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Leena Alanen, Liz Brooker and Berry Mayall
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Palgrave, 2015, 215 pp.

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Book Review

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Theorizing childhood with Bourdieu is the ambitious project at the centre of this book edited by such well-known researchers in the field of Childhood Studies as Leena Alanen and Berry Mayall, active in promoting the social study of childhood since the 1980s. There is something new and at the same time very familiar in this project for those scholars who, over the last three decades, have been undertaking a sociological approach to the study of childhood. New, insofar as most of the contributions adopting a Bourdieusian approach have focused mainly on adults; and familiar as well, insofar as many sociologists of childhood focused, like Bourdieu himself, on the interrelations between social structure and the subjective role of agents. The history of social studies of childhood could be described as an ongoing attempt to take into consideration both, on the one hand, the structural dimensions that shape, govern and control childhood, and, on the other hand, the children's experiences of the socio-economic and cultural regulatory frames, by examining the extent to which they might influence their form and directions. Thus we could ask ourselves, as the contributors do: "How Bourdieu can help us to understand childhood?" [p. 3]. The entire volume is an enlightening answer to this question.

By making reference to some of Bourdieu's main theoretical tools (i.e.: field, capital, habitus, symbolic violence) the authors uncover many of the cultural determinants that shape children's lives and show how "large-scale policies and socio-economic change relate to the character of intergenerational interactions at individual and societal level" [p. 11].

The book is composed of ten chapters and is arranged around three main domains. The first part focuses on children's socialization in the family, in pre-school, primary and secondary school, in societies of the so-called "minority worlds" (the term highlights that First World children are the minority whilst Third World children are the majority of the world's child population), where schooling is one of the key characteristics that differentiate childhoods in Western countries from those in the "majority countries", where there is no compulsory system of schooling. The second part (consisting of two chapters) discusses precisely the conditions of childhood in non-Western countries analysing the impact of globalization on children's life and the dynamics of domination between local powers and global hierarchies (in Africa), and different kinds of social capital at personal, familial and community level, which are crucial for children growing up in poor regions (in India). The last part focuses on another arena where childhood is a relevant matter: the welfare system and the social support for children in two European countries.

The overall aim of the book is to put together an analysis of childhood at macro-level with one focused on children's lived experiences and agency in order to reach a "better understanding of why and how childhoods on-the-ground are as they are, through interrelating private troubles with public issues" [p. 1].

Each chapter focuses on an arena in which childhood is constructed or enacted (in the family, at school, at work – as in the case of child labour in the mining industries in two societies in sub-Saharan Africa – or within social services) and on the various forms of capital available to children in different conditions. Whether in Europe or in Africa and India children always result deeply settled in social networks, they “actively draw on, generate or negotiate their own social capital” [p. 145] – for themselves or for their relatives – and they use it, not only to support their peers, but sometimes also “to exploit inequalities in their peer group [...], while simultaneously reinforcing differences in the children’s social and cultural capital” [p. 9]. However, acknowledging children’s agency does not neglect the structural constraints that impact on childhood. Chapter 9 offers a critical analysis of the genesis of a new field within child welfare in Finland, as it resulted from the struggle among devotees of the new value of “support” and followers of the previous dominant approach of the “protective supervision”, which was built upon top-down control. Chapter 10, nonetheless, reveals how children can be victims of a symbolic violence even in those services that should *support* them and sustain their participation. By using Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, capital and field, for example, the authors bring to light how social workers’ practices tend to marginalize children’s voices and perspectives even during the review meetings for children in care, although child involvement is now a legal requirement in UK.

To conclude, the book is convincing in showing that “Bourdieu is ‘good to think with’ and his concepts are useful heuristic devices” [p. 145] in order to work towards understanding childhood and intergenerational relationships.

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