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On the Changed Meaning of Childhood in the Twentieth Century

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RESEARCH PROGRAMME

"THE CENTURY OF THE CHILD"

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CHILDHOOD DISORDERS, incorrect habits unfavourable for the social adjustment of a child, arising during pre-school age, with harmful effects on the development of character and personality, such as refusal to eat, fear of darkness, bedwetting, thumb-sucking, objectionable sexual habits, face-pulling, nail-biting, temper tantrums, mendacity, deceitfulness, truancy, pilfering, etc. Childhood disorders were first described systematically by L. Strämpell (Die pädagogische Pathologie); their first successful aetiology and treatment came with psychoanalysis (Freud) and in American child clinics (the mental hygiene movement). Child disorders were at first exclusively perceived as "psychopathic inferiorities", in that they are often found to persist in adult psychopaths. In children they often give rise to psychic conflicts, which in turn can consolidate the disorders; otherwise they are generally easy to treat, if punishment is avoided and the law of effect is applied.

(Definition of barnfel in the Swedish encyclopaedia Svensk Uppslagsbok, 1955)

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Psychology and child psychiatry have taught us how early disturbances can continue through many years with changed symptoms. Damage of a serious nature during the first years of life can continue as contact difficulties and aggression among pre-school children, as discipline and learning problems among schoolchildren, and as asocial behaviour and criminality among adolescents; it can also lead to disease of psychophysical type among adults. This is one of our most powerful and noticeable chain reactions. Behavioural science has shown that many personality disorders, character disturbances, and illnesses are due to unsatisfactory emotional conditions during our long, helpless childhood, when personality and character are established.

_Barnstugor, Barnavårdsmannaskap, Barnolycksfall (SOU 1967:8, p. 46)._ 

In the first year of the twentieth century, Ellen Key wrote her book _Barnets århundrade_ (1900). It was a sharp attack on the way children were looked after, among both the upper classes and the working class. The book contained a vision of a better society, expressing the hope that the twentieth century would be, as the title put it, _the century of the child._

Other people shared her vision. The first decades of the twentieth century saw a great mobilization of private interests and municipal and state forces to rescue children from unsuitable environments and to improve their conditions.

Much of the discussion bore the stamp of a conflict between different ideals of childhood. In _Pricing the Priceless Child_, Viviana Zelizer says that the ideal was first formulated in terms of different notions about the value of children – the economic value of their work, and their emotional value. The great project to save the children at the turn of the century was to emphasize the emotional, non-useful value of children.

Childhood was to take on new meanings. Today childhood is a long period in a person's life. It is filled with schooling and organized leisure activities. Many children spend their early years in some form of pre-school care. There has been a dramatic change in the view of how to bring up the sort of children who would have been regarded as delinquent in the first decades of this century. There has also been a great change in the care of physically and mentally handicapped children. We have very little historical knowledge about these processes of change. It is obvious that new ideas about where and how children should spend their growing years were formulated by the new professional groups that emerged during the twentieth century. It is also clear that new ideals have been formulated by the commercial interests for whom children and parents are an important market. New and old media also create new pictures of children. State initiatives to safeguard the health and well-being of children, such as road safety information, also influence the picture of the child, as do the children we meet in literature intended for children.
The general purpose of the project “The Century of the Child” is to analyse changes in childhood during the twentieth century. The project can be described as a critical evaluation of the vision of the twentieth century as the century of the child and all the measures that have been taken “in the name of the child”. What has the development meant for the children? What were the unintended consequences of the welfare programmes that were launched? How were the new reality and the new visions shaped, and by what forces? How was the new childhood created?

To answer these questions, the project will involve research workers from a variety of disciplines. It will be based on the work carried on at Tema Barn in Linköping University, where research is interdisciplinary, with close contact with other research into children in Sweden, as well as a large international network of contacts. The programme continues existing research at Tema Barn, where the overall goal of research is to study social changes as they are understood by children and children’s perceptions of the world.

Theoretical perspectives

Theoretical perspectives

The relational perspective...
profession, measures were taken when necessary to exclude groups who could threaten the status of the profession – social closure (Martinsen 1987, Florin 1987).

Both these conceptual frameworks can be criticized. The first perspective, for example, which is consensus-oriented, does not problematize the relationship between individuals and the state. Researchers assume that there is a basic consensus between individuals and the authorities. There is good reason to suspect that the view of children and childhood was different among different groups of parents, between parents and institutional staff, and between parents and authorities. The other perspective, which is conflict-oriented, is limited in that it does not consider why parents sent their children to school and other children’s institutions, which this research trend describes as mainly repressive/adaptive, although they were in reality voluntary.

Changes in childhood from the children’s perspective are a large and central research task, in which there is reason to try to combine the two basic perspectives. There is also reason to try to develop other, more qualified perspectives on compulsory and voluntary aspects of the relation between the state and the population. Power, after all, derives its legitimacy from its ability to satisfy the fundamental needs of the population. Yet one can still consider the institutions and the work of the state from two different viewpoints – from above and from below. In recent research in social history and cultural history, questions of this kind have been posed about the emergence of schools in urban settings, originally on a voluntary basis. It is possible to show how diametrically differently the institutions were perceived by children/families and by the authorities. Cultural and social differences explain not only why the institutions were founded but also why the attitude to them differs so sharply according to whether they are seen from below or from above. The institutionalization of the children’s reality was accepted – but for different reasons. It has been shown, for example, that the authorities formulated educational programmes with a highly normative content and a critical view of the ability of the working-class family to keep the children away from what was defined as socially and culturally unsuitable environments. Parents nevertheless sent their children to the institutions, since these offered a certain measure of physical care: food, clothing, and so on. The children were looked after while the parents were working. School thus functioned primarily as a child-care institution. Educational demands were not raised by parents until the schools started to recruit children from the middle class. The difference between popular culture and the normatively defined official culture – the culture of the institutions – exerted a strong influence on the attitude to children’s institutions of various kinds. Working-class parents took their children out of school when it suited them, and in other cases the children stayed away completely. There was obviously a significant difference in mentality between popular culture – the culture of the working class – and institutional culture. (See Sandin 1986, Florin 1987, Edvardsen 1989, also Blom 1988 as regards infant care; for a general outlook see scholars such as Hobsbawm 1974 and Thompson 1983.)
Recent research has used other perspectives which are worth mentioning here. Social and political development at the turn of the century have been in focus in studies of the emergence of the modern welfare state. The concept of organized capitalism has been used chiefly to describe the collaboration of the state and industry in the field of industrial relations (peaceful labour market relations, the reproduction of the workforce) and trade with foreign countries. Representatives of this tradition, such as Kocka and Wehler, also emphasize the value of their new social-theoretical approach, as distinct from approaches more oriented to everyday history (Gesellschaftsgeschichte rather than Alltagsgeschichte). This means that these historians take little interest in children's history and women's history. This is an obvious weakness. To a large extent the organizational interest in the developed as well as the emerging welfare state involved a concentration on the social sphere, which also comprised the conditions of women and children (e.g. the so-called interest offices of the major companies and the Central Association for Social Work) (see Hult 1987, Larsson 1977, Runeby 1978, Ohrlander 1992). This has not been considered in research into organized capitalism, but the insight can shed new light on an old research field. Research into children, on the other hand, has to a large extent concentrated on everyday history, often with an atheoretical and descriptive character. Those who have studied children's conditions have rarely tried to combine everyday history with recent debate on societal history.

There is every reason to try to link these two approaches. The interaction between people's everyday conditions and broader political contexts is an important research field. It is important to clarify how compromises are achieved between the rulers and the ruled (see e.g. Blom 1988). The scope for action on either side depends on social conditions as well as on how the problems are defined and what concepts are used to describe reality. Power over politics gives the right to describe problems and define concepts, as well as to select the battlefield and the territory – to create institutions. In a historical study it is important to illuminate this exercise of power as well. This can bring new knowledge about both historical processes of change in everyday life and the conditions and development of state power.

The use of a longer historical perspective on changes in childhood gives reason to seek links with recent research into family history. In this large field a central topic has been the nature and continuity of family relations. Researchers such as Anderson and Hareven argue that the family was the institution that represented continuity during the industrialization of society. The breakup of the extended family during industrialization is thus said to be a myth. In fact, relatively small nuclear families have predominated as far back as we can see. At the same time, the high mortality rates and the large population migrations in early times meant that families were not always cohesive through time. Women's and men's work outside the home also made it difficult for large groups of people to exercise continual supervision of their children. It is highly likely that broad networks of neighbours and friends were activated to look after the children (Gaunt 1983, S. Carlsson 1978). The notion that children were brought
up by their parents and grandparents in a cohesive, pastoral society is thus largely mistaken. Studies in Norway and elsewhere show that the amount of family contacts and help between generations is much greater today than it was just 20–30 years ago (see Hagestad 1988; also Gaunt 1983). Moreover, our opportunities to maintain contacts are greater today than ever before, thanks to improved communications and the better health and economic resources of the older generation. In other words, the generations are better able to stick together and help each other, at the same time as public child care has been developed, often on the grounds that families have difficulties in looking after their children. Knowledge about long-term changes in neighbourly relations and inter-family relations in different social classes can serve as an important background for our understanding of public child care.

The entire history of the twentieth century bears the stamp of increased *professionalization* in the care of children. This development has also made itself felt in child-rearing within the family. Family counselling and parenthood training are expressions of this process. In many respects this has also meant a questioning of the family’s competence as a unit for the socialization of children. There have obviously been different views not only of childhood but also of the family in different social classes. The interest in social planning and the concept of childhood formed by society’s experts on childhood in the twentieth century further complicate the picture. Child-rearing ends up in the border zone between public and private, if it is not shifted entirely into the public sphere (Halldén 1988a, 1988b). Other scholars have described development in the twentieth century as the colonization of the family by the state and public experts (Lasch 1977). Regardless of how this development is described, it is clear that on the micro-level the growth of professional groups – institutional experts on child-rearing – has changed social relations and relations of power between parents/children and institutions. As we have seen, it is to be expected that this process has significant cultural consequences (Aronsson 1989, Olin Lauritzen 1990, Oakley 1984). Other aspects can be considered: from the point of view of Foucault’s *theory of power*, scholars have studied the development of a tighter system for surveillance, examination, and normalization of deviance in a modern welfare society (Armstrong 1983). This approach brings out the Janus face of the welfare state – help and support, but with it control and dependence.

Change and development in the public *care of infants* is a large research field, in which the interest has been focused on professionalization and the establishment of the welfare state. Among international scholars we may mention the English historians Anna Davin (1978), Carol Dyhouse (1979), and Jane Lewis (1980), who have critically examined the ideology of motherhood that emerged in England at the turn of the century. The ideology of motherhood was perceived as a way to solve the population problem on an individual level. Mothers had to be enlightened and taught from the beginning. The problem was individual, not structural. Davin, Dyhouse, and Lewis all interpret the emphasis on the mother’s role as a measure for social control. Deborah Dwork (1987) opposes this interpretation, viewing the authorities’
strategies as pragmatic actions. The women and their organizations supported the authorities’ emphasis on guidance for mothers. In Scandinavia work has been done in this research field by, for example, Anne-Lise Seip (1984), Kari Martinsen (1987), and Ida Blom (1988). Blom shows how infant care became scientific, which meant the “disciplining” of the mothers. Yet the mothers were not just passive objects; they took an active part in the work, although mostly on the doctors’ terms. Children became healthier. The view that women were primarily mothers with the duty of bringing up healthy children underlined the dependence of women on the men as breadwinners. Similar arguments about the consequences of protective legislation have been put forward by Christina Carlsson (1987) and Ann-Sofie Ohlander (1986). The prehistory of child welfare centres reflects these conflicts and problems, and is a central research field which also has relevance for our understanding of the way political decisions are implemented.

Analyses of children’s and parents’ conditions on the local level are indispensable for a meaningful assessment of political decisions and the understanding of the counterfinality of many political programmes once confronted with everyday realities. Studies of the population policy of the 1930s show that the effects of the decisions were very different from what was intended. The families did not act in the desired way when, for example, they were offered better homes. Instead of having more children, the number of children decreased in the population groups concerned. The families had a different social and economic outlook from the authorities (Kalvemark 1980). Against this background, there is reason to discuss in broader terms how society’s involvement in child-rearing changes and influences the family’s economic and social priorities, and how political objectives at the central level are viewed by children and parents at the local level.

There is considerable international research into delinquent children and society’s reaction to deviations. Prominent examples of this are Anthony Platt’s The Child Savers (1969) and Stephen Humphries’ Hooligans or Rebels? (1981). The latter tries with the aid of interviews and other qualitative material to describe the delinquent urban children from below. Unlike these two scholars, David Rothman (1971, 1980) systematically adopts a functionalist approach to society’s reactions to deviations, in connection with the rapid social transformation of the United States at the turn of the century.

In Scandinavia only a few works on this theme have appeared. One that deserves special mention is Tove Stang Dahl’s Barnevern – samfunnsvern, which studies the intentions behind Norwegian legislation in relation to humanitarian ideas and the need for control. From Sweden we have Gunnar Bramstäng’s dissertation (1964) about the intervention of the child welfare committees against asocial youths. This discusses the ideas underlying the 1902 Child Welfare Act, showing the arbitrary way in which the authorities intervened against the children. There is also reason to mention Harald Tuen’s ongoing study of institutionalized children at Toftesgave in Norway and Eva-Lis Bjurman’s essay (1984) about delinquent children in turn-
of-the-century Sweden. Finally, there is Anne Løkke’s study (1990) of delinquent and criminal children as regarded by Danish philanthropists and the state, 1880–1920, and Anette Faye Jacobsen’s work (1990) on control and democracy in Danish child welfare, 1933–1958.

In the present state of research, there are no large-scale studies which systematically analyse development from the children’s point of view or from a more generally formulated perspective from below. At the core of this programme there is also an understanding of the way gender influences the lives of individuals and work as a basic principle of social organization. The focus will be on the way childhoods vary and change according to gender and class, and differ from one generation to another. The issue of ethnicity will be dealt with when appropriate, for example, when dealing with the creation of modern urban childhoods.

The Century of the Child – a perspective

In the early nineteenth century, the upper classes began to see childhood in a romantic glow, as a state of natural, indestructible genuineness and immediacy. For the children of well-off families, however, childhood was also a time when they were deliberately taught the behaviour and attitudes they needed for their future social status. The children were not given responsibility until late in life, and, unlike the situation among the manually labouring classes, child-rearing had no connection with the work of the adults or an early transition to adulthood. Upper-class voices in the public social debate criticized the free, less controlled child-rearing of the working class and the peasantry. A connection was seen between popular child-rearing and the popular culture from which the upper classes wished to distance themselves (Sandin 1986). In particular the rowdy behaviour of apprentices in the streets was seen as a sign of an autonomous subculture and a rejection of the adult world. The ruling classes saw it as alien and menacing. Among the prosperous citizens, children’s existence was no doubt more strictly controlled by the demands and expectations of the adult world (Sandin 1986, 1987, Edgren 1987, Ohlander 1990).

This serves to illustrate that there is more than one kind of childhood. It is different for boys and girls; a rural childhood is not the same as an urban one; childhood differs from class to class (Halldén 1990).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the difference between these different childhoods became increasingly clear. Children in both town and country helped the family income by looking after the younger brothers and sisters so that the mother could work. They collected coal that had been dropped in the railway shunting yard; they gathered fruit and firewood; they delivered newspapers or worked as errand boys. The money they earned was handed over to support the family, and it gave status and self-esteem. At the same time, children were in the focus of public opinion. Many children of the day were idle, it appeared.
They drifted around with no adult supervision. According to an article in the newspaper Öresundsposten in 1888, coal-gathering spoiled the moral development of the children, since it gave them a lax sense of property (Bolin-Hort 1989, Sandin 1991).

The expansion of school in the towns can be largely explained by the need felt by the upper class to create order in what they perceived as turbulent urban environments when the control of children through family and work was insufficient. With the new school legislation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, children were compelled to spend a certain part of their growing years in school. Compulsory school and a higher leaving age meant a new reality for children from the lower classes. It meant a whole new childhood. It was no longer possible to stay at home looking after the younger children, or to leave school when the chance of a job came. New requirements to satisfy the routines of the school were formulated as absolute demands. Breaches of the rules were punished, being seen as a visible expression of an inability or a reluctance to meet the demands of society – the vice was known as refractoriness (tredksa). This was seen as fundamentally a moral problem, which emphasized the importance of new efforts to get children to attend school. At the same time, the children became visible in a new way. Apart from reluctance to go to school and the conflict between school and home, the children’s other flaws were revealed. Illness, deviations of a physical, mental, and not least moral kind were exposed. In Sweden there were early demands that all social classes should go to the same school – a comprehensive school. The demands were formulated by a middle class for whom it had become more difficult and more expensive to send their children to private schools. The new childhood had its price for these parents; private tuition for the boys, piano lessons for the girls cost a lot of money. Public elementary school had to be changed to suit all social classes. These demands were formulated by the corps of elementary school teachers. They were interested in having children from all social classes attend their schools. The children of upper-class families brought particular status. Steps were taken to change the curriculum, to delouse children, to tighten control of absence. Childhood was normalized and standardized. It was now important to weed out the “delinquent“ and “morally depraved“ children (Bjurman 1984, Brenzel 1983, Dahl 1978, Gillis 1975, 1981, Løkke 1990, Sandin 1991, Sundkvist 1989).

For working-class families this development must have had palpable consequences. The new demands on the children also involved demands on the families. The mothers were expected to be able to send clean, healthy children to school, at the right time. It was important to create a childhood – a long childhood. The men were expected to be able to provide for the whole family, wife and children alike. The higher demands presumably reinforced the trend towards men being paid the wages needed by a sole breadwinner. It is also possible that the new demands had the effect that families became smaller, since the burden of providing for a family had grown with the longer period the children spent as dependants (Bolin-Hort 1989, 1991).
The ideal of motherhood which was so strongly emphasized in the national sentiment at the turn of the century corresponds to this development of a new childhood – a non-useful child, dependent on a breadwinning father and a caring mother. The new emotionality in the family – the caring element – is a consequence of this kind of change. The moral demands also increased, now that a new “normal” childhood of general validity had been established. It was now essential for everyone to benefit from what were considered to be the blessings of childhood. At the same time, a new view of the family was created, with new roles for all members, not least for the children, and a new normality, a new childhood which did not always agree with reality, but which could at least be measured against it (Platt 1969, Sandin 1992).

Working children and women were now seen as a threat to the living of the adult men and to the view of childhood that had been established among the higher social classes. The place for children and women was in the home. Children had to be saved from being useless. A useful child was by definition a used child. Zelizer (1985) discusses the conflict between the economically useful child and the emotionally valuable child in a number of examples from the USA at the turn of the century. The conflict between the different childhoods was revealed in insurance cases, in questions about adoption, and in the matter of compensation in the event of a child’s death. As regards the latter issue, Zelizer shows how the valuation of children changed. Initially, a child’s death could be valued in terms of how much the child could have been expected to earn for the family before moving away from home. This attitude became controversial after the turn of the century, and in a famous court case a judge ruled that a child had no value in economic terms. The child was worthless – or priceless. It soon became clear, however, that a price could be put on the emotional value of a child, and parents in later cases sued for compensation with reference to the loss of emotional values – translated into economic terms.

A corresponding development occurred in the case of adoption. Child labour was traditionally valued in financial terms, which both determined the price and influenced the gender of the adopted child – boys of working age were preferable to girls. The new view of childhood now opposed this valuation of children. In Sweden the debate about the auctioning of poor children and orphans led to a prohibition (Sundkvist 1987). In reality the practice had ceased, but the ban reveals a new attitude. Now children had to be taken care of for their own sake, not for their usefulness.

This new view of childhood is illustrated in Astrid Lindgren’s novel Rasmus and the Vagabond. The book is about the despair of a little orphanage boy because no one wants to adopt him. The adults who came looking for children wanted only girls with curly blond hair. Boys like Rasmus with straight brown hair were of no interest to them. If the novel had been about the state of affairs a few decades earlier, Rasmus – the makings of a good farm-hand – would probably have been the first to be adopted. (Compare Anne of Green Gables from 1908,
where the old couple really wanted a boy to help on the farm.) The difficulty was not just a literary invention. In the 1920s an official at a child welfare office in Solna complained that they had so many boys but not enough interested foster-families. The few girls they had were not enough to satisfy the demand (Weiner forthcoming).

This change in norms did not come about on its own. We have already hinted at the development of school as a background. School was a meeting-place for different childhood worlds, and the differences became all too clear. Other factors can be mentioned. The years around the turn of the century were characterized by social conflict. The emergence and demands of the labour movement provided the background against which the debate about children was conducted. Attention was drawn to the destitution among the working class, and the bourgeoisie saw that the working class had to be integrated in society and the gulfs bridged to avoid political unrest. Nationalism was held up as a common ideal for the working class and the bourgeoisie.

The accumulation in the towns of people from different classes made the working-class children visible, and the differences in living conditions were made concrete. Children and young people were seen as a potential source of unrest in the streets, and police files were filled with records of delinquent and morally depraved children. The high degree of employment among women, while working-class children were allowed to grow up in the streets of the cities, was regarded as a real threat to fundamental social values. The bourgeoisie complained about the negligence of working-class parents. The family – the very foundation of society – was said to be on the verge of breakdown. The social problems also highlighted the need to counteract new forms of culture. Film and cheap fiction, such as the Nick Carter books, had to be combated. The growing generation should not be lost to values and ideals that were foreign to established society (Boéthius 1989, Douglas 1966).

A struggle for the children was thus waged around the turn of the century. The church, charity organizations, popular movements, and private "child-savers" took an intense interest in children and young people. The interest was shared by a large body of opinion in the bourgeoisie and other established groups, whose concern for the moral and material conditions of poor children was expressed in voluntary actions or through the work of various societies. Their efforts included issuing milk to poor children (at the so-called milk-drop centres), visits to summer camps, the foundation of children’s hospitals, leisure activities, and so on. Every child was ideally to find a home in an idyllic milieu with no class differences or social problems.

This Swedish opinion had its international counterparts. In both England and the USA the child-saving organizations played a major role in moulding public opinion and legislation concerning children (Dahl 1978, Donzelot 1980, Platt 1969). The struggle in Sweden was also to involve local and state authorities. In many cases the work came under municipal control or state authority. Various professional groups – kindergarten superintendents, doctors, teachers, clergy, psychologists – declared themselves specially qualified to give parents advice and
instruction in child-rearing. The professional groups argued among themselves about who was best fitted to the task of saving the children from unwholesome environments such as the home, the street, or the factory. This struggle also had a gender aspect. The question was whether professional men or women should be responsible for child care, and in what roles. The conflict concerned whether child care was a professional matter or a field for voluntary charity. Child care was changed from working for poor and disadvantaged children to include all children. The boundaries between public and private in the matter of child welfare and child-rearing were changed in the years around the turn of the century. It increasingly became a public concern, not just a private matter for the parents (Ohlander 1986, Ohrlander 1992, Weiner 1992).

The debate about the conditions of children and young people often arises in our own day. It is often in terms which we recognize from Sweden at the turn of the century: the crisis of the family, the inadequacy of the home, the deficiencies of school, young people’s behaviour in public places, and a supposed increase in criminality. Then as now, there were calls for more institutions for the growing generation, support and advice for families, and the need for school reforms. It is therefore important to reflect about why children were singled out – in fact discovered – as a political and social problem. For it is not just a matter of children who had real problems or who were a real problem. It is at least as much a matter of the emergence of new professional groups and about changed relations between adults and children, men and women, between different social classes, and about children’s chances of obtaining work, or about children as an object of commercial interests. These are precisely the reasons for the creation of new ideals of childhood (Constructing and Reconstructing 1992).

The whole history of the twentieth century is also characterized by increased professionalization of child care in a wide sense. This development makes itself felt in child-rearing within the family. The broader social undertakings of the school, family counselling, and parental education are expressions of this process, as are maternity centres and child care centres. In many respects, this has also meant a questioning of the family’s ability to meet society’s elevated demands as regards children and child-rearing. The interest in social planning and the view of childhood formed by society’s child experts in the twentieth century have further complicated the picture. Child-rearing has ended up in a boundary zone between public and private. Some scholars would describe this in terms of the state and the experts colonizing the family in the twentieth century (Hatje 1974, Lasch 1977, Halldén 1988, Olin Lauritzen 1990, Sidebäck 1992). Regardless of how this development is described, it is obvious that the emergence of new professional groups – professional child care personnel associated with institutions – has changed social relations and relations of power between parents, children, and institutions.

The raising of the school leaving age has helped to segregate children from the adult world and working life. One purpose of the school reforms of the 1950s was to create a school for all
social classes and the same opportunities for every child. Within the framework of this new school, however, children from different classes continue to follow different educational paths. A single school for all children has been created, but it contains different childhood worlds and different child and youth cultures (Arman and Jönsson 1987). All that they have in common is that their dependence on adults has grown longer, and that schooling has taken on increased importance for their future.

There has been a great improvement in the material conditions of children as a result of the general development of welfare and special supportive measures. In the latter half of the twentieth century, more and more women have once again begun to work outside the home. This development has been made possible in part by new forms of child care. At the same time, this has meant that the significance of the home and the family in children's lives has declined in favour of other forms of care: childminders, nursery schools, and leisure centres. For the children it means that the adult behaviour – control of emotions, keeping times, adapting to large groups, and so on – which was previously learned when children started school, is now encountered at an earlier age. This development has other consequences. Child care and the lower stages of school recruit mainly female personnel. To a greater extent than before, and for more years, children spend their time in a largely female environment, lacking male models outside the home. Yet the increasing importance of public institutions does not mean that children have lost their importance for men and women; on the contrary. In today's Swedish society nearly all women have children, unlike the early nineteenth century, when many women remained unmarried and never had children. Having children has become a much more required part of a woman’s life-cycle. This makes having children a normal expectation for women and men. Deviation from the pattern is regarded as abnormal.

But it seems as if the leisure centres and leisure associations are organizing more and more of the children’s time. Leisure time in the sense of truly free time has shrunk. Organized leisure time is mostly planned and defined by adults. Municipal authorities encourage leisure pursuits with an educational content, since they keep children and young people off the streets. Parents use similar reasons to justify sports or club activities: they are seen as preparing children for the future (Olson 1992).

The institutionalization of the younger children’s lives is one of the more significant features of childhood today. This is accompanied by the growth of new professional groups – preschool teachers, recreation leaders, paediatricians, child and family psychologists, and administrators who can supplement, support – and question – the way parents look after their children. These groups have an interest in showing that they are needed so that children will be well taken care of. Recreation leaders are experts at organizing leisure time. Child care personnel are experts in child care. All these professional groups feel a need to define their competence in relation to the way parents look after their children and in relation to other
professions. It is in their professional interest to show that they are needed (Florin 1987, Weiner 1989, Dencik 1989).

At the same time, the late twentieth century has seen an increase in what we demand and expect of children. Parents learn from scientific reports and articles in the press that they should let their children listen to music while still in the womb, so as to develop their musical talents. Other psychological experts say that infants have a much greater competence than we think (Schaffer 1991). A new concept – the competent infant – puts all this development in a new scientific framework.

Learning can start at a much earlier age. It is important to develop a child’s abilities. Children with innate defects can be diagnosed at the foetal stage and aborted. The demand for normality can be set higher and be more narrowly defined with the aid of new science (Tännö 1991a, 1991b, Välja barn 1986, Oakley 1984).

We have distanced ourselves from the turn of the century’s romantic dream of an idyllic childhood – a long childhood free of demands, like a long summer holiday in Astrid Lindgren’s Noisy Village. This ideology was shaped as a contrast to the tough reality and short childhood of working-class children. It was initially a building-block of Swedish nationalism, an element in the liberal and conservative ambition to use state and voluntary initiatives to improve people’s reality. It was part of the art of social engineering, which later became an ideal of the Social Democratic welfare state. This development in turn created the professional child-carers who once again were to change the meaning of childhood. Now we have different conditions and a different childhood. The scientifically planned child, living a timetabled childhood shaped by a working father and mother and a corps of child care personnel and experts.

This also means a change in the very meaning of childhood: being a child is not just a matter of being, of existing. Being a child is instead transformed into life’s great project (Halldén 1992). We thus detect the outlines of today’s childhood: early maturity; sharing the experiences of the adult world through the media (Postman 1984); quickly learning adult behaviour and the codes that apply in the adult world, by participating in institutions outside the home. It is a childhood full of demands for achievement and expectations. If children are to succeed, they must begin early. As the innocent, romantic view of childhood in the nineteenth century presupposed a new kind of motherhood, so this new view of childhood also presupposes a new kind of parent, educationally aware, responsible, planning.

Some fields of research

Against this background, there is reason to look at a number of problem areas. To begin with, it is necessary to elucidate on a general level the basic social and economic conditions of children and how they have changed during the twentieth century. There is also reason to examine the consequences of the actions of the professions, both in the professional organizations and in state and municipal administration. In this context, the relation of children
to institutions of various kinds is central, as is the relationship between organized leisure and free time. To understand how the concept of childhood is constructed, it is also important not only to study how the professions act but also how childhood is presented in the media – particularly in films – and children’s books. The commercial picture of the child is also extremely important. This picture sometimes agrees with and sometimes contradicts the picture obtained from the behaviour of other political agents and agencies. It is also worth while looking at the breakthrough of new scientific views of children’s development in relation both to changes outside science and to the internal development within the sciences. The research programme, however, will not concentrate on charting children’s conditions in a traditional sense, but will rather focus on a number of limited problem areas of a multidisciplinary nature.

**Home–school–work–leisure.** The twentieth century has seen a sweeping change in the relation between the different places where children spend their time. This development has not just been in qualitative but also qualitative terms. Leisure has been given new meanings with a development of organized leisure and a decline in free time in the strict sense. Leisure has not just been organized but also educationalized as a consequence. The organizations also appeal to new age groups. Very young children are now being encouraged to practise certain sports (Blomdahl 1979). School in recent decades has also assumed greater responsibility for children’s spare time and created forms for closer cooperation with home and parents. This no doubt also influences families’ attitudes to children. What does this mean for the development of new attitudes to children and for the understanding of the meaning of childhood? School has also been developed in the twentieth century as an important institution for social policy, where medical considerations and preventive health care have been crucial for the way of defining children (Sandin 1992, Johannisson 1991).

Children’s work during and after school hours was a central problem for many school authorities. In what perspective is this work described? Was it good, bad, or perhaps even dangerous for a child’s future development? Throughout the twentieth century, a conflict has grown about how children’s time should be used. Applying a long perspective, we see how the start of working life has been postponed and how participation in work is regarded as unsuitable for children. Ironically, this takes place at the same time as school exerts itself to bridge the gap between school and work through the work experience programme. The valuation of different kinds of work can be studied in the debate about children performing in theatres and music-halls, selling things in the street, working as errand boys, and youth unemployment. Different classes have had different attitudes to the school’s demand for a monopoly of the children’s time. The choice between work and school probably differs between families of different social classes, and it is different for girls and boys.

In a longer perspective, the transition from child labour to pocket money is symbolic of the changed role of children. When did children start to receive weekly or monthly pocket money?
The significance of pocket money is ambiguous. Is it a symbol of family membership, or is it a reward for making the bed? Is the intention educational – that children should learn how to handle money? Is the demand that children should help with the housework a desire for solidarity with the working parents, or is it part of the family’s educational role? Children have to learn how to wash the dishes; it is useful training for the future. Does pocket money have the same meaning for boys and girls? When and why do parents let children of a certain age look after their children’s allowance themselves? Is it a new symbol of maturity for children, who otherwise have to wait to the age of 20 or more before they get their first job – the traditional symbol of adulthood? The focus is on the interrelationship of adults and children around work, leisure, family and school, and the creation of new notions of childhood.

Institutions and medicalization. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a number of institutions were created to look after children who deviated in various ways from the behaviour that was defined as normal. The institutions for delinquent children, for example, which were established in the first half of the nineteenth century were based on differing principles. There was a conflict between a family-oriented, patriarchally structured institution such as the Räddningsinstitutet (Rescue Institute) at Stora Råby and a penal institution for delinquents, of which those at Skrubba and Hall are examples (Bjurman 1990). The debate about these different models influenced the development of measures taken during the latter half of the century and formed the basis for the institutions that were established in Sweden. A similar debate was conducted on the continent, and developments in Sweden had European models. From institutions of this kind we have registers, journals, records of punishment, and minutes which allow us to follow day-to-day life there. Punishments and rewards to the children were carefully noted. We can thus discuss the adjustment and resistance of the children on the basis of this material. It is also possible to chart the children’s background and what happened to them after their stay in the institution. Studies of this kind can also be supplemented with interviews with former inmates.

Central questions are: What system of rules was developed in the institutions – legal and illegal, formal and informal? What social patterns were developed, for example, in the form of repression and resistance? How total was the institution?

The reality for children in orphanages can naturally be studied in a similar way. Moreover, it would be of great interest to examine parents’ strategies when they handed over their offspring to the care of orphanages. Which children did they select from the family? What was the distribution as regards age and gender? Did men and women have different strategies and perspectives as regards how and why children were sent to orphanages? In a longer temporal perspective, a study of the placing of foster-children is of great interest for the same reasons as above. Moreover, placements in foster-homes are more extensive in quantitative terms: in 1928 there were no less than 29,000 recorded cases. A study of the way these cases were handled
can be tackled from a number of different angles. Both new scientific findings about children’s 
needs and the professionalization of social workers can probably be analysed in a long 
temporal perspective.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw an increasingly exact definition of different 
kinds of deviation. There was also a noticeable medicalization of the diagnoses of deviations of 
various kinds (Johannisson 1991, Qvarsell 1985). The way of making definitions had changed 
following the impact of a new scientific discussion. One can naturally ask what consequences 
the new view had for children in the institutions and for child-carers of various kinds in the 
public and private sector. Did the children who were defined as delinquent have a different life 
from those who were defined as mentally inadequate? In what way and according to what 
principles were everyday activities organized for these children? The view of the body can 
function as an interesting measure of the perception of the individual’s humanity. Why was one 
or another model or type of diagnosis chosen? What form could intervention take? At what 
age? This question touches on the issue of antenatal diagnostics and the increasingly rigid 
definition of normality (Steedman 1992, Armstrong 1983). How does medical technology 
influence and change notions of childhood and definitions of normality? What kind of interest 
groups lie behind? How does medical technology in this case interact with popular ideas about 
the importance of children and of certain types of childhood.

The absent father – from a poor relief problem to an emotional dilemma. At the start of 
the twentieth century the absent father was discussed solely as a problem of poor relief – how 
could he be made to pay maintenance to the mothers and children so that they did not become 
a burden on society? The children’s need for their father, and for that matter the men’s need 
for their children, received no attention. With the construction of the twentieth-century ideal of 
modernization and the fixed bond between a mother and her children, it is obvious that fathers 
who did not live along with their children were marginalized. It was only relatively late in the 
twentieth century that children’s need for their father came to the fore, and the absent father 
was seen as a problem for the child, but now a problem concerning emotions and identity. The 
transformation of male roles is of the utmost importance and has hitherto been neglected (Gillis 
1990).

“The state – the child’s best friend – as the guarantee of a good childhood.“ In the 
twentieth century the state has intervened on an ever larger scale to protect and care for 
children. In government enquiries into parental education, the need for kindergartens, nursery 
schools, and the like, we find articulated views of children and childhood, of the family as a 
unit of socialization. State activities, with councils on matters like children’s environment, play, 
and so on, also give a clear idea of the way the state perceives its role. The attitude of the state 
is not wholly unambiguous. Different attitudes find expression in the advice issued by the
National Road Safety Office about children in traffic, and in the way other public committees advise parents about children's need for free play. In general, much of the institutionalization and adult supervision is based on the ideal of creating the conditions for things like free play, but within the framework of the institutions.

The work done by child welfare officials is likewise interesting in a longer historical perspective. According to what principles was the work organized? What do the individual decisions reveal of differences in attitude to boys and girls? This new professional group gradually defined its work together with the other members of the child welfare committees, and thereby also stated what the problem really was. This also meant a definition of the meaning of childhood in positive and negative terms.

**Children as consumers of culture.** Children in the twentieth century have increasingly been the target for literature – magazines, books, comics, and so on. Like textbooks and other publications for children, literature for entertainment is created by adults. Not only have adults produced the material, but children are also dependent on adults if they are to be able to read the texts, since children do not have control over the economic capital. Adults have also had a monopoly as arbiters of taste, both for judging what their own children read and as experts in the debate about children's literature. Bejerot's battle against comics in the 1950s and the campaign against Nick Carter at the turn of the century are well-known examples (Boëthius 1989, Sundkvist 1990).

Apart from the fact that one generation has created texts for another generation and determined their opportunities to read them, the texts produced for children reveal a tension between the interests involved in the production. Religious denominations, the state, interest groups, and the like have competed during the century for the attention of reading children (Boëthius 1989). To this we should also add that part of the literature which on the face of it is intended only to entertain children, but which also (naturally) has a financier with his own special interests as regards what should be communicated to the children. There is thus an interesting paradox in the texts that are written for children to read in their spare time. The texts are an expression of the children's freedom, but the children have had no chance to choose them. They have first passed through several filters – the rules of the adult world about what makes good reading.

These texts give an idea of what has been considered good reading for children's entertainment during the twentieth century. Light reading is a particularly interesting object of study, since the primary aim of the texts is to entertain, not to teach any special knowledge, skill, or opinion. Yet the texts for light reading are full of normative messages which adults want to communicate to children. By analysing the texts we can obtain a knowledge of the twentieth-century norms for what a child should know, what children should be like, and what picture of childhood and society the adult world wishes to convey to the children.
The different problems sketched in this manner should not be regarded as separate fields of research. On the contrary. The over-arching aim is to relate the different perceptions of childhood to each other. In this way it will be possible to ask new questions of a more general kind. How, for instance, does the picture of children in literature relate to the picture of children created in the specialist writings of psychologists and doctors? How does the commercial exposition of children differ from the construction of the child in school and leisure organizations? How does school’s picture of the child relate to the family’s perception of childhood and to the practice that is developed within the framework of the social welfare service? Do the perceptions agree or conflict? It is important to repeat that childhood is never unambiguous or homogeneously constructed. Most childhoods are built up with internal contradictions and conflicting messages. In particular, there are differences in the perception of girls’ and boys’ childhoods. With this overall ambition, research in the programme “The Century of the Child” thus seeks to analyse how the idea of children and childhood is constructed by social, economic, and political processes.

The problems outlined here concern different analytical levels and methodological approaches. It is typical of the area that a variety of methods have to be used. In some cases we need a relatively traditional method of social history that seeks to shed light on family structures and the social recruitment of institutions. This type of method is also useful for elucidating the concrete choices made by people in the past. The research programme is also based on an analysis of the debate conducted in public sources – the press, official enquiries, and so on. In these cases the emphasis is on concepts of various kinds and how they have changed. It is also possible to analyse the systems of rules established in different institutions and formally expressed in regulations, statutes, and the like. This material can then be combined with other sources such as diaries and annual reports. Interviews may be a suitable way to find answers to some of the questions. Other possible material would be chiefly public sources – enquiries, parliamentary papers, reports from political authorities, propaganda on children’s safety, counselling literature, and publications about children intended for parents. The concrete pictures of children presented in commercial contexts, in film and in information material of various kinds, can also be important sources for understanding the history of childhood.
Summary

In the first year of the twentieth century, Ellen Key wrote her book *Barnets århundrade*. It contained a vision of a better society, expressing the hope that the twentieth century would be, as the title put it, *the century of the child*. Childhood was indeed to take on new meanings in the twentieth century. The overall aim of the present research project, "The Century of the Child", is to analyse how childhood has changed in the twentieth century. The project can be described as a critical evaluation of the vision of the twentieth century as the century of the child. How was the new reality formed, and by what forces? We can outline a number of fields of research where answers to these questions can be sought.

To begin with, it is necessary to elucidate on a general level the fundamental social and economic conditions and the way they have changed in the twentieth century. There is also reason to examine the new professional groups involved in looking after children; what were the consequences of their action, both in their professional organizations and in state and local administration. It also goes without saying that children's relationship to institutions of various kinds is a central issue, as is the relation between spare time and organized leisure. To understand how the concept of childhood is constructed, it is also important not only to study how the professions act but also how childhood is presented in children’s literature and the media, especially in film. The commercial picture of the child is also highly important; this picture sometimes agrees with and sometimes contradicts the picture obtained from the behaviour of other political agents. It is also worth while looking at the breakthrough of new scientific views of children's development in relation both to changes outside science and to the internal development within the sciences. The research programme, however, will not concentrate on charting children’s conditions in a traditional sense, but will rather focus on a number of limited problem areas of a multidisciplinary nature.

The project will involve researchers from different disciplines, but it will have its base in the research carried on at Tema Barn in Linköping. Tema Barn has an interdisciplinary orientation and a wide network of contacts with other research into children in Sweden. The project will run for six years. The first reports will start to appear in 1998. The final report on the entire project will come in 2000.
The Department of Child Studies

Linköping University hosts an interdisciplinary Institute of Advanced Study known as the Institute of Tema Research. The Institute of Tema Research is divided into five separate departments, each of which administers its own graduate program, and each of which conducts interdisciplinary research on specific, though broadly defined, problem areas, or "themes" (tema in Swedish, hence the name of the Institute). The five departments which compose the Institute of Tema Research are: the Department of Child Studies (Tema B), the Department of Health and Society (Tema H), the Department of Communication Studies (Tema K), the Department of Technology and Social Change (Tema T), and the Department of Water and Environmental Studies (Tema V).

The Department of Child Studies was founded in 1988 to provide a research and learning environment geared toward the theoretical and empirical study of both children and the social and cultural discourses that define what children are and endow them with specific capacities, problems, and subjectivities. A specific target of research is the processes through which understandings of 'normal' children and a 'normal' childhood are constituted, and the roles that children and others play in reinforcing or contesting those understandings. The various research projects carried out at the department focus on understanding the ways in which children interpret their lives, how they communicate with others, and how they produce and/or understand literature, language, mass media and art. Research also documents and analyses the historical processes and patterns of socialization that structure the ways in which childhood and children can be conceived and enacted in various times, places and contexts.

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