

Chapter 16

The ‘New Paradigm’ of the Sociology of Childhood: Reflections on Social Justice Through the Italian Alternative Pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims at developing a critique of the so-called “New Paradigm” of the sociology of childhood, which was developed in British sociological schools between the 1960s and 1980s. The New Paradigm represented a substantial challenge to mainstream sociology of childhood and from this basis, Childhood Studies were capable of producing influential thinking about childhood and practices involving childhood. The main idea of this chapter is that the New Paradigm cannot constitute an adequate theoretical basis for ensuring the fulfilment of children’s lives in terms of freedom and social justice. Its central point, that childhood is socially constructed, is not articulated coherently and is internally inconsistent. Italian alternative pedagogical practices are used to provide a concrete backdrop for the theoretical objections raised against the New Paradigm. These alternative critical practices commonly assert that theory cannot be separated from practice and that ideals of social justice for children are based on the struggles of marginalised communities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims at assessing some of the principal tenets of the ‘New Paradigm’ of sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1990) in the light of current development of critical pedagogies, as elaborated in the alternative realities of Italy (e.g. *Gruppo Pedagogia Libertaria* of Reggio Emilia, the Parents’ Pedagogy Group [e.g. Fraire and Colapinto 2012], the ‘slow school’ movement [Zavalloni 2008] and the critical testimonies collected in Marielisa Muzi [2009]). This New Paradigm in the sociology of childhood finds its theoretical expression especially in Jenks (1996 [1982]), James and Prout (1990), James

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Jenks and Prout (1998) and Wyness (2012) more recently (for a brief history of the 'New Paradigm' see also: Woodhead 2009). The New Paradigm has been very successful in transforming the discipline of Childhood Studies, advancing a new agenda that highlights children's agency, but also undermining conceptually important social factors that sustain children and families' livelihood, as we will see later.

The new sociology of childhood, which was mainly developed in British sociological schools and hereafter will be referred to as 'New Paradigm', cannot constitute an adequate theoretical basis for ensuring the fulfilment of children's lives, less so for their liberation. A more precise articulation of critique of social factors around childhood can be found in the alternative Italian critical pedagogy (e.g. *Pedagogia dei Genitori* [Parents' Pedagogy Group] and *Rete per l'Educazione Libertarian* [Libertarian Education Network]), which will be used as a theoretical and practical base to move a critique to the sociology of childhood.

The notion that 'childhood is socially constructed' has become a mantra for the New Paradigm, but the point raised in this chapter is that this social construction is simply postulated and not actually articulated. We will show that the sociology of childhood misses what exactly is 'socially constructed' and forgets to ask who the subject of the construction is. Despite the explicit reference to child's agency, this agency is conceptualised in an abstract manner, which has unhelpful consequences for policies around childhood and children's rights. Here the example of child soldiers can be the most befitting one: are they victims of war (structural constraints) or moral agents (agency) that should be held responsible for their bellicose actions? In this chapter we will try to show that the New Paradigm facilitates this type of questions, which are so abstract that cannot have a practical answer: using alternative Italian Pedagogies will link theoretical matters, like 'agency' and 'structure', with the practical orientation of pedagogies, that is: how in this modern world our values may have a practical foundation and what do these values say about the nature of childhood, subjectivity and modernity.

CHILDHOOD, SUBJECTIVITY, AND MODERNITY

In this chapter, we will use general concepts such as 'subjectivity' and 'modernity', in order to advance the critique of the New Paradigm into the practical terrain. The question of subjectivity (and agency) is central. Subjectivity is considered against the forms of modernity as elaborated both in Critical Theory (Bonefeld 2014) and in the practice of alternative Italian critical pedagogy (see the previous section). The question is: how the agency may or may not emerge in the social context of modernity? The stress has to be in the dialectical relationship between the social context and the subject that is in process of formation. There is a particularity of childhood, as there is a particularity of family life that needs to be taken into account, and child's agency needs to be seen through and against the integration of childhood into social life. More importantly: theoretical matters (and the issues of 'values') must converge with considerations around practice, as we maintain that the field of ideas and values cannot be severed by social practice (Bonefeld 2014, but see also Zavalloni 2012).

Modernity is here understood as capitalist modernity and the analysis of the sociology of childhood will be compared and contrasted with that of Critical Theory. We will see in the section 'Socialisation and childhood' how there is a need to understand the way children are integrated into their society because this integration is rather a complex concept which includes resistance to mainstream values and norms and creativity from the part of children and families. The context for integration is capitalist

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