

**From the side of the children.
The challenge of childhood studies to sociology of
education**

Maddalena Colombo

Three recent works by Valerio Belotti, made in collaboration with other Italian scholars, with no doubt enriched in a field of study – sociology of infant age – which is still unripe in Italy and make circulating important theoretical inputs and empirical results drawn from the international debate around the social role of children in the ageing society. In this note I refer particularly to what the author edited in 2010 and 2011, as products not only of a wide disciplinary state of art (he teaches Policies for children and adolescents at the University of Padova) but also as a corpus of empirical researches carried out when he was the coordinator of CNDAIA (Centro nazionale di documentazione e analisi per l’infanzia e l’adolescenza¹) from 2007 to 2011.

If the collective volume *Il futuro nel presente. Per una sociologia dei bambini e delle bambine* [The future in the present. For a sociology of boys and girls] (guest editors V. Belotti and S. La Mendola, Guerini, Milano, 2010a, pp. 383) represents a sort of manifesto of the opening scientific approach, which includes theoretical lines, methodological notes and empirical data that can be characterised as emblematic, the other two books are in my opinion the fundamental “bricks” of a new scaffolding for the diffusion of childhood studies in Italy. These are the Quaderno CNDAIA n. 50, *Costruire senso, negoziare spazi. Ragazzi e ragazze nella vita quotidiana* [Building sense, negotiate spaces. Boys and girls in everyday life] (editor V. Belotti, 2010b, Edizioni Istituto degli innocenti, Firenze, www.minori.it, pagg. 230) and the Quaderno CNDAIA n. 51, *L’Italia “minore”. Mappe di indicatori sulla condizione e le disuguaglianze nel benessere dei bambini e dei ragazzi* [“Younger” Italy. Maps of indicators

¹ CNDAIA: public organism instituted at a national level with L.451/1997 with aims of study and documentation, now operating by the Presidential Bureau of the Ministry Council – Department for the family policies and the Ministry of work and social policies.

on the status and inequality in the welfare of children and young people] (guest editors V. Belotti and E. Moretti, 2011, Edizioni Istituto degli innocenti, Firenze, www.minori.it, pagg. 174). Both report what emerges from national studies on children's life under the sponsorship of the Government agency for the protection of children. All reviewed books are written in Italian language.

Starting with the theoretical approach, which is introduced by Belotti in the preface of each volume but more extensively in the first one, this is already known that children and adolescents ("under aged" people) do not represent subjects in the history of sociology. As a matter of fact this regulation is more focused on socialization as a process oriented from the adult's point of view, rather than the children's one.

The reason why sociology has delayed in making visible children as a target group is not linked to historical or demographic factors (rather, in XIX century at the dawn of sociological thought, children were in greater numbers than nowadays) but to the influence of functionalism. Many sociologists, embracing the functionalistic view along the twentieth century, have reinforced a vision of socialization as an integrative process, in which the child must passively interiorize current values and models in order to become a future adult citizen. Thus it has risen a distorted, "future-centered", view of the child, designed as an adult *in fieri* (that is, a target of social modeling) instead of an already-active subject as student, son, minority group's member.

In opposition to this distorted view ranks to the approach by Belotti and the CNDAIA in the light of a rediscovery of children as social actors made during the Eighties by some Italian sociologists (mostly women) such as P. Di Nicola, M. D'Amato, E. Besozzi, G. Mangiarotti Frugiuele, A. Censi. But the limit of their studies consisted in making evident the child only "inside" the socialization contexts in which adults were looking at the children's condition: firstly the family, then the school and other nursery services, finally the mass media system. They explored the infant age as a specific topic of a (respectively) sociology of family, sociology of school, sociology of media, etc. It is only at the end of the Nineties that the Italian sociologists – even general sociologists – began to look at children as a "permanent social structure", thus not only as a (temporary) item for social investments or target of social / educational policies, but also and moreover as actors with positive right and gifted with inner capacities (to be enquired more deeply) that interface with the normative structure of opportunities

and with the social reproduction of inequity, precisely as adult and young people do. This new approach changed radically the view of previous studies, corrected the “adult-centered” tendency that was conditioned to look at the child as a product of vertical relations. Even if protagonist in a child-mother relation, the child was rarely viewed as an autonomous builder of their own relational world, rather as subjected to the so-called “generational orders”.

On the base of this “Copernican revolution” stays what intuited W. Corsaro (in a book edited in 1997 that came to Italy in 2003), that is, children produce autonomously their own culture, by structuring interactions and horizontal ties much beyond the adults’ presence and influence. What has been defined the “natural” social ability of children, and implicitly trivialized or transformed in a curious object of interest for adult people, it seems not so banal and easy to decode, because it could be full of intricate rules (as it contains complex grammar) also between all children, even the very little ones (1-6 years old). That’s why childhood must be “taken seriously”, mentioning the expression used by B. Sirota, one of the most relevant voices in European childhood studies and whose essays are reported in Italian language within the volume edited by V. Belotti and S. La Mendola. On the idea of questioning the little ones in an active way, of involving the child as much as possible during the survey and not using he/she only as a passive respondent, is just based the empirical study *Creare senso, negoziare spazi* [Making sense, negotiating spaces], which may be the first research carried out at a national level with this approach (although it draws inspiration by a seminal study of M.C. Belloni, carried out in 2005 in Turin at a local scale).

Another decisive contribution to the Belotti’s child-centered scientific approach comes from the Crc – ONU Convention of rights of the Child that since 1989 embodied the different streams of the international movement for children protection and today represents the best normative and legitimating frame for those who aim to “identify in the public sphere political entitlements and responsibilities both in the implementation and the avoidance of children’s rights” (quoted by Belotti, 2010a, p. 27). As a consequence of a sort of “social debt” towards children – that is enlightened by the gap between principles (stated by Crc) and real life conditions of children – it has been developed along the Nineties a new field of research strictly connected to the concept of justice, thus based on a “sociology of law” approach. I do mention here a series of studies carried

out by A.C. Moro, G. Maggioni, C. Baraldi, A.R. Favretto and R. Bosisio published within the collection “L’aquilone” by Donzelli in Rome (directed by G. Maggioni, C. Baraldi, P. Ronfani), which also provided the Italian translations of very important books by A. James, C. James, A. Prout, M. King.

This course of inquiries inspired the Belotti’s second reviewed book, focused on social indicators of children’s well-being. The work is an opportunity for the author to verify the rightness of his “child-centered approach”, which is needed in his opinion for filling the gaps of a statistical measurement still too “institutional”, that is, partial as it catches the children’s condition only through social data (demography, illness, schooling, detention, ...), which are in itself “a mirror of the power relationships among the social actors” (Belotti, 2011, p. 3) and make children as a marginal, invisible group like women, immigrants and disabled people.

Moreover, it’s not under discussion the importance of the cultural aim of Belotti’s works. His itinerary of study is not so recent as in the past he analyzed several topics of the children’s condition in Italy in line with the child-centered approach, such as: social communications about childhood, children living away from the family, implementation of Crc in Italy, the state of sporting education and practices. With all these works he claims for a scientific space *within sociology* to be assigned to childhood studies, until now dominated by educational sciences (psychology and pedagogy), particularly by psychoanalysis (Freud) and genetic epistemology (Piaget). All these approaches were idiographic and put in evidence the self-centeredness of the child, also neglecting the cultural and collective dimensions of the growing-up subject (thus, his/her autonomy as a social agent). Moreover they contributed to reproduce conventional assumptions that today should be reviewed: for instance, the idea that the little is the exclusive issue of a mother-child relation, or that he/she is totally modeled by significant adults, and so on. In my opinion, the Belotti’s de-constructive action is carried out with a wide looking, without assigning the task of the “fair” analysis of children to one or one other of the various branches of sociology (doing so, he bypasses the question of which one should be better to comprehend the child). The author suggests, both implicitly and explicitly, that children – as well as the youngster – are deserving of a sociological *regard* simply because they are there, independently from their statistical weight; because their present life is the

“particular” reflecting the “universal” social life (just to quote by S. La Mendola); because analyzing their original relationships is a way to go in depth of a comprehension of the social tie as such; finally because each child possesses a language and a meaningful structure through which does not only undergo the social structure of differences but also contributes to produce differences in taking turns.

In Belotti’s conception I don’t realize any paternalistic intention, typical of different specialists of childhood who looked at the child as a fragile object to defend (consistently with the Freud’s “distress of civility” thesis), that is, the so-called *child saver*. Rather he makes transpire a propensity to social criticism towards the current visions of childhood and to the “participatory ideology”, as the *kid libbers* do. But he also underlines the awareness that any adult’s vision of childhood can be rhetoric and can hold an intrinsic “cognitive egocentrism”, thus risking to take sides for a social category without giving it voice. With this, any rhetoric of the child may hide internal resistances, prejudices from the side of adults towards an open view of children. Belotti’s program of study is very critique and reflexive; he seems far from both the culturalist perspective (in his opinion this is insufficient for understanding children within the current political and social frame) and the reproduction perspective (in his opinion the child is not only reproducing social categorizations but he/she modifies the environment as well). He embraces a subjective, interactionist view that tends to look at all subjectivities at stake (thus children as well as adults) and to their reciprocal relations, as indicators of a given social order. He develops his analyses very consistently with the aim of many childhood studies: “understanding what children do with what we do to them” (B. Sirota).

Some methodological options in both empirical researches can demonstrate this consistency. First of all, in the volume *Costruire senso, negoziare spazi* [Making sense, negotiating spaces], a vast survey has been carried out on a national sample of 21.527 preadolescents (11-13-15 ys.) in order to identify what is negotiated by children in their socialization contexts: school, family, sport organizations and young people’s associations. The questionnaires were submitted with the support of public schools (lower and upper secondary schools). Thus, it can be argued that the children’s cultures might be better caught “in a situation”, that is, thanks the intermediation of the public sphere, in this case the school institution that hosts a huge part of the preadolescent’s socialization.”

Then data analysis of the questionnaire, alternatively from what often occurs in quantitative enquiries, were joined by “missing replies” analysis and a supplementary section devoted to collect the “critiques to questionnaire” by respondents (with open and close items). Authors consider this kind of data a good way to reconstruct the *true* thinking of children, what can be expressed beyond the environmental influence provoked by the survey (i.e., peers influence, teachers evaluation, tendency to normative reply); in other words, they are listening to a possible children’s reflexivity.

Unfortunately the data risen from these supplementary analysis are not so strong (only 17% of respondents filled the form of free comments and suggestions) and the factorial analysis made on the children’s evaluations (only considering close items) did not reach a satisfying result in terms of which structural factors could have influenced their evaluations. All these are signs that lead to go further in the search of accurate methods for understanding the “life world” of children, even remaining within the track of standard methods, so as to compare childhood studies with researches focused on other social categories. Belotti also thinks of coming to build a valid strategy for enquiring children in a straight way of having a positive influence on medium/long terms, also on a social representations of childhood: for instance, it will enlighten minors not only about their problematic issues, but also about their normality.

In the volume *L’Italia “Minore”* [“Younger” Italy], Belotti and Moretti realize a mapping of social indicators on children’s conditions, this purpose is to homogenize the variety of informative sources, choosing among the available but often incoherent ones. This reduces the complex of information into 9 observation dimensions, 39 sub dimensions and 337 indicators. It is appreciable in the sense of that the authors limit is mapping to the only measures (both at European, national and regional level) referring to child’s life and exclude those referring to parents or community’s life, even if the latter are more easy to be found. It’s precious as well that they include – when available – subjective indicators (issued from direct surveys on children) in order to reduce the “institutional” effect deriving from the exclusive use of social statistics. But, once again, this good attempt fails with the lack of direct surveys on children and with the weakness of sampling strategies.

As a matter of fact, staying from the children's side, still represents a true challenge for sociologists. In the balance between traditional methods of enquiring and desires of renewal. Sociology of education cannot remain indifferent to the challenge launched by childhood studies in general and by Belotti's works, in particular. That is, this requires to join together the different contexts of socialization (family, school, peer cultures, mass media, leisure organizations) in order to understand what occurs among/within subjects and among/within contexts as outcome of the reciprocal interaction. This is the object of a number of previous studies about adolescents and preadolescents, edited by an Italian sociologist of education Elena Besozzi (her communicative model of socialization in 1990 has to be mentioned here), the suggestions provided by Belotti for studying children seem very useful to enlighten two of the main "opacities" that sociology of education meets nowadays: a) how to build education services really "child-sized", if the target is analyzed only from the side of adults? and b) what is there behind the inter-generational relation in the current age, when many adult people tend not to trust in a powerful education and to leave children out of the social and cultural scenario. Ask the children, please, as recommended by Belotti and his team.