

Childhood as a policy target

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I would like to share some questions with you about the way European institutions and policies currently consider the child. More and more, we hear the slogan: “Public policies must focus attention on childhood”. In France, this sentiment may remind us of the pro-natalist arguments of the 1930’s. It was such arguments which dominated the foundation of the French social insurance system, which was built up around this particular demographic issue, (just as poverty was a cornerstone of the Anglo-Saxon *Welfare State* and workers’ status that of Germany’s *Sozial Staat*).

However, today this rallying-cry has a new meaning at the European level. Many experts consider childhood to be a central political issue, whether in terms of coping with the new demographic decline affecting many European nations, or because of the risk of child poverty¹. Some European experts even emphasize the need for a “social investment strategy

¹ For example, Sheila Kamerman *et al* (2003) insist on the importance of public policies and question the commonly held belief of a connection between family structure and child poverty. The fact that 60% of children living with their mother in a single-parent household were poor in the mid 90’s in the U.S. as against 4.5% in Sweden is not attributable to the greater or lesser number of single-parent households in these countries but rather to their social policies. One finds cases, in Sweden and Denmark for example, where the proportion of single-parent families is high and child poverty low, countries like Italy where child poverty is high and the number of single mothers low, but also countries like the United States with both a high percentage of single-parent families and a high percentage of child poverty.

centred upon childhood” (Esping-Andersen, 2002). Some others, like Jane Jenson, underline the same reasoning process under way in Canada through the “*Programme d’action pour les enfants*”. She writes: “the child is the new target of State interventions” (2000:15). All things considered, childhood would constitute a “good investment” for the future through implementation of a dual strategy of prevention: aiming on the one hand to raise household incomes through the granting of family allowances and on the other to promote women’s employment and create double-income families through the development of childcare services.

Conceptualising Childhood

To become a policy target, childhood must be defined by policy makers. Three main definitions can be identified. The first one is based upon psychology and sociology of education and considers childhood as a learning process and the child as an incomplete personality. Childhood is organized in different stages of development, which vary in timing and rhythm depending on social class². A second conception of childhood sees children as wholly individualized, capable of expressing their own point of view, able to act and influence their environment. First fashioned by adults, now the child has his/her own rights and strategies. In that perspective, he/she must be protected from the excessive power and authority of adults, even his or her nearest relatives. This distinction is not only metaphoric, but has an important impact on policy making. Some of the political controversies are actually based on this opposition.

To exemplify this second definition, and referring to the myth of Pygmalion, François de Singly (1996) suggests that parents have seen their function evolve to the point that they are responsible for the “revelation” of the child’s potential through the creation of favourable

² For developments, see Smart et al (2001).

conditions. One image of this “revealing” function of parents could be the sport of curling, where one player warms up the ice ahead of the stone, to enable the stone to slide along. The new belief is that there exists a latent personality which, to reveal itself, requires the assistance of one or more close relatives. In this process, the functions of the mother and the father tend to merge, overstepping their conventional roles as breadwinner and carer. In this lies one of the principal changes occurring in the typical family of the “second modernity” (Singly, 2001). Parental responsibility therefore shifts from the promotion of a model, imposed from above by the adult on the child, to a “closeness” model where each parent is called upon to create an environment that promotes individualisation. These practices are psychologically justified by proposing an educational model able to foster the development of the child’s personality.

Over and above this promotion of the child’s social capital, his/her development must respect another criterion, that of learning skills and school performance. In this two-fold conquest of “autonomy and success”, the family loses a substantial part of its legitimacy and traditional prerogatives. In de Singly’s words, “It is no longer the economic capital held by the family combined with a moral capital that determines the value of the child. In order to maintain the ties of family, the child must, on his or her own initiative, give proof of determinate innate qualities, resources and aptitudes to be confirmed by institutions external to the family environment. Because of this, the family has become an institution that has lost part of its relative autonomy; it functions now in association with two other socialising factors – the school as endorser of the educational capital and a body of specialists as guarantors of the child’s self-fulfilment” (Ibid., p. 129).

The third and last conception of the child is the economic one. Being excluded from the sphere of labour and production, children seem to have disappeared as economic actors only to reappear as a charge and source of expenditure. As Helmut Wintersberger wrote,

Children are considered a responsibility for their parents and for society. In consequence, policy makers, demographers and statisticians are confronted essentially with two questions: how can the cost of the child be calculated and how can this cost be shared between the State and family. (1994, p. 213)

To answer the first question, it is possible either to start with the theoretical needs of a child, so as to work out a package of benefits; or one might compare the expenditures sustained by households and the disparities of these according to the composition of the family so as to estimate, on a scale of equivalence, the cost of a first, a second or more children. To evaluate the distribution of “the cost” of children, the family and the State can also compare, according to country, the amount of public expenditure by item of cost (education, health, social services, justice, taxation etc.). But the legitimacy of covering the cost of the child out of public funds lies primarily in the concept of human capital, that is to say, the relationship between effective costs and the gains that society and community may expect. Fecundity could be taken as an example of this³.

Like de Singly, Wintersberger calls for a new shared responsibility between parents and the State. In industrialised societies, the care of children is the responsibility of the family, whereas education is entrusted to the State. Investment in the child is effected jointly by both and society receives part of the benefits by generating members that are best qualified to operate in its economic system. The gain for parents is in terms of the social success of their offspring. In post-industrialised societies, this relationship has evolved even further and collaboration between the family, the State and third sector in the upbringing of children has intensified because of social inequalities. Actually, contrary to what was promised by

³ If, in a given institutional context, a couple considers that they would be unable to bear the cost of a child's upbringing, they may give up the idea of becoming parents. This would have consequences not only for the couple in terms of affection or an unfulfilled desire for children, but also for society at large. In this sense, a declining birth-rate constitutes a problem for the public sphere. In the absence of investment in human capital, the society as a whole may reach an impasse. It is necessary to create the conditions apt to promote the human capital of the future, that is to say, a juvenile population the cost of whose development, especially schooling, would be shared with parents.

democratisation, wealth and success continue to be the prerogative of the more affluent classes. To face this challenge, some are advocating a prevention strategy (investment in the child), rather than a curative strategy (adult-oriented social policies):

Since the possibilities of employment and a professional career depend to an ever greater extent on the individual's acquisition of learning skills, this must be taken as the starting point. The mobilisation and adaptation of the adult is realistic and profitable provided he or she is already in possession of a minimum of learning capacity... Policies that aim at guaranteeing a second chance are far more costly and far less efficient than those that aim at improving the well-being of the very young. (Esping-Andersen, 2002, pp. 49 and 55)

Consequently, top-quality public childcare services should be developed on the one hand, and on the other, the work of mothers advocated, so as to ensure better economic and social living conditions for their children and the avoidance of poverty.

The politicisation of caring in Europe

The debate about childcare policy at European level refers to this previous issue. European institutions are among the principal advocates of this new approach and suggest the development of a strategy of social investment in human capital – termed in European jargon, “social quality”. A comparison of the child-oriented policies now being implemented in Europe makes it possible to clarify the various models in each case (Martin, 2003a):

1. The first model - that of maternal salary - suggests paying the parent who in most cases assumes domestic and care work. The approach recognises the value of caring and its contribution to collective well-being. The “conciliation” involves allocating separate roles to each parent- breadwinner and carer, which is not only in conflict with equal opportunity of the sexes on the labour market but also with equal sharing of the responsibilities of parenthood between the father and mother.
2. The second model considers the father as the principal provider of income and the mother as a secondary provider. Policies seek to favour part-time employment of the

mother and conciliation is envisaged for one of the providers only. Other means may be employed to achieve this aim, for instance parental leave, thereby facilitating a temporary withdrawal of the mother from the labour market with or without compensation for loss or remuneration. The smaller the compensation of this loss of income, the wider the division in the roles of the sexes becomes.

3. A third model envisages a double income with both parents in full-time employment. The rapid development of female employment has caused this type of household to predominate among contemporary European families, although this is more widespread in some countries than in others (in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, France, Belgium and Portugal). Notwithstanding this, the fact that women want to have a professional career does not mean that the question of conciliation arises for both men and women; in effect, since it is only the woman who is confronted with the problem of incompatibility between family life and a professional career, the policy debate on conciliation necessarily centres upon the female partner only. The third conciliation model therefore tends to the development of public and private services that would enable the devolvement of child care to others. This in turn would entail the creation of new forms of employment, to be undertaken principally by women; which means inequality between the 'career woman' and the 'carer woman'.
4. The last model favours equal sharing between men and women, either in work or in care activities. It seeks to ensure the parity of male/female relations in the various spheres of existence: employment and childcare. We would mention for example, the case of parental leave, which in Scandinavian countries is compensated on the basis of a percentage of the most recent wage (Deven & Moss, 2002). This model, which is favoured by European institutions, runs into difficulties owing to disparities of incomes. It works well for high-income households but less well for others since it is

based on the assumption that the joint income of the couple is sufficient. It also necessitates the individualisation of social rights.

The childcare issue evokes a variety of scenarios. One might well think that the choice of childcare provisions is purely a private matter and parents should decide for themselves as to the arrangement that suits them best without the intervention of the public authorities (liberal or “free choice” models). One might also come to the conclusion that the best solution would be to encourage mothers to remain at home and look after their children up to the age of three years; such encouragement might be given by the promotion of maternity leave benefits or so-called “free choice” facilities, or again, as in Germany, Austria and France, by granting long, poorly remunerated periods of parental leave. One might also consider that parents should have an effective choice between carrying on at work or remaining at home to care for children under three by developing systems that would permit one of these solutions: either extended public services or remunerated paternal leave as in Finland. Finally, different solutions may be adopted according to the age of the child – up to one year of age, a period of well remunerated parental leave with the guarantee of public structure childcare services thereafter, as in Sweden and Denmark. In any case, the issue is more about the parents’ choice than the child, except perhaps as an investment for the future, i.e. as a future adult.

Although this form of human capital investment policy calls for the development of a wide-ranging network of State-organised childcare services – through the school and monetary aid – it is far from achieving unanimous approval at European level. There is a good deal of controversy over this high-cost strategy and some politicians prefer to frame childcare as a parental responsibility. This way of thinking considers that the problem is the parents – that is to say, cases where incapacity or insufficient educative competence may jeopardise the complete success of the child’s socialisation.

Once again, the question is: are the parents able to take care of their children? In France, for example, from the late nineties, public debate is focused on insecurity, juvenile delinquency and parental irresponsibility (Martin, 2003b). Raising the subject of parenthood within the framework of public policy-making consists above all in the diagnosis of omissions, incompetence, failure to exercise parental authority or parental responsibility and, in consequence, the need to define the scope and limitations of the parental role. Moreover, contrary to what occurred in the past when right-wing traditionalism or conservatism was opposed to left-wing progressivism, this issue has today attained a quasi-unanimity in political circles, where a more or less solid front has been raised against the dissolution of the family-based society (Commaille and Martin, 1998).

This recalls the view of Jacques Donzelot (1977) when he suggested that “the crisis of the family” was less a reality than a subterfuge on the part of liberal societies to shift greater responsibility onto the family. By again focusing attention on the effects on the children of a “crisis of family”, it sought to achieve the dual aim of making the family over-responsible for the upbringing and well-being of the children and therefore, in the event of failure to do this, an important source of social problems. The family would be the first to be blamed and the imposition of controls would be the only means whereby such incompetence might be avoided.

Does the child remain at the heart of such public policies, whose objective is to ensure public order? In these debates, children’s well-being remains a secondary issue. The problem is simply: what kinds of adults are they going to become? The investment strategy corresponds to the prevalent economic view which dominates political discourses and European discussion. But, unquestionably, it is also a way to make childhood policy possible at this level, because economic arguments are the only acceptable ones. Nevertheless, it seems

important to go beyond rhetoric and to develop a discussion around child well-being as a specific policy target in terms of social citizenship.

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