




Childhood and the pandemic: Chronicle of an absence foretold

Infancia y pandemia: Crónica de una ausencia anunciada

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ABSTRACT As the COVID-19 pandemic has made visible, childhood is the virus's proverbial south: a world where care is not a value chosen from a place of desire, and where children's voices are silenced at the hands of an ancestral epistemic injustice. Thus, the transformation that human societies are undergoing due to COVID-19 has significantly impacted the rights of children, both at the micro and the macro levels. In Spain — a country that has been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic — we find that both infancy (especially through obstetric violence) and childhood at all its stages fall victim to an adultcentric paradigm based on control and epistemic injustice. This essay analyzes and discusses some of the negative consequences observed in this country related to the care for and the confinement of minors and their families — which has occurred as a result of the pandemic — and considers that the crisis triggered by COVID-19 may be an opportunity to shed light on situations of ancestral injustice towards children.

KEY WORDS Child Care; Child Rearing; 2019 New Coronavirus Pandemic; Maternity; Spain.

RESUMEN La infancia es el sur del virus, como ha visibilizado la pandemia de COVID-19: un mundo donde el cuidado no es un valor escogido desde el deseo, y donde la voz infantil es silenciada en virtud de una injusticia epistémica ancestral. Así, la transformación que las sociedades humanas están experimentando debido a la COVID-19 ha impactado significativamente en los derechos de la infancia, a niveles micro y macro. En España, como país especialmente golpeado por la pandemia, encontramos que tanto la primera infancia (a través especialmente de la violencia obstétrica) como ella misma en todas sus fases, están siendo víctimas de un paradigma adultocéntrico de control e injusticia epistémica basales. En este ensayo se analiza y discute algunas de las consecuencias negativas observadas en este país con relación al cuidado y el confinamiento de menores y sus familias, acaecidas a raíz de la pandemia, considerando que la crisis desencadenada por la COVID-19 puede ser una oportunidad para visibilizar situaciones de injusticia ancestral para con la niñez.

PALABRAS CLAVES Cuidado del Niño; Crianza del Niño; Pandemia por el Nuevo Coronavirus 2019; Maternidades; España.

INTRODUCTION

Before I begin, I would like to include a methodological-hermeneutical note as an anthropological and philosophical justification for this essay: these reflections emerged and evolved in the context of the pandemic, most of them during lockdown, based on preliminary versions^(1,2) and within the framework, among others, of the group Public Health Ethics for Action, Care and Social Observation [*Ética Salubrista para la Acción, el Cuidado y la Observación Social*] (ESPA-CyOS), which also came to be during Spain's first lockdown in the spring of 2020. Thus, instead of ethnography, this essay has been developed based on novel fieldwork that is still authentic and genuinely anthropological: it is built on social dialogue that implies an interlocution through the Internet, most importantly, through intense virtual contact regarding the topics of that concern us here. It additionally draws upon pivotal sources of grey literature (such as news articles or blogs of ardent timeliness) given the fact that, since the pandemic was declared, the rapid pace at which various virus-related news, regulations, policies and evidence were communicated and altered has been comparable only to the *virality* of SARS-CoV2 itself. New and *anthropocenic* times call for perspectives and tools that are cutting-edge as well.

ESPA-CyOS is a multidisciplinary network made up of professionals from the fields of clinical bioethics, medicine, anthropology, public health, sociology, and philosophy, who work in different areas of health care and academics. After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we decided to join efforts to explore shared lines of work related to social and public health ethics. One of the numerous results achieved so far is the issue "Ètica i salut en temps de pandèmia. Reflexions sobre cures i justícia social" [Ethics and Health in the Time of Pandemic. Reflections on Care and Social Justice] published in 2020 in *Enrahonar: An International Journal of Theoretical and Practical Reason*.

Bad times for childhood: academic articles or colored macaroni during the pandemic?

In their house, the stones of the walls imposed an ancestral law dictating that children had to look down when they were caught doing something undesirable. They had to show the back of their necks, as docile self-offerings or propitiatory victims. Depending on the severity of the crime, a slap on the neck would suffice as punishment or would only be the prelude to a greater beating [...] Red lines flared on their sides like memories of masters' whips. The same whips that on the drylands subjected children, women, and dogs.⁽³⁾ [Own translation]

Not long ago, I read an article in which, in order to criticize the widening of the "gender gap" in the field of science in Spain as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a university professor complained about the effects of lockdown on the parents' academic CVs: "When this is over, researchers without children will have written two articles or a book chapter. But those who are parents will have their names written in colored macaroni."⁽⁴⁾

It has been a long time since I have read, both as a mother and Spanish academic, such a dreadful, sad and offensive sentence, despite (I'm sure) the author's best intentions. Specifically, the *dreadful* part of this message is that this professor, who we are to understand is also at the same time a *father*, is "complaining" precisely about that. Let's turn the terms around: those who experience the privilege of taking care of their children, a responsibility freely chosen although perhaps "exacerbated" during the lockdown, are able to enjoy this enormous gift in the form of domestic art (instead of adding another article or two in their CVs, which, let's be honest, in most cases, isn't going to change the world anyway). But no, the world does not seem to be a place where things work that way, does it?

A world such as ours (particularly in Spain), makes it impossible to consider care (something that is chosen, as there is no longer an obligation to procreate) as a privilege that is delicate, complex, and precious; the critique of this patriarchal-capitalist world system in which we live should overwhelm us, should sound around us as the distant roar of an ever-approaching earthquake.

If childhood could be abolished, capitalism would certainly abolish it, without batting an eye. We would already be adults at birth, with a suitable age, ready to be productive. Or, so long as this is not feasible, as is currently the case, children should go unnoticed as much as possible. If a woman gives birth (or, better still, if she can avoid giving birth by using less privileged women as surrogate mothers or “wombs-for-rent,” or even more ideally, baby factories, if we recall the classical dystopias of fiction), there should be as little evidence as possible, on her body, in her surroundings, in her family and in her job. Leave the baby at daycare insultingly few weeks after birth, and have the mother looking “like new” — *just after birth, glamorous and receiving visitors*⁽⁵⁾ — fabulously fit and recovered as if nothing had happened. There should be no milk, no traces on the flesh, in the body fluids, that there has been a pregnancy and a childbirth and, perhaps, lactation.

As to surrogacy, I do not want to go further into the complex controversy that it sparks; my criticism here is only regarding the types of surrogacy that entail the overt and even illegal infringement of the rights of mothers and children, as is common in these cases. The reader who is interested in a critical approach may consult the issue “Cuestiones Abiertas sobre la Gestación Subrogada” [Open Questions on Surrogacy],⁽⁶⁾ which offers several perspectives and approaches on the topic.

As for the previously mentioned dystopias, let us think of, for example, *Brave New World* (1932), in which Aldous Huxley described a Humanity that had “gotten rid” of the alleged sacrificial obligation of having to grow one’s offspring inside one’s own womb.

A few decades later, the feminist thinker Shulamith Firestone went so far as to consider pregnancy a *deformation* of the body, an individual (personal) sacrifice for the sake of the species (global). These views of maternity have been widely revisited and fiercely contested by different contemporary feminisms, although tackling such stances is beyond the aims of this essay.⁽⁷⁾

Returning to our original quote about macaroni and academic articles, what hurts me the most about that phrase, so universally damaging to children and their care, is that it continues, among other distressing things, to *uncritically* reproduce the message that childrearing is a burden and that research and publishing imply a more valuable use of our time; that we as women (and the men who also take part), are *losing* because we are more engaged in childrearing and less in publishing. And, unfortunately, this is a fact financially: we live in a world where, in general, maternity *impoverishes* us economically and in terms of social prestige. This issue is taken up by the feminist motherhood movements in Spain, as can be seen in the *Asociación PETRA Maternidades Feministas* [PETRA Feminist Maternities Association], although related demands have long since been made by feminist economics.^(8,9) Yet, the blame should not be placed on motherhood, but on the world (or really its social structure); it is as if, when sexuality oppressed women systematically (as it often still does), we accepted that the problem was sexuality itself (and not patriarchy, among others), and that the solution was not to exercise but to eradicate women’s sexuality.

However, that is another matter; we wish to vindicate a deeper, structural issue. What we highlight and *denounce*, from the perspective of the anthropology and philosophy of parenting, is that it is never even insinuated that those men-fathers who do not raise their children – or do not fully commit to the task – are not only neglecting a crucial responsibility but are *also* missing out on something big, something much bigger, in fact. In those long days dedicated to their work, they are missing out on something huge. Something

that in addition is already (or should be) a *choice* in our society: creating a human being. Not not as the result of a social mandate, but from a place of desire.⁽¹⁰⁾

No, this is not even implied or hinted at. The world is not yet prepared for that. Not even, or, especially, not now, in times of pandemic.

We should of course demand, once and for all, that care be *funded*, because it is something great, irreplaceable (no, the institutionalization and externalization of care are not the same thing), and radical for human beings and their becoming. If science is publicly funded, if the writing of an academic article is funded, why not care, strictly speaking?

Why is care, and more specifically here, the care of children and childhood, uninteresting, undervalued, discredited? And so no one is at home,⁽¹¹⁾ or even worse (or at best, no better), now parents have to work from home while also coordinating their children's remote schooling, and meanwhile the day continues to have its usual 24 hours, until further notice.

As philosopher Jordi Carmona⁽¹²⁾ recalls: "Rights are the property of a subject, a subject who holds, among other things, rights. On the other hand, obligations are assumed with respect to someone or something who is not one's own self, someone or something which we do not possess, but instead is free and common" [Own translation]. Thus, we should demand the ethical condition of "obligation" for care which, I insist, is not actually so or, at least, should not be so, considering that the social mandate of having children no longer exists and therefore, choosing to parent is a path of freedom (with commitments, as all true freedoms have).

The problem is that unless we subvert the scales of values, nothing will change. In order to show that we as women are worthy (*as worthy as men*), we have to take part in all those mandates/pleasures, which is good as long as it is done within certain limits and because we want to. However, it never seems to happen that men, to show that they are worthy (*as worthy as women*), want to take part in tasks which, I insist, should not

be viewed as a shared sacrificial obligation, but as a value no less fundamental (and even more fundamental, for many people including myself), than writing one or two articles when an unknown pandemic breaks out.

In order not to give the impression of a dyadic confrontation (women vs. men), which is far from my intentions, I will go deeper into the matter: there has not yet been a world that would welcome men actively and formally demanding to *participate* in certain tasks. I'm not referring to the topic, impossible to address here, of the non-transferable leaves in Spain. This issue has proved to be a remarkably different matter altogether and constitutes more a new form of discrimination against women-mothers than an allocation of rights to men or children.

I often urge my students to think about why there was a sociopolitical movement of women demanding to be able to "work" (have paid jobs in public spaces, acknowledged as such), or, even, to be able to wear pants; but there has never been a sociopolitical movement of men formally and actively demanding to be able to change diapers, cradle babies or wear skirts. The closest thing, not very close at all, are the current movements of *new masculinities*, which we of course welcome and hope will proliferate. However, they have nothing to do with what we call "feminisms." The long-since published work (1977) by the Norwegian feminist Gerd Brantenberg, *Egalia's Daughters*,⁽¹³⁾ which is highly relevant today and which I also often recommend to my dear students, deals precisely with this matter and illustrates this radical inequality with a powerful, atrocious metaphor that shows with clear-cut intuition the concepts explained by the great feminist theories.

We defend here an extended vision of feminism, which understands, according to Casilda Rodríguez,⁽¹⁴⁾ androcentrism as an exercise of symbolic-practical supremacy not only over women, but also over childhood (the childhood kingdom) and over the non-human (the ecosystemic animal and plant kingdoms). As referred to in the quote that initiated this section: those *masters'*

whips that submit children, women and dogs in Carrasco's drylands.

The correction factors that take into account duties of care (such as parenting, among others, although parenting is a type of care singularly different from others) are nonnegotiable and pressing. Care without the corresponding economic support and public policies, established as such, will always lead to discrimination and exclusion. It will be a mockery, an illusion of rights. Like so many others.

Facts to process, words to think about: childhood in dispute

Children should always show great forbearance toward grown-up people. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.⁽¹⁵⁾

In an article published in the journal *Pediatrics* concerning the transmission of COVID-19 in children, the authors confirm that children are not to blame,⁽¹⁶⁾ in contrast to those initial reactions that still prevail to a large extent in collective praxis, about the alleged "super contagious" condition of an army of asymptomatic children acting as silent transmitters of the virus. The authors conclude with absolute certainty that *children are not significant drivers of the COVID-19 pandemic*. Moreover:

Almost 6 months into the pandemic, accumulating evidence and collective experience argue that children, particularly school-aged children, are far less important drivers of SARS-CoV-2 transmission than adults. Therefore, serious consideration should be paid toward strategies that help schools to remain open, even during periods of COVID-19 spread. In doing so, we could minimize the potentially profound adverse social, developmental, and health costs that our children will continue to suffer until

an effective treatment or vaccine can be developed and distributed or, failing that, until we reach herd immunity.⁽¹⁶⁾

In May 2020, another renowned journal published that children were not "super spreaders" and that it was time to go back to school, and from very early on there was an urge to prioritize the rights of children in the way of responding to the pandemic.⁽¹⁷⁾ As argued by Rosenthal et al.⁽¹⁸⁾:

Many children already do not reach development potential or struggle to grow and develop because of multilevel barriers, including those resulting from poverty or homelessness. However, COVID-19 has added a whole new layer of risk.⁽¹⁸⁾

The literature also highlights the differential impact of school closures in terms of gender⁽¹⁹⁾ and acknowledges as a key factor the *psychological* impact, among others, that school closures have over the health of children and adolescents.⁽²⁰⁾

The consequences that the measures to contain this pandemic have on the rights of babies and newborns, in relation to the reproductive rights of their mothers,⁽²¹⁾ entail a severity all their own (that we will not discuss in depth here): COVID-19 has already been classified as a risk factor for obstetric violence⁽²²⁾ and, as we know, this violence is exerted not only on the pregnant woman, but also on the newborn; it is an intrinsically *bidirectional* violence, so to speak.

All the studies⁽²³⁾ to date definitively concur in highlighting the serious impact of lockdown on children,⁽²⁴⁾ in comparison with other social groups, and of the other general measures of pandemic containment, implying a striking increase in children's vulnerability⁽²⁵⁾; such implications are revealed in the increase in the rates of mistreatment, abuse and violence against children, which is still more noticeable in children in institutionalized settings.⁽¹⁸⁾ Childhood should therefore be a central consideration in the recovery and planning process, during and after the

pandemic. However, as sociologist Jimena Mantilla⁽²⁶⁾ denounces, why was it that the lockdown of children was not immediately included on the agenda? What happened in Spain during the first lockdown that pets could be taken out for a walk, but children could not? What happened that, still in December 2020 and even in early 2021, parks were closed and bars open? (We will take up the issue of parks later in this essay given that it is highly relevant for several reasons).

In the face of so much arbitrariness, and as Viner *et al*⁽²³⁾ posit, the measures to mitigate the pandemic that affect the welfare of children must be taken only if there is verified evidence that they help, *because it has indeed been proven that they are harmful*.

What Boaventura de Sousa Santos⁽²⁷⁾ describes as “the tragic transparency of the virus,” helps us to see more lucidly, or at least, shed some light on, something that has always been there, *for a very long time*: children have been and still are one of the greatest victims, both symbolically and practically, since the start of the pandemic, because of the essential discrimination against them. As stated by Carolina del Olmo⁽²⁸⁾ referring to the “small second class subjects”: “The crisis of coronavirus and the strict lockdown of children evidence the denial of children in Spanish society.”

The fact is that children, in spite of their recognized and much vaunted resilience, in many aspects lack the resources of cognitive maturity that adults have. Therefore, their psychological health also needs to be especially protected in relation to the intense changes in their daily routines that they are experiencing; even the way of communicating with children and explaining what is happening are issues which call for fundamental discussions. As Freire^(29,30) states:

Not only should we have taken them [the children] into account when planning a strategy to overcome the pandemic. It is also an urgent matter that we consider them, that we legislate with sensitivity and intelligence regarding their situation, especially if we do not want to commit,

as a society, a crime of negligence and abuse. [Own translation]

It is known that “in-fant” literally means “not able to speak,” as Jorge Larrosa⁽³¹⁾ reminds us in his brilliant essay *P de profesor* [P as in Professor]. And, as Pedro Yagüe⁽³²⁾ puts it in his insightful reflection on childhood and politics in Agamben and Rozitchner, since the dawn of political philosophy, childhood has been considered an area of reflection that is closely linked to the problem of human life in community, despite the subsequent and scant problematization in contemporary theory. Thus, undoubtedly, *adding complexity* and *plurality* to the topic of childhood — of *childhoods*⁽³³⁾ — as a concept in dispute, is important today; however, first and foremost, we should start by simply *addressing* it.

All these observations have enabled us to think of childhood again as a value and as a politics, rather than a depoliticized, commoditized, institutionalized form of the concept; and to regard the lockdown as a political challenge. Just as we speak of the virus having a “geographical south” (as a metaphor to refer to so many things),^(27,34) we can use this idea to refer to childhood. *Childhood is the proverbial south of the virus*. As usual, they, the children, have no voice. And not in this matter either. They do not have an acknowledged public political voice, they do not vote, they do not earn money, they do not join trade unions, they do not work. We all speak *on their behalf*, depending on what we see fit and deem best. As Freire states⁽³⁰⁾:

Although they are not a specific risk population, they have become the age group most affected by the implementation of the lockdown. More even than domestic animals, which are mentioned several times in the decree declaring the state of alarm [...] urging us to reflect on the need to think about children’s rights during this lockdown, as countries such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany have done. [Own translation]

Actions, parks... and much more than parks: epistemic injustice toward children

Don't run in your new shoes or you'll wear them out! Don't jump on the couch or you'll tear it apart! Don't crawl on the floor or you'll tatter your clothes! Now, tell me, what's so great about childhood if you're not allowed to use it?!?! (Miguelito's complaint, Mafalda comic strip, by Quino) [Own translation]

Citizens' movements, reclamations, and petitions aimed at various institutions through diverse platforms have emerged non-stop since the beginning of the lockdowns in Spain, demanding empathy and respect⁽³⁰⁾ for the rights and needs of children during the pandemic crisis. For example, the political proposals of the PETRA Feminist Motherhood Association at the start of the pandemic specifically include campaigns demanding regular benefits for each dependent child, with the focus now in terms of care, if the main caregiver works outside of or from home.

In these protest movements, the specific demand⁽³⁵⁾ to reopen parks that stands out in Spain, for multiple reasons, is called "*Reabran los parques y jardines de Granada. Las niñas y niños lo necesitan #ParquesAbiertos*" ["Reopen parks and gardens in Granada. The children need them. #Openparks"]. Despite many attempts to refute false beliefs about childhood and coronavirus,⁽³⁶⁾ also in relation to outdoor areas, *the parks are closed once again*.

In order to ensure proper understanding of the matter, some additional information may be useful. The restrictive measures related to the closure of parks, similarly to many other specific policies in Spain, are characterized by autonomy and delegation from the central government; that is to say, they are carried out by the autonomous communities in their own differential manner. However, as well as in many other countries, the declaration of a state of national emergency may imply temporary modifications to this decentralization. It should be noted that Spain has a political system organized into autonomous

communities that hold a high degree of independence from the central government and that exercise several delegated powers, many of which are essential, such as education, health or various aspects of taxation. During the beginning of the pandemic, when the Spanish government declared, on March 14, 2020, the first state of alarm and imposed lockdown on all the population, any possibility to access public parks was annulled. Such a measure, evidently, was merely a consequence of the situation, then and later on; however, in addition, a restriction to go on walks with children was introduced. Walking pets (mainly dogs), however, was allowed, in order for them to relieve themselves.

Since the start of lockdown, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium permitted their children to go out accompanied by their caretakers, with each country establishing their own conditions or restrictions. On the contrary, Spain was the only country in which children could not leave their homes *at all and under no circumstances*, from March 15th until April 26, 2020, when it was established that individuals aged 13 or younger could go out to walk, play and exercise for one hour a day, although the access to playgrounds continued to be banned and outings were limited to the period of 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. As a result, for over six weeks, almost 50 full days, dogs had more rights than children. We understand that animal rights should not be limited in any case, as we do not want to level down, but rather to level up, by fighting against speciesism, but fundamentally, against adultcentrism.

With regard to parks, I would like to highlight as a meaningful example the mobilization that took place after they were closed in the Community of Madrid [*Comunidad de Madrid*] at the beginning of the second wave: this measure resulted in a petition on the Change.org platform, called "*¡NO CERRÉIS LOS PARQUES a los niños de Madrid! Queremos saber la explicación CIENTÍFICA,*"⁽³⁷⁾ ["DON'T CLOSE THE PARKS to the children of Madrid! We want to know the SCIENTIFIC explanation"] in September 2020, aimed

at the Community of Madrid [*Comunidad de Madrid*] and the City Council of Madrid [*Ayuntamiento de Madrid*]. With 13,550 signatures, it accomplished its goal just a month later and the Ministry of Health [*Ministerio de Sanidad*] revoked the ban on playgrounds established in the ministerial order, which compiled the latest restrictive measures for containment of the pandemic, after its new post-summer flare-up. This revocation meant that no city council was *bound* to close its playgrounds (although the measure remained optional, that is, it was enforceable at the city council's discretion, as indeed happened in many cases).

The petition got extensive media coverage, including public and private regional and national television channels (for example, Telemadrid and Antena3), along with digital media, which certainly contributed to its success, as acknowledged by the petition's organizer Nuria del Olmo.⁽³⁸⁾ Similarly, one of its key aspects, of general interest and which made it incontestable, was the fact that it unambiguously demanded a "scientific explanation." Therefore, this petition requested a very opportune "EXPLANATION BASED ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE, which would substantiate this restrictive measure WITH DATA" (capital letters are reproduced as in the original petition text). Thus, the petition organizers did not want to give in to irrational fear and fake news, which have so strongly spread during this pandemic that they are already giving rise to clearly syndemic areas of specialization. Instead, they demanded scientific substantiation, facts, reason, evidence and enlightenment, to justify a measure that had certainly resulted in severe harm to a sector that was already particularly hard-hit by the pandemic and that remained silenced in the background.

Another analogous petition in Change.org stood out, started in November 2020 in the capital city of a province in southern Spain, called "Reabran los parques y jardines de Granada. Las niñas y niños lo necesitan #ParquesAbiertos,"⁽³⁹⁾ ["Reopen parks and gardens in Granada. The children need them. #Open-parks"]. It was addressed to the Regional

Ministry of Health and Family Affairs of Andalusia [*Consejería de Salud y Familias*], the City Council of Granada [*Ayuntamiento de Granada*] and the Regional Government of Andalusia [*Junta de Andalucía*], which are autonomous bodies by delegation of the central government. Drafted in similar terms and with a request identical to that of the petition mentioned above, it was, however, unsuccessful given that with 4,101 signatures it did not reach the 5,000 required to make it formal and have an impact. It should be noted that the closure of parks (which continues to this day in this city and many others) occurs simultaneously with, among several measures and as a prominent example, the permission for bars to remain open. These open bars allow people to eat and drink inside without wearing face masks, despite verified evidence of the risk of indoor aerosol transmission when face masks are not permanently worn. Meanwhile, the same children who cannot play in public parks go to school daily, where the student ratio has not been reduced in the vast majority of the cases, or the educational resources have not yet been optimized in expanding the classroom space or extending break times. With this I do not intend to criticize the fact that schools are kept open; on the contrary, I believe that they should remain open, but this situation just emphasizes the inconsistency of the measures taken regarding the closure of parks.

At present, well into 2021, with Spain at the terrible peak of its third wave and showing the most unfavorable data since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic a year ago, the different communities and city councils close the parks at their own discretion, and do so discreetly, without there being a unanimous regulation of national restriction. All this, despite the fact that, for several months now, the scientific evidence that has been so reasonably demanded on these civic platforms has highlighted the lack of danger of parks in terms of transmission, as well as their desirability, as they are open and free spaces, in the face of so many other inconsistencies which foster dissent and lack of trust in the political class.

And thus, words cannot describe the park situation. Or perhaps one does: *nonsense*. At social, human, universal levels. It already been demonstrated not only that parks are not considered a risk, but also that people should even be *encouraged to go to them*, as stated by the physician Javier Padilla,⁽⁴⁰⁾ based on all the scientific evidence available so far.

This issue of parks is not inconsequential: they are one of the few outdoor, municipal, free-of-cost spaces intended *specifically* for the entertainment of children (we are not talking about the ball pits in shopping centers or similar places, which are neither municipal nor free-of-charge), for their recreation, in the outdoors. In parks, they can freely be children, play, shout, kick and, essentially, *make use of their childhood*, as demanded by Miguelito, the youngest and most rebellious of Mafalda's friends. Therefore, the closure of parks is not a trivial matter: it is of practical and symbolical importance. It is *political*.

As science communicator Deborah García⁽⁴¹⁾ states in her reflection in favor of opening the parks: "This is not about politics, but about science." And although she is right, the problem is that politics *is* everything, it permeates everything, it is even (and above all) the atmosphere of science. That is, politics unquestionably understood in its strongest sense, as related to the *polis*, the *res publica*, a public affair. For that reason, we have to *politicize* this matter to its very core, to its final consequences.

And the point is that this is not only about parks, but about much more. It is much more than parks (although also parks) that should be won back from this type of exclusion, of segregation, which is as old as humankind. "Childhood will be forever the subversive state of human beings," writes the great Sánchez Piñol.⁽⁴²⁾ "Wherever there are children, there is a golden age," sings the ineffable Novalis. Both statements are true, a profane, unsacred, carnal truth that transcends time. However, that state which is "golden" and "subversive" in practice is politically dispossessed, deprived of its attributes. That original and joyful homeland remains unheard. It is

the object, among other things, of epistemic injustice. This concept, brilliantly coined in 2017 by Miranda Fricker,⁽⁴³⁾ has from the outset produced remarkable hermeneutic offshoots. Unusual and hybrid offshoots: their scope and application have today transcended all frontiers.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Until dignity becomes customary

All grown-ups were once children,
although few of them remember it.⁽¹⁵⁾

Epistemic injustice⁽⁴³⁾ occurs when a subject's capacity to transmit knowledge and give meaning to their social experiences is annulled. If this normalized and completely uncritical annulment occurs paradigmatically in any particular social group, that group is proverbially children. In fact, the absence of the application of studies with this approach to childhood, to children's voices, is notorious (a sort of epistemic *metainjustice*). We should be fair though and admit that this absence is not total: this cognitive tool has already been used in interesting studies on transgender children,⁽⁴⁴⁾ for example, but they are still marginal, tentative and incipient. It is not at all a consolidated field of critical studies, like so many others bringing silenced voices and epistemologies to the forefront.⁽³⁴⁾

This type of injustice is being made extraordinarily visible by the generalized crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Marta Plaza⁽⁴⁵⁾ affirms as much with harsh straightforwardness: "the usual treatment of children implies silencing them, usurping their speech to allegedly protect them, condemn them to social invisibility and lack of credibility and accept without the slightest social outcry the daily violation of their individual and collective rights" [Own translation]. *Everything for the people, but without the people*. Adultcracy, adultcentrism and *epistemic injustice*, among other possible labels, can help support our understanding of this matter.

Because it is important to give these problems a name, a face, or, as the poet would say, to give them *safe shores*. I am referring to the writer Rafael Guillén, born in Granada, and his poem “A gesture for the fifth anniversary of your death,” dedicated to his mother, and which can be heard recited by the author himself.⁽⁴⁶⁾ “Sometimes it is enough to change the words to have a better understanding of things, so that the world may be seen in a new light,” as the great Larrosa muses.⁽³¹⁾ There is great power in enunciation, in narration, in the way we tell a story, which is always the poetry of memory.

The terms “neurotypical” or “neurotype,” which are becoming increasingly utilized, may also be applied to childhood in terms of the discrimination implied by absence or being taken for granted: the neurotypical traits of an adult are not equivalent to those of a child, who is prone to move more, talk more, shout more, and who, fortunately, laughs and smiles a lot more, praise be to all the goddesses!

“Those small citizens, but citizens, after all,” as Tonucci explains, should be listened to, because “listening means having a need for the contribution of others” and because, in the words of Marta Plaza,⁽⁴⁵⁾ “societies, spaces, policies cannot be built [...] by asking and learning only from the adult world.” The Italian pedagogue, Tonucci, is the author of the revolutionary yet compelling proposal of the children’s councils,⁽⁴⁷⁾ which has been acknowledged by the Science Park Museum of Granada⁽⁴⁸⁾ [*Parque de las Ciencias de Granada*], a pioneer in its scientific spirit, since 2004. In addition, during lockdown, Tonucci⁽⁴⁹⁾ contributed to the reflection on what it could and should mean for parents to share that precious time with their children, far beyond remote schooling.

What do we mean when we complain that something “infantilizes” us and should not? This term is used by the general public to refer to illegitimately and derogatorily treating an adult like a child. In fact, even Nelson

Mandela writes in his remarkable memoirs that the rebellion on Robben Island was against the “infantilization” endured by the inmates when being forced to wear short pants in jail, “just like children,” when clearly, they all deserved to wear long pants for a number of other reasons unrelated to age. Notwithstanding of course that rebellious Madiba’s *Long walk to freedom*⁽⁵⁰⁾ is a must-read, as a manual on moral standards and good practice.

As long as the term “infantilize” continues to have the negative connotations that it has today in the social imaginary (not necessarily coinciding with its “objective” definition in the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy), childhood will continue to be that *subversive* and idealized state that, like so many other subversions, is in fact *subaltern* and domesticated by adult supremacy.

Thus, in the face of these logics of ageism, adultcracy and adultcentrism, there should also finally be a decolonization of childhood — yes, that is also intersectionality⁽⁵¹⁾ — until dignity becomes customary, as the three ñöhño women shouted from Mexico to the world, when an apology was not enough.⁽⁵²⁾

We are still waiting for the day when it will no longer be *normalized* (although such behavior was definitively banned by the Spanish legislation in 2007) to watch parents hit their child in the street or in a supermarket queue, and see that *nobody does anything* or that our first thought is “well, if they hit their child *really, really* hard, then, sure, we’ll do something, of course...” And how would we react if it were a man hitting a woman? Would we stop to ponder the degree and efficiency of the smack? Not only is the beaten child a minor and thus, obviously more vulnerable than the batterer, no matter the strength of the “smack”; this child is, above all, *under the batterer’s care*, which makes the aggression even more painful, even bloodier. Until this day comes, the dignity of children will not be customary.

And that dignity, that justice, should also be more than a dream.

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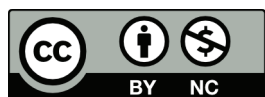
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