Unexpected allies:

Expanding the theoretical toolbox of the children’s rights sociologist

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Outline

1. A theoretical turning point
2. Two tales about children’s rights
3. Expanding the toolbox
4. Applications to the study of public policies
5. Discussion
6. Conclusion
1. A theoretical turning point

• Reflexivity, normativity and critique (Alanen, 2010, 2011; Reynaert et al., 2012)

• Main theoretical debates:
  – Beyond the structure-agency binary (Tisdall & Punch, 2014)
  – Accounting for both the biological and the social nature of the child (Lee & Motzkau, 2011)
  – Beyond human agency (Prout, 2005)
  – Ideal-types, static views vs. movement, change, diversity... “assemblages” (Lee, 2001)
2. Two tales about children’s rights
3. Expanding the toolbox

• A powerful, but heavy, Bourdieusian legacy

• Bourdieusian dissidents
  – Refusal of the “epistemological break” (Latour, 2006)
  – Refusal of heavy conceptual frameworks:
    o “No groups, no social classes, no workers, no contexts, no youth, no women, no voters, etc. with which the social sciences (…) have made us all so comfortable… This work overflows with a multitude of beings, sometimes human, sometimes things, which never appear unless the state in which they occur is simultaneously described” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991).
    o “a flat world” (Latour, 2006b)

• A pragmatic research strategy, i.e. follow the actors and study situated action:
  – Disputes and critique
  – Test (“épreuve”)
  – Justifications
4. Applications to the study of public policies
“Living my municipality”

• Approach: Combining “unexpected allies” to enhance knowledge (Buzelin, 2005) and to foster reflexivity (Bénatouil, 1999)

• Research strategy
  – Localize the global
    • Focus on processes rather than results
    • Focus both on people and material arrangements
  – Historicize the local
    • Locate action in history
    • Situate the local within intertwined and/or nested contexts (e.g. networks, arrangements, ideas of the “good”, etc.)
Mapping landscapes of critique

ELECTED POLITICAL BODIES

ADMINISTRATION (APPOINTED)

HEALTH  EDUCATION  PROTECTION  PROMOTION  PARTICIPATION
Reaching consensus in situation open to critique
A key test: State support to “youth projects”

- **Factual criteria**
  - residential status
  - age

- **Relative criteria**
  - project presentation
  - number of beneficiaries
  - autonomous mobilization of resources and network
  - youth-led

- **Normative criteria**
  - risk-free
  - feasibility
  - being (pragmatically) « realist »
Into a network

The Regional Conference of Child/Youth delegates (CRDEJ)

• Hybrid institution (cantons and municipalities; children, youth and beyond)
  – “A strange beast”… “a funny beast” (“drôle de bête”)
  – “Who’s delegating us?”

• Relational positions, diversity and tensions

• Explicit efforts to maintain the capacity to critique despite growing institutionalization
5. Discussion
Strengths

• Disputes and critique do allow revealing key stakes

• The research strategy allows to reveal the social and material conditions through which particular “truths” are instituted
  – Sheds light both on change and stability of institutions
  – Public policies as sites of tension, conflict, resistance
  – Allows to account for complexity, uncertainty, paradox

• Particularly adapted to analyse current bio-politics (biological-social-technological)
Challenges and sites of tension

• Practicing a “different kind of exteriority” (Garnier, forthcoming):
  – Following the actors… to what extent? What for?
  – The risk of being prisoners of the cave
  – A nomadic “bricoleur”?
  – How to justify (technically, morally, politically, etc.) the pragmatic combination of partially antagonist approaches?

• Learning to live with the Otherness of objects

• How to navigate complexity without getting lost (Lee & Motzkau, 2011)?
6. Conclusions

- A pragmatic engagement with theory: theories as "tools" (Garnier, forthcoming) or "research strategies" (Bénatouil, 1999)
- Not a new "grand theory", but an expanded toolbox allowing a nuanced account of children’s rights practices
- The uncomfortable productivity of epistemic frontiers (Fassin, 2010; Foucault, 1984)
Bibliographical references


