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978-0-521-87977-4 - *A Historical Sociology of Childhood: Developmental Thinking, Categorization and Graphic Visualization*

Andre Turmel

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

The areas covered by *A Historical Sociology of Childhood* are of relevance to sociologists, to historians and, more broadly, to social scientists. The title deserves some clarification. From an analytical standpoint, it alludes to two distinct sets of meaning. The first that comes to mind evokes, at least for readers familiar with social sciences, the emergence of modernity – and, afterwards, its design and patterning – in a sociological and theory-driven approach to history. It brings into play the work of historians to a sociological purpose, namely explanation in a comparative framework focusing on large-scale processes, which, it should be borne in mind, are the core of classical historical sociology: capitalism, bureaucracy or the state (Delanty and Isin 2003). However, the historical sociology of childhood put forward here is somehow different: it does not arise primarily from the aforementioned processes. It rather proceeds from compounded social operations such as the circulation, translation, standardization and stabilization of children, which were crucial in shaping modern childhood; these will be spelt out later on.

A second meaning pertains to a more unusual thrust with regard to these complex operations, for it was tucked away under layers of connotation, piled up one above the other for over two centuries. They were rendered feasible by what is known as statistical thinking and reasoning with its share of technologies. As the nineteenth century discovered statistical thinking and reasoning through large-scale empirical investigations – understood as population studies conducted by state authorities (Farr, Villermé, Quételet etc.), the statistical concepts of population, and of sub-population, came of age. Within the large movement aiming to delineate the national population in western countries, these statistical investigations brought to light the peculiarities, hitherto unknown, of different parts of the population, among them, children. Accordingly, the condition of children – health, work, education, social problems (abandonment, neglect,

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truancy, delinquency etc.) – was gradually uncovered; let alone the extensive history of child welfare or health policy and the sustained struggle against infant mortality. The net outcome was to frame children's situation in an entirely novel way as an autonomous category of thinking and acting thereupon in the national population: the historical rise of the category of childhood was set forth within this specific context. *A Historical Sociology of Childhood* outlines the statistical concept of the child population, henceforth the empirical discovery of their characteristics and idiosyncrasies.

The subtitle of the book, *Developmental thinking, categorization and graphic visualization*, also warrants some explanation. The starting point of the analysis, the acknowledgement of children's particular situation, came about in the wake of the rise of an autonomous category of 'childhood'. Although it is an astonishing social achievement, it is one that is estimated equivocally. What is a child, above the peculiarities brought to light by those large-scale inquiries? The question remained unanswered by the end of the nineteenth century. While it faced substantial uncertainties such as the appalling rates of infant mortality, the community – the childhood collective, as we shall find out later on – was nevertheless in search of a cogent answer to this issue. The discovery of 'childhood' launched an enormous research effort culminating in the systematic investigation of childhood. This effort took place in scientific domains such as public hygiene, paediatrics, psychology, education etc., and paved the way to social interventions leading to the onset of a specific form of childhood regulation.

This study covers a period of almost one century, from 1850 to 1945, which is considered as the apex of the developmental paradigm. The latter is understood in a broader sense than in developmental psychology as it applies to society as a whole: a model of history, which amounts to a model of progress, assuming that all societies follow the same course of transformation, with each going through identical stages of development, in brief from archaic or primitive to modern or advanced societies. This overarching model has been altering all social sciences from the outset, whether investigating global societies or changes in family life for instance; all societies are pegged at diverse stages along a uniform development continuum of stages and sequences (Thornton 2005). The influence of developmental thinking is broad: the decline in infant mortality and female fertility – known as the demographic transition – is an interesting case which will be looked at

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later. This paradigm is conveyed in numerous ways in the nascent science of childhood – notably although not exclusively via developmental psychology – integrating it into this substantial trend of the scientific community in the second half of the nineteenth century. I shall examine how developmental thinking impacted on the science of childhood and the consequences of this.

The answer to the question ‘What is a child?’ varied substantially according to its social inscription, whether it came primarily from the community at large – parents, social workers, teachers, welfare activists etc. – or from researchers in laboratories circulating scientific knowledge in a broader context. Beyond these variations, we are likely to find common ground providing a conceptual/empirical space within which to think about and act upon the child’s body away from biological determinism. The nub of the issue is the manner in which social accounts or narratives of children’s bodies, wherever they come from, tend to include and emphasize the likelihood that children’s lives bear a material, as well as a discursive or representational, component (Barad 1998; Suchman *et al.* 2002: 101). Childhood as a social phenomenon is not basically the outcome of clear-cut ideas – the Hegelian pure idea<sup>1</sup> – produced by philosophers, for the child as an object is configured in social practices.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, the chapters of this book show the possibility of apprehending childhood differently, via the rise of a childhood collective – numerous social actors interacting together to frame children and regulate their behaviour – using diverse artefacts such as graphs and charts.

Whether these arguments are credible or not, the key point remains: it will map the way scientific investigation and public policy muster data and resources relevant to children, which then go on to influence their lives. It will explore, accordingly, the decisive historical trends leading to our current awareness of children. Population studies were

<sup>1</sup> Philosophy, in this respect, is not considered as a universal thought which transcends all particular situations from a unifying superior standpoint, but rather a singular and contingent thought produced in a specific society under particular conditions. This epistemological stance draws on the tradition, inaugurated by Marx, of a strong critique of philosophy. See his *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847).

<sup>2</sup> Although Aries’ hypothesis – the relatively recent solicitude regarding the child in western culture – was widely debated in the scientific community, it is generally acknowledged that concerns about the child took a new form and received a decisive impulse with the passage to modernity.

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indispensable in this process: vital statistics, large-scale inquiries and data collection during systematic investigations by the Royal Statistical Bureau in the UK or its equivalents in France and the USA. These studies' categorization and classification rendered possible the emergence of an autonomous type, childhood, and the methodical comparison of children, thus ushering in the elaboration of norms of development.

For several complex reasons that this book will consider extensively, after a period in the nineteenth century during which public hygiene and paediatrics played a leading role in the social fabric of childhood, psychology progressively moved to the forefront in the twentieth century. It became the core of the nascent science of child research with the coming of age of the category of the normal child and, in the aftermath, the rise of the developmental paradigm. There were always tensions in the childhood collective: tensions between child experts and parents, between paediatricians and psychologists, between public authorities and welfare activists, and today between childhood research's new perspectives, with children's views provided either from a socialization standpoint or from developmental psychology. These tensions are a driving force in the process of child research understood as 'a culturally patterned and socially structured mode of already being in the world' (Alanen 1997a).

My goal in this book is to examine the inception of this key modern development in the social fabric of childhood. I am primarily concerned with explaining it sociologically, whereas others did so psychologically or philosophically, hence from various other scientific perspectives. My aim is, rather, to understand child research both as a historical achievement and a social production, and, accordingly, to show a science more in tune with the modern world and its major trends and characteristics.

### **A historical sociology of childhood**

Though the subject matter of this book is original – so far no historical sociology of childhood has been written<sup>3</sup> – its general topic, childhood,

<sup>3</sup> It is essential to raise this core distinction in order to clarify a specific space in the scientific field, since historical sociology must be set apart from the more widely known history (British, American, French etc) of children that is already partly

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is not. Psychologists, historians and specialists in education or social work have written at length on the issue from their specific standpoints, all stamped in the developmental paradigm. Without undertaking an extensive review of this sound literature, I shall examine what a historical sociology of childhood is about, what it means and why it is needed. This venture takes place in the wake of N. Elias' disturbing concern: 'The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present', as the core statement of a general analysis of sociology's main trends over the past fifty years.<sup>4</sup>

The historical part of the question is broached at the outset: why and how is childhood a historical achievement? The sociology of childhood has, for the past twenty-five years, been very forceful, yet diligent, in putting forward a genuinely sociological standpoint on childhood. As the childhood field was overwhelmingly dominated since its inception by psychology – sociology being historically confined to the field of family studies<sup>5</sup> – the breakthrough of an insightful sociological stance still looks promising, be it only by putting forward a fresh view directly challenging the predominant psychological perspective. Unfortunately, some weaknesses can be detected in this. One of the most blatant flaws pertains to the ahistorical outlook implicit in most sociologists of childhood research, thus reiterating psychology's patent

written. Historical sociology, in the usual sense of the tradition, refers mainly to a specific type of analysis: 'macrohistory', long-term patterns of political, economic and social change (Collins 1999). It alludes largely to the rise of empires, world systems, global capitalism, modernization and so on. But the scope of the historical sociology perspective is now broadening towards new scientific objects and its scope is no longer restricted to macrosociology. A good example is Mackenzie's *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Guidance Missile* (Mackenzie 1990).

<sup>4</sup> 'This retreat, their flight from the past, became the dominant trend in the development of sociology after the Second World War . . . That it was a retreat is evident if one considers that many of the earlier sociologists sought to illuminate problems of human societies, including those of their own time, with the help of a wide knowledge of their own societies' past and of earlier phases of other societies. The approach of Marx and Weber to sociological problems can serve as an example . . . The narrowing of the sociologists' focus of attention and interest to immediate present' (Elias 1987: 233 *et seq.*).

<sup>5</sup> Everything happened as if a form of scientific division of labour occurred by the end of the nineteenth century according to which psychology took hold of the field of childhood, whilst sociology became restricted to family studies, thus kept apart at the scientific level from the awakening and development of the childhood collective.

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misconceptions as an ahistorical and acultural domain grounded in the assumption of a universal child.<sup>6</sup> The dangers of an ahistorical inscription of children must not, in any circumstances, be underestimated: a sound concept of childhood does emerge from society's real historical processes – past and ongoing – in which children are an integral part. 'Therefore, by placing concepts of childhood in the historical process in which childhood has emerged and developed, a more valid conceptualization of childhood can be approached' (Alanen 1992: 99).

This book reveals how wrong it is to assume that childhood is either a natural or universal entity, which amounts to an inconsiderate denial of its historical processes. Psychologists may be able to set up in a causal form their own experiments upon children in a quasi laboratory-type setting from the developmental paradigm. Sociologists have to wait for the passage of time: social changes gather together the phenomena and operations that draw their attention in the form of a historical process (Elias 1987).

The historical processes upon which the social fabric of childhood basically rests cannot be restricted to the most obvious aspects of its course. Childhood is neither an inevitable consequence of the historical accumulation of western societies' public policies, be it in the form of infant welfare, compulsory schooling or whatever, nor a simple outcome of experts' advice to parents and others. It is, rather, the product of a complex movement of cooperation, conflict and resistance between a broad range of social actors, including children themselves, in a historical process of moulding a form via diverse social actions: the child as a social form to be moulded throughout 'a sequence of biographic trajectory' (Bourdieu 1980, 1986).<sup>7</sup>

In such a process, the invention of childhood – to adopt Aries' wording – has fuelled, and been fuelled by, artefacts or social technologies:<sup>8</sup> graphs, charts, IQ, tabulation and so on, which regards

<sup>6</sup> Psychology's universal child is a direct product of developmental psychology's and, more broadly, developmental thinking's origins, which lasted until now in psychology's mainstream with a few remarkable exceptions (Woodhead 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu defines the social trajectory as 'the series of positions successively occupied by an agent (or a group of agents) in a space itself in the becoming and subjected to unremitting transformations' (Bourdieu 1986: 62–63).

<sup>8</sup> The syntagm 'social technology' is used in contrast to the more conventional term of technology: soft technology as opposed to hard technology such as computers or the electricity network. The distinction is purely pragmatic and

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graphic visualization as an essential patterning of children's condition. These were a shaping force and, thus, are considered as worthy ideas concerning child-rearing or abstract philosophical propositions pertaining to children in the overall historical process leading to our current understanding of childhood.

Understanding childhood as a historical social process creates particular consequences in need of being addressed. The Ariesian proposition relating to 'the invention of childhood' can be misleading to a certain extent. Childhood is not solely social to the point of invention and then self-sustaining thereafter. Its very conditions of possibility are always social from the onset and along the whole course of its trajectory leading to adulthood. Therefore this amounts to asserting that childhood cannot, in the first place, be restricted to an exclusive biological or psychological phenomenon, nor be considered a pure outcome of external conditions such as public policies. As a historical achievement, childhood pertains to broader processes gathered together under the aegis of social practices taking place in a collective within a fully pluralistic model of human societies as Elias suggests.

The latest explanations regarding social practices, which are tantamount to a clarification of the sociohistorical character of childhood, establish the three main reasons why the perspective of this research should be sociological as well as historical. Some are relatively patent, others less so. They allude respectively to the sociology of scientific knowledge, actor-network theory and the concept of collective cognitive dispositif to give an account of the now predominant developmental thinking framework.

Studying childhood amounts – it is an explicit objective – to throwing light on the historical processes of childhood social fabric more generally, and in particular those that have been kept in the dark for so long. The aforementioned processes were crucial in the rise of the concept of the normal child and developmental thinking at the turn of the twentieth century. It is acknowledged that the childhood collective was disturbed and rather chaotic and a subject of great anxiety for families, various reformers, public authorities, the state

does not pretend, in any case, to have theoretical foundations, the Foucauldian tradition being quite different in this respect. The distinction raises two serious questions: first, the relations between social actors and artefacts; second, what is technology from a sociological standpoint, which will be addressed later.

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and the like. Children were threatened by appalling rates of infant mortality and unknown diseases; the questions of child work and compulsory education were still divisive; problems such as delinquency, truancy and cruelty to children needed to be addressed. Concerns about the normal child and its development were voiced publicly. Accordingly, the continuing uncertainties brought forth by the condition of children demanded to be resolved, and yet the collective required stabilization.

One must keep in mind that, although public concern about the plight of children was deep, very few devices were available for the appraisal of the child and its accurate measurement; no precise criteria or standards were widely recognized. The starting point is unquestionably the lack of scientific and technological instruments for the purpose of the knowledge of children. It is crucial to recall that issues such as infant mortality rates and compulsory education set up the context – namely, social environment and conditions – within which large-scale inquiries took place.<sup>9</sup> Children's bodies started to be observed, recorded, described, weighed, measured with diverse technologies, and physically as well as psychologically assessed at specific intervals in socio-medical encounters.

In tune with the line of argument brought forward, I shall emphasize that several social technologies relating to the condition of children contribute decisively to shaping childhood thoroughly; these technologies emerged as one of childhood's critical conditions of possibility. I do not intend to study these technologies technically but sociologically, via the sociology of scientific knowledge,<sup>10</sup> as they have materialized in the childhood collective nowadays to the point of being self-evident. At any rate, social technologies form a set of threads central to normality, hence to developmental thinking, for

<sup>9</sup> To a certain extent, social technologies, emerging in the wake of population studies and linked to developmental thinking, pertain to the implementation of a technical system in the social world. However, it must be asserted that these social technologies are very different from large technical systems such as transportation, electricity, water distribution and so on (Coutard 1999).

<sup>10</sup> The sociology of scientific knowledge has developed over the last thirty years as it moved beyond the classic Mertonian sociology of science. This new field purports to a set of empirical studies which examine social processes at the heart of the production and the assessment of knowledge by science. The most direct sustainable effect of this upon social technology arises because it also produces knowledge through categorization and classification.



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every childhood collective has to confront the question of the child's transformations – growth, maturation etc. – in both its body and mind.

These threads inform the childhood social fabric by means of the basic activities of the observation and recording of children. They paved the way to a more formal knowledge-driven activity, namely, the categorization and classification of children leading gradually to developmental thinking's sequences/stages framework.<sup>11</sup> The height and weight chart appears in this respect as the typified form of the latter, the first step among several others leading to the sequential development of childhood. Charts were the very first technologies brought forth to appraise child development, once related contagion and diseases were mastered; in other words, once the threat of infant mortality was no longer insuperable. The childhood technologies not only set up extensive categories – normality/abnormality etc. – but more finely-tuned ones, as we shall see with feeble-mindedness and, above all, with Binet's intelligence tests (Bijker *et al.* 1987).

Technical devices such as graphs and charts provide knowledge to a given collective and yet, as artefacts, they realize this exclusive task in a performative interface with other actors by way of parameters in need of clarification. Asserting that technical devices provide knowledge in the form of graphic visualization amounts to saying that technology bears a particular status, radically different from the usual purely instrumental status (as a residue) which mainstream sociology abides by. These considerations bring the line of argument to the complex question of the intricate relationships between social actors and technologies in the construction of a stabilized common world; this is where actor–network theory (ANT) comes to the fore.

The essential feature of ANT, relational materiality, denotes the power of science and technology: it arises from the action of both human and non-human actors linked together (Prout 1996).

<sup>11</sup> The stages/sequences framework leads quintessential developmentalism as I shall argue in this book. The steady emergence of the concepts of stage and sequence is generally considered as an outcome of statistical reasoning applied to population studies and their large-scale enquiries. They played a vital role in the creation of a common world – namely, the wording of children's predicaments and the implementation of an efficient framework to cope with their maturation – and in the process to stabilize it. Moreover the concepts of stage and sequence were not restricted to the childhood collective as they percolated into other scientific fields (Desrosières 1993; Hacking 1990; Ménoret 2002).

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Accordingly, its object constantly focuses on the deeds of mediation between the two distinct entities. I shall assert that ANT is particularly relevant to the circulation of graphs and charts in the childhood collective. Hence my hypothesis asserts that the assorted technical devices are mediators as well as translators, which operate as such in a network of relationships, namely a collective. A graph or a chart circulates – and interposes itself – between children, parents and the like by adding new resources to the collective which play a decisive role in the stabilization of a common world, thus raising the stakes.

Translation concerns the materials, which produce the practices ordering and patterning social life. It emphasizes the relational, constructed and process-oriented character of social life for it constitutes children as social beings emerging from the continuous interactions of humans among themselves throughout the inter-connectedness of a vast array of non-human objects with human actors. Mediation, on the other hand, is understood as an operation that furthers the circulation between human and non-humans. Non-human entities (technological devices such as graphs and charts) bear the status of an extension of human action, which then becomes more efficient and coordinated: the hammer is a prolongation of the hand that holds it just as the computer is a continuation of the fingers and the mind typing on the keyboard. Mediation transforms the collective's relationships in startling ways in the process of stabilizing it. To establish technical devices as mediators indicates that something happened, an event occurred. Charts and graphs make new connections while opening up new possibilities to the collective: novel forms of inscription and graphic visualization of children. They have the capacity to transform data and observations into visualized documents that interpose themselves between actors with a view to stabilizing the collective.

From a chaotic and disturbed situation in the last third of the nineteenth century to a more stabilized common world by the 1930s and 1940s, children's conditions were mediated and translated into diverse technical devices bringing forth developmental thinking. This passage – the trajectory leading to sequential development – is understood as the most acute attempt to stabilize the childhood collective. How was this massive achievement made possible? The answer to this question requires the concept of the collective cognitive dispositif, for it focuses on learning procedures, cognitive schema and institutionalized practices, all of which provide actors with resources to stabilize a common