1. Introduction

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The main purpose of this book is to give visibility to children who are living their childhood in four Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) and also to their ways of facing the challenges and risks that accompany the status of being a child in a context of turbulence. This is a context where contradictory ideologies (neoliberalism and familism) are mixed with political decisions imposed from the centres of world economic power, and with timid responses, fundamentally of a remedial nature, from states in which the welfare system never developed in the same way as in Northern and Central European countries, all of which influences the childhood policies that are carried out.

The base from which this approach to children's lives is taken, is that of the sociology of childhood, which allows us to both contemplate global phenomena as they impact on the daily lives of children and also the subjective ways the children themselves perceive, interpret and act in relation to these phenomena. To this end, 12 case studies have been gathered in this book, focusing on three salient themes characterized by their potential capacity to create challenges, or even risks, in the lives of children in the countries under study: (1) current changes in forms of living; (2) poverty and well-being; and (3) migrant children.

1.1 CONTEXT

Since the global financial crisis hit Southern Europe in 2008, countries such as Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain have witnessed the emergence of harsh measures of austerity; great precariousness (unemployment and underemployment); state violence; migration from non-EU countries – the massive flow of refugees in Greece, Italy and, to a lesser degree, in Spain; crises in politics and democracy; the rise of right-wing and far-right populism; collective disempowerment; and individualization. These issues have affected the majority of the population, and particularly young people and children. Children are 'in principle exposed to the same societal forces as adults, although in a particular way', as Jens Qvortrup (1993, p. 15) explained in his sixth thesis on 'Childhood as a social phenomenon', also stating that, from a sociological

point of view, it is important to bear such an idea in mind, because it describes society as a common terrain for all age groups. In consequence, 'nobody, including children, can avoid the influence of major events occurring outside their micro-cosmos' (Qvortrup, 1993, p. 16). However, children are not often taken into account in this context – their voices are not heard and their interests do not count, except, perhaps, those of children who are part of a family.

To understand the values of childhood and family policies, as well as the recent changes in children's lives and well-being, and the status of migrant and refugee children in Southern Europe, which are the main issues we are focusing on in this book, we need to situate all of them in the current critical context and consider how this is related to the specific welfare, care and gender policies (González, Jurado and Naldini, 2014) shared by the above four countries. This Mediterranean welfare regime is characterized by the existence of strong 'familism' (Bettio and Plantenga, 2004; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Moreno, 2007), a 'providence society'¹ (Santos and Ferreira, 2002, p. 14) and weak protection provided by the state.

Similarly, it is crucial to seriously consider how the crisis of liberal democracy, the technocratic and authoritarian nature of the regimes established under the global rule of neoliberalism, the tendency to produce 'responsible individuals' who take charge of their lives without relying on collective security nets or collaboration and social guarantees (Rose, 1999), have an effect on subjectivity. Furthermore, the treatment of vital social issues, such as families and children's well-being, as solely technical questions, and the increasing authority of experts in governance, or the loss of real alternative choices in political and social matters, are the trademarks of a post-democracy dominated by elites (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005) who largely ignore people's interests, and especially those of children.

In particular, in the 'state of exception' (Agamben, 2005), which is not technically declared as such, produced by the debt crisis and the threat of a total economic collapse in the countries of Southern Europe, ruling parties enforced recession policies and harsh austerity measures in line with the hegemonic monetarist-neoliberal policies of the EU and the IMF. However, austerity has increased child poverty rates and consequently has negatively affected their well-being (see UNICEF, 2014 and 2017).

¹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, a Portuguese sociologist (Santos and Ferreira, 2002), defines a providence society as: 'networks of relationships of mutual knowledge, mutual recognition and relationships based on kinship and neighborhood, through which small social groups exchange goods and services on a non-market basis and with a logic of reciprocity'. He said that Portuguese society has a weak welfare state and a strong providence society.

Moreover, since 2010, citizens in Italy, Spain, Portugal and, to the greatest extent, Greece, have lost numerous social rights (social benefits, welfare and labour rights) and their governments have systematically disregarded their political liberties. This severely stressful situation has had an enormous effect on the construction of children's subjectivities, their status, power, and the implementation of their rights. Individuals, and particularly children, tend to become '*homines sacri*', people who are fully exposed to the arbitrary discretion of power and extreme misfortune (Agamben, 1998, p. 171). Power itself turns into a *biopower* exerted on bare life, directly on the body and soul of people. Nowadays, control is continuous and unlimited. Subjugation is pursued not only by means of state repression and the dismantling of social security nets, but also by installing codes of control through which the subject internalizes his or her conformity to social disciplines, taking charge of his or her self-discipline in line with an 'objective' state of affairs in market societies (Dean, 1999).

In a situation in which the societies of Southern Europe risk falling into a state of bare life, stripped of effective rights and struggling for survival, permanent fear prevails for the indebted subjects, families and their children. The 'fabrication of the indebted man' was crucial for the production of self-disciplined, disconnected and controlled individuals (Lazzarato, 2011). Individuals in debt strive to deal with poverty and the lack of social benefits, to manage accumulating debt and to ensure their employability (Lazzarato, 2011, pp. 28, 41–3, 74, 97). The 'administration of fear' (Virilio, 2012) paved the way for continuous reductions in wages, welfare expenditure and living standards.

1.2 GOALS OF THE BOOK

The aim of this book is to provide a coherent and robust sociological understanding of these phenomena in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) insofar as they affect the lives of children in these countries. Its aim is not so much to provide a descriptive report about the current situation of each country in particular (similar to those already existing) but to look at this situation with a specific focus on children and based on the two main premises of the sociology of childhood, that is: (1) that children are social actors, moral human beings who act in their environment and interact in it with the rest of the actors; and that (2) childhood is a social phenomenon, a permanent element in every social structure, that presents historical, cultural, geographical and socio-political variations (Corsaro, 1997; Gaitán, 2006; James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 1994; Pechtelidis, 2016; Qvortrup, 1993; Qvortrup et al., 1994; and Satta, 2012, among others).

Under this sociological conceptual umbrella, 12 case studies are presented with the aim of demonstrating how the material, social, political and symbolic disempowerment we have described above affects the welfare and status of children in Southern Europe; also, how governments and policy makers responded to these critical conditions. However, it should be noted that the effects of the crisis have manifested differently in each country depending on their position in the global financial system, as well as their responses to the challenge of maintaining, recovering or restructuring both their economy and society according to the instructions of the EU experts and policy makers. Therefore, it is important to consider the official governmental responses to the current needs of children in the context of the particularities of each country considered.

Nevertheless, children are not only passive recipients of the public social benefits of the welfare system, but are also active members who contribute to their family well-being and build their own resilience strategies to cope with crisis. Consequently, through the different cases presented in this book, we will try to demonstrate the interaction that exists between social structures and children's forms of participation and agency (Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010).

1.3 BACKGROUND: THE SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

The origin of the sociology of childhood was in the will to place childhood at the centre of reflection of the social sciences, from the conviction that it is important, socially and politically, to bring sociological thinking to childhood in order to duly recognize children as important members of society, not as future members of it. Accordingly, as a first task, it was proposed that we question the set of ideas that has been taken for granted in the study of childhood. This was done, on the one hand, by offering a solid critique of the dominant paradigms (developmental psychology and functionalist version of socialization), and on the other, by proposing a theoretical scheme that served to bring to light, with a proper sense, the life and the actions of a social group – that constituted by children – that until then had been relegated to private space, obscured and involved in studies related to the two main framing institutions, that is, the family and the school. Thus, by presenting children as social actors and childhood as a social phenomenon, which is a permanent and stable part of the social structure, the sociology of childhood was placed in an entirely 'heterodox' position and of some revolutionary mode in relation to all the scaffolding held within the social sciences.

Nowadays, the sociology of childhood is recognized by various authors (Sarmento, 2008; Sirota, 2012) as the most influential paradigm on what has

come to be known as childhood studies (see Qvortrup et al., 2011), which has an interdisciplinary character and shares some key features, summarized by Woodhead as follows:

The first is about childhood: the many senses in which childhood is socially constructed, with implications for the ways it is studied and theorized. The second is about children: recognizing their status and their rights as the starting point for research, policy and practice. The third is about childhood and adulthood: acknowledging that studying childhood is in numerous different respects about intergenerational relationships. (Woodhead, 2009, p. 19)

The idea of children's agency has been one of the most important theoretical developments in the recent history of the sociology of childhood. It means a change in the way of looking at children: they are now seen as social actors that deserve to be studied 'by themselves' and not as appendages to other institutions – such as the family or the educational system – or as parts of other phenomena – for example, social deviance (James, 2011). On the other hand, the notion of childhood as a structural form functions as a framework within which children lead their lives and refers to childhood as a particular and distinct status of any society's social structure. This leads us to consider one of the classic dilemmas in sociology, namely, the relationship between structure and agency.

Giddens (2000) tried to integrate both concepts in his theory of structuration. He affirms that the basic domain of study for the social sciences is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but the ordered social practices through time and space. The bridge between the structural approach and that of agency is in admitting that we all participate actively in the construction and reconstruction of the social structure in the course of our daily activities. If Giddens's explanation of the interaction between structure and agency is accepted, then children should be considered, as well as adults, as active participants in society, as they interact with each other and are influenced by the structure, and, in turn, influence the structure.

From a sociological point of view, understanding the status of contemporary childhood in Southern Europe requires the use of statistical data that illustrate the wider economic and social structures; we should also listen to the voices of the children and the adults who relate to them, and observe their daily life experiences during the current crisis. To be more specific, a critical discussion of the recent situation of childhood in these countries requires us to explore, in the first place, the socio-demographic changes and the impacts of the family context on the living conditions of children. In the historical conjuncture that is contemplated in this book (that of the recent economic crisis), social policies, far from being strengthened, have undergone cuts and have reinforced

their assistance and individualistic character. This has forced families (both nuclear and extended, and even children themselves) to adopt their own survival strategies that deserve to be studied in adequate sociological terms. The poverty of children (considered one of the consequences of the crisis) cannot be separated from the poverty of their parents, but it has specific characteristics. However, the specific nature of the various forms of child poverty is not usually a separate object of reflection in itself, but is subsumed under the social category of the family, to whom measures are directed to 'improve' their behaviour, ignoring the children's own agency as subjects and treating them only as objects of social transformation. On the other hand, poverty is a key factor in the migration and mobility of children, but it is not the only one: there are also other factors such as armed conflicts, persecutions of political, ethnic or religious origin, or natural disasters. However, although there is a large amount of data and research on migratory movements in general, there is a lack of knowledge about the mobility of children and young people, especially in Southern Europe, where the flows of refugees have intensified in recent times.

The weakening of the family safety net, and poverty and migration are three specific interwoven social phenomena that are closely linked with the economic and political crisis, deeply affecting children's lives in Southern Europe. From this perspective, the book centres on three social subject areas: the first deals with the current changes in the lifestyles of children and their family conditions; the second with child poverty and child welfare; and the third focuses on migrant and refugee children or children on the move in general.

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The idea of writing this book has its antecedents in the conversations that, in different professional meetings, some of us, as researchers of the sociology of childhood working in Southern Europe, had maintained, sharing our findings and ongoing research and, at the same time, pointing out the importance of some main problems for children that were taking place simultaneously, or were worsened by, the recent economic crisis that, as already indicated, has also been social and political.

The creation of the book series Southern European Societies helped to crystallize that idea, and thus we called on some of the specialists who were researching in our respective countries to participate in this common project, which, from a methodological point of view, tried to meet several conditions: (1) combining structural context data with descriptions of the children's agency; (2) showing different methodological tools applied to the research of children's lives; (3) conciliating systematicity of the entire text with flexibility

in the contributions of each country; (4) adopting a critical, ethical and political perspective.

The result of all this is what shapes the structure of this book, which is divided into three parts. Part I: Current Changes in Children's Forms of Living focuses on the characterization of children in the ageing societies of Southern Europe as a demographic minority and as a socially minority group, but also, the way in which children, silently, with their living and their daily actions, change the way of being of childhood in Europe today. Part II: Child Poverty and Children's Well-being in Southern Europe, offers the elements for a reflection on the most obvious consequences of the crisis on children living in Southern Europe, that is, their impoverishment, the loss of opportunities, increasing inequality, as well as dualization and deterioration of their quality of life, in general terms. Part III: Migrant Children and Children on the Move is centred on the situation of children involved in the migratory flows that have taken place in Europe in recent years, bringing to light their voices and wishes, but at the same time showing the strong contradictions that exist in society and policies regarding them.

All the chapters of the book respond to the same scheme: there is a first section (Main Trends) where data of a statistical nature are collected, from selected sources, as well as the main debates in focus and applied policies; in a second section (Case Study) is the description of a specific case, which provides the title for the respective chapter.

The concluding chapter offers a comparative view of the common characteristics, the similarities and the differences among the countries studied, as well as the possible implications for childhood policies that could derive from them. In a nutshell, in this final chapter, the theoretical reflections suggested by the cases studied are presented, as well as the book's contribution to knowledge in the field of the sociology of childhood.

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