

DEL RÍO, NORMA. "Assuming uncertainty in daily life". Roundtable: Migration and Dislocation: What are the questions worth asking? *Children's Rights at a Cross-Roads. A global conference on research and child rights.* Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 30th November, 2009.

ASSUMING UNCERTAINTY IN DAILY LIFE

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And nonetheless, it moves...Galileo

ABSTRACT

Following the aphorism employed by a well known anthropologist: "if you don't know the answer discuss the question", I intend to reflect on the complexity of the mobile and circulating ways of life of a thousand million of people (PNUD, 2009) as a bidirectional phenomena of contrasting scenarios that emerge from the growing inequity that goes along with the globalization process. I comment on some strategies that families and their members display in order to maintain their agency in the face of exclusionary processes that dissociate instrumentality from identity at high costs of their well being.

The continuous process of "moving on" (in different spaces and times) places emphasis on processes that reconstruct and redefine realities, leaving behind rigid institutional structures on which policies seem to be based. In this case, instead of classifying those phenomena as problematic and maintained in separate and parallel worlds, with defensive and reactive policies, there is urgent need of stretching the gap by recognizing them as social actors and unique persons, with community actions that build on social networks to promote the free use of their capabilities, so that everyone may be not just with others but among others.

KEYWORDS: migration, globalization, agency, research and policy.

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THE QUESTION OF POLICY AND RESEARCH

Focalized policies tend to isolate and create a delusion of "groups in exceptional circumstances", although it is a question of excluded majorities who have been banned from participating as citizens in their own territorial space, where they should be enjoying well being conditions of living to guarantee the development of their full human potential. Indigenous children, invisibilized by the fact that they are in cities -as if the urban spaces were reserved to non-indigenous people-, leaving them with the rural realities as their only possible ethnic space¹. Street youth forced to give new life to a world of waste products, and construct at a high cost of survival a counterculture that may show and denounce the series of abuses and the exploitation that conform the so called "social progress". Material, social and moral poverty, as a result of the unjust distribution of resources and stripping of means, of continuous colonizations that have to be fought and controlled so that human dignity may emerge.

Poverty as Sen (1992, 1999) has reminded us, is not only a question of survival in spite of adversity, but an expression of violence implied in the coercion of freedom to be, and the obstacles drawn to block access to information, to the possibility of belonging and constructing a legitimate identity, to be among others, as part of the social texture that is blended by dialogue, negotiation and confrontation. Poverty is not only transmitted to a child not merely from within the same household or extended family, but also from institutions such as schools, hospitals or care centres/foster homes, and from the state via benefits and legal protection, as the study of Moore (2001) on the transmission of

¹ As Del Val points out, we cannot keep thinking of indigenous people as "poor peasants habituated to live in inhospitable regions, that are fond of isolation and lack of communication, specialized in agriculture of subsistence, and producers of handicrafts" [Del Val, 2002:69] and neither is useful the one sided description of an indigenous utopia of an unplugged alternative world rather than a complex and contradictory scenario where they may be "included, "plugged" without being run over on their difference, nor condemned to inequity... in sum to be intercultural citizens in the full sense of the word" as García Canclini states (2004).

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intergenerational poverty concludes. The children on streets are result not so much of the abandonment of their relatives but rather because of the abandonment that can more appropriately be applied to the policies, practices, institutions and actors that perpetuate regimes of exclusion (Butler, 2009).

What is then the line of research that should be the background of transforming actual static and structural policies into dynamic and mobile plans of action? Research that may focus on processes and not on structures, prioritizing complexity that leads to an integral and comprehensive systemical analysis rather than a segmented and analytical approach.

Research that is done with full consciousness of a descentered look with interior journeys, reminding that we are at the same time different and integrated; unequal and participants and plugged-unplugged subjects in this globalized world. We have to give account of local contexts that are reinterpreted and transformed for the distant academic world, coordinating similarities with differences, alterity with ownership, recognizing the borders which go beyond our comprehension rather than describing them as chaos and entropy.

But as Touraine (2000) says: "rights can protect coexistence but cannot assure communication". That is why it is of utmost importance the use of participating methodology that reconstruct and actualize life histories, family or community trajectories. Qualitative approaches that may put personhood on a first plane, the universal right to be recognized as a Subject; and here, we are talking of children too. It is a question of how to integrate the perspective of agency and subjectivity with the structural factors that constrain behaviour and opportunity (Butler, 2009). We have to create spaces of "subjectivization", travelling not only in space but in time. Narrating oneself brings cohesion and texture to life and the past is reactivated in function of the present and in this active listening to the other, we become guest-inhabitants of their world, in order to construct together the social frameworks of memory (Ricoeur, 1996).

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Some concepts that are closely related to migration may be useful metaphors for the process of research. Border or frontier may be seen as the limit in which something ceases to be: we can be talking of a painful identity fracture, a cultural shock. But it also can be perceived as a transitional zone with blurred limits or even as a zone of transgression, and catalyst of processes. Frontiers as Augé (2007) maintains, cannot be erased but can be retraced and displaced, and this is not only true for political borders but also for epistemological obstacles. The real cannot be complete without some doses of utopia that may mark a direction and intentionally, when action and agency are part of our research. A dialectical way of thinking may be more fruitful: to deal at the same time with unity-diversity or conceive the urban without the city "the unlimited presence but also the infinite absence" (the city not as a place of encounter but as "ghettos and isolated communities crossed by highways and freeways: no-places as they have been described in a postmodern approach as Augé points out) or in questioning ourselves how the private has been colonized by the public ("the TV asks the questions and internet answers them"²) or vice versa, when the policies and public programs to assure the right to education, stop at the gate of a private field, where children live and work (Del Río, 2006).

On the following section I offer some other contrasted scenarios that emerge when we try to look both ways on our circulating field of study:

CONTRASTED SCENARIOS :

1. *Are we talking of the same country or place, that is target of exotic tourism and at the same time expels their inhabitants in local or regional migrations because of the unequal distribution of resources? (Augé, Marc 2007, Maffesoli, 2004)*

Latin America is the most unequal region in the world and this combination of relative wealth and inequity in the distribution of income and wealth, places a social arena for

² Peregil, El País, 29-04-2001 cited in García Canclini, N., 2004, p.72.

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indignation which may then be worked out by means of critical consciousness of the need of collective social transformation (Freire, Marina & Valgona, 2000). As Sartre sustained: "From the day when we can conceive a different state of things, a new light will shine on our problems and our sufferings, and it is in this moment when we decide that they are unbearable".

This Sartrean reflection could well be applied to the decision to migrate as another strategy to make things change, actively marking a turn point in the present living conditions and changing the direction and trajectory of their lives along with a significant amount of uncertainty and risk, but in some sense lowering the uncertainty and insecurity of daily life that characterizes living in poverty (Deepa, Narayan, et. al., 2000).

2. *Can we explain the logic of those places of attraction that promise economic rewards for caregiving tasks to women, who in turn, must leave their own children to kins to look after them? (Ariza & De Oliveira, 2004)*

This question suggests a necessary change of perspective: we may have to stop studying the "culture of poverty" to make things change, for it may well be the culture of wealth among the rich and middle class that keeps the poor in poverty (Moore, 2001).

The family strategies put into play in this new phenomena of "transnational care" that moves women not only from south to north but also from south-south (from Peru, Ecuador to Chile or Argentina), are very different on both sides: while a "professional-female stranger" is hired for substitute care so that the younger generations may "go on living", the caregiver's extended family on the other side, rearranges and re-functionalizes the domestic roles, bringing closer both generational extremes in this new arrangement of care. The eldest and the youngest, will develop a relationship that will feedback the process of upbringing and a process of re-socialization will also take place, as the children will circulate external information to their grandparents (Machado-Pais, 2000). The

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extended family model may also be opened to other kin and neighbors implicating them in the rearing activities by means of "godfathering rituals".

This kind of social networking has proven to be critical for the well being of children and the prevention of impoverishment that is seen, when family closes to the care of the elderly: "emotional and financial support rise with each additional extended kin tie and with the co residence of network members" (Kana'iaupuni, Shawn Malia et al., 2005).

3. Is migration only a process of loss and of human impoverishment for the ones who stay or can it be also a two way process where a family extends its own vital space, creating new corridors of continuous passage "to and from" and thus reconnecting itself by expanding nodes in their social networks?

This question can be perhaps rephrased on another level: In this globalized world, how can we understand the exercise of citizenship in a complex regimen of multiple ownerships? can we sustain that we are full-time subjects of one and only culture, or do we have to admit the versatility of multiple identifications that keep changing and reorganizing, in order to transform meanings and traditional senses in new ways, without denying the right to be different? (García Canclini, 2004)

4. What are the real degrees of freedom associated with migration?

Debt plays a crucial part in migration and traffic of human persons³. It dissociates instrumentality from identity and it has been defined as one of the sources of generational transmission of poverty (Moore, K. 2001). It has been a way of maintaining servitude in different modalities, from sexual or forced labour exploitation⁴ to migrant

³ According to the Annual Report on Human Traffic of the Dept. of State of USA, around 600-800,000 people cross international borders as victims of this traffic each year. 80% are women and girls and 50% are minors. (Ezeta, 2006)

⁴ Near 10,000 people from China, Mexico, Vietnam and other 30 countries are forced to work in many cities and states of USA (Florida, Texas, California, New York and Oklahoma). Ten percent are boys and girls

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professionals hired by head-hunters. Ten to 15% of the estimated 200,000 teachers hired annually in USA are foreigners, often from Philippines and India. Most of the teachers arrive in debt, owing a \$7,500 fee to a head-hunting firm, later falling further into debt renting apartments and adjusting to the U.S. lifestyle ⁵.

García Canclini (2004) critically points out how the Latin American Economic System (SELA) states that "each Latin American inhabitant owes 1550 dollars since birth" (Boye 2001) globalizing us as debtors even before than as possible producers or consumers.

In some traditional cultures such as Thailand, children have duties toward their caregivers for having been raised and being given life, so they may work in fields, or girls may be prostituted, as a mean to financially contribute to their relatives, and they seem to appreciate clients who would "generously provide and take interest in their family needs" (Montgomery, 2007).

But debt can also be part of the dynamics of reciprocal giving that characterize traditional nahua and indigenous communities in Mexico. In this case, as in Thailand, children are in debt for the work they have been receiving during the process of childrearing. But in contrast to Thailand, it is the time and work dedicated to the child that establishes the rights of motherhood or parenthood and it will be only in a later life stage of the child that will be expected to return this "investment", by caring their elders and looking after them. In this case, work is an energy that flows from adult to child and viceversa, creating a social bond glued by work "tequitl", the nahua word for collective work (Good, 2005).

sexually exploited (Free the Slaves, Human Rights Center, Univ. of California, Berkeley, Hidden Slaves. Forced Labor in the US, Sept. 2004).

⁵ Joe Mathews, "The New Import: Teachers," Los Angeles Times, August 10, 2002 cit. in Kapur, Devesh & John Mc Hale 2005. *Give us your best and brightest. The Global hunt for talent and its impact on the developing World*, Center for Global Development.

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In these type of communities, when a family decides that a particular member will migrate, as a strategy of change of their critical life conditions, they will go and share their project with others in the community to seek economic support, so the process of indebtedness functions here not as a way of coercion of liberty but as a social engagement to a common project. Social networks are thus strengthened by this new bond. The family crisis becomes a common and public issue, and debt acts also as an anchor to their place. Last year, 20,000 million dollars were sent in remittances back to Mexico (Bank of Mexico, 2008). 20% of the eldest who live alone in 2003 received national or international remittances that represented 12.5% of their monthly income (CEPAL, 2009).

Debt is not the only element to give answer to the question of degrees of freedom in migration. Valsiner (1996) provides us with other elements from a developmental point of view to answer this question of freedom linked to agency in contexts of significant uncertainty. Rather than taking a stochastic and chaos approach to the issue of facing uncertainty, he sustains that agency is linked with prospection, a proposal that fits nicely with probability theory by "loading the dices". He explains it in this way: we meet uncertainty by representing at least two possible scenarios and a three step action planning process takes place:

1. Probable estimation: It is probable that "x" or "y" may be
2. Personal Preference: I would like that "x" would happen
3. Proactive action: Let's do this, so that we may "x" to happen.

So let's load the dices to recognize children and youth as active social actors and citizens in the full sense of the word, so that children's rights may become part of the daily life of every children.

If we conceive personhood as a seat of a net of relationships, we may come to answer yes to the question threw by Alain Tourain's : Can we possible live together?

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