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CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDHOOD

INTRODUCTION: A KALEIDOSCOPE OF REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILDHOOD

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Reconceived as a 'child of desire' (Gauchet, 2004) and as a rare and precious being, the contemporary concept of child has been a focus of intense and passionate debate in recent decades (Gavarini, 2001). Over the past thirty years, there has been a silent revolution in the representation of children. From the notion of 'birth without violence' to the emergence of the 'right to be born a normal child', and against the grain of the traditional conception of the child as a 'being-in-becoming', children have come to be seen as individuals in 'constant progress' or 'development' (Gavarini, Lebrun & Petitot, 2011).

Whether it be the child-king, the child-victim, the child 'as pupil', or simply the 'child' as the source or producer of a culture specific to children and childhood (Arléo & Delalande, 2011), the object 'child' has become a major focus of research and media attention, with the media showing an unprecedented interest in popularizing recent research findings on children (Sirota, 2010).

In academic research, the current sociology of childhood partly overlaps with the field known as 'childhood studies', a relatively new area that emerged in the 1990s to become a major field of study in Anglo-American research. Fields know as 'studies' generally combine pure and theoretical research with a focus on practice and action, encouraging researchers, practitioners, politicians and even activists to engage in collaborative work. In France, the complex and relatively new field of 'childhood studies' is still relatively unstructured and is currently based on an interdisciplinary and holistic approach to childhood involving anthropology, economics, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, medicine, law, education, art and literature (Allison & Adrian, 2008).

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In the media, the main areas of interest are:

– The notion of the child-king or child-victim – the two sides of the current interest in children and childhood;

– The issue of whether education should be child-centered or knowledge-based. One major focus of recent media attention has been the tribal war between 'pedagogues' and 'republicans', with both camps claiming to continue the Condorcet tradition;

– The issue of whether to promote the liberation of children or the authority of adults in order to remedy the current educational crisis;

– The issue as to whether childhood is in danger, or indeed whether children themselves are dangerous. The fears of western societies have redefined the conceptions and boundaries of childhood (Sirota, 2010).

This study provides a brief overview of some of the new paradigms of childhood.

> *'Where does childhood start and end? To include the embryo, the fetus, the baby, the infant, the child, the pre-adolescent, the adolescent, the post-adolescent, and the young person under the same common status immediately implies an intellectual inspection'* (Sirota, 2006)

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IS THERE SUCH A THING AS 'CHILDHOOD'? THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF CHILDHOOD

THE BIRTH OF THE CHILD

Representations of childhood in the West have been predominantly shaped by the **eighteenth-century.** From the outset, the writings of philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau sparked much debate and were widely popularized, becoming a matter of great interest to educationalists and families alike. According to Locke, whose writings on education have been widely published and translated over the past three centuries (most notably his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690, and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, published in 1693), children are travelers who have arrived in a foreign land about which they know nothing. Their radical alterity comes from their lack of knowledge and moral sense. As such, children have everything to learn from adults. Another key Lockean concept is the idea of **the child as a 'blank slate'** (Locke, quoted by Archard, 2004), which, in addition to implying that children have no innate ideas, also foreshadows the 'modern' conception of childhood based on a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood (Archard, 2004). Locke was partly the inspiration of Rousseau's *Emile*, a widely read text that has been extensively studied and debated since it first appeared in 1762. It is to Locke that we owe our modern idea of the child as a minor. However, as with Descartes, Locke's

is a negative conception of childhood. In Lockean philosophy, childhood is the age of ignorance, errors and confusion, and adults therefore play a vital role in child development and education (Youf, 2002). The notion of child culture as 'a transitional culture, since every human being adopts it for part of their life before moving on from it when they leave childhood' implies a view of childhood as a period of life (Arléo & Delalande, 2011).

Where Locke and Rousseau diverge is in their conception of childhood. For Locke, childhood means being vulnerable and under the protection of adults, while for Rousseau a child is an incomplete (or unfinished) being who is nonetheless capable of thinking and willing (Rousseau insisted on the need 'to consider the man in the man and the child in the child'). However, 'today, we hold both conceptions' proposed by Locke and Rousseau, who, 'by positing the idea of the democratic man, made the notion of the rights of the child philosophically possible' (Youf, 2002).

'We know nothing of child-hood; and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray. The wisest writers devote them-selves to what a man ought to know, without asking what a child is capable of learning. They are always looking for the man in the child, without considering what he is before he becomes a man' . (quoted from http://www.philosophy-index.com/rousseau/emile/preface.php Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762). *Emile ou de l'éducation* translated by Barbara Foxley).

Regardless of country or discipline, researchers have invariably praised the pioneering work of the French historian Philippe Ariès, although his terminology and some of his arguments are a matter of debate (Schmitt, 1993, Gros 2010). His modern take on the evolution of attitudes toward children, as a group increasingly less threatened by mortality and more widely recognized as unique individuals, encapsulated in the phrase 'the sense of childhood', emphasizes the absence of conceptual or theoretical framework for defining childhood in the Ancien Régime (Archard, 2004) and accounts for the emergence of early (precocious) parental attachment (Sirota, 2010, Archard 2004, Postman, 1982). Ariès also demonstrated the key role of institutions (such as schools) in the emergence of the modern concept of childhood. According to the British scholar Alan Prout, childhood is a social construct. In his view, there are only 'storytellers of childhood' (Prout, 1990, 2005).

Postman (1982) argued that childhood is a social rather than a biological phenomenon, lasting from 7 to 17 – in other words, from learning how to speak to learning how to write, and more generally a period corresponding to the age of schooling. The concept of childhood emerged with the birth of printing, which contributed to establishing the distinction between the knowledge of adults and the knowledge of children. Before printing, children were seen as miniature adults. After Gutenberg, children come to be seen as 'unformed' adults. As a result of these developments, schools were entrusted with the responsibility of introducing children to the literate world of adults (Postman, 1982).

Foucault demonstrated the significant impact of the new classification systems that emerged in the eighteenth century and that could be applied to society, whether in an educational or prison context. Turmel (2008) referred to the work of Condorcet (see *Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des Progrès de l'Esprit Humain*) and Leibniz on statistics to argue that as a measured, weighed and examined entity,

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a 'normal' child is a child in good health. Another key assumption of Western views of childhood has been that a 'normal' child is a 'well-educated' child (in the sense of 'well-mannered') since social and behavioral disorders are considered to be pathologies. **In the nineteenth century**, Galtonian eugenics provided a framework for devising a classification of children, while Comte's positivism resulted in the idea of *medical* normality being extended to the notion of *social* normality. The concepts of 'normal' and 'pathological' thus shifted from physiology to sociology, while disease, disability and inappropriate social behaviors (or at least behaviors *deemed* inappropriate) came to be seen as indications of disorder or as an interruption of 'standard' or 'normal' development. Childhood was gradually 'institutionalized'. The demand for regulation and standardization went hand in hand with the emergence of normative canons and frameworks. In the nineteenth century, population surveys defined children as a sub-population requiring a specific approach, with hygienists and subsequently pediatricians and schools playing a major role in determining the key stages of child development. A spatio-temporal framework specific to childhood is also central to the historical sociology of childhood (Turmel, 2008). As part of this consensus, one specifically French assumption is the *l uniqueness* of rhythms, methods and means from the youngest age (Gavarini, 2004). School eventually emerged as the institutional framework of reference for the socialization of children. Those outside this framework gradually came to be consigned to another definition of childhood – i.e. as 'disabled, monitored, delinquent, [or] protected' individuals (Plaisance, 2006).

At the turn of the twentieth century, research on childhood became the prerogative of psychology, while sociology focused on the field of family. One of the effects of this division was the emergence of the concept of the 'developing' child or the child 'in development'. Following the pioneering work of

Piaget, André Turmel, a sociologist at Laval University, has focused more recently on the 'developmentalism' (particularly Piagetian) of the approach to childhood in Britain, the United States and France. Having become institutionalized, the implications of this conception have become a matter of debate (Turmel, 2008).

The nowadays development of cognitive science has raised new questions about childhood. Alison Gopnik, the leading figure of American post-Piagetian research, has studied the underestimated cognitive abilities of babies. In Gopnik's view, children learn almost 'scientifically', moving from experience to the elaboration of theories. Though different from an adult's brain, a child's brain is no less powerful. This discovery challenges the notion that children are imperfect and incomplete individuals in the process of developing into complex adults (Gopnik, 2010).

Since the 1990s, neuroimaging has been used to study cognitive development. A range of different techniques (including magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, and functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI) have been used to show that brain maturation is neither uniform nor linear and can be used to measure brain activity by describing the activation and inhibition of cognitive processes. Research in psychology and neuroimaging over the last decade has drawn attention to the non-linear development of intelligence and the role of inhibition (the ability to correct an error in reasoning by recognizing failure or through imitation or instruction). By contrast with the Piagetian baby climbing a staircase step by step (Piaget argued that intelligence is linear and cumulative), **the post-Piagetian baby is a mathematician, a 'baby physicist' using a range of complex cognitive strategies from birth** (Fayol & Gombert, 1999, Houdé & Leroux, 2009, Houdé 2011).

EXISTENTIAL EXPERIENCE, TEMPORAL BLURRING, GLORIFICATION OR 'DISAPPEARANCE OF CHILDHOOD'?

The [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC, 1989) defines a child as a 'human being below the age of eighteen years' (article 1), regardless of sex, color, or religion. However, far from ending the debates surrounding childhood, the CRC's legal definition of the child has only served to intensify them.

For some, childhood is a period of life. By contrast, for others (such as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben), childhood is not 'a mental substance, but a way of being in discourse' (Perrot, 2008). Following Walter Benjamin, Agamben argues that the modern world is characterized by the end of experience – in the sense of 'a man of experience'. Like mother-of-pearl, existence is composed of elements that do not crystallize. The contemporary 'crisis of experience' implies a new conception of childhood, the assumption being that childhood is not a chronological period but a relationship to language. In this sense, there is always a child in every one of us, whatever our age. From this perspective, childhood needs to be seen as a pure transcendental experience liberated from the subject. **In short, there is no such thing as 'a child', but simply 'childhood'** (Agamben, 2002).

Unlike traditional sociology, which has tended to deny the agency of children, actor-network theory, as developed by Bruno Latour (Latour, 2006), implies that children are agents (or actants) in their own right. In actor-network theory, a child is seen as an entity that is not reducible to an age of life and that endures in every human being: 'childhood is a figure of life, nomadic and mobile, and continually re-emerging'. If age is no longer the only criterion for defining childhood, what should it be replaced by or supplemented with? The answer is probably this: childhood is the period during which individuals devote themselves to developing diverse and multiple networks of social relationships. From this perspective, adulthood is viewed as a slower period during which relationships become stable (Prout, 2005, Turmel, 2008).

Children develop their individuality through their experiences (at home among their family, at school, and so on) and are the actors of their own individualization, in the sense that they are able to give meaning and coherence to their experiences. This 'fragmentation' 'is not a bad thing, but is something that extends beyond education' (Prout, 2005).

> 'It is not a paradise that we leave behind us once and for all to begin speaking; it [childhood] coexists originally with language' (translated from Agamben, *Enfance et Histoire*, 2002)

The democratizing and egalitarian impulse of modern societies has meant that the age criterion has tended to subside in recent times, having long served as the major dividing line between childhood and adulthood (Renaut, 2003). Traditional representations of childhood have also become obsolete. In modernity, the status of children has been redefined. As a result, the modern concept of child now extends beyond childhood. **One consequence of these developments is that the many temporal definitions of childhood often create confusion**, with age ranges and categories tending to vary or overlap. For example, it has been suggested that 'by virtue of its social influence, marketing […] has also invented its own categories, such as "teens", and has segmented its target audiences by blending gender and age to focus, for, example on Lolitas' (Sirota, 2006) and to encourage children to leave childhood as quickly as possible. In Western societies, some activities that had previously been seen as contributions to the family economy (for example, helping with work in the fields) have become 'odd jobs', serving as a source of pocket money or as a way for young people to enhance their quality of life. As a result, the life of children has been 'monetized'. The question that arises is: To what extent are these changes an affirmation of childhood

(i.e. a period of life endowed with autonomy) or on the contrary an indication of the 'disappearance' or 'dissolution' of childhood (Feil, 2003)?

Through their games, children create **a culture of childhood** – a culture that has been scrutinized and targeted in recent times by producers and manufacturers of child products, although it is important to note that the relationships between mass culture and child culture (e.g. *Power Rangers*, *Barbie* and *Pokémon*) are more complex than is commonly assumed in the marketing world (Delalande, 2009). Arléo & Delalande (2011) defined child culture as 'the cultural knowledge and practices that are specific to children', arguing that child culture represents 'a stage that enables children to enter the world of adults by assimilating' the cultural structure of the adult world 'among their peers'. According to Postman (1982), the period from the 1850s to the 1950s marked the apogee of youth. Pampered, cared for, and educated, children were recognized, and recognizable, by the nature of their reading material, their clothes, and their birthday. In the 1950s, television [*note that the author was writing before the creation of the Internet*], which, according to the author, did not require the acquisition of specific literacy skills, blurred the distinction between adults (infantilized) and children (eroticized). According to Postman, one sign of the disappearance of childhood is the increasing number of crimes committed by or against children and the increasing tendency of children and adults to share the same tastes in music and clothes (Postman, 1982). The Latourian principle of symmetry places children and adults on a par – i.e. as equivalent and interchangeable agents in social reality. Some scholars have argued that there is evidence of this in less developed and less democratic societies, for example in the form of child labor, child soldiers, and child prostitution (Turmel, 2008). The work of German sociologists (for example on child labor in Latin America and India) has provided striking evidence of the difficulty of developing a consistent definition of childhood (Overwien, 2005).

The rise of computers has also transformed children in two very specific ways. First, children have begun to engage in adult activities and to access adult content and material (Prout, 2005). Second, the real world and the virtual world (or the offline world and the online world) have tended to 'shape one another' – in other words, virtual worlds are increasingly tending to merge with the real world without any distinction or apparent conflict (Valentine & Holloways, 2002).

A CHILD IF AND WHEN SOCIETY WANTS, AS IT WANTS

Another major trend is that as rare and desired beings, children have moved within a matter of decades from being objects of 'primary benefit' (i.e. working or caring for their elderly parents) to being objects of 'solely secondary benefit', serving as a form of narcissistic gratification for their parents (Delaisi, 1994, Gauchet, 2004, Lebrun 2004).

Today, the only possible child is a 'normal' child, with precociousness being elevated to the rank of educational norm. As the focus of the educational plans and ambitions of his/her parents, the desired child is a 'fetus-pupil' learning English and music *in utero*. This deterministic conception of children again raises the issue of the freedom of the subject and has been reignited by recent predictive theories in genetics and neuroscience. In the 1950s, people were beginning to speak of the 'post-modern' child – a child nourished from the cradle by the advances of science and technology. The fantasy of the perfect child raises the question of the boundaries between the normal and the pathological and has become an object of both concern and fascination. Under the guise of good intentions, eugenics has resurfaced in recent years, promoting a similar belief – namely that 'genetic normality is normality full stop'. Our affection for children requires that we only allow those deemed by society to be healthy to be born. In other words, controlling the gene pool also means controlling children. From the sex of the

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child to 3D ultrasound, babies have become the product of the almighty power of parental desire. While this may be a 'eugenics of convenience', what it shows is that the freedom of children (starting with the freedom to be as they wish) is now controlled by adults, whether it be the biological parent or a representative of society – such as the medical profession (Gavarini, 2004).

Likewise, there can only be a child if there is a child project – i.e. a planned project. In any society, a child must have a status as a human being before coming into the world. Based on observations in a hospital setting and interviews with people who have experienced abortion, a study by Luc Boltanski found that the status of a person as a human being involves a symbolic adoption that overrides the biological existence of the fetus. A range of 'frameworks' or 'arrangements' have been used in Western culture to define (i.e. confirm or deny) the existence of unborn children:

- Divinity: based on a monistic conception, this view '**is entirely non-selective/allows for no exceptions** and rejects any notion of selection among all flesh-and-blood beings'.

- Lineage: in the Western world, this framework operates on the principle of legitimate descent.

- The industrial nation-state: in this conception, the assumption is that a physical being is expected to have a social utility; medicine and the moral and political sciences make selections.

- The planned project: today, parental power sanctions the 'planned fetus', while the tumorous fetus, the 'accidental embryo', is merely flesh and is not 'the focus of a life project' (Boltanski, 2004).

TO CHERISH, EDUCATE OR PUNISH: THE CONTEMPORARY CHILD BETWEEN DEPENDENCE, AUTONOMY AND RESPONSIBILITY

As both dependent and autonomous, **the contemporary child has come to be seen as a 'paradoxical alter-ego'** (Renaut & Mesure, 2002) benefiting from both protection and subjective rights, or rights and freedoms (Renaut, 2004). There have been two major trends in this area:

- First, there has been a shift from adult-centrism to pedocentrism, a major trend in many contemporary societies focused on the protection and affirmation of the rights of children (Segalen, 2010);

- Second, a conflict has emerged between child liberationists and child caretakers. The constant tension between 'care/protection' and 'liberation' is a specific feature of the individualization of children in contemporary individualistic societies (de Singley, 2006).

Children have become subjects, as shown by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the appointment of child mediators (Sirota, 2006). As a key reference text, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) recognizes the fundamental rights of children (in France, the Convention is not legally recognized, although many of its principles are applied in practice). The CRC states that children are entitled to their own rights (article 4) including 'the inherent right to life' (article 6), the right to 'well-being' (article 3), 'the right […] to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development' (article 27), 'the right […] to education' (articles 28 and 29) and 'the right […] to rest and leisure' (article 31). Renaut (2003) even referred

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to the right to a 'gentle' life (O'Neill, 1998, quoted by Renaut, 2003) and to a happy family atmosphere. Children also have 'the right […] to be protected from economic exploitation' (article 32), to be 'protected' 'from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation' (article 19) and to be 'protected' when 'deprived of his or her family environment' (article 20). The CRC also refers to key freedoms, including freedom of opinion (article 12), with 'the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child', in addition to 'the right to freedom of expression' (article 13), 'the right […] to freedom of thought, conscience and religion' (article 14), and 'the rights […] to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly' (article 15).

The CRC does not have unanimous support. Irène Théry has even spoken of a form of 'mystification' (Théry, quoted by Segalen, 2010), arguing that children have been liberated from parental domination only to come under the authority of the state. Practices such as surrogacy, access to ART (assisted reproductive technology) for single women (both illegal practices in France), and anonymous birth (a specifically French practice) suggest that the state, which has had the right to interfere in family life for over a century, now has the power to control and organize the life of unborn children. Two key notions have emerged: child abuse (an ill-treated child is the obverse of the figure of the pampered child conceived as a legal subject) and parenting or parenthood (i.e. 'the capacity of parents to know how to bring up their children' – 'the new stereotype of sociology and social action', to quote Martine Segalen). In both cases, the implication is that children who are at risk are first and foremost children whose parents are unable to educate them (Segalen, 2010).

All of the great modern philosophers (Locke, Hobbes, Kant, and, today, Hans Jonas, among others) have argued that children do not ask or consent to come into existence. The implication of this view is the emphasis on the notion of parental responsibility (as opposed to the notion of parental authority). Anticipating the CRC, the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation in 1979 'stating that children should no longer be viewed as the property of their parents, but as individuals with their own rights and needs' **[version anglaise 'officielle' à vérifier]**. In France, article 371-2 of the *Code Civil* is based on the same principle. In short, the concept of authority has been superseded and replaced by the concept of responsibility. Most countries have changed their legislation along similar lines. Examples include the Children Act in the United Kingdom (1989), laws enacted in 1979 and 1999 in Germany, the Family Law Reform Act (1995) in Australia, the Domestic Relations Act (Maine, New York, Alberta, etc.) or Parenting Act (Washington, 1987) in the United States, and a 1977 Quebec law on the protection of young people (enacted in 1977 and amended in 1984, 1994, and 2006).

EDUCATION AND/OR PUNISHMENT?

As a result of the evolution of contemporary law, and of juvenile criminal law in particular, most European countries have recognized that a child is an incomplete being who matures through education (Youf, 2002).

European judicial systems are currently in the process of 'changing the educational and preventive logic that had prevailed until recently into a securitarian logic'. The age of criminal responsibility varies significantly (from 8 to 14), as does **the care of minors** (Jovelin, 2009). In France, the ruling of February 2, 1945 relating to juvenile delinquency, amended by the law of September 9, 2002, and the *Code Civil* (article 122.8) are based on a modern conception of minority founded on the notion that a child is an incomplete being. Today, educational measures tend to be substituted for or combined with sanctions, while sanctions, temporary detention, custody and detention have been adapted to meet the specific needs of children. The degree of responsibility of the child

based on the child's age and level of discernment or judgment is also taken into account. Insofar as it involves sanctioning and educating individuals who are not autonomous (Youf, 2009), the current juvenile justice system is based on 'two complementary and sometimes conflicting logics'. The 1945 ruling defines the juvenile justice system as a balancing act between punishment and education. In a criminal context, the primary purpose of education is to ensure that minors integrate society (Youf, 2010). The development of a specifically juvenile criminal law framework has been a long and arduous process. In France, the 1810 *Code Pénal* views children as 'miniature adults', while the 1945 ruling defines children as developing individuals (i.e. incomplete beings) who need to be protected and educated (Youf 2001, Youf 2004). While justice is impartial, the 'ethics of care' emphasizes the uniqueness of every individual and as such is an 'ethics of relationship'. **The notion of 'care', which originated in the United States, implies attentiveness to and concern for others, but also involves practical measures aimed at meeting the needs of others**. Juvenile justice is a good example of the coexistence of the ethics of justice and the 'ethics of care', and is based on the assumption that young people are more fragile than adults and that the development of their autonomy needs to be nurtured (Meurin & Youf, 2009).

The first circulaire d'application de la loi du 10 août 2011 on citizen participation in juvenile criminal justice changed the procedures applying to juvenile offenders. Three key points relate to the age of criminal responsibility (13, 16 or 18 according to the offense) and to the relationship between young people and adults, a key issue in current debates over the definition of childhood:

– A 'judicial police officer' now has the right to issue a summons requir-

ing a person to appear in a juvenile court, 'a kind of direct summons that removes the need for a pre-trial investigation by a juvenile court judge' (Léna, 2011). Depending on the allegations, the summons can be issued to an adult aged thirteen or sixteen. This procedure does not apply in the case of a first-time offender. A minor must have legal representation and the summons can be issued to the parents, legal guardian or custodian of the child.

– The extension of the authority of juvenile criminal courts (in French, the *cour d'assises des mineurs*): in the current state of the law, 'in the case of repeated or related offenses (for example, sexual crimes), a distinction must be drawn between offenses committed before the age of 16 and offenses committed after the age of 16. Because of this distinction, two trials may need to be held in two different courts, in in the presence of the victims (…). In current law, a juvenile criminal court can deal with offenses committed before and after the age of 16 during the same trial when the offenses are inseparable'.

– A prison sentence can be turned into a suspended sentence with a community order. The sentence is based on the age of the offender at the time of sentencing and not the age of the offender at the time of the offense.

'If you consider the act itself, then it is a question of punishing a delinquent; but if you consider the perpetrator, then it is a matter of seeing a child or a teenager that can still be saved. This dialectics [...] is at the heart of juvenile justice' (translated from Robert Badinter, *Les épines et les roses*, 2011.

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National and international laws on the rights of children have raised new questions and opened new areas of inquiry:

–   The notion of the rights of children is assumed to have created a unified 'social group'. However, as a category, 'childhood' remains difficult to define. There appears to be an increasing tendency to view children as subjects and agents. However, current conceptions also view children, paradoxically, as being subject to new determinants, both social and genetic (though mainly genetic). Today, children tend to be wanted, planned, stimulated and listened to, and are required to meet parental expectations (particularly precocious learning). In the Western world, there appears to be an 'illusion' that children are 'subjects' (Gavarini 2006).

–   Disabled children are a reminder of the significant role of disability in representations of childhood and highlight the ambiguity of the definition and implementation of 'children's rights' in this area (Renaut, 2003); educational measures that address the issue of disability tend to see disabled children first and foremost as being disabled (depending on the period, as a mentally retarded person, an 'abnormal' person, etc.), and only secondarily as a child. The representation of disabled children can be seen as a 'magnifying mirror' of the representation of children (Plaisance, 2006, Musset & Thibert, 2010).

–   Unlike the proponents of care and protection (see the 'caretaker thesis'), who deny children's right to (or capacity for) self-determination (which is assumed to be the responsibility of the adults caring for them), child liberationists argue that children have a right to self-determination. The state can replace the parent(s) if the latter is (are) deemed to be failing in his/her (or their) duty of care. It has been suggested that the term 'right' may not be adapted to childhood (Archard, 2004).

–   For others, adults have tended to focus on what they believe pertains to the protection of children and have neglected, whether deliberately or inadvertently, to guarantee or promote children's freedom of expression, thus limiting their creativity or their ability to make a judgement about the surrounding world (Alderson, 2008). Some experts have called for a reform of education and teacher training in order to promote the role of the CRC (Invernizzi & Williams, 2008, Howe & Covell, 2005).

CHILDHOOD AND CONFLICTS OF RIGHTS

A product of democratization and a sign of the end of traditional authority, the current crisis of authority (as Hannah Arendt described it; see Arendt, 1972, Renaut, 2004) has its origins in this new representation of childhood: while children are recognized as being different from adults, they are also considered to have the same rights as adults. It has even been suggested that the relationship between children and adults may become a contractual relationship (Renaut, 2004, Renaut, 2003).

These developments account for the current crisis of family law and the rights of children in many democracies, where current laws have been unable to make the distinction. The assumption is that an artificially conceived child must 'have the same rights as any other child'. The emphasis on the right to know both parents and to know one's origins have sparked debates over issues such as sperm donor anonymity (allowed in France, but not in Sweden), anonymous birth (specific to France), and all kinds of 'children's rights'. As a result, conflicts of rights have become increasingly common. France differs from other European countries by virtue of 'its mechanistic conception of nature that views biological products as objects', while the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom and Switzerland allow mature children or people over 18 to know their origins (Youf, 2002).

'Assailed from all sides – whether it be as a pupil and future citizen or as a marketing target, depending on the specific vocabulary of each framework – the [contemporary] child must construct her own experience amid a labyrinth of norms and references' (translated from Sirota, 2006)

THE FUTURE OF THE POSTMODERN CHILD

Today, children are no longer defined solely in relation to adults, but have come to represent a distinct and recognized group. This may explain why some experts in the field have suggested that sociology, which has recently begun to focus on the question of childhood, has supplanted education and psychology in research on children and childhood (Hengst & Zeiher, 2005, Andresen & Diehm, 2006). Among the emerging issues in this field, researchers have focused on two particular areas.

THE CHILD AS SUBJECT: AN OBJECT OF MEDIA ATTENTION

Academic research on childhood has the peculiarity of having attracted significant media attention since the 1970s, based on the assumption that 'academic knowledge about social practices […] has an impact on these very same practices'. While the injunction to be oneself may be the leitmotiv of postmodernity, children are currently caught between two representations or figures – the child as tyrant and the abused child. In their popularized form, research findings have often tended to be decontextualized when relayed in the media, while producing academic norms serving as reference standards. For example, media interest in the cognitive abilities of newborns and precocious learning can sometimes be counterproductive, resulting in a conception of children as 'passive consumers of taught knowledge' (Neyrand, 2005).

Paradoxically, 'the child as subject is a passive child exposed to two potential dangers, adult sexual perversion and consumer alienation' – two forms of alienation of the subject. Marketing strategies have developed their own take on the idea of the child as subject by directly addressing children as consumers (Neyrand, 2005). Since the beginning of the twentieth cen-tury, the fashion industry has developed a strong interest in the idea of children as subjects and has sought to promote the point of view of children at the expense of parents. In the United States, a range of initiatives (Children's Bureau, Baby Week, etc.) have sought to combine the results of research (on childcare, in education, etc.) with marketing. As a result of the rise of pediocularity, marketing experts in the 1950s began to devise new categories such as 'preteens' and 'toddlers'. By as-serting their rights and expressing their desires, children have come to play a ma-jor role as consumers (Cook, 2004). The focus on consumerism targeting the child-king is based on the notion of the lack of frustration. Freud and Lacan showed that lack is an inherent feature of human be-ings – hence the discrepancy that has been a feature of schools for some time, but which can now be found in families as well (Gavarini, 2004).

The concept of childhood as a 'category of people with specific rights has given credence to a new representation of children in the general public and in the world of marketing, where basic needs tend to be redefined as extended subjective rights', which can cause some confusion or lead to conflicts between different rights (e.g. the right to know one's genetic origin, the right to be wanted by both parents, the right to education, the right to consumption, etc.). In any event, the emphasis on meeting the needs and rights of children has become a fundamental norm of family and social life (de Singley, 2009, Gavarini, Lebrun & Petitot, 2011).

In childcare, pediatrics, psychology and education, a baby is defined as a person. The everyday life of babies is premised on the notion that they will eventually integrate society – as enlightened and educated citizens, watched over by protective yet determined adults. At the same time as the Convention, the Loi d'Orientation scolaire (1989), also known as the *Loi Jospin*, appeared to signal a 'similar shift' by placing students at the center as the new common basis (Rayou, 1999) and by 'defining citizenship

education as one of the key priorities of education' (Iwaniukowicz & Hedjerassi, 2009). There is significant scope for possible psycho-educational applications based on research on child development, and in particular research on inhibition (a form of neurocognitive and behavioral control). The assumption is that a lack of inhibition may account for various learning difficulties (errors, reasoning biases, etc.) and adjustment difficulties, 'both cognitive and social' (Houdé 2011). In this respect, a common characteristic of modern societies is the tendency to translate and popularize the results of academic research from the various disciplines with an interest in issues surrounding children and childhood.

CHILDREN AND ART, OR THE ART OF CHILDHOOD ●

Art plays a specific role in current views on the definition of childhood. On the one hand, access to the arts is widely considered to be part and parcel of the rights of children. Many institutions have responded to the need for a greater emphasis on art, and most countries have developed art education programs based on different curricula but similar objectives. On the other hand, there is an assumption that aesthetic and artistic experience is independent of any knowledge of artistic culture or of any kind of educational objective. An aesthetic and artistic experience is an ontological encounter in which the difference between children and adults appears to dissolve. Artists have testified to this fact in 'shared creations'. 'The figure of the child-artist is part of an attempt to conceive childhood differently, against the grain of the objectifying approach of rational thought – or at least of instrumental rationalism' (Kerlan & Loeffel, 2012). Since the 2000s, a consensus has emerged on the question of art in education (2004, 2006, 2007 and 2010 UNESCO conferences). The assumption is that as a fundamentally educational activity, art has a positive impact on society as a whole. Inspired by the poet and philosopher Schiller, contemporary societies have used art (in the form of painting workshops, writing workshops,

etc.) in order to relieve illness, mental suffering and social difficulties. In their fight against inequality, hospitals, prisons and now schools are making increasing use of art. Artists have also become involved, although the effectiveness or usefulness of art in education remains to be demonstrated (Kerlan, 2008).

As a result of these developments, art education has become the core focus of research on childhood in many quarters. Inspired from Rousseau, the recognition of the sensitive subject 'involves a fundamental shift in the model of childhood' (Loeffel, 2011). The assumption is that aesthetic experience has nothing to do with the age of the subject engaged in an aesthetic experience, and can be part of a process of art education that takes into account both the ontological continuity of the being and the discontinuity of the individual over time (Kerlan, 2005). The circulaire n° 2010-032 du 5 mars 2010 entrenched the educational and pedagogical role of artist residencies, while the law of August 13, 2004 on local freedoms and responsibilities has served to promote partnerships in addition to promoting significant changes in the educational landscape (Loeffel, 2011). Democracies throughout the world are increasingly resorting to art education and promoting interactions between artists and the educational community (Kerlan, 2011). As a result of these developments, artistic projects often tend to supersede the curriculum, just as artists are tending to supersede teachers (Hall & Thompson, 2007).

The idea of using artist residencies and residential art programs (*Enfance*, art et langage à Lyon, La Criée in Marseille, and the example of Reggio Emilia in Italy) to promote art and aesthetic experience in schools is a radically different idea from art education, although there are some links (Bacconnier & Poyet, 2005). The realm of art includes sensibility, intuition, imagination, the senses, and symbolic discourse (Hoyuelos, 2006). The assumption is that the realm of art fulfils the ontological, aesthetic and social needs of humans and has little concern for the educational

'With art, from the youngest age, feelings, emotions, and sensibility have been erected into purposes or values of education, as conditions of balance and harmony, without which there can be no true learning, thus surpassing the Piagetian paradigm that long prevailed in our understanding of child development and learning' (translated from Loeffel, 2011).

or cultural value of art or the transmission of common values through art. The artistic realm does not consider art as a tool for the appropriation of other forms of social or intellectual knowledge that might enable children to grow and develop in accordance with the norms and expectations of the adult world.

Nevertheless, art has performed many educational functions in recent times. For example, art is sometimes used as an instrument for resolving conflicts between children (Brunson, Conte & Masar, 2002, Hetland & Winner, 2007), while music is often used as an introduction to mathematics. Likewise, drama is sometimes used to introduce students to reading. In France, the 2002 national curriculum (see programmes de 2002) specifies that choir singing 'expresses a collective discipline […], [and is] an excellent remedy against aggressive impulses'. The 2009 inquiry by the European Commission on art education in schools reviewed the objectives of art education in all European countries. The inquiry found that the primary objectives of art education are the knowledge of art and the development of aesthetic judgement and creativity in the broad sense of the terms (in Spain, Slovenia, Britain and Norway, artistic creativity is associated with innovation and entrepreneurship). Other objectives include access to the cultural heritage as a way of promoting national identity, the development of social skills and the promotion of environmental awareness. **In short, the assumption is that art educates citizens – i.e. fosters citizenship**. The least common objectives are 'the development of a permanent interest in the arts' and 'the identification of artistic talent'. In France, the loi d'orientation et de programme pour l'avenir de l'école (2005) recommends using 'the specific benefits of art subjects to […] promote the development of social and civic skills', while 'the development of art and cultural education is based on four major principles:

– *The development of artistic practices both in and outside schools;*

– *Interactions with artists and artworks and visits to cultural sites;*

– The continued promotion of the history of art in general education;

– *Teacher training in art and cultural education'.*

Researchers and practitioners have made no secret of their mixed feelings about the potential instrumentalization of artistic experience in educational settings, in particular because of the demand for assessment (Kerlan, 2005, Bacconnier & Poyet, 2006, Kerlan, 2004). The work of Nelson Goodman has been widely referred to in attempts to give art its rightful place in education. The assumption is that art and culture are valuable 'in themselves' and that 'art requires no extrinsic justification'. It is on this condition that art can help to understand the perception of childhood.

> ' Goodman argues that there are 'elaborate arguments emphasizing extraneous psychological and practical virtues of training in the arts. It is held to soothe the spirit, sharpen the mind, increase effectiveness in daily pursuits, resolve social tensions, and so on. Whatever merit these arguments may have, they succeed mainly – by their existence – in fostering the suspicion that the arts are worthless in themselves' Nelson Goodman, *L'art en théorie et en action,* 1996.

There is another key issue in this debate. Artistic activities in schools led by artists are based on popular education trends, which tend to focus on 'the child as a whole' – i.e. the child viewed as a unique individual with specific physical, intellectual, moral and

affective characteristics. 'This model differs radically from the educational model of the child, a standard and standardizing model' (Loeffel, 2011). In English-speaking countries, the phrase 'inclusive art education' is often used to refer to a holistic approach to the relationship between children and art and to underline the role of art in a global approach to education, especially in the era of globalization and in multicultural societies (Smith, 2007, Hall & Thompson, 2007)

In this sense, art education is an education in democracy. Based on the notion of the involvement of the individual in art, Joëlle Zask contrasted the republican model of education with the democratic model, of which art education is the most accomplished expression – with the other subjects remaining 'republican': 'The only truly democratic model of education is one that seeks to ensure that students participate personally in their own education' (Zask, 2003, Zask, 2007). Yet the idea of groups of students filing through museums suggests mixed feelings. The satisfaction of seeing that art is becoming more accessible (i.e. more democratic) is tempered by a nagging doubt: to what extent can guided visits foster an aesthetic experience? Such experiences are often poles apart from the Montessorian idea of 'lessons in silence', during which students are encouraged to listen to and feel their environment in order to give it meaning. It is only on this condition that art can educate. There is a consensus in anthropology and education that art requires sustained attention, concentration, and creativity, suggesting that art can be likened to another key symbolic system among children – play (Kerlan, 2005, Kerlan, 2008).

CONCLUSION

After two centuries of change, children have come to be seen as social actors in their own right and as fully-fledged subjects. Historians, anthropologists and sociologists have argued that several systems of representation of childhood have emerged over time and in space. Adultcentrism, for long the dominant paradigm, has been widely challenged, as has the classification (or construction) of society based on distinct age groups. Neither innocent nor accidental, the category 'child' needs to be seen as a social construct with significant implications. The field of childhood studies has emphasized the conflict between the notion of the child 'in becoming' and the notion of the child 'in the present' (Prout, 2005). The term 'childhood' (as opposed to the term 'child') implies a state rather than a stage of human existence (Archard, 2004). ●

This review of contemporary perspectives on childhood has highlighted the extreme diversity of representations of childhood and the intensity of the debates on this issue (including legal, philosophical, socio-anthropological and psychological debates). The notion of the 'child-problem' (Le Débat, 2004) lies at the crossroads of these representations, with the unifying issue of difference at its heart. Against the backdrop of the critique of adultcentrism in social anthropology, sociology and psychology (Quentel, 2004, Turmel, 2008), the question of the difference between adults and children has resurfaced in recent times, notably because the answers provided by developmentalism are felt to be no longer adequate. The critique of the Piagetian paradigm in sociology and psychology is not only rooted in specific developments within these fields, but is also, on a more general level, an acknowledgment that the Piagetian paradigm is no longer enough to provide an exhaustive account of the experience of children or to encompass the plurality and complexity of representations of children and childhood.

'[Is it a case of] one conception of childhood or multiple conceptions of childhood? From the many conceptions of childhood there have emerged a number of paradigms [although] the paradigmatic view does not provide an exhaustive account of the issue. Beyond the many paradigms that have been developed to understand it, there is always something about childhood that seems to elude us' (translated from Kerlan & Loeffel, 2012).

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