

Caterina Satta

**Michael Wyness, "Childhood". Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, 210 pp.**

(doi: 10.2383/80406)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2015

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book Review

**Michael Wyness, *Childhood*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015, 210 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/80406

Among the array of international key concept books, *Childhood* by Michael Wyness stands out for its analytical and original approach. At the core of the book lies the notion of children's agency and the concept of global childhoods, topics that have already been dealt with by various authors in other books, but are tackled by Wyness under a different light. He looks at child agency from multiple perspectives and also analyses the complex effects of globalization on children and childhood.

The book develops on many levels – global and local, disciplinary and multidisciplinary, adults and children, academic and political – in which the concepts of childhood and agency are analytically deconstructed and reconstructed. The new social studies of childhood have developed an area of multidisciplinary research and theorization on children and childhood, challenging many modernist conceptualizations that have been shaped by theoretical and empirical developmental psychology. Against this backdrop, the concept of agency has almost become a mantra when referring to children.

This book tries to give greater substance to this term without challenging its significance, but on the contrary by revealing its many strengths and potential. It does so by looking at childhood within the context of the social, political, economic and cultural large-scale changes that have influenced the nature of adult-child relations. It describes some key dimensions and important issues in the life of children, who are often the subject of political and media-run debates.

Child labour, child health, child abuse, children's involvement in conflicting armies, children's premature sexualisation and the different forms of inequality that children must face on a daily basis are some of the issues covered by the author, yet he presents them under a different perspective. An example is child's labour which, he argues, children must not necessarily be safeguarded against by imposing bans, as advocated by international awareness campaigns. In fact, in the majority world, labour gives children the means to become involved in their material well-being. Many sociological studies show that often children claim the right to work, to be able to work in safety and in a dignified manner and to have access to free schooling. This perspective shifts the issues at stake. Abuse and exploitation are condemned, yet should not be prevented by prohibiting all forms of labour.

In his narrative, the author underlines the relationship between participation and labour, and explores the ways in which children in developing countries combine school and work by producing “distinctive” rather than “deficit” childhood models. Indeed, child labour is seen as a major social problem, a form of deficit childhood model (or a deficit model of child participation) within international policies because it doesn't meet the Westernised “global standard of a regular schooled child” [p. 80.] The book shows how this is a culturally specific frame of reference which reflects the values and norms of more affluent countries and therefore should not be applied globally. The “participating child” is the dominating model in Westerns countries. However, the risk of accepting

only one model of child participation is that other forms of participation that are more inclusive and widely-spread in the majority world are discarded, whereas they would contribute to understand children's lives and different types of childhood.

More specifically, the first chapter addresses the foundations of the concept of agency and the "paradigmatic status" it has achieved in the field of childhood studies in recent decades. In contrast with a developmental approach, this new paradigm recognises children's capacity as agents to actively participate and contribute to cultural production and change, since their very early stages of childhood. In this chapter Wyness traces its growth as a key and mainstream concept and introduces different studies that have investigated the true meaning of children's agency.

By studying the topic in depth, it becomes clear that this concept, assumed by now in an almost mechanical way, reflects the model of a Western liberal society dominated by values of self-determination, rationality and independence, which has forged an individualistic interpretation of childhood and agency. "The individualistic strand of thinking has generated an over-romanticised conception of agency" [p. 10] that has driven a search for authenticity in children's voices and participation. This conception is related to tighter relational models, in which children's agency is embedded in an intricate web of relationships with their peers, but mainly with adults.

Following this strand, we should stop adhering to a vision of powerful adults in contrast to powerless children, and explore "the way that children's agency is enabled through the kinds of relationships that children have with their social environments" [p. 13.]

At this point the author introduces us to two of the main topics in the book, namely the concepts of "generation" and of "inter-generational relations" where agency "emerges from the dynamic nature of inter-generational relations" [p. 13,] which are also an expression of power relations. Power is not presented as a zero-sum conception but "emerges from complex ongoing power relations between children and adults" [p. 14] which also encompass children's refusal to be empowered in certain contexts.

The last paragraph is dedicated to the way children see their capacities and agency. There is a substantial amount of analysis on children's agency, but not as much on children's voices about children's agency. The author discusses the conceptualisation of children, in particular regarding their status and level of participation at school, and it becomes apparent that for children the fact of having a voice is "a way of generating change" [p. 29.] Agency is seen as an end but children are in fact mainly focused on the outcome of their active participation.

As a general comment to the book, there is a scarce presence of children's voices and of ethnographic accounts of children's lives. Even if this is not the aim of a handbook, more examples of children's lives and words would have helped the reader understand and "see" the agency "in practice" and not only in theory.

In the second chapter, Wyness takes a broader political and institutional stance in his assessment of the meaning of children's agency, the status of children and the re-conceptualization of childhood. In particular, he focuses on the social distribution of children's agency, drawing on factors that differentiate children's lives and childhoods, such as poverty, social class and age, and exploring the ways that different groups of children exercise their agency.

Taking as an example the wide-spread alarm of the “disappearance of childhood” and the dangers threatening childhood that are echoed in the mainstream media outlets – consisting in particular of the premature sexualisation of children and of the consumerist world – he quotes a number of studies which demonstrate that, on the contrary, children are capable of taking control of these worlds. Childhood and the agency of children – that these public narratives would want to hide – are reinforced by the concept of children’s agency itself. Focusing on agency, it is in fact possible to shape different conceptions of childhood that fully position children within the social institutions they are part of.

However, Wyness warns the reader of the risk of oversimplification that can arise from overestimating children’s abilities, thus introducing a two-pronged approach to the issue. On the one side he takes into account the social backgrounds that differentiate the infant population and determine “the quantity and quality of agency with which children are able to deploy” [p. 59]; on the other hand, he highlights the types of agency that children can continue to exercise in spite of structural conditioning. A lot is at stake when it comes to acknowledging or disowning the actions of children as being “agentic” and who is in a position to acknowledge and legitimise their actions.

The third chapter analyses the relationship between children, childhood and globalization, and the consequences that globalization produces on children in economic and political terms. Globalization has produced a re-work in the debate on structure/agency, focusing on topics such as local and global issues. This chapter suggests the way in which childhood can be theorised in terms of complex relations within global trends and local factors. Globalization has had a great impact both on our understanding of childhood and on children’s social relations: from how they access education to their ability to engage in increasingly creative ways through global media.

The fourth chapter hones in on the political and cultural aspects of globalisation and on the different ways in which childhood is constructed on a national and local level. It explores the ways in which children from different political and cultural backgrounds use global media to develop their identities, and highlights the discrepancies between a single model of childhood which emphasises global uniformity and differing conceptions of childhood that underscore specific local traits.

The fifth chapter analyses the position of children within the social structure and focuses on the generational approaches in studying childhood. Generation is presented as a dimension of structural analysis, which can be both complementary and supersede more conventional analytical categories such as gender and social class. Generation is frequently described as a “contested concept,” whereas it is presented in social studies of childhood as a valid interpretative approach.

The author highlights two prevailing approaches regarding the concept of generation: categorical and relational. The former outlines an oppositional difference between adults and children within the generational social order and the latter gives more prominence to the action and the agent rather than to the structure and to the role that children and adults play inside these overarching theoretical structures. In the first approach children are seen as a group with traits and interests that are opposite to those of the group of adults. Here generation is considered as a dimension of social stratification and a way to recognize power dynamics and highlight the economic and social inequalities linked to the generational status. On the contrary, in the relational approach, the gener-

ation category is inhabited by adults and children who are implicated in social relational processes. It is therefore not interpreted as a status but as a way to draw closer, rather than a means to separate children and adults through their social condition.

The sixth and last chapter reflects on the position of childhood studies within the social sciences and the implications of an interdisciplinary approach in the research on children and childhood.

Currently the aim of new international social studies of childhood is to promote a shift, moving from the perspective of a single discipline dominated by developmental psychology to a more multidisciplinary approach, which would result in a richer and broader analysis of children and childhood, leading to an integrated approach instead of several fields running parallel.

However, calling for an authentic interdisciplinary approach poses questions with regard to the nature of childhood: is childhood a social construct or is it determined biologically? The difficult relationship between sociology and psychology/biology – in other words between a constructivist view and a biological and developmental approach – means that the relation between the two fields is still perceived as a dualism.

Political actions, academia and practitioners alike have concurrently spread the notion of childhood as an investment on a global scale. New trends aim to consider childhood as a biological and social nexus and soften any differences and oppositions by trying to find an agreement between the social and biological interpretations. In the conclusions the author focuses on the difficult relationship between sociology and psychology and on the role played by the new sociology of childhood in questioning a rigid vision of child development as the only analytical frame of reference for studying children.

While this is happening on an international level, I believe that in the Italian scientific debate – which lacks almost entirely a sociological approach to childhood and where childhood is seen as the target of social and health-related policies only – perhaps a multidisciplinary approach would be advisable, bearing in mind that childhood features deeply-rooted and necessarily specific social aspects, and not only biological (in the medical sense) or psychic. In Foucauldian terms, disciplines such as psychology and pedagogy have “dominated” our understanding of childhood and still construct a narrative that mainly focuses on the concept of development.

To sum up, the book has the merit of putting childhood at the centre of the debate of sociological and anthropological sciences. The critical debate on the concept of children’s agency, which is extremely developed and widespread within social studies of childhood and the child research methodology, in fact revolves around the promotion of an authentic and effective participation, which finds its *raison d’être* in the search for the purity of children’s voices.

The notion of purity in children’s voices and its representation is relevant for anybody conducting empirical research in the field of multiculturalism and who is confronted with problems of authenticity and authorship, as raised in the anthropological debate of the 80s, starting with *Writing Culture* by Clifford and Marcus. As stated by Wyness, “In a complex media-driven world both adults’ and children’s voices are heavily mediated” [p. 11.]

Equally, the discussion about the socially constructed or biologically driven “nature” of childhood, is linked to the debate, within the gender studies, about

the differences between gender and sex. I am referring in particular to the arguments put forward by Judith Butler and subsequent debate, in which any theorization in favour of sex, body and gender as being natural is questioned, yet also refuting the principle of social constructivism as unquestionable. A deep and thorough interpretation of the social aspects of existence are put forward, focusing on the processes that underlie social phenomena regarding both gender construction and deconstruction, and, as discussed in this book, childhood, adulthood and age.

An additional merit of this book, particularly for researchers studying children, young people or the so-called “second-generation immigrants” in Italy, is to present a composite definition of the concept of generation, highlighting the various approaches in which it can be used. Too many times, in the sociological debate, the conceptualization of generation doesn’t appear to have gone any further than Mannheim’s ideas, and the category is frequently adopted as mere demographic or statistical data even in qualitative research.

To conclude, it can be said that the book by Michael Wyness stimulates a rediscovery of the sociological significance of childhood and children’s worlds. Not only because studying childhood and the vast literature on childhood since the emergence of a new paradigm of childhood studies means to tackle many concepts and dilemmas at the core of the sociological debate, but because it may offer epistemological and methodological inspirations on how to do research, theorization and writing about “the other.”

*Caterina Satta*  
University of Ferrara