How Americans Raise Their Children: A Comment

Comment on Paula Fass’s Annual Lecture, GHI, November 14, 2013

Till Kössler

University of Bochum

Was American childhood different? Do we have to speak about American exceptionalism in the field of child-rearing? It is somewhat astonishing that these important, thought-provoking questions have not been posed earlier. Paula Fass argues that in the United States there existed a specific democratic tradition of child-rearing from the revolutionary period onwards. She suggests that while Americans and Europeans shared many specific concerns about bringing up children, they did not share a vision of liberal democratic citizenship as the framework for child-rearing. Some European intellectuals like Alexis de Tocqueville believed that European childhood was characterized by a more formal and distant relationship between parents and children, a clear subordination of children to adult authority and an educational culture that held deference towards adults, social authorities, and community traditions at a premium.

I have to admit right away that I find this argument compelling in many ways. The German example is a case in point. There was not a German John Dewey — or a European John Dewey for that matter — and John Dewey’s preoccupation with democracy did not resonate much with contemporary German pedagogues. His preoccupation with democracy did not receive much attention until the 1960s. While German Reformpädagogen shared many convictions with their Progressive colleagues, a deep concern for democracy was definitely not one of them. Similarly, the work of Benjamin Spock and the pedagogical ideas it stands for only began to influence German advice literature in the 1970s at the earliest.

However, while I find the argument that there was a specific American tradition of democratic education in many ways very convincing, I hesitate to follow Tocqueville’s analysis of two separate paths: one American, and one European. In what follows, I want to elaborate three thoughts in this respect. First, I will stress both the plurality and dynamics of European visions of childhood and child-rearing in the last two centuries. Both tendencies make it impossible to speak of a European way of child-rearing in the singular. Second, I will

1 Jürgen Oelkers, John Dewey und die Pädagogik (Weinheim, 2009); Jürgen Oelkers, Eros und Herrschaft: Die dunklen Seiten der Reformpädagogik (Weinheim/München, 2011).

point to important entanglements between American and European ideas of bringing up children. And finally I want to dwell briefly on the ambivalences of liberal and democratic child-rearing since the Enlightenment. The thrust of my argument will be to stress the existence of multiple strands of connecting children with larger communities and to bring the American and European traditions closer together without denying important differences.

I.

First, the plurality of visions of childhood in Europe needs to be stressed. Paula Fass convincingly argues that while there did exist a variety of different childhoods in America, it is possible to identify a rather coherent hegemonic concept of what education should achieve. In Europe, at least until the very recent past, no such single trajectory existed. On the contrary, European developments were characterized by bitter clashes over childhood and education. It is therefore difficult to compare Europe as a whole to the United States.

To begin with, in Europe socialist concepts of childhood became very important in the late nineteenth century and shaped the debates about child-rearing in an important way. Even more important, I would argue, was the clash between secular and religious concepts of child-rearing. In countries with a strong Catholic tradition, it is impossible to understand the history of childhood without taking into account the fierce battles between a secular and a religious camp. Both sides ran their own schools, organized their own children’s clubs, parents’ organizations and published their own advice literature and children’s magazines. In most European countries, Britain perhaps being the major exception, religion was an important and often overlooked factor in child-rearing until the 1960s, and I would also be curious to hear more about the role of religion in the American case and how it was interwoven in the democratic tradition.

Finally, history of child-rearing in Europe was shaped by fierce battles between nations and between nationalist and regionalist movements for the hearts and minds of children. The Chicago historian Tara Zahra, for example, has demonstrated in great detail how both German and Czech nationalists in the Czech-German borderlands fought bitterly over control over the young generations between the late nineteenth century and the aftermath of the Second World War. Keeping all this in mind, I would argue that in the European case, at least until the 1960s, we have to talk about quite different visions of

---

3 See, for example, Laura Lee Downs, Childhood in the Promised Land: Working-class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960 (Durham, 2002).


modern childhood. These sometimes overlapped, but also presented distinctive features, even if we concede that countercurrents did exist, such as, most importantly, the modern child sciences.\(^6\)

Often, certain European traditions had more in common with intellectual currents in America than they had with other European approaches. Even during the Franco dictatorship, Catholic educators in Spain felt that they were part of a global educational movement that also encompassed American Catholic democratic child-rearing. At the same time, they distanced themselves from German protestant and French and Spanish lay initiatives.\(^7\) And it can equally be argued that French Republican teachers in the 1920s, who debated what lessons could be learned from the Great War in order to educate new democratic and peaceful citizens, had much more in common with the Dewey school of thought than with the agenda of conservative or nationalist teachers in the different European countries.\(^8\) While visions of a democratic society differed from one another, it is an important task to compare the similarities and differences from a transnational perspective in more detail. It also seems promising to describe the conflicts between more democratic and more authoritarian concepts and practices of child-rearing not — or not only — as clashes between different national cultures, but as clashes within national societies and even individual families as well.

II.

The second point I want to make concerns transatlantic entanglements. Writers like Toqueville not only analyzed life in the United States but also popularized images of American child-rearing in Europe. The entanglement became even closer in the twentieth century as the new illustrated mass press circulated representations of American family life and childhood an integral part of European mass culture. The most direct influence of American visions of childhood on European societies came perhaps in 1945 as hundreds of American social workers descended upon war-torn Europe to help reconstitute families, democracy, and nations all at the same time.\(^9\) We still do not know enough about how these different influences affected child-rearing in Europe but I would argue that we have to go beyond simple linear concepts of acceptance and rejection and look more closely at amalgamations as well as contradictory effects. In Spain, for example, in the 1920s and 1930s the new


\(^{7}\) See for example the travel impressions of an eminent Spanish Jesuit educator: Enrique Herrera Oría, Norteamérica al día: Memorias de un viajero español (Madrid, 1946).

\(^{8}\) For the differences between German and French educational responses to World War I see Andrew Donson, Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918 (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Mona Siegel, The Moral Disarmament of France: Education, Pacifism, and Patriotism, 1914–1940 (Cambridge, 2004).

images of family and childhood led to heightened expectations and a political radicalization of liberal and democratic reformers who found the Spanish state to be utterly deficient.  

Since at least the late nineteenth century another form of entanglement developed between child psychologists, educational experts, and childhood reformers on both sides of the Atlantic. To a considerable extent, these contacts stemmed from a similar assessment of the dangers and promises of modern civilization. For Europeans, too, child-rearing became increasingly intertwined with the future of the nation, and they, too, diagnosed a decline of strong-willed, autonomous individuals. German Reformpädagogen, French Republican educators, and Spanish regenerationists, to pick just a few examples, also yearned for a new self-reliant, energetic citizen that was not all that different from the image Ulysses S. Grant popularized in his autobiography. They entered into a transnational debate on how best to educate this new individual and often proposed quite similar measures. The American orphan trains, for example, found their counterpart in the French colonies de vacances (vacation colonies) that placed urban children in the countryside during the summer months, both within camps but also — and preferably — with temporary foster families. Likewise, German educational reformers founded Landschulheime (boarding schools in the countryside) far away from the corrupting influences of city life. These visions of a “new man,” however, were not necessarily democratic ones, and Paula Fass reminds us to look more closely at how they became intertwined with broader political agendas of political regeneration and change.

III.

Finally, I want to make a last and more general point regarding the ambivalences of liberal-democratic education since the Enlightenment. Inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, educational theorists have, in the last decades, begun to explore the coercive sides of liberal child-rearing. They point to the fact that the concept of Bildung (education) that stood at the core of liberal child-rearing in Germany and other countries, did not only lead the way to individual emancipation, but also posed new coercive demands on individuals to fashion themselves as rational, autonomous human beings. In this view, the liberal education reformers since the late eighteenth century not only propagated the education of a new generation of self-reliant and independent citizens, but at the same time introduced various new techniques to supervise, discipline, and control children.

10 Kössler, Human Sciences.


13 Norbert Ricken, Die Ordnung der Bildung: Beiträge zu einer Genealogie der Bildung (Wiesbaden, 2006).
A century later, after 1900, especially in the Scandinavian countries but also in other European countries, democratic concepts of child-rearing were often closely entangled with eugenic ideas. The Swedish reformer Ellen Key, for example, promoted not only a more egalitarian family life and more independence for children, but also marriage restrictions and the sterilization of supposedly “unfit” men and women to prevent them from having offspring.14

Even if one is not ready to buy into this line of argument completely or even partially, both examples invite us to look more closely at the ambivalences and contradictions of liberal and democratic child-rearing as it developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, but perhaps also in the United States. To do this, it is helpful to historicize the notion of democratic child-rearing and examine what it meant at different times and in different places. And it seems equally helpful to study not only educational discourse but practices of child-rearing as well.

Paula Fass has offered us a compelling and thought-provoking narrative that poses a challenge to students of European history and opens up a vast new field for future research. In particular, she invites us to think more systematically about the interconnections between child-rearing and democracy.

In contrast to the situation in the United States, where the history of childhood is well established, in Europe, for the most part, we still lack studies that systematically analyze the relationship between political regime changes and educational visions and practices of child-rearing. Against this background, the question of democracy offers a promising point of departure for comparative research and a leitmotiv for a European history of childhood, especially in the twentieth century. A major question of this research should be to determine the similarities and differences between European and American visions of childhood and practices of child-rearing.

14 Marcus Reiß, Kindheit bei Maria Montessori und Ellen Key: Disziplinierung und Normalisierung (Paderborn, 2012).