



Anthropology and Childhood. From Research Teams to the Development of Teaching and Learning Spaces in the Buenos Aires Area (Argentina)

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Résumé :

Au cours des dernières décennies en Argentine, l'enfance est devenue un champ légitime de recherche en Anthropologie. Le travail continu des chercheurs locaux, ainsi que la croissance des équipes de recherche, ont rendu possible la création d'espaces pour l'enseignement de ce domaine au sein des universités nationales. Dans cet article, nous analysons ces espaces encadrés dans la formation d'études supérieures en anthropologie, au sein de quatre universités

publiques de la ville et de la province de Buenos Aires. L'observation des plans d'études met en évidence, d'une part, la grande profusion des questions qui concernent directement et indirectement les enfants et l'enfance, et, d'autre part, la revendication du potentiel de l'anthropologie pour dénaturiser l'enfance, tout en mettant en avant les approches historiques et ethnographiques.

Mots-clés : Anthropologie et enfance, formation universitaire

Abstract :

In the last few decades in Argentina, childhood began to emerge as a legitimate field of anthropological research. Constant work by local researchers and the growth of research teams have given rise to educational activities in this field at universities all over the country. The focus of analysis in this paper are the different courses developed as part of undergraduate and graduate training programs in Anthropology at four public universities in the city and province of Buenos Aires. The study of the seminar's syllabuses shows, on the one hand, plenty and varied subject matters concerning childhood both directly and indirectly. On the other hand, we will examine the shared stress of such courses on the potential of anthropology to deconstruct childhood through historical and ethnographical approaches.

Keywords : Anthropology and childhood, Buenos Aires, higher education

Preliminary Issues

In Argentina, since the early 1900s, several academics have conducted anthropological research, resulting in the prompt emergence of institutions such as the Museo Etnográfico (Ethnographic Museum) (1905) and the Sociedad Argentina de Antropología (Argentine Association of Anthropology) (1935). The aforementioned Museum, located in the city of Buenos Aires, was “the first South American institution devoted to the study of human disciplines” (Perazzi 2003: 39, our translation), and the first one to create a course on Anthropology. In any case, the Argentine anthropological research went a long way to become a higher education program.

It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that the first curriculum for the Anthropological Science career was approved in Argentina. The higher education structure established at that time has not changed: unlike other countries, it consists of exclusive disciplinary cycles lasting for at least 5 years, including about 30 subjects with several foreign language levels. In many institutions, anthropology’s undergraduate program requires the presentation of a thesis, which usually takes students one year of research. This means early specialization in the discipline and subject matter, as well as an introduction to research.

Until 1983 the development of university research and training activities was restrained by blows to democracy. Therefore, anthropology training at various institutions was affected by a succession of de facto governments and the resulting internal or external political exile of many Argentine professionals.

Nowadays, there are undergraduate anthropology programs at the following public institutions, listed chronologically, according to their starting date (see map in Appendix 2):

- Universidad Nacional de La Plata (National University of La Plata) (1958),
- Universidad de Buenos Aires (University of Buenos Aires) (1958),
- Universidad Nacional de Rosario (National University of Rosario) (1967),
- Universidad Nacional de Misiones (National University of Misiones) (1975),
- Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (National University of Central Buenos Aires) (1993),
- Universidad Nacional de Jujuy (National University of Jujuy) (1984),
- Universidad Nacional de Salta (National University of Salta) (1985),
- Universidad Nacional de San Martín (National University of San Martín) (2007),
- Universidad Nacional de Río Negro (National University of Río Negro) (2008),
- Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (National University of Córdoba) (2009)

Education at the above-cited institutions is entirely free, and either provides various specializations, such as archeology, social anthropology, biological anthropology, ethnolinguistics, ethnohistory and management, or includes subjects and seminars on different areas of specialization. Graduate

courses are also provided (Master's Degree and Doctorate).

This time our analysis is focused on anthropology and childhood training courses proposed in the last few years as part of undergraduate and graduate education, and is limited to the four public universities in the city and province of Buenos Aires which offer anthropology as an undergraduate career (Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional de San Martín, and Universidad de Buenos Aires). As outlined above, it is worth considering that anthropological activities were never restricted solely to the city of Buenos Aires, and that they have recently extended further to several areas in Argentina. In this sense, although a large percentage of anthropology training sites are included in this article, it shall be interesting to extend this analysis to the whole country in future investigations, considering the large number of educational institutions and graduates that may not be represented here.

From Research to Training

For this analysis, it is important to consider that as childhood increasingly became an item in the public agenda in the last few decades, it began to emerge as a legitimate field of anthropological research in Argentina –as well as other countries in the region– becoming visible in publications and scientific meetings (Szulc & Cohn 2012). In the past, many researchers interested in childhood used to take part in theoretical discussions in workgroups devoted to more institutionalized fields of study (education, religion, migrations, indigenous studies, legal anthropology). These researchers, who initially developed their studies individually, began to interconnect by building up specific meeting points at academic events and educational institutions. Thus, emergence of this research field received a significant contribution by a young generation of anthropologists, mostly women, who started numerous investigations on childhood as a contended social, cultural and historical construction, acknowledging and examining children's social agency ethnographically.

Consistently with this, different workgroups, symposiums and national and regional scientific meetings involving Argentine and Latin American anthropologists interested in childhood have been organized in the last decade. These events proved very important, not only for the presentation of research results, but also to legitimize a field of study and provide training through the exchange of different professional cohorts.

In addition, exchange with colleagues from Brazil, Spain and Mexico began to grow thanks to these meetings, and was then institutionalized in diverse ways (circulation of visiting lecturers, conferences, research stances, and scientific events). On the one hand, international researchers have conducted seminars in Buenos Aires (see seminars 3, 6, 10, 11, 17 and 23 in Appendix 1), and on the other hand, researchers from Buenos Aires usually give seminars in other provinces of the country and abroad, e.g. Venezuela and Mexico (see seminars 4, 9, 13, 14, 18 and 22 in Appendix 1).

In short, work by local scientists and the growth of teams made it possible to provide training on this field at universities. For this analysis we have considered the information supplied by syllabuses from different seminars and courses (see list in the Appendix 1). As these were collected from universities websites and contacts with colleagues, we may have committed some involuntary omissions.

We have identified a total of thirty three seminars addressing issues with a direct or indirect

relation to childhood, some of which have been offered on a regular basis while others have been presented discontinuously.

Prior to making further progress into our analysis, two things need to be highlighted. Firstly, childhood-related subjects are not taught at every anthropology undergraduate program, and when this happens, they are not compulsory but part of a set of optional subjects that students choose from based on their individual interests. This shows that while this field of study has become increasingly enriched by various approaches, it is still not strong enough to be considered part of the mandatory undergraduate syllabus.

Secondly, many of these courses are framed within some of the most strongly consolidated sub-disciplines in anthropology – such as educational anthropology, legal anthropology, gender and family anthropology –, thus dealing with a wide range of issues and having a certain conceptual heterogeneity. Of note, childhood is absent from anthropological syllabuses devoted to religion, economy, or rural anthropology, social fields which are still implicitly or explicitly believed to be the exclusive realm of adult men.

Analysis of contents from the syllabuses we were able to gather shows different emphasis. On the one hand, they focus on educational processes for issues concerning social production and reproduction in varied and unequal educational environments, educational policies, and school curriculums. They also contain reflections on intercultural education, training processes both inside and outside schools for groups with diverse ethnic and national heritage, and relationships between individuals and groups involved in such processes. The analysis of educational environments has recently included contents which are specifically linked to childhood as an issue and with children as the protagonists of their own learning experiences.

On the other hand, there is an emphasis on issues relative to modalities of childhood and family management and state intervention, punitive violence, and human rights. As regards children's rights, there is a focus on their theoretical and chronological development connected to national public policies and composition of different social subjects based on paradigms with various outlooks on childhood and adolescence.

There is also a prominence of theory-based discussions concerning gender relations, kinship, and family, accounting for their transformations in time and power relationships involved therein. These are concerned about issues relative to the public and private spheres of daily life affecting childhood experiences.

Finally, there is an emphasis on the study of different approaches to childhood according to anthropological/archaeological traditions, and the discipline's recent re-conceptualization of childhood and children is analyzed. Childhood is revised within the framework of widely varying issues (teaching and learning, playing, health, ethnicity, religion, and migration).

Despite an evident abundance of subject matters and approaches, we can see that most of them claim the potential of anthropology to deconstruct social and cultural realities. This arises mainly from the historical analysis of the addressed phenomena and the ethnographic approach that proves the diversity of human experience (Guber 2001, Rockwell 2009, Szulc *et al*, in the same issue). Consistently with these premises, seminars tend to focus on two approaches: history and ethnography.

As regards the former, direct or indirect training in childhood anthropology usually deals with historical dimensions and different regulations contributing to present childhood configurations. Therefore, it might be argued that in order to study an issue such as “childhood”, “the essential and most compelling scientific priority (...) would be to focus our study on the social work of constructing the pre-constructed object. These are the grounds for a genuine break-off” (Bourdieu 2005: 319, our translation, underlined in the original copy).

In some cases, this historical approach is based on the institutions that deal with the specific subject matters related to childhood, e.g. family, school, the State, juvenile justice, among others. In other cases, specific questions about childhood as a historical production are suggested as a starting point. Historical construction of the concept of childhood, its acknowledgement by various fields of knowledge, and the historical changes affecting this notion are dealt with.

Apart from historical researches, the second most common approach when childhood is related to the ethnographic approach typical of anthropology. As most identified spheres of education on the topic ask students to undergo a field experience based on an ethnographic approach, though not exclusively (document and journalistic source analysis or research on social policies, etc. is also accepted), it is interesting to make a distinction between two ways in which this exercise is carried out. The first one is usually found in proposals derived from the most highly institutionalized anthropological sub-disciplines, i.e. the analysis of ethnographies on the problems or working dynamics of different institutions related to childhood. The ethnographic exercise is focused on the social and institutional spheres of childhood, such as law, school and community institutions and regulatory frameworks.

The second modality involves methodological reflection on ethnographic work with children and conduction thereof by students, when appropriate and according to the subject matter they have chosen for their individual investigation. This requires an analysis of the methodological implications of researching with children, and thinking about the most relevant methodologies for their incorporation in the study. The researching field of anthropological studies with children is fertile ground for the development of methodological proposals and combined strategies (audiovisuals, drawings, drama, etc.). While participant observation is the most promoted technique, the use of different types of interviews has been essential for an anthropological transformation of these approaches.

Concluding and Reopening Remarks

Finally, it is important to point out the flourishing demand of anthropological perspectives for childhood studies and investigations by other disciplines, seen both in the number of students from other careers enrolled in the above-cited seminars and the inclusion of childhood-related anthropology subjects in graduate interdisciplinary syllabuses or other disciplines. This is the case of the seminars in the appendix below, addressed to university students of various careers and not solely to anthropologists or anthropology students, with at least one of them as part of the mandatory curriculum (see seminars 7, 12, 21, 24, 27 and 29 in Appendix 1). Thus, anthropology has become legitimized as a fertile discipline for an understanding of childhood from a holistic perspective.

Anthropology concerned about the study of childhood is slowly but continuously consolidating as a productive branch of Argentine anthropology. Considering the growing number of researchers in

the area, we can anticipate continued expansion and replication of teaching and learning spaces in the future.

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