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Citizenship, cultural identity and exclusion

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In order to become citizens - that is responsible and active members of political life - children need support from their families, who help them to achieve primary socialisation, to fit into a larger community and broaden their minds to society at large, by which they eventually acquire a sense of history. Is open-mindedness still possible when a child's family is marginalised and stands apart from economic, social and cultural life? Parents who are left out in the cold can neither give hope to their children, nor inscribe a concrete meaning to the words 'past' and 'future'. Conversely, when parents - even though they are poor - can pass a message of hope on to their children, then a sense of belonging to a cultural community and the possibility of becoming a citizen are unspoilt. What role might school play in the case of families living in such dire straits? The school appears to be the only institution that can manage to make up for the harm done to children whose parents are thus excluded. School can also help such families to keep in touch with society.

Past and present: the acculturation of poor children

Luce Dupraz has contributed greatly to our thinking on cultural transmission and to ways of re-establishing communication between disadvantaged families and the school. In his book 'Le temps d'apprivoiser l'école' (Time to tame the school, 1995) he discusses how he was struck by the similarity between the situation of the primary school in the early years of France's Third Republic and that of schools in the most deprived areas today. Just as it was then, for him the need now is to contribute to the 'acculturation of poor children'.

While the similarities between the two should be acknowledged, are there nevertheless not profound differences between the two situations, differences to do with the cultural rootedness of 19th century children in comparison with their 20th century counterparts?

Acculturation and cultural deprivation

Although the issue in the 19th century was indeed the acculturation of the children of the poor, this process should be seen more as a change of culture - that is their integration into a new culture. The change was often profound and sudden: a change of language, a new relationship to time and space, a struggle against traditional practices, new rules of politeness, a new relationship to the body…. The violence of this acculturation left its mark and is recorded in childhood accounts. However, it is precisely the existence and the strength of the original cultural roots that made this cultural shift so difficult.

The situation of children from the poorest families in the late 20th century is undoubtedly more serious, since even the initial process of 'cultural nesting', which takes place in all families, may not operate satisfactorily. In families living in exclusion, that are themselves dis-integrated, the process of primary socialisation is itself fragile, whereas nineteenth-century peasant children were anchored in a popular oral culture through local but often powerful cultural roots.

The narrow horizon of woods and fields, the recurring rhythms of work and feast days, regional songs and games, ancient solidarities and feuds: all wove a web of symbolic support around children, successive envelopes of meanings which sustained them and helped them grow, human beings among human beings, despite the 'false beliefs', 'old habits' and stubborn and repetitive practices opposed by the School of the Republic, the ambassador of Reason and modernity. There is doubt that the shift to cities, to jobs in factories or mines, represented a total break with this world. The destabilisation of mores, described in works on the social question, clearly shows that the move away from the land quickly modified cultural behaviour. However, it has been shown that a mixed lifestyle (of temporary or part-time work in the city), and also the reconstruction of a new working-class culture (based on shared interests, worker solidarity and the maintenance of hope reflected in the struggle for a better life), did not leave families excluded from all of the networks of symbols, or from the desire to pass them on.

At the most profound level, what changes with exclusion is undoubtedly the development of the incapacity to give children any hope. Families that live in the deepest poverty are those whose standard of living does not offer children sufficient cultural openings, but above all it is these families for whom past and future do not really exist. Jerome Bruner (1983) speaks of 'subcultures of hopelessness', by which he means groups that seem to have given up any hope of controlling their own destiny. He shows how hopelessness is communicated to the young in a very subtle way, since the parents' sense of powerlessness leads them constantly to confine their plans and actions. In these terms, it could be said that the 'subcultures of hopelessness' are precisely those where acculturation can no longer take place because adults are lacking social integration and a life plan, and can no longer pass on meaning to their children, or provide them with models and direction, or even with the self-confidence which makes it possible to learn and to live.

Bruner's description of the links between emotional and intellectual development underlines the importance of these forms of 'non-determined emotional skills' such as self-confidence, the ability to try again when one fails, and an orientation towards the future. These are the skills that Feurstein identifies as necessary to revive children suffering from 'cultural deprivation'. Even though the ten-point list seems somewhat rigid, it nevertheless shows the speed at which unsatisfactory 'cultural mediation' can damage children if adults - and the mother in the case of a baby - are crushed and have lost the will to teach and to transmit. What may be missing are:

- Intentionality and the sense of reciprocity (provided by early play)
- Support for transference and generalisation
- Mediation of meaning
- Mediation of the sense of competence (through praise by the mother)
- Mediated control of behaviour (through which the child controls its initial impulsiveness and thus becomes capable of forming plans).

These forms of adult support enable the child to perform goal-oriented, ordered and shared tasks with sufficient self-confidence, a process that is both the basis of intelligent behaviour (as Feurstein maintains) and of primary socialisation. The essential point is indeed this lack of relationship to the future, of hope for oneself and one's children, which truly damages the individual's deepest roots, and extends to future generations. As proof,

we need only to look at the accounts of certain children from peasant or working-class roots who, by contrast, and despite a background of what might be called 'cultural deprivation', nevertheless achieved social success. Through the help of exceptional adults, the essential survived in them.

It is hard to imagine tougher conditions than those experienced by Toinou, a child from the Ambert country, apparently growing up with little maternal care and left largely to his own devices from a very early age (Sylvere, 1980). All his support came from his grandfather in Montsimon. And what support, what a peerless teacher he had in that illiterate peasant! The grandfather treated Toinou as a friend, took him seriously, helped him in the planning and building of a child's cart, took him collecting pine cones with a bag perfectly matched to his strength, worked him each day on useful and appropriate tasks, and taught him all sorts of things. It was the 'oasis of Montsimon' in a life of bullying and blows. But above all, what an impetus to the future this amazing grandfather gave the young Toinou. Looking up at the stars one night, he says to the child:

> They all have names. But the people who know them keep them to themselves, like a secret. You'll be needing to go to the cities, where you can learn that kind of thing. There'll be no land for you here. There's nothing to keep you.

And he ended with this advice:

> What people won't tell you, don't be afraid to steal. If you're really set on learning, even the thunder of God won't be able to stop you.

This is remote from the educated culture of the time, but also shows great awareness of the value and importance of knowledge, and of its monopolisation by the dominant elites. What counted, more than Nature and contemplation of the stars, was finding out their names: A powerful and subversive message was passed on to the child, showing him the path he should follow at any price. Instead of impotence and passivity, the attitude instilled into the child by this impoverished peasant was one of immense hope and a kind of rebellion.

Born into a poor but emotionally stable working-class background, the writer André Stil (1979) describes his childhood as 'coddled', well protected, well supported, with two parents who were keen for him to learn. It was only at high school that he would discover social difference, become conscious of the cultural poverty of his milieu, of his family's habits (such as wearing used sheets as underwear, and of washing in a certain way). He discovered humiliation and came to see his parents as 'poor folk'. However, during his primary schooling, the ever-present emotional support from both parents - Fernande and Constant - when he made the effort to learn, the commitment to his success, had already given the child an irresistible momentum:

> Constant, you never see him write, or read, except the newspaper. But when Bernard reads, sometimes his father comes and sits right next to him, with chairs almost touching. He is there doing nothing, saying nothing, but it is understood that he is there, that he feels good there, because the child is reading.

The father's silence seems to reflect his support, and shows how technical help is secondary to real assistance, to moral support.

What Constant, or Fernande, expect from Bernard's studies is vague, never stated, but immense. What is clear is that it is Bernard that they care about - for him and no one else, including themselves.

There is also silence concerning the child's future career. Nothing is really stated, doubtless because nothing is specifically envisaged. It is nothing but an immense hope, the wish that he should have a life different from theirs, and the knowledge that only school can achieve this because there is nothing to inherit. However, the impetus given by the parents is not so simple, because there are two further forms of cultural transmission. The family does not simply say 'don't do things like us'. The father's message is more complex: Constant also wishes to pass on technical skills to his son:

> Everything he can do with his hands, Constant never fails to teach his son, willy-nilly. You might think sometimes that he is looking for respect, but no, he is only interested in what is useful. Not at all as a way of proclaiming: there are things that I know, that I can do too ...

Although it is true that Constant is not seeking to show off his practical skills, it means that the child can still admire his father, find possibilities for identification, lean on him, lean against him, even if Constant also tells him: 'Don't do things like me' and he has somehow to grow against him in order to fulfil this. All the scenes of shared play in making bows, slings, technical objects, are exemplary because they illustrate the complicity out of which growth arises:

> man and child are side-by-side, sitting or squatting in the grass by the biggest willow, in perfect harmony.

Amongst the advice given and the values handed down, more important even than technical skills, it is remarkable to see that Constant imparts a curious attitude towards the forbidden:

> and also, don't be too ready to give up what you want because it is forbidden. Without permission, you can't fish in the pond, you can't climb the slag-heap… You can't go into the old Pasquier pit.

'If you want', says Constant, 'everything is forbidden'. Curiously, what would especially stick with Bernard is the 'if you want'. There is an ambivalence in Constant's words, as he simultaneously lists what is forbidden and points to the possibility of transgression. Flexibility with regard to the rules, a flexibility that makes them relative and somehow gives the idea that they can change. The child's picture of Constant takes up this theme of the forbidden and expresses a new type of paternal authority: a father who, rather than holding you back, restraining you, forbidding everything, instead shows you unexpected powers. The value of technical skills (another conception of authority) and a desacralisation of rules, (they must be obeyed, but they can also be disobeyed), are the elements of a working-class culture, with specific relation to action, that Constant is here passing on to his son.

For the tradition of class struggle to survive, for the torch to be passed on, it takes something like a licence to subversion to be handed down from father to son. We see this more clearly in another account, Karlin and Laine's description of their youth in 'La Mort du Père' (Death of the Father 1985). Father and son are on a boat, the father is telling his son sea stories:

> I learnt the essential law that made me a man amongst men... I heard intensely in my father's words the assertion of a relationship and the summons of loyalties.

Then the boat meets a Spanish ship with Republican sailors leaning over the railings. It is 1936, and the father raises his fist and encourages his son to do the same:

> I had the feeling that he was taking me seriously, and that he was now resolved to show me that he was my father... Then he explained to me, in simple and patient words, injustice, freedom and its struggles, solidarity and fascism...
> ... I vaguely perceived that it took only a brief space for the child to be born into the father's legitimacy and for my connection with History to be shown …

These passages clearly show that the father's word is essential - through it the son is truly acknowledged as son. It also introduces the child to a community, maps out his path and sets an example to follow.

When this process of transmission is absent, there is no past, no future, no loyalties, no plans. When the parents are totally unintegrated to the point of feeling no sense of community, then no initial cultural integration can occur. Everything is present - desperately present - for life exists only in the day-to-day. Such impoverished individuals are no longer sustained by the richness of cultural time, and are left with nothing to say to their children.

We should perhaps consider the specific situation of single mothers. The examples above all refer to the father/son relationship and to the transmission of 'loyalties' via the father. It is a fact that in patriarchal society it was the father, with his connection to the world, who provided the introduction to culture, because he was the mediator between the family and the wider community. The mother ruled the domestic hearth. In a society where many children are brought up by mothers alone, what are the consequences?

Even if the mother is sufficiently able (Winnicot) to provide day-to-day care and introduce the child to its first symbolic exchanges, even if her love and her courage protect the child from the very first 'cultural deprivations', she is not really capable in a patriarchal society of integrating the child into a wider social life. Brought up in a society where women 'did not go in for politics' and where their social involvement was indirect - via father or husband - she has little interest in 'public affairs'. How could she have the idea or the desire to 'connect the child to history'? We do not yet have the measure of these transitional situations, in which young women, still in a sense dependent on the models and references of a patriarchal society, find themselves independent - even if they are assisted financially - and responsible for a child who needs to be 'introduced to culture'. There is no doubt that early action is helpful in preventing the emotional abandonment of children with young single mothers. Work on the psychological front is required to prevent the most serious damage. But how is it really possible to get round the socially constructed incompetence which has meant that women are not 'cultural mediators' capable of offering the child a glimpse of broader horizons?

The support - real but also symbolic - of public bodies and in particular of the School is all the more essential for these single-parent families where nothing would otherwise provide the sense of broader social solidarity.

Today's schools and situations of great poverty

Very deprived families (these days referred to as belonging to the Fourth World) have a difficult relationship with the school. Although it has been shown - from the analysis of real accounts and from interviews - that respect for the school still subsists with a degree of trust in the institution, contacts with the school remain rare and difficult both for parents and teachers.

The Joutard report on 'Major Poverty and Success at School' (1992) has shown ways in which these difficulties can be understood and resolved.

In very deprived areas parents take little part in organised activities in the local community (youth and cultural centres, social centres). They often receive no social help, let alone cultural support, at school (they are rarely seen at parents' meetings or at parties and outings). Their children's cultural universe can be very limited (the home or caravan, the street, the local shop, or television if they have electricity). Their universe is limited and they do not try to go outside it, even if given the opportunity.

It is this paradox that Joutard begins by analysing, confirming Bruner's analyses on self-limitation through the fear of further rejection. In chapter IV 'School and culture', the report analyses the reasons for parental non-participation:

> Fear of the unknown: they are afraid of shame, of humiliation for themselves and their children, of being different, speaking differently ...

The feeling that 'it's not for us': as Bourdieu clearly shows, it is this attitude which precisely expresses the balance between aspirations and desires on the one hand, and actual possibilities on the other. However, here it locks them even further into a cycle of cultural deprivation and exclusion, through the rejection and fear of that which is arranged or created to help them escape from exclusion. The attitude which leads to being 'afraid of being out of place' will encompass a trip to a national museum and a local exhibition of their children's drawings, regardless of whether such outings are free or require payment.

Home centredness may arise from the fact that even the relationship with the children is perceived as precarious and under threat (with a latent fear of removal of children into care). As a result, outings and class exchanges will be refused because of the possible cost but also due to a more powerful fear of separation.

There is also the fear of mockery and rejection for the children themselves. The issue of appearance - no doubt less significant than in the 19th century when dirty children dressed in rags were a more common occurrence - is still present in the fear that they may not be sufficiently well dressed, or not have the right clothes.

This is how the 'limited involvement of parents' can be explained. It locks them further into social exclusion, and above all affects their children precisely at the level of their cultural development.

What can the school do?

Schools cannot end economic and social exclusion, but they can at least attempt to establish links with families in difficulty and try to break the cycle of exclusion that constantly threatens the child. The school has a crucial role in cultural terms, since it

alone can provide the cultural environment that children lack at home. At the same time, it may be the only institution that allows parents to establish social ties outside the home. The vicious circle can only be broken through a snowball effect through which parents gradually recover their self-confidence and their trust in the institution, and their capacity to perceive themselves as partners with a voice:

> The School must monitor the child's progress, announce it, take pleasure in it, even if it falls short of the norm. The School should be much clearer and more positive in celebrating achievement. In reading for example, when does the child receive recognition for significant progress? Often just once, when it is announced that 'he can read'. And even then this fantastic event in the child's life is often reported confusedly through notes and comments on the time it took or the work remaining to be done... (Alain Bourgarel, Yvelines IUFM CEFISIM).

By giving the child better support, but also by helping parents to be parents, the notion of partnership can begin to mean something. Such a partnership must be constructed without condescension or paternalism. Jean Vanlangermeersch, an industrial doctor in the deprived areas of the Pas de Calais, puts it well:

> Partnership is a word that is used more and more today. It punctuates the language emanating from institutions, from associations, from social services... Enabling Fourth-World families to be 'partners' with the school is about much more than speeches or grand promises ...

Working at the sharp end, the discrepancy between the inflation of the term and the reality seems clear. Does this mean that in certain circumstances partnership is impossible? Not if we are sensitive to the nature of those particular circumstances. It is then a matter of constructing the possibility of partnership.

The way the school works needs to become more transparent. Families could be asked for their opinions about the school, and on their children's future. They should be asked how they teach their children (to speak, to read), how they themselves learn with their children, and perhaps from their children. It is a matter of finding out what people say, even if it is incomprehensible, or shocking or inaudible. It is also about recognising the child, reaching out to the child, even and especially if he shuts himself off, if he buries himself: 'What are you saying? What do you mean?'

What is said is not the most important thing, but acknowledging that the child and the parents have a voice will make it possible to begin a partnership. If we want the schooling of families in difficulty to be the means by which such families reconnect with society, rather than the occasion to legitimise further exclusion, then such an effort is absolutely essential.

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