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978-0-521-84366-9 - The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights

David Oswell

Excerpt

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PART I

Introduction

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1 | *Introduction*

The long twentieth century is, and has been, undoubtedly the age of children's agency. Children are not simply seen to be, but seen, heard and felt to do. Children are not simply beings, they are more significantly doings. They are actors, authors, authorities and agents. They make a difference to the world we live in. Over the period from the late nineteenth century up until now, in the early twenty-first century, children's capacity to do has intensified and the areas in which they are able to do have proliferated. Children have been seen and felt to do in the life of family, the life of society, the life of politics and the life of economy.

It is not simply that the child in the singular has become a focus of huge emotional, social, cultural, technological and economic investment; rather, it is that over the course of the last hundred years or so children as a class or group or collective of people have become more vocal, more visible and more demonstrable in ways that resonate across our contemporary world. Across this period of time it is not only the presence of children as social actors that is of importance; it is also children's presence as biological and non-social or pre-social actors that has intrigued investigators, provoked debate, and led, among other things, to research, surveying, institutionalisation, building, support, sanctions and regulations. And children's presence has been felt by them and by others not simply because somehow children over this period of time have gained a voice which was before hidden, or that they had a strength and political power that has until now not been revealed. No. Rather, children's capacities to speak, act and become disclosed in particular social, natural and technological contexts has been dependent on their being networked, assembled or infrastructured with other persons and things in such ways as to endow them with powers, which they alone could neither hold nor use.

To put this crudely, over much of the twentieth century we have seen the emergence, development and embedding of children as being seen

to have a stake in the institutions and processes which govern their lives and others'. Children are increasingly seen and related to as democratic subjects. Nobody is saying, nor have they said, that this is straightforward, nor even that it has been achieved (whatever that might mean), but across the major social institutions of family, school, criminal justice, health and medicine, consumer culture and work, and political structures proper it is impossible now when talking about children not also to talk about their stake in the decision-making process and their role in shaping the institutions and organisations that shape them. What power do children and young people have in modern families? Should children have a say over the school curriculum? Does it make sense to talk about infants and babies as having political rights? Alongside the democratisation of our relations with children, we see a huge investment in children as consumers. Either directly as consumers of toys, television programmes and computer games, or as influencing the purchasing decisions in the household, children are addressed as significant economic agents. As many commentators have shown, the relationship between children as democratic subjects and children as consumers demonstrates often intertwined histories (Cook, 2004; Oswell, 2002). The growth of the modern mass media of novels, magazines, film, radio and television address children as distinct and separate audiences and often narrate their lives in ways that endow them with power over their lives, their environment and the lives of others. Different again, our thinking about crime and illegality frequently involves concern with children's power on the street or in the ghetto, or with children as the vehicles of crime through generations and across time. The sins of the fathers and mothers are seen by some as most visibly present in the infant, whose nakedness is often seen to conceal the wickedness of a changeling. And the health of populations is now often seen to reside in either the neglect or wellbeing of children. Panaceas, for example, directed to the psychiatric disorders of young children playing in the nurseries repeat a long-standing hope that the agency of children will, like a *pharmakon* (both cure and poison), bring about a new Jerusalem.

Of course, the narration of children setting off on adventures and becoming kings and queens in strange lands in worlds of fiction is a long way from children sitting in a council chamber making decisions which affect how we live our lives. The buying of a computer game is similarly very different from being able to determine with whom one

lives during the process of family divorce. And the transformative power of an educated child is different from that of a genetic disorder. To suggest otherwise would be ridiculous, but across the different modalities of power and expression, the different apparatuses, institutions and organisations, the different materialities and relations, and the different histories, temporalities and geographies, sociologists of children have provided research and ideas that demonstrate how the capacity for children to determine their and others' lives has emerged and grown, certainly over the long twentieth century, but also slowly and incrementally over the last two to three hundred years.

In sociology, but also in anthropology, psychology, literary theory, art history, media analysis, history and various other disciplines, groups of pioneering scholars began to provide empirical and theoretical understanding for the emerging, developing and extending agency of children. My concern in this book, though, is not to attempt the huge task of surveying and synthesising an interdisciplinary field of childhood studies (as it is now often termed), but the more modest, but equally huge, task of building on the significant research in the sociology of children, which has grown significantly since the late 1980s and 1990s, regarding the emergence and distribution of children's agency. This book is a contribution to the growing field of childhood studies, but is only so from a particular perspective and trajectory. In that sense, this book emerges out of a particular disciplinary formation and it is framed in the context of questions and debates that come from that field of study and research. But more than that, it is a book that hopes to introduce newcomers to the field in a manner that acknowledges the huge debt of much original and significant research from the sociology of children. I should note here that, although there is some discussion over the use of these phrases, I use 'sociology of children' and 'sociology of childhood' interchangeably.

For many people who are studying and researching children, there are four central questions: what is a child?; in what ways is childhood differentiated from adulthood?; how do we understand the growth of a child?; and, what freedoms or controls are appropriate to be placed on the child? For many people, these questions are intimately related. We know what a child is in the context of how that child is different from an adult and how they might be seen to progress from one stage of being to another. And we govern our relations with children according to

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the age of a child, according to their maturity, and according to their closeness or distance from adulthood. Even those who would balk at the thought of such thinking are, by and large, caught by the attraction of trying to understand children through the divisions and walls that separate them from adults. We can refer to this as the identity/difference thesis, namely that children (or childhood) have a distinct identity, whether this identity is considered in social or biological terms. Moreover, this identity is understood only inasmuch as it constitutes a difference from adults (or adulthood). Thus, we know children and childhood only by virtue of their difference from adults and adulthood. Equally, though, there are many people for whom such natures and divisions have a lesser importance and for whom living with or as children is a matter of the singularities or particularities of that particular being, doing and becoming. There is a need, it can be argued, to tilt the balance away from questions about identity and difference and towards ones about children's lives and experiences. But, we argue, any tilting needs to be done in such a way to make intelligible how those lives and experiences are entangled in complex webs of bodies, technologies, and associational patterns. Children are certainly subject to difference machines, to scalar devices, and to measuring systems. In some cases these machines, devices, and systems are stacked up and consolidated; in other cases any relation is unclear, imprecise and fuzzy; but in many cases there is no consistency across differentiations, scales and measures. There is no common standard for children; no difference is well-executed. In that respect, this book hopefully touches on the sympathies that have grown up in a relatively young field of knowledge, not to police any line of difference, but simply to observe, to investigate, and to describe.

This book is concerned with a series of questions about children's agency not inasmuch as agency might be paired with social structure (although that certainly is a focus of Chapter 3), but inasmuch as it allows us to think through children's and young people's capacities to make a difference (rather than being constituted as a difference) and inasmuch as it allows us to think through the different ways in which children and young people have been and are actively involved in emergent, innovative, experimental and substantive forms of solidarity and coexistence. But also it allows us to think through how children and young people are, whether in whole or in part, the focus of innovation and investment in the shaping and reshaping of social

existence. My concern in this book is to locate in broad terms how the troubled idea of children's agency might be suggestive of novel investigations and pathways rather than a restrictive and limiting notion. For what we see across the broad and growing field of research in childhood studies is, for sure, the repetition of a normative model of social science which endlessly returns to the dichotomy or duality of structure and agency. But we also see a huge array of innovative studies which empirically and descriptively offer novel analytical interpretations of children's active engagement with their everyday lives and with the enduring patterns of social and historical presence. Over the course of this book I intend to survey some of this work in a way that offers a series of sketches of the different, complex and multiscale articulations of children's agency. In that sense, the book is intended to provide a series of meta-observations on this growing field in order to make visible an array of descriptions of agency in the lives of children.

The design of the book is quite simple. It is shaped by an intention to review some of the existing literature both in the field and in peripheral fields. It is intended as an exploration of children's agency in a way that does not reduce agency to a self-present consciousness or reflexive subjectivity of the unitary child, but which considers agency in all its mobilisation, networking and experimentation. If children's agency is not centred on a point of origin, then the ascription of agency as 'children's agency' becomes less a labelling of possession. Agency is not, then, performed in the manner of He-Man the Master of the Universe, 'I have the power'. If anything, it is 'We have the power', but both the 'power' and the 'we' are supported through human and non-human arrangements and infrastructures. Moreover, agency, since it is not seen to be centred on human reflexivity, is distributed across human and non-human arrangements and infrastructures, but it also rests as much on parts of children as on whole children. Rarely is there concern about children or the child in an holistic sense; it is more likely that government is concerned with 'disruptive behaviour' or medics with a 'viral infection' or psychologists with 'cognitive functions'.

In what follows these issues are considered through a series of key problem spaces, which have attracted concern and investment from a range of different actors, including academics, experts, governmental authorities, children, teachers, parents and various others.

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These spaces – concerning the family, schooling, crime, health, play and consumer culture, children’s labour and children’s rights – can be seen to comprise some of the main concentrations of research in the field of childhood studies. The areas are defined, in part, by the social and historical contexts of children’s relation to parents, to the state and to the market, namely to those concentrations of government and economy with respect to their lives as children. By and large the book reflects the limitations of the field of childhood studies inasmuch as it is shaped within the histories, social contexts, economies and governmentalities of Europe and North America. The more recent research that has become visible in the field from Latin America, India, China and Africa raises serious questions and points of discussion and dialogue with much of what I say. But also there are many bridges and continuities across the different national and regional contexts. I have included some of that emerging material, but too little.

The book opens up the problem of children’s agency for further investigation and attempts to provide, not any kind of theory of children’s agency, but something more in line with what Foucault refers to as an ‘analytics’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983). In that sense, its intentions are limited to making more visible a rich analytical and descriptive language for thinking through the complexity of children’s agency as a sociological topic.

2 | *Agency after Ariès: sentiments, natures and spaces*

In this chapter I return to a seminal work in the sociology of childhood, written by the historian Philippe Ariès over fifty years ago. The book, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), was originally published in French as *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (1960). It offered a history of childhood, but also, perhaps more importantly, it provided a way of understanding and perceiving children not only as actual children in the 'here and now', nor even childhood as an image, but as children whose very distinctiveness as children is a consequence of their history. What Ariès gives us is a sense of children as imbued with a historicity. Children are seen as having an historical particularity, as constituting not only a social or psychological, but an historical subjectivity. For the question Ariès asks, 'How did we come from that ignorance of childhood to the centring of the family around the child in the nineteenth century?' (Ariès, 1962: 8), is one which is not only about the status of an idea (despite what Ariès insists), but also one which changes our relationality with and as children. It is only with the work of Ariès and others in the 1960s that this particularity is able to be understood qua historical particularity: namely, as an aspect of historical self-reflection and reflexivity. But also this sense that children have an historical existence implies that the experiences and agencies of children are disclosed within a horizon of historical reflection.

Nevertheless, the sociology of childhood has really only been concerned with three aspects of Ariès' argument: namely, that childhood is an historical invention; that childhood is thus a social institution (not a biological given); and that childhood constitutes a form of division and segregation between children and adults. In the proceeding sections I follow Ariès obliquely in order to provide brief genealogies of three main thematics which undergird much of this book. In doing so, I am sympathetic to, but also highly critical of (a standard sociological reading of) Ariès' argument inasmuch as I argue that children are not reducible to categorical forms of conceptualisation; children as a

collectivity are not reducible to a social invention; and children as modern collective subjects are not reducible to their enclosure within purified 'child only' spaces. These three reductions, I argue, have been highly significant in delimiting questions about children's agency within the sociology of childhood.

Sentiments and descriptions

A pivotal idea in the sociology of childhood is that childhood is a social construction. Those beings which we perceive as children are perceived and understood as separate entities with definable attributes and qualities only by virtue of their being socially constructed. Thus when sociologists talk about children's agency, they do so with this in mind inasmuch as children's agency is conditioned in some sense by their being defined as children; inasmuch as they are constrained by the institutions which reproduce this category of childhood; and inasmuch as their agency is directed to either reproducing or contesting this structurally reproduced category of childhood.

Iconographies and the accumulation of description

The sociological argument about childhood as a social construction or a social institution is an argument that, as I have mentioned above, sociologists trace back to Ariès; namely, that childhood is a social and historical invention and that, although children (as those in a state of biological immaturity) have existed for all time, childhood as a 'conception' (Archard, 1993), or as a 'mentality', has had a finite and specific period of existence. Ariès boldly states that

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. (Ariès, 1962: 128)

Much of Ariès' argument is taken up with a discussion of the history of the school, the centrality of the school in shaping modern ideas of childhood, and the school as constituting a 'disciplinary system' (Ariès, 1962: 397). But in the context of his discussion of the family, he