



Childhood & Culture

International Conference Proceedings, Ministry of Culture and Communication –
International Association of French Language Sociologists – University of Paris Descartes,
9th The sociology of childhood Days, Paris, 2010
<http://www.enfanceetcultures.culture.gouv.fr/>

Sylvie OCTOBRE, Ministry of Culture and Communication, DEPS
Régine SIROTA, University of Paris-Descartes, CERLIS

Introduction

Childhood & Cultures: When Two “Small” Scientific Contents Meet

From the Fringes Inward

Childhood and culture each have long been pushed to the outer reaches of the social sciences. Can it be “serious” to delve into the world of Barbie dolls and Pokemon? Is there value to be found in what children say about museums or books, as a means toward understanding the elective mechanisms underlying cultural tastes and distastes? Is there no risk that the researchers lurch into rampant “kitchen research”, some foraging into the minute knowledge realms of cultural industries¹, others into an analysis of birthday parties² others into the dynamics specific to games³, and still others into fun foods, while many other research focus – first and foremost, children’s relation to reading⁴ – can appear more legitimate² And yet, when a research programme on children was launched by the National Research Agency on these topics in 2009, in France, their seriousness became clear and contributed to structuring a field that was very alive up to that point, but little organised. The international perspective steps up this view: childhood and culture are two objects which it has become increasingly of interest to consider in cross-research.

The Childhood and Cultures Colloquium, jointly hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Communication and the Sociology Research Committee on Childhood at the International Association of French Language Sociologists (AISLF), with the contribution of the University of Paris-Descartes, which was held in late-2010, came at the end of two parallel cycles of ten years of work.

At the end of 2000, the Department of Research, Foresight and Statistics of the Ministry of Culture and Communication initiated a research programme on the relation to culture in France’s youngest populations, the highlights of which were the institution of two large-scale quantitative studies - published respectively in 2004 and 2010⁵ - and a call for research projects, published in summary format in 2010⁶.

The Research Committee on The sociology of childhood at AISLF⁷ came about at approximately the same time, and published a first synopsis of its research work in 2006, designed to bring into the limelight and to life an international network, in particular through annual events⁸.

¹ Dominique Pasquier, *La Culture des sentiments. L'expérience télévisuelle des adolescents*, Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1999.

² Régine Sirota, "Les copains d'abord, les anniversaires de l'enfance, donner et recevoir", *Ethnologie française*, n° spécial Les cadeaux, déc.1998, p. 457-471, (réédition 2001).

³ Gilles Brougère (dir), *la Ronde des jeux et des jouets. Harry, Pikachu, Superman et les autres*, Paris, Autrement, 2008.

⁴ Christian Baudelot, Marie Cartier, Christine Detrez, *Et pourtant ils lisent*, Paris, Le seuil, 1999

⁵ Sylvie Octobre, *Les loisirs culturels des 6-14 ans*, Paris, La documentation française, 2004 ; Sylvie Octobre, Christine Detrez, Pierre Mercklé et Nathalie Berthomier, *L'enfance des loisirs, Trajectoires communes et parcours individuels de la fin de l'enfance à la grande adolescence*, Paris, DEPS/MCC, 2010

⁶ Sylvie Octobre (dir), *Enfance et culture. Transmission, appropriation et représentation*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, deps, coll. « Questions de culture », 2010

⁷ Régine Sirota, "L'émergence d'une sociologie de l'enfance : évolution de l'objet, évolution du regard", *Education et sociétés*, n° 2, 1998

The Childhood & Culture Colloquium, also the ninth The sociology of childhood event, thus had an air of birthday celebration about it...

Scientific and Political Dialogue

Over the past ten years, both these fields of research have been coordinated, worked and reworked, sometimes even stirred up, by large-scale refounding efforts. As the ages of life⁹ and work became redefined, as children gained consideration as full-fledged players in their own lives, as a new perspective was taken on the modalities of socialisation and shifts in family forms¹⁰ and institutional models¹¹, as new interpretive frameworks on cultural consumption were put forth (eclecticism¹², omnivorism¹³, variations in intra-individual dispositions¹⁴, tablature model¹⁵), and the impact of new media¹⁶ and network dynamics¹⁷ were explored, the entire way in which childhood and juvenile practices were seen in building the self began to change.

At the same time, traditionally-studied topics took on a new life: are gender, age and generation only differences within difference, and thus secondary when compared to the effects of social stratification¹⁸? How is the status of childhood changing today? Are cultural transmissions in “crisis”? How is the fabric of childhood woven when threads of material culture are taken into consideration? Clearly, the fields of culture and childhood were beckoning to be considered transversally, as research topics that are concurrently thematic, epistemological and methodological.

These are questions not only for research, but also for exploration from a social and political perspective, the related responses successively irrigating policy on cultural democratisation, cultural democracy, culture for all and culture for each individual. How does cultural initiation from the earliest age shape tastes subsequently? What are the consequences of this, as pertains to schooling? What is the interplay between cultural socialisation as it takes place between families, peers, schooling institutions and cultural establishments?

The theoretical shifts in action in the meeting of the sociology of childhood and cultural sociology have been international¹⁹, even though the dialogue between national research was uneven: intense on the field of cultural sociology, in particular as Richard Peterson’s concept of omnivorism was spread, and more broadly disseminated when it came to the sociology of

⁸ Les précédentes journées de sociologie de l'enfance se sont tenues successivement à Paris 2001, Genève 2002, Lisbonne 2003, Tours, 2004, Rome 2005, Strasbourg, 2006, Galatasaray 2008, Québec 2009. <http://w3.aislf.univ-tlse2.fr>

⁹ Marcel Gauchet, « La redéfinition des âges de la vie », *Le Débat*, octobre-décembre 2004, 132, p. 27-44.; Olivier Galland, « Adolescence, post-adolescence, jeunesse : retour sur quelques interprétations », *Revue française de sociologie*, 2001, vol. 42 ; « une nouvelle classe d'âge ? », *Ethnologie française*, 2010-1 ; « une nouvelle adolescence », *Revue française de sociologie*, 2008, vol. 49, n°4.

¹⁰ François de Singly, *Libres ensemble : l'individualisme dans la vie commune*, Paris, Nathan, 2006

¹¹ François Dubet, *Le Déclin de l'institution*, Paris, Seuil, 2002

¹² Olivier Donnat, *Les Français face à la culture, de l'exclusion à l'éclectisme*, Paris, Editions La Découverte, 1994

¹³ Richard Peterson et Robert Kern, « Changing highbrow taste : From snob to omnivore », *American Sociological Review*, vol. 61, 1996, p. 900-907 ; Richard Peterson, « Le passage à des goûts omnivores : notions, faits et perspectives », *Sociologie et sociétés*, Volume 36, numéro 1, printemps 2004

¹⁴ Bernard Lahire, *La Culture des individus. Dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi*, Paris, La Découverte, coll. "Textes à l'appui/Laboratoire des sciences sociales", 2004

¹⁵ Hervé Glévaec, Michel Pinet, « La "tablature" des goûts musicaux : un modèle de structuration des préférences et des jugements », *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 50, n° 3, 2009

¹⁶ Ana Nunes de Almeida, (ed.), *Childhood, Children and the Internet : Challenges for the Digital Age*, Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbonne, à paraître

¹⁷ Dominique Cardon, Zbigniew Smoreda et Valérie Beaudouin, « Sociabilités et entrelacement des médias », in Moati Ph. (dir.), *Nouvelles technologies et modes de vie. Aliénation ou hypermodernité ?*, Paris, Éditions de l'Aube, 2005

¹⁸ Jean-Claude Passeron et François de Singly, « Différences dans la différence : socialisation de classe et socialisation sexuelle », *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 34, n°1, 1984

¹⁹ Doris Bühler-Niederberger, Régine Sirota, « Marginality and Voice, Children in Sociology and Society », *Current Sociology*, n° 58 (02) 2010

childhood research²⁰, insofar as the Anglo-American and French traditions drew respectively on distinct sources. To wit, aside from David Buckingham's work, which was translated as *La mort de l'enfance* [The Death of Childhood] in French, 10 years after its publication in English (when the original title – *After the Death of Childhood* – better stated its aspiration), the research carried out by Alan Prout²¹ or Henry Jenkins²² was little-known in France... Practically the same can be said about consumer sociology, whether cultural or material, as research that cross-analyses childhood issues is difficult to disseminate²³. Similarly, it is only too rarely that attempts are made to intermesh the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology and social psychology, not to mention history, marketing, museology, the educational sciences, cultural studies²⁴, gender studies and childhood studies²⁵...

The Childhood & Culture colloquium was designed to foster that international dialogue between approaches, traditions and issues, as well as dialogue between researchers and professionals. It is not by chance that it results from a relatively rare institutional encounter – between a Ministry, an international research network and a university, nestled in a double-cradle, availed by Musée du quai Branly and University Paris Descartes.

Five Thrusts

Five main thrusts have been outlined for the event:

1 – children's relation to cultural practices, contents and products and the affiliations this creates: should the reference be made to cultural practices or consumption? How should the cultures of the children and the individuals and content in the said cultures be analysed?

2 – analysing material culture: how does the concrete relation to objects build up? To what extent does it involve a relation to space (culture assuming bedroom) and the body? What does it imply to have the ability to use and analyse cultural objects themselves?

3 – age-related issues: how should age be construed – in categorical terms or in terms of processes? Are "age-exclusive" issues in life transferrable (and to what extent) or specific?

4 – questions relating to method, epistemology and ethics. Does status as a minor not imply that special attention should be paid, not only to the possible effects of research on the individuals studied, but also the tools, methods, notions and concepts put to use? Is inventiveness inherent to research on younger populations, or is the specificity of lower age groups overestimated?

5 – explanatory factors: is childhood a time of emergence, when new factors explaining variations in the relation to recreation and culture surface, or does it only bring out already-existing combinations between social origin, gender, etc., in which case, the modalities in action need to be specified?

²⁰ Cléopâtre Montandon, « La sociologie de l'enfance: l'essor des travaux en langue anglaise », *Education et sociétés*, n° 2, 1998
Régine Sirota, « De l'indifférence sociologique à la difficile reconnaissance de l'effervescence culturelle d'une classe d'âge », Introduction, in Octobre, S., (ed) *Enfance et culture, transmission, appropriation et représentation*, op cit.

²¹ Allisson James, Alan Prout (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, London, Falmer Press, 1990

²² Henry Jenkins, *The Children's Culture Reader*, New York, New York University Press, 2005

²³ Daniel Thomas Cook, *The commodification of childhood*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004,

Stephan Kline *Out of the Garden, Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*, London, Verso, 1993

²⁴ Hervé Glevec, Eric Macé, Eric Maigret, *Cultural Studies*, Anthologie, Paris, INA/Armand Colin, 2008

²⁵ Jens Qvortrup, William Corsaro, Michael Sebastian Honig, *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009

The Vitality of a Field

The seventy-two papers brought together in the colloquium's proceedings attest, beyond whatever doubt may have remained, to the field's vitality. What's more, only half of the papers submitted were selected and the decision was sometimes a very delicate task. In the end, North America and Central America, Oceania, Asia and Europe come together in these papers, as they did in the audience of the three-day colloquium. Involving over sixty research centres, the event enabled researchers of different generations, horizons and theoretical traditions to present their work in progress, before an audience of 350, from the academic or professional community, and from cultural or educational institutions.

The colloquium was divided into two parts:

- the first part consisted of plenary conferences, designed to engage dialogue at the international level, between the most contemporary approaches. The six conferences during the first day, five of which were held in English, will be published in the near future, in French, in a book published in the collection *Questions de culture*, from the Ministry of Culture and Communication.

- the second portion, made up of workshops and debates, featured over sixty papers on topics as diverse as “object systems”, “practices and gender”, “family and transmission”, “childhood images”, childhood memories”, “age boundaries”, etc.

These papers were brought together as articles following the colloquium so that they could be published online, as part of this colloquium's proceedings. We would like to thank the authors for their joint work. The result encapsulates the debate shared, the state of exploration at given point in time and matter for future scientific fields currently bustling with life.

Scientific Committee

Gilles Brougère, Professor, University of Paris 13, France
Philippe Chantepie, DEPS Head, Ministry of Culture and Communication, France
Christine Detrez, Lecturer, Ecole normale supérieure de Lyon, France
Hervé Glévarec, Research Director, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France
Ana Nunes d'Almeida, Research Professor, University of Lisbon, Portugal
Sylvie Octobre, Researcher, DEPS, Ministry of Culture and Communication, France
Dominique Pasquier, Research Director, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, France
Régine Sirota, Professeur, University of Paris Descartes, France

Organising Committee

Philippe Chantepie, DEPS Head, Ministry of Culture and Communication, France
Sylvie Octobre, Researcher, DEPS, Ministry of Culture and Communication, France
Anna-Michèle Schneider, Head of Promotion, DEPS, Ministry of Culture and Communication, France
Régine Sirota, Professor, University of Paris Descartes, France

All material arrangements for the Conference were made by Phénomène, selected following competitive call for tender.

Quote this article:

Sylvie Octobre and Régine Sirota, « Childhood & Cultures: When Two “Small” Scientific Contents Meet », in *Actes du colloque Enfance et cultures : regards des sciences humaines et sociales*, Sylvie Octobre and Régine Sirota (dir), [online] http://www.enfanceetcultures.culture.gouv.fr/actes/actes_intro_version_EUK.pdf, Paris, 2010.