

## *Foreword*

### *“Marginality and voice”. Children and childhood studies in Italy*

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#### **Children and childhood studies**

In his work acknowledging the development of childhood sociology in ten different countries, Bühler-Niederberger (2010) identified at least two fundamental characteristics which are common to the different national directions of research. The key trait regarded the fact that “children constitute a more or less marginalized group”. Children are still barely considered social actors who are able to express their own viewpoints and to participate in the public decisions which concern them directly. The second trait was the dependence of scientific research connected to children upon the interests of specific public policies. Such policies aim at financing cognitive activities only in conformity with precise and demanding social emergencies, for example drop-outs or juvenile delinquency, or connected to specific social groups risking exclusion (for example migrant children or poor children). This kind of choices nurture the general tendency, which is visible in the public discourses and in the scientific research, to view children only as offenders or as endangered individuals and victims. As a consequence, this approach renders invisible children’s ‘normal’ daily life and their contribution to its formation, production and reproduction.

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This synthesis mirrors the situation of sociology of childhood in Italy. In fact, I believe that it has not significantly evolved in the meantime, attempting to overcome what looks like a real ‘trap’, especially at present, when public funds for research – either conducted in an academic setting or not – have been considerably cut down because of the prolonged economic and financial crisis in the world. Of course, some research and publications on children’s daily life have emerged in the last few years, yet this particular research and analysis topic has difficulties in imposing itself in the array of interests, in public policies as well as in the scientific field. Several reviews on the Italian evolution of this discipline have already been done (Baraldi, 2010; Belotti, 2010; Satta, 2012) and everybody agrees upon ranking this research focus as still marginal, especially in regard to the situation in other European countries.

Of course, the ‘new’ sociology of childhood, as it is often called, does neither overlap nor cover childhood studies entirely. Yet, the revival of a particular attention towards children and their daily lives in the last decades is, to a great extent, due to the discovery of children by a branch of sociology which had completely forgotten and even ‘mishandled’ (Corsaro, 1997) them, in its long tradition. This revival has the merit of stimulating other renewals which gradually interested not only pedagogy but also anthropology, psychology, history, geography, to quote but a few. The links, or sometimes the mere connections, established between different scientific disciplines succeeded in highlighting the necessity to create a new area of interdisciplinary studies, as childhood studies are defined, with its own formative courses, which, as Thorne (2007) points out, have become acknowledged even at an academic level.

The basic assumptions underlying the new discipline have often been repeated in the studies conducted in this field and may be summed up in a few key concepts: children are social actors; the relations between the generations, especially those between adults and children, are characterized by an unequal distribution of resources; childhood is a social construction endlessly elaborated with reference to time, space, gender, culture, social class, ...; childhood is a structural component of the society; the ethical dimension, the listening, the viewpoint and children’s and teenagers’ citizenship are aspects to be considered and to be included in the practices regarding the welfare policies as well as in the practices of scientific research.

By now, there are numerous authors and publications focusing on the analysis of either the shifts in the sociological domain or the birth of childhood studies. A review of these shifts would be out of place in this editorial and also not very original, if we take into account the varied

contributions on this topic which represent the current scientific references available. Instead, it is more useful to dwell on those studies representing critical points and landmarks in the evolution of this 'new' scientific domain, after twenty years of studies and research that aimed to legitimate its existence.

A first critical aspect lies precisely in the interdisciplinary character. This is more often invoked than understood and even the publications taken as references at the international level appear more as a package of contributions of various authors belonging to various disciplines than as a real combination of new data. The majority of the studies conducted in the area of childhood studies are more multi-disciplinary than interdisciplinary. This does not mean that the gathering of contributions from different backgrounds is useless or inefficient, but it is undoubtedly still only a first step towards achieving a creative and efficient dialogue between the disciplines. An example of this relative incompleteness is the monographic number of the present scientific journal, in which the term 'childhood studies' represents, more than everything else, a container and an opportunity to bring together, for the first time in this place, interesting papers which belong to different disciplinary fields but have a common topic: children and childhood.

A second element for reflection regards the very core of these new studies, in other words the voice of the children or, more precisely, the methods and the modes used by researchers in order to represent children's voices, the "place" held by children in these knowledge products. Spyrou (2011) proposes a critical reflection on this subject, drawing attention to the different modes in which children's voices are gathered and represented, to the social, cultural and institutional contexts in which they are produced and to the power differentials between children and adults or researchers which characterize these modes. Such critical caution ought to be shown also in regard to the processes of analysis of these voices. To give voice to children's voices: "this is not in and of itself sufficient to ensure that children's voices and views are heard. [...]. That is to say, giving voice to children is not simply or only about letting children speak; it is about exploring the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives can provide" (James, 2007: 262). In her synthesis of the reflections developed during the last years on this topic, James identifies three different arguments and dilemmas: the authenticity of the gathered "voices"; the lessening complexity and differences between children, which may cause too much unilateral attention towards children's voices; finally, the role of children

themselves in the processes of production, distribution and consumption of these voices (Belotti 2012).

“It is timely to consider a more global approach to childhood studies”, Tisdall and Punch (2012: 243) say, arguing for another aspect which has characterized until today the development of the research on children and on their daily lives. Undoubtedly, such recent studies have addressed children living in the so-called Minority World with the unforeseen result of favouring an homogenous and standardized understanding of the condition of childhood experienced in the Majority World. In particular, as concerns the varied forms and conditions of expression of children’s and teenagers’ agency. Currently, children living in the poorest countries have daily lives which are clearly different from those of their age-mates living in richer regions of the world. We might think, for example, of the thought-provoking sociocultural studies conducted by Rogoff (2003) who, within the socio-cultural paradigm, has the merit of highlighting experiences and representations of childhood which are entirely different to the Western ones, especially in regard to the individual, familial and collective assumptions of responsibility. We might also think of the various experiences of working children (Mizen, Pole and Burton, 2001) which, in some southern states of the world, cannot be labelled as forms of work exploitation and which, for a long time, have been little understood by the great international organizations of the United Nations (Unicef, Ilo), which are sometimes so rigorous with the compliance to or the interpretation of the principles of the international Conventions on the protection and the promotion of childhood. The latter ones attempt, in turn, to institutionalize a specific and unique form of childhood all over the world (Bentley, 2005; Wells, 2009). The necessity to ask oneself about the connections between research works conducted in different countries belonging to the Minority World and the Majority World also evokes the utility of expanding, if not even setting in a transnational frame, the analyses addressed to children who are involved in the migratory process in various forms (Punch, 2012).

The observations on the characterizations and the development of childhood studies bring forth the need to support the critical revision of a evolution which is so fertile, interesting and coherent. In the short excerpt from James, quoted above, it is visible how the “new” research field does not require today the umpteenth attempt to demonstrate the existence of children’s agency, but research and elaboration works allowing greater attention and the thematization, even theoretical, of the links between different micro- and macro-levels of analysis in which the agency of the subjects (not only of children) is expressed. It is necessary to pay attention to the contributions brought by the works produced in Southern countries in

order to revive a field which is probably overly dominated by a social constructionist perspective on the one hand and by a perspective closely related to the carrying out of the individual rights viewed as universal on the other. Two major perspectives that risk backgrounding “the potential of notions of relations, relationships, and reciprocity: a focus on relationships can shed light on the complexities and interconnections of childhoods in a globalizing world” (Tisdall and Punch, 2012: 260).

Such a possible rearrangement of the theoretical and methodological assets of childhood studies is accompanied by a reflection aiming to regain the critical dimension and directed towards the institutional knowledge which had distinguished the birth and the recognition of childhood studies. Not only towards the academic knowledge, but also towards the culture informing the welfare policies for children, for adult representations of children and of their culture, for the nature of social, cultural, and power dimensions characteristic for the relations between generations. Alanen (2011) claims that all the aspects and the innovative results obtained in the last years (also at the methodological and methods level, besides research ethics) should be thought over again in order to revive this critical function which, besides covering “the ‘real’ world of children and childhood”, should be of interest for very childhood studies, which question links between the relevance of the scientific questions and the research practices and the positive effects which the children may enjoy from all this in terms of their welfare.

### **Families, women, children**

In spite of the necessary exceptions, if we examine the study programmes of the courses in family sociology and education sociology offered today by various Italian universities, the child – as Sirota (2008) noted with reference to the situation in France – appears as a ‘ghost’, viewed as an object of mandatory care by family sociology and as the last student to recover by education sociology, or an ‘object’ crushed by the transformation of the educational institutions and by the effects of globalization on the schooling processes. Reiterating the observations made by Thorne (1987), which are still current, one might say that these knowledge prospects are still marked by a strong adultcentrism or, better said, characterized by an approach in which children’s experiences are considered and filtered through the adults’ preoccupations. In this way, children are seen, from time to time, as a threat or an inconvenience, if they

protest or are deviant; as victims, if they are the object of the adults' possession; as 'students of the adult culture' in the socialization processes.

As I have already argued elsewhere (Belotti, 2010), some of the first studies made in Italy and connected to the international movement of childhood studies are due to researchers of juridical sociology and not to those of education sociology or family sociology, or to researchers belonging to the feminist movement, as it might have been expected and as it happened in other countries such as the United Kingdom and France (Mayall, 2012; Sirota, 2006).

In Italy, albeit with some exceptions connected to the topics of very small children and of socioeducational services for the first childhood, the great debate around carework and women's condition has generated scarce attention to sons and children as subjects of the carework itself, not to say children as social actors. As if the connotation of the general perspective adopted in these studies had partially obscured the possibilities of interconnections and of mutual vitality that could have emerged with the inclusion of a generational perspective.

Nevertheless, the European processes of intensifying the politicisation of childhood in the last two decades lead us to a long trajectory of renegotiating the boundaries between public and private, which is so central in the debate of carework; a track that, even maintaining different profiles in different countries, has managed to redesign new scripts, familial roles and expectations (Leira, Saraceno, 2008). These processes have affected Italy only lightly, so it is still necessary to think and produce welfare policies marked both by an acknowledgement of the carework made by women and by the full citizenship of children. It would be interesting to make a closer investigation on how the affirmation of a new institutional attention in Italy towards family policies – clearly more stated than practiced – might also be the result of suffering and of indifference for equity issues in the national welfare raised by movements for women and for the children's rights.

Within this frame, characterized more by absences than by proposals, it appeared to be necessary to dedicate one issue of this magazine to the research on children. It cannot be said that the contributions published here, as well as those that will be published in a future number, adopt the perspective of childhood studies in a unitary way. As mentioned before, our proposal offers a space in which to highlight the necessity of assuming, in the studies on family, a perspective connected to children and above all to the study of their relationships. In other words, by paying attention to and showing interest in the various scientific contributions which hopefully one

day may lead to the opening in Italy of a research space which is not only multidisciplinary, but also interdisciplinary.

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