro-structural changes had profound impact on children's life conditions; if you like, we can verify a correlation between macro-structural changes and changes in childhood, but I think it is a plausible hypothesis that changes in childhood were the result rather than the cause.

Let me here mention only a few important developments pertaining to changes in childhood in this century:

\* the percentage of men in agriculture is decreasing from almost ninety per cent in the beginning of the nineteenth century to less than five per cent now (Coleman, 1993)

\* the decreased percentage of people living in rural areas (in the Nordic countries from circa 80 per cent to circa 15 per cent) (Qvortrup, 1994)

\* women without gainful employment decreased in the US from 85 per cent in the late nineteenth century to fifty per cent one hundred years later; in our part of the world this development has been much more dramatic (Coleman, 1993)

\* percentages of households with children decreased from 73 to 36 (Coleman, 1990)

\* the per capita income of children relative to that of adults decreased from 71 per cent to 51 per cent (Coleman, 1990)

\* percentages of children aged 5-19 not in school decreased from around fifty to converging to zero (Coleman, 1993)

\* the fertility rate decreased from 6.6 to 1.7 during the period (Hernandez, 1993)

The most surprising and powerful, in my view, among these developments is the parallelism between them, or the correlation between the phenomena. It is heuristically rich as to how macro-structures directly influence the form of childhood as well as the contents of it. If one were to capture the essence of the story told, one might suggest that childhood has become smaller, poorer, institutionalised, privatised.

Of course it is no surprise to anyone that the fertility rate has decreased; but it is not without importance to see how it plummeted together with other factors, and first of all one can only conclude that childhood has become much smaller in quantitative terms. One might rebut that this is not neces-

sarily of importance for the individual child, who actually is born, but I do not think this argument is a good one. The falling fertility rate, the increased longevity of life and the concomitant reduced share of children in the population, in other words, demographic factors are of utmost importance as indicators of macro-structural changes. It indirectly reveals a changing attitude to childhood and it proves the power of adults to determine in the most ultimate sense the life of children - not by killing them, but by preventing them from being born. It is of course true that no child is as such violated by that; the point is rather that the decisions taken to that effect have repercussions on childhood and society. It has implication for the cultural climate of society if its average age is increasing - from some 20 to now close to 50: an American demographer's predominant impression of Vienna was that of "gray-haired ladies prepared to intimidate with their walking sticks the rare unruly child who might sit near them on a tram" (Coale, 1987, p. 209); it has implications for children's alternatives in terms of where to stay, if no children are left in the locality, while parents are working; it has political and economic implications for distribution of resources, etc.

Children's life arenas are determined also decisively by parents' work, or more generally by prevailing modes of production. Of course it is interesting to make intensive studies of individual children on site, about their use of time and space, about their peer relations etc., but it is important in addition to figure out the whole framework of their arenas; how and why they were established. The information about women's employment - and its development throughout this century - is therefore of great value as a macro-factor determining the landscape of childhood. This is well known stuff. The changes of childhood because of changes in mode of production is on the other hand less discussed.

Therefore the match between men in agriculture and children's schooling is perhaps the one which I'm most fond of because of what it is telling about the development of child-

hood; what happened was that children as a collectivity changed their main mode of activity in accordance with the major change in the dominant mode of producing; it was not a change due to a new discourse among educationalists or child savers, but it was a change that was demanded of a new industrial system, which was in need of a mobile, educated labour force. What we are told is to my mind a correction of - to use a Marxist vocabulary - idealist interpretations of the history of schooling to the advantage of a materialist interpretation. Ariès was in my view right in suggesting the importance of schooling for the development of childhood, but I think he was wrong in proposing as the cause of that 'the Reformation's great moral rearmament of mankind' (Ariès in preface to second edition, here translated from Danish ed., 1982, p. 7); neither was it the child savers' compassion. These views are too narrow and do not grasp the changing material conditions which brought about the changes. The development in the mentioned variables demonstrate clearly to me - without, of course, depriving the cultural arguments of any value - that only if certain material conditions were ready, children were allowed to be fully scholarised on a massive scale.

Whichever of the mentioned arguments are more salient, it can in my view be established that the landscape of childhood actually changed - children were schooled with the consequences it had for them, for instance in Ariès' interpretation: "at this point begins a long process of segregation of children which has continued into our own day, and which is called schooling"; it was, he continues, an "isolation of children, and their delivery to rationality" (Ariès, loc.cit). However, I do not think it is all the same which interpretation one gives the development, so let me say a little more about what led to children's schooling.

I have explored a bit in school history of England and Denmark, and my conclusions are supporting my hesitance to accept cultural changes as most important. What is interesting about these two countries is that they vary very much as to when crucial laws were enacted, but the timing of mass-

schooling is more or less the same. In Denmark schooling was made obligatory as early as in 1814, while in Britain this was the case only by the end of the century. On the other hand legislation against child labour began in Britain very early in the nineteenth century, while in Denmark this happened only in 1872. What is interesting is that these pieces of legislation did not determine when children on a massive scale were scholarised, whether we talk about labour laws or about school legislation. By and large children - or rather their parents and the communities in which they lived, were not ready to let their children go. They continued working in the fields, in the factories or wherever. But in both countries the mass-scholarisation was a reality around the turn of the century; almost 100 per cent of children now attended. The interpretation varies - children were made superfluous, the level of technology made them less fit, the competition with adults became more conspicuous, even parents saw an interest in their schooling, etc. The parallelism between the two curves demonstrates what it was about: only when children are not seen as useful for parents, schools become a realistic alternative, and this seems to correlate with industrialisation and urbanisation. On the other hand the long moral and legal discourses against child labour and for schooling had only little effect as long as it was not supported by material interests (cf. Qvortrup, work in progress).

I talked earlier about not forgetting the obvious or seemingly obvious; schooling belongs to this category - it is nowadays one of the most obvious arenas for children. What history shows is that it was not always obvious; it was an object of intense struggles between different interests. But does the fact that schooling is now a general interest and that there is no doubt that all children must be schooled, does this fact mean that schooling as a fundamental framework for children has lost our research interest? Does it mean that we can take this agreement for granted and trivial and proceed to exploring only what happens within the walls and laws of the school? I don't think so. The fact that we all agree about

something seems rather to indicate that it has become much more and massively important; the danger is however that since it is no longer contested terrain less attention is given to it.

6

There are, actually, many factors worth mentioning in this connection that can be interpreted as determinants of macro-societal changes of childhood. Some of them are partly cultural - or if you like, part of a continued discourse about childhood. I have no figures to illustrate this, but I'm sure that a curve could be made about the rise of the numbers of professionals who are taking care of children in different ways. It is interesting that the time when the developments quoted above began, was also the time when the child professionals began to organise themselves - developmental psychology, child psychiatry, paediatrics and pedagogics for instance all had their founding conventions in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and as mentioned people began at this time to sentimentalise and sacralise children. "The association of childhood with primitivism and irrationalism or prelogicism characterises our contemporary concept of childhood. This concept made its appearance in Rousseau, but it belongs to twentieth-century history. It is only very recently that it passed from the theories of psychologists, pedagogues, psychiatrists and psycho-analysts into public opinion" (Ariès, 1962, p. 119). I would agree that this change in attitudes can be interpreted and analysed as a particular discourse which have contributed to constructing childhood in the minds of modern adults - contrary to a few centuries ago when, as Ariès says, "the ideas of innocence and reason were not opposed to one another" (loc.cit.). I would however add that in view of the massive involvement of such professionalism at all levels - from scientificisation of upbringing through manuals for parents over psychologisation of even ordinary problems to children's exposure to professional assistance in schools, child care institutions, libraries, theatres, media and other areas of child

culture - one can safely speak of a system which qualifies as an important societal parameter in forming the landscape of childhood. It is fine with me that researchers are interpreting children's own roles, reactions and contributions as actors on these arenas, but I believe that it is worthwhile also to understand the implications of the very system itself as a system of usurpation and exploitation and constraint as well as of new opportunities. In the French tradition this has been taken to task, indirectly by Foucault (1973) and directly by Meyer (1983) and Donzelot (1980), the latter talking about the psy-complex. In the UK it is worth mentioning David Oldman (1994) and his analysis of the particular interests of the child workers, as he calls those who are working gainfully with children and by that in his view exploiting children's labour force. We need in my view desperately more research about the framework within which children are playing, working, expressing themselves etc.

7

Let me return to the developments quoted above. It has been documented frequently in the last years by several authors that children as a population group are in greater danger of poverty than most other population groups (see for instance Preston, 1984; Rainwater and Smeeding, 1995; Ringen, 1997; Bradshaw, 1998; Sgritta, 1999). It is therefore very instructive to see Coleman's figures that inform us that this appears not to be a new development. The proportion of income which is at the disposal for children has become relatively smaller than that for adults. This information is highly relevant for policy makers, but it also forces researchers to ask about systematic factors to explain this development, which exposes children more than others. For while most other authors tend to connect the development with the crisis of the welfare state combined with the growing political power of the elderly, Coleman's figures cannot be explained in this way. In my view, there is though a demographic factor involved, but in combination with an ideological one.

The ideological factor is that children were and remain a private matter; it is parents' responsibility to provide for children; the state may or may not be supporting in terms of family or children's policy, while other adults, organisations etc. have no responsibility. This is the gist of the family ideology, which because of its legal underpinnings actually functions as a kind of macro-structure in a very concrete sense. The demographic factor is a consequence of both decreasing fertility and prolonged longevity, which produce much more households without children under their roof. In Denmark only 23 per cent of the total number are households with children, and given the family ideology the adults in these households are the only adults who must share their incomes with more than one or two persons, mainly children. More than three out of four households are thus allowed to use what they are earning for themselves. Since finally all children belong to a household in which the incomes must be shared between adults and children, but only one fourth of adults is in this position, it logically follows that the income of children relative to that of adults is bound to decrease.

This is a classical example of structural developments which nobody has wanted nor initiated deliberately; in several western countries - particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries - there are very high poverty rates for children (in the UK 33 per cent), and in most countries the risk for children to end up in poverty is higher than for any other group, even in countries which traditionally are committed to welfare states such as the Nordic countries. Although the Luxembourg income studies have shown that state interference is able to soften unmitigated market forces, for instance by lowering poverty rates considerably, a new study in the Nordic countries has shown that in Sweden in 1993 less than three per cent of all poor people were older than 65 years (a down from almost 20 percent in 1975), while one out of ten were children - a share which had been constant over the last two decades; particularly bad off were young people between 18 and 29, whose share of all poor had risen from 40 to more than 60 per cent

(Puide, 1996, p. 161). In Norway the picture was more or less the same: almost constant for children (and luckily also for young people), but a decrease in poverty among the elderly from 9 per cent to less than one per cent (ibid. p. 125).

The problems dealt with here belong to what is called economics or politics of childhood, which perhaps more than other orientations are interested in macro-structural factors impinging on children's life conditions. Unavoidably one is forced to think in terms of intergenerational questions and of different interests pertaining to various groups; it can hardly be denied that such interests must have effects on childhood, on whose behalf pressure groups are small and relatively weak. One thing is to study such direct economic and political measures as child allowances or children's institutions; as important but more hidden are factors that are politically decided or that are implemented in organisations or business-firms. If one stays with the public purse one may ask: who is defending children's interests? In my country, the ministry of social affairs is formally in charge of childhood policies. However, I contend, much more important for implications on children are such resort areas as traffic, labour, taxes, building and several other departments, because of what is decided without having children in mind.

An excellent example to demonstrate this is David Thomson's recent work (see Thomson, 1996a; 1996b). He is taking up a number of very important problems with far-reaching implications for children, but many of them are not from the outset seen as childhood problems. His conclusion is that since the Second World War, and especially during the last two decades wealth and fortunes have massively flown from the younger to the older generations; he is not completely sure how to explain this development, although he does not believe too much in ideas about demographic ageing, but rather in what he calls political ageing. By that he is thinking of a kind of not intended corrosion or metal fatigue of the welfare state. The pooling of resources, as the welfare state is embodying, has proved to be without much control, he ar-

gues. Now, leaving aside his explanations, it is interesting that he takes up topics which most childhood researchers would not have thought of. He is thus demonstrating that the tax system, as it has been developed, has an inbuilt generational bias. It was not only that tax relief given to parents of dependent children ended; also tax relief for interest payments on home mortgage payments have dwindled in value and been curtailed for new arrivals on the housing market; substantial tax relief for wages and salaries, but not for interests, rents, dividends and the like, have been abolished; there has been a lowering of the top marginal tax rates, a growing exemption from tax-paying of the self-employed and the companies. All these steps were not suggested as an assault on the younger age groups, who also happened to have children, but they worked out in this direction. In addition there was a move towards payroll taxes rather than general income taxes, and towards 'user charges' for public services, and as Thomson says, "governments have been much quicker to impose charges on higher education than on health services for older citizens for example" (Thomson, 1996b, p. 51). "The result has been a massive and historic redistribution of taxation, from the middle and later years towards the earlier, family-building ones" (loc.cit.).

Another example is the social security system, of which family benefits is a common issue, so I'll rather talk about the less familiar housing area. Thomson shows how well this was supported after the war in New Zealand. The result was that a medium-income family could buy a new, modest, 100 square meter bungalow by devoting 15 per cent of total net income to mortgage repayments in the first years of ownership. This share has now risen to 70 per cent since all schemes, grants and regulations were first cut, then scrapped. And, as he concludes, "in the last 25 years young adults have lived with their parents longer, married several years later, delaying having children, had many fewer of them, returned both parents to the paid workforce sooner, bought older, cheaper or

more dilapidated homes, and bought in groups rather than as couples" (see *ibid.* p. 52-54).

Finally, Thomson mentions in general terms the change in economic management, for instance the fact that "in the last 20 years full employment has been dropped as the central goal of western governments, in favour of maximal investor gains and consumer choice. It represents a stunning reversal of mid-century priorities, and the young lost badly from it" (*ibid.* p. 55).

What I want to indicate by quoting examples as those from David Thomson - and one could continue with the book by John O'Neill (1995) and his attack on liberalism, individualism, globalisation and duty-free market forces - is that there are scores and scores of topics to be explored in economy, business, politics, management, organisational structures etc. which has traditionally not been dealt with in terms of consequences for childhood, because they appear to be too far away from children. But they are not, simple because - as I suggested in my thesis - 'childhood is in principle exposed to the same societal forces as adulthood, but in a particular way'. So let's study children's language, creativity, responsiveness, but never forget that whatever they do, they do it within frameworks of childhood that have primarily been constructed and reconstructed by larger societal forces.

As I mentioned these macro-structures may be easier to grasp historically, but actually I believe that we are today in a much better position because we have in principle access to much more information. But we must in this case sometimes be bold enough to make the necessary intellectual detours; it is tempting to devote most of one's energy on the living children working, acting, playing, thinking etc., but one must always remember, that the whole architecture and landscape of childhood may be left to others to design and implement - others who did not for one moment think of it from the point of view of children. Not because they are hostile to children, but simply because childhood was not in their minds. I am not, of course, trying to impose a research programme

on anybody; I repeat that the action or agency perspective as well as discourse analyses are vitally important. What should be encouraged in my mind is a division of labour within childhood research so as to widen our understanding of a diversity of children's arenas and for coming to grips with the fact that childhood is produced by children and adults, by the family and the state, by the locality and the society, etc. This is trivial in a sense, but it is probably not by chance that in the grant we applied for recently in Denmark the whole part dealing with the economics of childhood was simply cut off. We did receive a considerable amount of money, but only a few appear to understand that societal macrostructures may add a lot to explaining children's life conditions; my intention was simply to remind you of this perspective.

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## Childhood Exclusion by Default

1

One of the merits of the new social studies of childhood is the import of childhood as a structural concept. For us who have taken part in this endeavour it makes a difference, whether we talk about childhood or children as excluded or integrated. We do not necessarily find it contradictory to claim on the one hand that children are integrated, while on the other hand childhood is excluded. Indeed, it seems to be a widely held view that children, in the course of this century of the child, have been met with more attention and understanding from those responsible for them, such as their parents, teachers and other caretakers; also the rhetoric has become more obliging to children and it is culturally unacceptable not to support and promote ideas about children's happy and healthy life conditions. In this sense children are embraced and protected more than ever. To all those who are sincerely caring for children it would be insulting to suggest that children were not integrated in their family and community, since everything possible is done to achieve this.

Yet, it does give a great deal of meaning at the same time to hold the view, that childhood may be an excluded component of society. The notion 'excluded' needs qualification, but it would at least not be too daring to suggest that childhood is experiencing predicaments - both quantitatively and qualitatively. As I said, this is no contradiction, but it is certainly a paradox. It is a paradox that most, if not all, adults - especially in a democratic society in which these adults are said to be the true sovereign - wish the best of all worlds for the children they care for, while simultaneously childhood is slighted.

What is the problem? There is likely not to be merely one problem, but one of the important ones is that while our societies as a whole have experienced an enormous centrifugal expansion in the sense that traditional communities have been

split up, we have sought to keep children outside this flood, both symbolically and practically. Although it is true that children as well as their parents in large numbers are evacuating the home to spend their day time in other settings, the fact is that nothing has basically changed as to the responsibility for children, which in principle remains as private as ever.

Is this wrong? No, from a moral point of view I personally believe this is as it should be, but my personal view is not so interesting. The problem is rather that there no longer seems to be a fit between the reality of childhood and modern economic and political organisation. If children previously were part of and indeed integrated in what the Greek called *oikos* - the prevailing and dominant economic organisation - this is no longer seen to be the case. *Oikos* means house and economy at the same time, because the household was the economic unit at the time; it was a broad concept which encompassed "the totality of human relations and activities in the house, the relation between man and wife, parents and children, master and servants and the implementation of all tasks" (Brunner, 1978, p. 83). Our modern *oikos* is equivalent to the old one in the sense that both presupposes a division of labour and the production and distribution of goods and services; the phrase 'societal household' is a remnant of it. But there are also important differences, in our context first of all because parents are now as individuals taking part in the modern economy without seeing their activities as connected, while children are apparently totally outside our modern *oikos*; children are in this sense literally speaking excluded as actors and claimants. In the wider sense, given the sole responsibility of parents for them, children are also largely morally excluded from the modern *oikos*. The German sociologist Kaufmann (1990 and 1996) has captured this in his theses about a structural disregard and structural indifference towards children on the side of modern economy and society, not necessarily in the strong meaning of behaving irresponsibly, but in the sense of being exempt from responsibility. In

end effect this means sociologically that there is no more an obliging mutuality and reciprocity between children and adults, merely between children and their parents.

If we are to use Ariès' insight (Ariès, 1962), it follows that childhood did not exist under the early oikos, ironically enough at a time when children were recognised as active persons and full participants with expectations and claims. Under the modern oikos children are not left completely without expectations to them (schooling is the best example), but they have no legal claims on society, because their obligatory activities are not understood as having a worth. They belong from an economic point of view to the house or household, which in modern time has little to do with the economy understood as the national economy, but is rather the equivalent to the family. While children in other words were integrated in the oikos at a time when childhood did not exist, it is now - as childhood has been invented - children's lot and role to be excluded from the economy, which eventually has become a privileged adult domain.

2

Does this mean that children/childhood in reality is outside society? No, but our impression that this is the case is due to an historical faux pas, which it obliges the new social studies of childhood to make intelligible by means of historical and structural approaches, which is one of the new paradigm's two main pillars.

We are already witnessing and welcoming important strands within these new studies - and this is the other pillar - seeking to rehabilitate children, their agency and subjectivity; the settings in which these studies take place are however typically restricted to small scale arenas, be it in child care centres, schools, playgrounds or restricted areas in towns and rural areas. Much has already been achieved in demonstrating children's ingenuity, creativity and strategies, and these studies must continue because they greatly help to convince adults in general of children's competencies and capacities

and to conquer myths to the opposite effect. If, however, these strands are becoming relatively unrivalled approaches to childhood studies, as one may fear given the nature of interest announced, we will in the end be badly missing perspectives and information about broader contexts within which children's agency takes place. Indeed, we may risk consolidating the impression of exclusion and isolation of children if the limits, constraints and opportunities provided by the larger frameworks within which also children live are left unaccounted for. One can understand the temptation to dive into the exciting and colourful activities of children to demonstrate their skills, but I warn against any belief that children's - as little as adults' - life worlds can be dealt with in a void. A too one-sided focus on children's own worlds and their agency in their own right - as important it is - may well make us blind to factors outside their small scale life worlds and thus make us forget about the much more powerful circumstances surrounding all of us; it may unduly exaggerate differences among children and thus in the end deprive us of analytical tools for manipulating variables which are important for changing factors which may prove decisive for the collectivity of children; the latter programme demands that we look for similarities, which will also and in particular be useful for the political level.

So, I would say that these studies successfully document children as actors within their small scale territories; they do in a sense contribute to showing that children are integrated in and sometime excluded from these small worlds, whereas the question of childhood's position in the larger structures of society is unaddressed. An analysis of this question demands that childhood research is taken out of the playroom, so to say; it demands our attention to units, factors, variables which perhaps at first glance has nothing to do with childhood; we can in other words not afford to assume that childhood is not a part of the larger society or that children are provisionally strangers. It is not merely an example of the famous false consciousness in the sense that the prevailing

view holds that children should neither be seen as or actually be a part of the modern oikos, or as James Garbarino (1986) said ten years ago: children should be shielded against economic and political forces, while the particularistic is maximised and the universalistic is minimised; it is also a result of our protecting and caring mood that children are sought kept away from an alleged dangerous world. The problem is however if childhood can be kept outside discursively; perhaps are these discourses rather adding to and consolidating a particular form predicated on ideas about the child.

3

How can we substantiate a claim that childhood is an integrated part of society against ideological hopes and perhaps an empirical reality that it is excluded or marginalised in a number of important respects? In addition to what small scale studies tend to do, I think we have to minimise the differences between children and maximise the similarities - not as a moral goal or a theoretical principle but rather as a methodological device. We have in other words to focus on childhood as a social form and to accept that childhood has changed, has another position, is impacted by different parameters, assumes a different format, as the oikos changes; of course its metamorphosis has had many stages and so has childhood, but let us make it simple and hopefully more pedagogical by staying with the pure forms.

I think this was what both Philippe Ariès and Ruth Benedict accepted. Ariès (1982) when he said that scholarisation was one of the main vehicles in producing childhood historically and that - as schools gained ground - a long process of segregation, of isolation and of delivering children to rationality began, which has continued into our own day; and Benedict when she 60 years ago said that "From a comparative point of view our culture goes to the extremes in emphasizing contrasts between the child and the adult. The child is sexless, the adult estimates his virility by his sexual activities; the child must be protected from the ugly facts of life, the adult

must meet them without psychic catastrophe; the child must obey, the adult must command this obedience: These are all dogmas of our culture, dogmas which, in spite of the facts of nature, other cultures commonly do not share. In spite of the physiological contrasts between child and adult, these are cultural accretions" (Benedict, 1955 [1938], p. 21-22).

Both Ariès and Benedict are maximising similarities between children and of course overlooking innumerable differences between them, which does not mean that they were unaware of them, but they had another story to tell, a story which aimed at understanding the main contours of a changing childhood. Also, it did not mean that they lost points of reference, because both more or less explicitly they compared childhoods historically or interculturally; they did not think of any transition of the child into an adult, but of the transformation of childhood as the society and the oikos changed, and by that they also indicated a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood. Their comparative macro-units were in other words different societal formations and their respective socio-economic parameters. Although several righteous and fussy historians have attempted to kill Ariès by showing - probably correctly - that he failed to take on board a lot of differences between families and children, they are likely to soon end up in oblivion, while Ariès survives because he had a fruitful methodological point.

In other words: to come to terms with childhood as a social form is to ascertain its main contours while maximising what is common for children in a given society; for doing so comparative perspectives are helpful tools - be they historical, intercultural or intergenerational.

4

How do we apply this insight on contemporary society? I am afraid that we cannot do it directly; we have to sharpen our awareness about the macro-units and the parameters which define them. All research - at all levels - needs a comparative point of reference; this is true for small scale research study-

ing relations among children and between children and adults, and this is true for macroresearch, which endeavours to study societies, or childhoods as generalised life worlds of children within a macro context.

The question is of course: which factors are the more powerful ones in forming society and childhood? At one abstract level the answer is, that this factor is the oikos. There is always an historical continuity in a changing oikos, but the oikos remains; if we compare early with recent socio-economic formations, they differ by childhood, if we are to believe Ariès; they also differ by a lot of other things such as schools, cities, sewerage, telecommunications etc. The absence or presence of such phenomena are pressing towards conformity and similarity within each oikos or formation, but also towards variation between them. The most powerful force behind any value of such variables or any constellation and correlation between them is - hardly a surprise - the economic formation or the present stage of oikos. It determines largely both the scores on a number of indicators, and the meaning of them in our interpretation.

The strong co-variation between indicators is evident if you look into for instance UNICEF's yearly *The State of the World's Children*. Depending on level of modernity or economic development countries are clustering around a set of highly predictable values of survival indicators in a very systematic way; I am therefore surprised that James, Jenks and Prout (1998) in their inspiring and well-informed book are drawing another conclusion. They say, while quoting exactly this year-book but also many other sources, that "in sum, what these accounts point to is that it is quite misleading to think about childhood in the developing world as homogeneous" (p. 130), and a bit later that "... it is the specificity of childhoods which emerges as a predominant theme through comparative analysis" (p. 132). I would have drawn exactly the opposite conclusion. It is of course true, that lots of differences can be observed, but in my view these within-differences wane to the advantage of relative similarities if third world childhoods are

compared with first world childhoods. Unless one is prepared to deny that strong economic forces are largely determining disparities between rich and poor countries, one is forced to suggest that a number of similar causes are pressing towards conformity in life conditions within each group of nations. It is therefore also plausible, that these parameters are promising explanatory factors for understanding the life worlds of children - both in terms of similarities within each group of nations and in terms of differences between these groups.

5

Now, having argued for the importance of comparative analysis for identifying our explanatory factors, we can proceed to our own modern world and stay there for the rest of the time. What we must bring with us from our comparative adventure is a sharpened awareness for what are the most relevant factors, which can not so easily and clearly be discerned if we are too close to our research object. We must have distance, whether in terms of comparative analysis or in terms of theoretical abstraction.

What is determining childhood in modern societies? If we seek to identify a few salient trends, which again presupposes a historical comparison, at least five emerge (see Wintersberger, 1997):

a) a demographic trend - childhood has in numerical terms become relatively much smaller - i.e. children have become relatively fewer due to a declined inclination by adults to have children and a longer life expectancy; b) a family trend - childhood has changed in stability due to a greater risk of being involved in pluralisation of family forms; c) an institutionalisation trend - childhood has become more and more institutionalised and organised; d) an economic trend - childhood is more exposed to risks of becoming relatively poor; e) a legal and/or ideological trend - children's chances of obtaining subject- or individual status have increased.

Apart from the fifth and last trend, none of them were as such prompted with childhood in mind; and in addition, al-

though some of their consequences can be studied in small scale studies with children, neither their shape nor their causes could be revealed without having recourse to macro-research. For explaining even these trends we must dig still deeper to find forces lying behind, such as industrialisation, capitalist development, individualisation, employment of eventually both parents outside the home and so on. Important to note is obviously that these trends seem to apply to most developed nations, and thus demonstrate the pressure towards conformity and towards within group similarity. With a lot of variations of course, but this does not detract from its validity in general terms, which is best perceived in historical or intercultural comparisons.

6

I am afraid that time does not allow me to comment much on each of the trends, which by the way are well known. I would like to spare some time to take up a last kind of comparison, which in my view is decisive for any childhood research, namely comparison between generations. The concept of generation is of fundamental importance, because it for the study of childhood assumes the same theoretical status as the concept of class does in accounting for social inequality, gender for patriarchal domination, and ethnicity for alerting us to racial and cultural discrimination. In these research - and political - areas, it is obviously both possible and relevant to study within-group relations, such as connections between different groups of workers, women and relations within or between one or more ethnic groups. These approaches, important as they are, do however fail to address and cross boundaries of dominance, and thus fail to elucidate structural reasons for inequality and discrimination between classes, sexes, and ethnic groups, i.e. to study the respective group's relation to its corresponding dominance group; indeed it is the strength of these categories to do exactly this. So, I believe, is the case also in generational studies, in which childhood assumes status of being a dominated category, whi-

le its dominance category is adulthood. Only if we seek the quintessential differences between childhood and adulthood we can hope to identify factors important enough to manipulate to the advantage of the collectivity of childhood.

To the extent it can be made plausible, that childhood is discriminated against - positively or negatively - in terms of resources and privileges, there is a basis for changing the reality. The category childhood is thus thought to be strong enough in its assertive power to assume that defining characteristics of sub-groups of children are secondary to the categorical status of childhood as such. In analogy, if patriarchy is strong enough as a theory about male dominance, it does not weaken this theory that a number of women are not objectively or do not subjectively see themselves as dominated; if the theory of class is sound, it is not rendered invalid if some working class members enjoy different life conditions than others; and ethnic discrimination remains theoretically plausible even if some differences within ethnic groups can be ascertained.

7

Now, following my argument from above, although different groups in a given society are exposed to in principle the same external factors, because they live in the same country, they are not necessarily impacted in the same way or equally strong, indeed they are for a number of reasons likely to be influenced differently, due for instance to the differential position they enjoy, such as class, gender, ethnicity and generation.

It is clear that children, as other social groups, historically have benefited from and been enjoying the fruits of welfare developments in modernity. Yet, it is much less clear if they have kept pace with other groups, if we look at it from a generational perspective, i.e. to which extent have children achieved shares of resources in the same measure as other components of society, such as for instance adults and the elderly. We have barely data which convincingly document

this question historically (see though Coleman, 1990; also Caldwell, 1982); and even today it is uncommon to find information about generational distribution of resources (see Ringen, 1996; Rainwater and Smeeding, 1995; Bradshaw, 1998; Ditch et al., 1998).

One reason for this lacunae is the fact that childhood so far has been denied its categorical status. Children have not been allowed to be defined in terms of variables pertaining to themselves; despite recent improvements (see Jensen and Saporiti, 1992; Qvortrup, 1990&1997) they are for instance seldom dealt with as statistical units of observation, i.e. they have been part of the family, and as family variation is typically tailored on socio-economic indicators pertaining to adults' characteristics in terms of class or stratification variables, children have been insufficiently accounted for and nothing is said about intergenerational cleavages.

The main question is if generations are sufficiently distinct so as to make intergenerational comparison relevant. As I have said before, it is immaterial if results in the end prove to be to the advantage or disadvantage for any of the generations; what counts is merely if we are better informed by adopting a generational view than without it. As I see it, childhood is a distinct category or social form in several respects, whereby I am implicitly defining other generations; I will mention only a few.

It is distinct in a regulative sense: children are without exception - and per definition - legal minors, whereas everyone, who is not, is an adult. From this law one can derive a number of others, although the age breaks for obtaining particular rights are not always the same, such as criminal or sexual minority. It is nevertheless indisputable, that legal regulations vary systematically with age, and in most countries persons, who have reached the age of 18, are entitled to enjoy all rights of person.

A universal rule, but not quite as strong as the majority regulation, is children's duty to receive education. It is less strong in the sense that its implementation varies from coun-

try to country in more respects. This is though less important than the empirical fact that practically all children are enrolled in schools for many years; the duration varies in Europe from 9-10 years - and historically the number of years have everywhere increased. The formative power of schooling thus is presumably one of the most forceful ones, and one which more decisive than others distinguishes children from other generations.

Children's high risk of poverty has been documented both historically and as a current problem on several occasions during the last one or two decades (cf Bradshaw, 1998). The generational profile of poverty makes it reasonable to speak of pauperisation of childhood (Jensen, 1994). In this sense, childhood seems to be more vulnerable than other generations, not only economically, but also politically: children do not, neither as individuals nor as a collectivity, possess rights or powers to ensure distributive justice.

Similarly, children's access to and enjoyment of the environment is limited compared with that of adults, in particular in urban areas, the shape of which is largely determined by economic interests. By giving supremacy to the idea and practice of protecting children in all imaginable areas and ways, one is justifying a solicitous mood, irrespective of its encroachments on other wishes children might have, for instance a desire for making new experience on their own. In increasingly more dominant urban environments, children's life worlds are squeezed, their degrees of freedom reduced and their opportunities for autonomous explorations more and more beyond their reach.

Finally, the normative and ideological views of children are very powerful; to the extent that they are internalised in adults and accepted as truths they eventually assume a power which hardly falls short of the material and concrete influences of the economy and the built environment.

8

As I said in the beginning, childhood can be seen both as ex-

cluded and integrated. As I have shown, childhood is excluded, marginalised - or as I prefer: differs distinctively from adulthood - both legally and normatively and empirically in terms of differential access to resources and privileges. It is however important to stress that childhood is also an integrated component of society, although this is typically overlooked.

In the first place childhood is an imperative component of any society in the trivial sense of its presence; even now as it has quantitatively been reduced it can not be rejected and one cannot deny the unavoidable interactions between generations; children are not merely potentials, they exert an influence on adults wherever they are and also as a collectivity they leave their imprint.

More importantly perhaps, they are contributors to any society in which they live. Children's activities should be appreciated not merely in their small scale interactions with peers and parents, but they have a role in the socio-economic process as well. As I have sought to demonstrate elsewhere, children's shift historically from classical child labour to school work was a logical shift which was predicated on the change in the oikos. Exactly as children were useful with their hands in an economic formation in which manual labour dominated, children remain useful with mental activities as the oikos changes into one dominated by planning, calculation, desk work and symbols. Historically, children have always been asked to take part in the kind of activities which is dominant in the respective mode of production; thus in our present economic formation, their school activities has - and must have - a logical correspondence with the dominant nature of work in this formation. Children therefore are active contributors to human capital formation, and it is important to stress that their school work is necessarily useful also while it takes place; indeed, if children did not do this school work, society would soon cease to function. This is briefly the way in which children are also economically an integrated part of society. Vis-à-vis this reality of being an integrated part in even our present oikos, children can then be said to be excluded in

two ways: firstly to the extent that their work is not recognised as a valuable input into our economy in terms of reciprocity or exchange value, their status as legitimate claimants is not acknowledged. Instead children and their parents are left with the unenviable risk of suffering relative economic hardships, and still worse: under the pretext that they are finally at the receiving end considering the investments the society makes in them - as if they stood outside society. Secondly, they are excluded by being expelled out of the oikos in the sense that merely those manual activities as children conduct after their real, system-immanent work in school are recognised. This kind of anachronism confirms, perhaps unwittingly, the pre-sociological and traditional psychological picture of them as waiting for the door to be opened to the serious business of life.

This lack of recognition on the part of culture and society thus adds to other signs of exclusion; the familiarisation of responsibilities inclusive the economic one has historically exposed children and their families to greater risks of economic hardship, which is likely to have become a disincentive to have children and thus have left us with a society in which children are becoming relatively fewer. In the end this may even jeopardise social cohesion for instance in terms of threatening our potentials to finance pensioners in the long run.

You may have wondered why I have called my paper 'exclusion by default'? It was briefly indicated in my opening words about contradictions and paradoxes. It is a problems which needs more reflection, I guess. However, the point is that if children fare ill or experience discrimination it is not due to bad will, nor to any conspiracy on the side of adults. Rather it is the result of a combination of insufficient analysis and competing priorities. Nobody wishes children to be poor and everyone would undersign the demand that children are given the opportunity to explore and make new experiences in their environment. If the opposite occurs, as it unfortunately does, we have to ask about other interests. The demands accruing

from modernity's desire for productivity and mobility; individualistic claims for education and consequently for using the achieved potentials in the labour market, strong economic interests in colonising urban areas, etc. Such interests may be more or less legitimate and many of them have certainly been fought for with strong support in the population. However children were hardly seen as a part of these political or economic equations; they were defined out of our modern oikos and left to the responsibility of parents; even this was interpreted as morally right and the child sciences were supportive of keeping children outside the society. But the consequences of this cultural trends towards privatising the child are, irrespective all good wills and intentions behind it, paid for by children themselves or at the cost of childhood. The paradox in our popular imagery therefore appears to be that while the child is priceless, childhood is a nuisance.

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## Working Papers

The publications can be collected or ordered at the Department of Contemporary Cultural Studies as long as editions are available.

1. Jørn Guldborg: Tradition, modernitet og usamtidighed. Om Børge Mogensens FDB-møbler og det modernes hjemliggørelse (not available).
2. Flemming Mouritsen: Child Culture - Play Culture
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