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Political competencies and childhood citizenship

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Non-political participation? The Convention on the Rights of the Child and political participation

Democratic societies, as we know them, are based on consensual principles such as participation, freedom of information, of association and of assembly. When we say democracy we also mean equal opportunities for all citizens to participate. But history is not devoid of examples of the hardships some minority groups (eg women, blacks) have suffered in asserting their claim to political rights and their ongoing struggle for the redefinition of existing power relations. This paper is focused on a particular contemporary minority group – children – whose rights seem to be denied, even though they have been acknowledged by a Convention.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), among other mechanisms, is undoubtedly, responsible for the promotion of children's participation and for actually introducing it into social scientific discourses about childhood. Due to its scope of action and legal nature, CRC has had an impact on both ethics/culture and politics. Although we can say CRC has promoted the production of new discourses and, to some extent, the rebuilding of new practices regarding children, in which their voices and actions are valued, there are still some paradoxes concerning the exercise of children's rights of citizenship.

Children have no political rights, such as the right to vote, below the age of 18, but at 16 they can be held legally accountable for any crimes they commit…old enough to be brought to justice, but not old enough to participate? If they can contribute to the nation's productivity after they reach 16, why are children's participation competencies still seen as a project with no visibility whatsoever concerning politics? The examples referred to previously could be used to challenge the concept of the political participation of children and youths.

We do not care much for debating children's participation according to the formal models of representative democratic societies. What we really care for is the difference between theory and practice, between law in books and law in action, which, according to Santos (1993, p39), characterises the modern State. This notion has been abundantly demonstrated by the sociology of law, so we could say that the law ultimately plays an instrumental rather than an effective role in assuring and promoting the rights of the child.

In spite of the fact that the term 'participation' is only explicitly referred to three times in the broad set of articles which constitute the CRC (article 9, no.2, article 31, no.1 and no.2), those evoked to support children's participation do not explicitly use the term, but build upon the dynamics implicit in an array of articles which compromise the exercise of the rights associated with the right to participation. Those articles which directly refer to the principles and mechanisms underlying the exercise of the right to participation – concepts like opinion, expression, thought, association, assembly and information – were included on a first set (articles 12, 13, 14, 15, 17). These concepts are instrumental in operationalising and consolidating children's participation.

Article 12 of the CRC is usually referred to as an icon of children's participation. The right contemplated in this article radically challenges a more traditional attitude of excluding children from the action and decision-making arenas. This article does not directly refer to the need to give the child the right to autonomy, or control per se, while ignoring any other essential requisites for the exercise of this right, such as maturity and social competence; this is why we say it introduces major changes in the participation models which depend on age criteria, because it advocates that all children are capable of expressing their views, provided that they are offered the varied set of strategies required to enhance their competencies. In order to respect the child's opinions and to enhance his or her participation competencies, age and maturity criteria must always be combined with variables such as the child's social context, the nature of the decision, the child's life experience and adult support throughout the process. Above all, it presupposes the involvement of adults who somehow share professional or family responsibilities concerning the children, so that they can make sure they feel stimulated by the possibility of participation.

- Article 13 advocates the right of the child to expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information of any kind, through any media of the child's choice, either orally, in writing, in print or in the form of art.

- Article 14 refers to the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and the respect of the rights and duties of the child's parents or legal guardians to provide direction in the exercise of his or her right.

- Article 15 refers to the right of the child to freedom of association and assembly, which includes the right to plan and enforce decisions to fulfil those same rights.

- Article 17 refers to the right of the child to access information and material aimed to the promotion of 'his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health'. The observation of this right is essential for the child to understand the range, the usefulness and interest of his or her participation and, at the same time it is essential for adults to come up with renewed conceptualisations about the significant role of children's participation in some processes; that is, to consider children's participation, through their action and voice, a genuine process.

A second set of articles (articles 2, 9, 21, 23, 24 and 31) includes a few rights which, besides being aimed at specific aspects of children's everyday lives (including family rights and duties, the fact that the child should not be separated from his or her parents, adoption, the rights of disabled children, the right to health and the right to rest and leisure), build upon a concept of participation in what concerns the way such rights shall be exercised by the child. Since CRC identifies basic principles of political participation, such as opinion, information, association and assembly, we ought to ask ourselves why children are being excluded from it.

We agree with Milne (1996) when he says that participation 'is not a political campaign that puts children first, as children's liberation, but a process of creating a society that is inclusive of young citizens.' Franklin (1986; 1998) supports this idea by referring to the exclusion of children from full political status 'an enigma which democratic politics should not allow…what is at stake here is not simply the denial of citizen rights but the right to be a citizen.' (Franklin, 1986, p 24). The same author considers that 'more important for children's experience of childhood is the fact that this exclusion is the basis

for a range of other exclusions from decision-making that include not only State but also community, school and family'.

According to Ennew (2000) there are two consequences of this social exclusion: 'children are subject to laws they have not participated in making' – which is fundamental in any democratic state –and according to Franklin (1986), 'children are the only grouping in a democracy whose political rights are entrusted to another group, to be exercised on their behalf, without the restraint of any mechanism of accountability or democratic control'.

The negativity present in the exercise of citizenship by children (Sarmento) builds on classic and traditional concepts about children and their social and civic inadequacies, which nonetheless are still tremendously visible in the different contexts of childhood. So it seems that children's political rights, in spite of having been defined and legitimatised by the CRC, depend on the discourses and praxis of adults. In order to commit to the promotion of a paradigm of children's participation and the consolidation of citizenship in childhood, they should discuss children's competencies, sense of belonging and impact on the community, participation, etc, so they can work together, not only in the making of practices but also of policies, whether they are local, national or transnational.

Collective action groups and social movements of children: challenges and opportunities

In a world characterised by intense international interactions, which many authors have called globalisation (Featherstone, 1990; Giddens, 1998; Santos, 2001), the debate on the phenomenon has become quite relevant. Part of the debate is concerned with the relationship between globalisation and children. It consists of, among others things, discussing exclusion and its impact on the various aspects and dimensions of childhood (Kaufman and Rizzini, 2002; Rizzini, 2004). In this sense, including children in the debate on globalisation could be characterised as telescopic inclusion and macroscopic exclusion practices (Marçal, 2002, p54). However, due to changes over the last few decades, it would be wise to conclude that this current setting deserves a closer look. We are able to identify and enumerate instruments towards emancipation, experiences, initiatives and struggles concerning the rights of the child which seem to have contributed to a progressive, though slow and troubled, inclusion of children in the world's social and political agendas. This has also played a fundamental role in gaining a deeper knowledge of children and of childhood and in deconstructing some persistent ideas about childhood (Ponte, 2002; Tomás and Soares, 2004); on the other hand, it has become a potential transformer of social reality.

In this paper, we confine ourselves to introducing some hints for reflection and analysis of social movements of children (SMCs), such as the movements of children and youths in Africa, Asia and Latin America; starting with Latin America, in the late 1970s, and Africa and Asia, in the 1990s. There are national and local examples such as MNNATSOP (National Movement of Organised Working Children and Adolescents of Peru); AMWCY (African Movement of Working Children and Youths) and Bhima Sangha (working children's union in Karnataka, India). Working children and youths from all over the world have come together, not to play the victim's role (although not denying the fact), but to make a claim for their status as active social and political actors, in which SMCs play only a small part. It was through these common thoughts and claims that they had the chance to participate in the making of Convention 182, which concerns the

prohibition and immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour and was adopted by the International Labour Conference on 17 June 1999, and the World Summit on Children at the UN headquarters, New York, in May 2002.

The Movimento dos Sem Terrinha/The Little Landless (Brazil), is another example of an SMC. They have been meeting since 1996, and claim 'Education is our right and the State's duty' (*Carta das Crianças Sem Terrinha à Sociedade*/Letter from Little Landless to Society, October 2004, VIII State Meeting of the Little Landless of RS), to learn about the rights of the child, such as the freedom of association and the right to land, among others.

Another reference is the *Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua*/National Movement of Street Boys and Girls (MNMMR), a non-government organisation founded in 1985 with the main goal of fighting for the rights of children and adolescents in Brazil. It is focused on street boys and girls. They participate actively in the making of laws and public policies concerning children's social group.

Though still at an early stage, we consider children's cosmopolitanism as a transnational movement for the rights of the child, which finds a parallel in national, local and international organisations (UNICEF, Childwatch, International Save the Children Alliance, UNESCO and so on); in scientific research and production, namely in the relevant part played by the sociology of childhood (Tomás and Soares, 2004), which has contributed to consolidate the concept of the child as someone with rights; and in the struggles, organisations, initiatives and experiences of the SMCs.

We shall focus our analysis only on the latter, without, however, being able to fully characterise the complex and distinct theories and lines of thought whose main goals are the new social movements, including the SMCs. The sociological literature on social movements claims that these movements are successful when able to influence political agendas and consequently social practices, because the group is acknowledged as a political actor (Cohen, 1985, p 675). With regard to the social movements of children, though diverse and heterogeneous, the manifestations of collective action against (perpetual) injustices against children and the defence and promotion of their rights are evident in the objective distribution of the globalisation effects and the different discourses which adopt different perspectives of the world, of children and childhood. We can say that herein lie some of the biggest challenges to children's cosmopolitanism: their participation in democracy and the transnationalisation of strong and interactive movements of children.

Children's movements, associations, struggles and claims, rather than being supported by models based on potentially general and linear analysis, must be reviewed in the light of the structurally uneven access to power, of economic assets and symbolic resources, of the uneven social and economic redistribution, of the inequality amongst social groups, of the uneven power relationships between nation-states and social groups (Fraser, 1992; Chomsky, 1999; Santos, 2001). The SMCs take place in three different space-time categories: transnationally, nationally and locally. Nevertheless, the fact is that many of these networks for strategic action, which help construct and transform children's reality, work according to a particular and local scale, ultimately get 'trapped in scales which prevent them from being credible alternatives to more global ones [dominant scale logics]' (Santos, 2003, p 745).

As collective action contexts, social movements promote a collective mobilisation of individual rights, so we can state for sure that we are in the face of a broader conceptualisation of rights. Since thousands of children today are living on the margin of this principle and market values overcome the child's needs and the new forms of democracy, this notion of the rights of the child promotes a distinct articulation from the one that is currently prevalent, at least in what concerns discourse and practices. The idea of justice suggests an unbiased distinction between parties and a qualitative differentiation of rights. The unveiling of particular situations where rights are prevented from being exercised suggests an uneven distribution of those same rights.

Children have, increasingly and publicly, been given more importance in the discourses of political and non-government organisations. Children's participation (even if often symbolic) is considered to be essential to improving their life conditions and that of their families, to discuss new kinds of relationships between adults and children, to contribute with new sources of knowledge about childhood and, last but not least, to create new spaces. The public aspect is vital and must be reviewed and considered, especially because there are social movements being dragged into this symbolic struggle. Some events are perfect examples of this, such as the Children's Forum (New York, 2002), the *Foro d'Niños* – the first Social Forum of Mallorca (Spain, 2003), the World Social Forum and the *ForumZinho Social Mundial*, which has, since 2002, been taking place in parallel with WSF.

By insisting on struggling and claiming, children manage to bring to the political arena some of the issues which, until recently, were on the margins of discussion. Some of the lines between public and private were crossed, because alternative interpretations of their needs were offered. In addition, new public discourses are being made, while 'some of the hegemonic means of interpretation and communication are being channelled, changed and/or moved' (Fraser, 1989).

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