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Children, new social risks and policy change.
A LEGO™ future?

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Recent intensification of the “politicisation of childhood” has been observed by analysts in numerous social science disciplines, and in a variety of public policy domains. Sociologists of childhood, for example, often attribute this greater politicisation both to shifts in the social construction of “social problems” and visions of children’s agency (for example Mayall, 1994; Oakley, 1994: 17; Qvortrup, 1994; Livingstone, 2002: 13). Others observe this politicisation in changing patterns of defamilialisation and refamilialisation of social care and their implications for patterns of social solidarity (Leira and Saraceno, 2002 or Wincott, 2006, for example). Indeed, the politicisation of childhood – defined as the move from childhood being understood as primarily a family or parental responsibility to it being also a matter of public importance and concern – has emerged as a major theme in debates about “modernising” social policy paradigms (for example, Leira, 2002; Jenson, 2004; Esping-Andersen *et al.*, 2002).

The reasons suggested for the patterns of politicisation are varied. For one approach, operating at a macro-level of analysis, it is the inevitable result of late modernity and the embrace of the concepts of risk society and individualisation (Prout, 2002 provides one overview), with some pointing particularly to the notions of “responsibility” underpinning governmentality practices in neo-liberalism (Rose, 2000: 1405 for example). Focussing on structured patterns of social relations, transformations in the work-family nexus as well as significant shifts in income distribution, a second approach identifies rising poverty and threats of social exclusion as the reason for a growing policy focus on children (Saraceno, 2001; Micklewright, 2002; Leira, 2002: Chapter 1). Numerous analyses also point to the strong linkage between the mounting popularity of the economic discourse of human capital and rise of child-centred policy perspectives both

during and after neo-liberalism (for example, Myles and Quadagno, 2000; Saint-Martin 2000; Lister, 2003; Dobrowolsky and Saint-Martin, 2005).

New social risks and paradigm change

This article shares the perspective of the second approach, focusing on the ways childhood has been politicised since the mid-1990s, in particular since what Porter and Craig (2004: 391) describe as the watershed year of 1997.¹ Over the past decade one dimension of the politicisation of childhood has involved devoting explicit public policy attention to children, to child poverty, to reconciling work and family responsibilities and to early childhood education and care (ECEC). In many countries, these policy foci increasingly arise as responses to what are termed the “new social risks.” New social risks result from income and service gaps in post-industrial labour markets.² Compared to the labour market of the industrial era, there has been a loss of well-paid and traditionally male jobs in production and an increase in low-paid and often precarious service jobs sectors, with many families falling into the category of the “working poor.” This is one social risk of inadequate income security. There has also been an increase in the female employment rate and virtually all adults are now expected to be actively engaged in employment. The male bread-winner model has been eclipsed (Lewis, 2001). Such changes in employment plus family transformations generate a higher risk of low-income and precariousness in several ways. For example, lone-parent families headed by women are significantly more likely to be in low-income. In addition, restructuring of labour markets and transformations of family and demography create challenges to traditional public as well as private assumptions about provision of social care. Inadequate access to social care for children is, then, also on the list of new social risks, when young families lack access to affordable and quality child care and

yet all adults in the family must enter the labour force. In many ways, then, policy attention to new social risks has led to a politicisation of childhood.

Policy responses to the new social risks can be grouped under three inter-related categories: services for the elderly and disabled; services for families with children; active labour market policies. Comparison of spending levels in European countries between 1980 and 1999 reveals that across all welfare regime types, there has been an expenditure increase in all three categories. While the rates and amounts differ, there is no exception to the trend (Taylor-Gooby, 2004: Table 1.1, p. 16). Many protections against the “old social risks” – such as access to pensions; health care; primary, secondary and post-secondary education for example – addressed in the so-called golden age of the post-1945 welfare state have often been redesigned via privatisation or off-loading to the third sector. In contrast, the new social risks have received some infusion of public funds for services. According to Francis Castles (2005: 420), who compared the years from 1990 to 2001 across 21 OECD countries, the overall result is that “... although the pace of structural change has not been dramatic, it has been quite consistent, suggesting a developmental tendency of precisely the kind predicted by the ‘new social risks’ hypothesis.” Across all regime “families,” services have gained ground in the expenditure mix. With the exception of the Bismarkian continental cases, the shift was particularly pronounced in the last period for which he has data, 1998-2001 (Castles, 2005: 419). As Giuliano Bonoli (2005: 446) puts it:

In a majority of OECD countries social programmes providing protection against new social risks are still at an embryonic stage, but virtually everywhere these issues are being discussed in public debates. There are big country variations in the extent to which NSR [new social risk] coverage has been developed, with the Nordic countries being at the forefront. However, even in those countries lagging behind in the

adaptation of their social protection systems, essentially the conservative welfare states of continental and Southern Europe, some steps in this direction have been taken.

Levels of benefits, policy instruments and overarching goals have all changed. Families have been relieved of some responsibility for social care, for example, as public spending on and provision of early childhood education and care has increased and moved in the direction of universality (OECD, 2001; 2006). New programmes have been instituted, relying on a variety of instruments to provide “payments for care” to the vulnerable elderly and disabled persons. Both mark a move away from post-1945 assumptions that families would take responsibility for the cost and provision of social care (Daly and Lewis, 2000; Jenson 2004). Another example of change comes from the area of income security. Increasingly, reliance on wage supplements to the working poor makes the state and the market sectors jointly responsible for the *earnings* package. Again, the levels and instruments vary, but reliance on supplements to the earnings of the “working poor” reflects an understanding of market failure different from that underpinning policy design of the post-1945 decades.³ Social knowledge and its statistical techniques are also being redesigned, as analyses focused on inequality and poverty at certain key junctures of the life course replace cross-sectional measures. Most broadly, notions of equality have been altered, focusing more on opportunities for the future than on the here-and-now and the development of all children (not only those “at-risk”) has become the concern of states as well as families (Jenson, 2004). There has been, in other words, a shift in the policy paradigm.⁴

The proposition of this article is that such modifications in levels of benefits, policy instruments and overarching goals in response to what policy networks identify as new social risks have prompted creation of and adherence to a future-oriented policy paradigm, one that involves a significant level of politicisation of childhood. It is a policy paradigm that often

evokes intergenerational solidarity and life-course risks and seeks instruments to limit them. The paradigm's instruments are multi-purpose, intended to support activation now and in the future. Thus, they respond to parents' need for support in reconciling work and family life, a mounting need as women's labour is mobilised in the post-industrial service economy. Beyond that however, ECEC services are intended to foster social inclusion by limiting the long-term and life-course effects of childhood poverty, while often evidencing less concern with the poverty of adults who are not parents of dependent children. Thirdly, a goal is to promote skills appropriate for the rapidly changing labour markets of the "knowledge economy," for future generations of workers as well as those in the labour force now, so that activation objectives can be achieved.

Convergence around ideas for a social architecture of prevention, investment and activation to reduce the effects of new social risks, prompt us to label it the *LEGO™ paradigm* (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006). As a paradigm, it shapes understandings of social risks, while providing policy prescriptions and suggesting instruments and even setting benefit levels. The consolidation of the LEGO™ paradigm for drawing and building a new social architecture to address the so-called "new social risks" is a significant factor in accounting for the politicisation of childhood. This politicisation is observed not only in the OECD world but also in the global South, promoted by international actors such as the World Bank.⁵

At this point a caveat is in order. When we describe the LEGO™ paradigm, we are neither endorsing it nor claiming that it is being fully implemented (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006: 434). To say that a new paradigm is in place and that it focuses on new social risks does not mean that its discourse and instruments produce outcomes that correspond to its promises. The Keynesian macro-economic paradigm did not produce "full employment." The discourse of equality underpinning post-1945 welfare regimes did not produce "full equality," even in those

countries most influenced by the principles of social democracy. Nonetheless, the Keynesian paradigm did give rise to policy analysis and interventions different from those of its predecessor liberalism and of monetarism, with its own outcomes and effects. When feminists identified post-1945 welfare regimes that were more “women friendly” than others, they could also document the differences in the norms and practices of social protection that distinguished them from those in which equality did not include a gender component. In other words, identifying the norms underpinning a paradigm is one type of analytic task. It is not the same as assessing outcomes, but it is a worthwhile task in itself for what it helps to understand policy communities’ idea sets, diagnoses, prescriptions and interventions.

The next sections present the LEGO™ paradigm. In doing so, the article focuses on the notions of childhood and children that underpin it and identifies some of the ways in which expectations of childhood are altered when the paradigm’s principles are adopted. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the politics of paradigm change.

The LEGO™ Paradigm

The name of this well-known toy is appropriated here in two ways. First, it is a metaphor, to describe convergence around some basic building blocks of a social architecture; three are identified. Second, its self-description actually allows us to capture the key features of the future-oriented, investment-centred activation strategy currently advocated as a blueprint for welfare state redesign in policy circles, one that involves a significant politicisation of childhood.

The company describes its *raison d’être* this way. It sees: “children as natural learners. These are precious qualities that should be nurtured and stimulated throughout life. ... ‘Play’ in the LEGO sense is learning. By helping children to learn, we build confident, curious and resourceful adults. For their future. And ours.”⁶ Moreover, while a toy, LEGO® is also

appropriate for lifelong learning: “LEGO products are developed in such a way that there is something for all ages and stages of development. From kindergarten toddlers, schoolchildren and teenagers to young-at-heart adults. There’s something for everyone.”⁷

The corporate philosophy illustrates at least three key features of what we term the LEGO™ paradigm. First, it clearly focuses on *learning as the route to security* throughout the life course. Play is educational and useful because it fosters the capacity for continuous learning, flexibility and adaptability. Second, this philosophy has an *orientation to the future*. Children who play with LEGO now are already creating their future.⁸ And finally, it suggests how activities in the present are ultimately *beneficial for society as whole*, and not only for the individuals themselves. Successful play in childhood enriches the community. This metaphor of constant learning, knowledge acquisition, involvement and engagement as well as the notion of open-ended results and variety is particularly appealing in the so-called knowledge-based world. Each of these three building blocks can be easily identified in current policy thinking and they all involve a politicisation of childhood. The next sections provide examples.

Learning as the route to security

In policy circles sensitive to the challenge of new social risks, security is defined as the capacity to confront challenges and adapt. Lifelong learning, for example, permits acquisition of new or up-dated skills; early childhood learning prepares this capacity. Rather than providing social protection, then, the goal of this new social architecture is to provide a trampoline that can constantly reinsert people into employment.⁹ From this perspective, acquisition of human capital is proposed as a response to the changes associated with de-industrialisation, the growth of the service economy and, particularly, the emergence of a knowledge-based economy.

The LEGO™ paradigm's focus on learning extends the long-standing concern with formal education to other types and moments of learning. In the past, secondary and post-secondary education provided credentials for life. Now, technological change, labour force restructuring and corporate insistence on "flexibility" mean that there is a high risk that schooling and training undertaken in adolescence will become out-dated and new skills will have to be acquired. Moreover, for decades "full employment" was defined as only half the population. Now policies of activation seek to raise employment rates across the board; all women as well as men are expected to participate in the paid labour force. With such expectations, policy communities fear new patterns of exclusion will be entrenched, due to inadequate access to knowledge as well as the deterioration of skills because of withdrawal or exclusion from the labour force. The solution proposed is learning throughout the life course. Policy suggestions range from promoting a start in very early childhood to retaining the labour force's skills by encouraging the most experienced older workers to postpone retirement. Policies also include attention to groups "at risk" of inadequate skill acquisition or retention.

There is agreement that one critical building block is human capital acquisition, with learning being a key tool for adjusting to the new economy *and* for promoting social inclusion. One result has been increased focus on early childhood and pre-school children. While early childhood is obviously not seen as the only moment for learning, it is a privileged one.¹⁰ For example, reflecting on a high-level conference entitled *Beyond 2000: The New Social Policy Agenda*, OECD documents called for (Pearson and Scherer, 1997: 6; 8): "A new approach to social protection [that] will have a stronger emphasis on interventions earlier in life and more preventive (and less remedial) measures. The goal would be to re-define equity and security in terms of barriers towards life-course flexibility"

One important result has been growing attention to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Concerns about women's human capital are part of the analysis of new social risks. They are considered to be particularly at-risk of succumbing to exclusion from the knowledge-based economy, while there is also a sense that human capital is "wasted" when well-educated women withdraw from the labour force because social policy encourages familialist arrangements.¹¹ As a result, there has been a politicisation of child care around concerns about reconciling work and family (Leira, 2002: Chapter 2). The European Union, for example, has established the Barcelona targets for member states' provision of child care services.¹² Bismarkian welfare states have altered their appreciation of women's employment as well, and in consequence, child care services. Swiss and German family policies, for example, are moving away from the male breadwinner model and providing greater support for working mothers (Bonoli 2005; Hausermann, 2005, for example).

Nonetheless, objectives for expanded ECEC go well beyond addressing parents' need to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Policy communities' definition of ECEC as part of *any* learning strategy is exploding, based on a growing body of scientific data, especially from longitudinal studies, of the long-term effects of early educational experiences. For example, the European Commission's Communication on Education and Training (2006b) asserts: "Pre-primary education has the highest returns in terms of the achievement and social adaptation of children. Member States should invest more in pre-primary education as an effective means to establish the basis for further learning, preventing school drop out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels."

The OECD has emerged as a flagship organisation in the transformation of "day care" into "early childhood education and care" (Mahon, 2007). It has undertaken an ambitious series of studies of ECEC, launched out of the 1996 Ministerial meeting on *Making Lifelong Learning a*

Reality for All. The Organisation also reports that a clear pattern has emerged: “The trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the 3- to 6-year old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling” (OECD, 2001: 48 and *passim*). The international organisation supports this trend, in addition to recommending that parental leaves be long enough to provide care for and bonding with newborns but not so long as to allow mothers’ own human capital to stagnate.

Countries such as the United Kingdom, that had been major laggards in the provision of even custodial day care, have undertaken to improve their ECEC services (Wincott, 2006). After its 1997 victory, for example, New Labour immediately announced a National Childcare Strategy and the creation of new spaces in nursery schools. In the run-up to the 2005 election, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown promoted his 10-year Strategy for Childcare as a key electoral plank, one that would supposedly give every child “the best possible start in life” (Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2005: 219). This emphasis on early childhood in the LEGO™ paradigm takes a page from the book of some Nordic countries, where municipal governments are now required to provide a child care space to all pre-school child whether their parents are employed or not, in the name of achieving good developmental outcomes (OECD, 2006: Table 4.1, 81-82).

Such an emphasis on universal provision means that policy goals for ECEC go well *beyond* the notion that childcare is necessary so that mothers can seek employment, or to allow the reconciliation of work and family life. Pre-school education and early remedial interventions for developmental delays are deemed essential so that children will have the foundational skills to be life-long learners and avoid the long-term costs associated with precocious school failure (OECD, 2006: 12). This notion crosses regime types. For example, the Finnish government states that “growing and learning are understood to constitute a lifelong process. Upbringing at

home and in ECEC forms the foundation for lifelong learning” (Finland, 2004: 8). But, in the liberal British welfare regime too, the government says: “childcare services need to be high quality, and need to reflect a child’s different needs throughout its life” (HM Treasury, 2004: 17).

If new attention to quality in early childhood programmes reflects the politicisation of childhood inherent to the LEGO™ paradigm, there is still space, just as there was under the previous paradigm, for variation on three dimensions of instrument design: who cares, who pays and how child care is provided (Jenson, 1997: 186-88). Such choices will have consequences for the specific implementation of the paradigm and the extent to which quality in ECEC is a goal. France, for example, has changed its answer to two of these questions in major ways over the last decades. In the past, most public expenditure for toddlers went to *crèches*. Now the state relieves parents of significant portions of the costs of care and there is little expectation that parents of infants and toddlers will do all the caring.¹³ But, public spending has gone primarily to programmes that provide incentives to parents for hiring childminders, including those with no training. This policy choice is driven by the goal of supporting activation of the female labour force, both women with toddlers and women providing informal care for toddlers.¹⁴ French governments have consciously and determinedly moved to reinforce the informal sector of child care, with major subsidies going to parents hiring babysitters and other informal carers for their infants and toddlers, despite the lower quality of such care and ample criticism from experts outside as well as inside France (Jenson and Sineau, 2001: Chapter 4; OECD, 2004).

The Nordic countries have gone in yet another direction in designing their instruments. These countries demonstrate less concern with increasing their already high female employment rates than do Bismarkian welfare regimes. Some have been, therefore, willing to use public funds to pay parents to provide child care for infants and toddlers as well as to subsidise private provision. In 1985, the Finnish carers’ allowance was extended to parents providing their own

child care until the child reaches age 3. Norway too offers parents a care allowance if they do not use public child care services. These choices are justified in terms of “quality child-rearing,” supposedly allowing parents time to transmit their values to their children (Ellingsæter, 2003: 427; OECD, 1999: 26).

Although public funds still provide a significant share of the costs of child care, several central governments have also tried to off-load responsibility for provision to employers. The 2001 Dutch legislation on child care is based on an expectation that collective agreements will push employers into covering one-third of the costs. Income-tested subsidies to parents are available when employers fail to meet this expectation. This approach was part of a broader move to a supply-side approach that has raised fears about loss of quality control (OECD 2006: 108).

As these examples show, shared appreciations of investments in human capital to protect against new social risks prompt a politicisation of childhood, albeit not always in the same way. In some cases there has been a focus on *children’s pre-school education*, while in others the attention is more on the conditions for *activation of women* and therefore measures to support reconciliation of work and family life. In the latter case, babysitting and unregulated care may be considered sufficient. Most jurisdictions are refusing this stark choice, however, and they are being pushed to do so by experts in child development who stress the need for “holistic services” (for example, Moss, 2004: 9; also OECD, 2006).

Orientation to the future

The emphasis in the LEGO™ paradigm on individuals and their human capital, both as ECEC and life-long learning, owes a good deal to practices initiated in some of the Nordic welfare regimes that pursued active labour market policies and universal ECEC in advance of them being promoted by the OECD, the EU and many national governments.¹⁵ Thus, their contribution to

the first dimension of the paradigm is significant. The focus on future life-chances described in this section, however, owes most to the emerging principles of liberal welfare regimes and international organisations such as the OECD and World Bank.

In the LEGO[™] paradigm, social policy is future-oriented because of its investment theme. Investments imply a particular notion of time. They generate dividends in the future, whereas consumption (that accountants label an expense) is something that occurs in the present (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2003: 83; 89). This position is reflected in a recent communiqué after a gathering of OECD social affairs ministers: “social policies must be pro-active, stressing investment in people's capabilities and the realisation of their potential, not merely insuring against misfortune,” which is what the ministers considered post-1945 social protection did.¹⁶ Notions of prevention quickly lead to a politicisation of childhood.

Many countries now choose to supplement the low incomes of the working poor and, especially those with children, the objective being to reduce the chance that children are subjected to a childhood of poverty. Social knowledge about the relationship between childhood poverty and future life chances and circumstances are an important part of the policy discourse.¹⁷ As UNICEF's experts at the Innocenti Centre put it, echoing a broad consensus in academic research (UNICEF, 2000: 3): “Whether measured by physical and mental development, health and survival rates, educational achievement or job prospects, incomes or life expectancies, those who spend their childhood in poverty of income and expectation are at a marked and measurable disadvantage.”¹⁸ New Labour in Britain re-iterates the analysis frequently: “Investment in children to ensure that they have opportunities and capabilities to contribute in positive ways throughout their lives is money well spent and it will reduce the costs of social failure” (HM Treasury, 2004: 2). Providing supplements to family income, in the form of cash transfers targeting children in poor households has become increasingly popular. The liberal welfare

regimes have begun to use such cash benefits extensively (Mendelson, 2003), while Eastern European countries after 1989 shifted toward away from universal benefits to targeting (Barrientos and DeJong, 2006). The World Bank – no proponent generous state expenditures – finds the investment frame a useful one for justifying new public spending, promising to invest in children and making a “business case” for such investments.¹⁹ For its part, the European Union has begun targeting “children in poverty” with the notion being for many that there should be “children mainstreaming” (Heikkilä, *et al.*, 2006: 21; Atkinson, *et al.*, 2005).

Such future-oriented calculations imply a conception of equality different from the one that informed the post-war welfare state when social policy focused on redistribution and on fostering greater equality in the here-and-now (whether or not those goals were ever achieved). In contrast, the LEGO™ paradigm emphasises equality of life chances, a much more liberal philosophical stance.

Childhood is also often politicised when the acquisition of assets for the future becomes a policy goal. Many countries now promote the idea that children need to learn good saving habits and accumulate assets that will grow into the future.²⁰ Responsibility for making sure children both have assets and learn good middle-class saving habits is shared by governments and families, with governments setting up incentives for parents to save as well as providing assets directly to children. For example, along with other instruments for encouraging people to save, New Labour has instituted the *Child Trust Fund* which provides a “stake” to every newborn. In Mexico the conditional cash transfers (CCT) include asset accumulation mechanisms linked to bonuses for graduation (Luccisano, 2006).

The investment and savings theme in the LEGO™ has taken another form as well, encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their key life transitions, by saving money to exchange for time, including parenting time. For example, explicitly addressing the new social

risks theme, the Netherlands recently introduced an individual life-cycle savings scheme. It is described this way by the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs (Geus, 2005):

The money in the savings account can be used for various forms of unpaid leave, such as caring for children or ill parents, schooling, a sabbatical or, indeed, early retirement. This reduces the risk of unwanted withdrawals from the labour market, particularly by working mothers, and unnecessary absenteeism because of illness or disability.

The notion that time must be “saved” before it can be “spent” is quite different from the various sorts of leaves and career breaks developed to address “old” risks, such as childbirth or unemployment.²¹ These were granted according to need rather than on the basis of good planning.

Benefits for society as a whole

The company promises that when children play with LEGO they are building not only “their future, but ours.” For example, the 2002 Italian agreement to reform labour market and employment benefits was titled the “Pact for Italy,” to indicate the extent of the general interest involved in, among other things, improving life-long learning and education.²² There are several versions of the idea that combating new social risks enrich the collective good. One is a simple notion of prevention. For example, a report to the Government of Ontario, that has profoundly influenced Canadian policy discourse, puts the issues together this way (McCain and Mustard, 1999: 15):

Over time, increased community-based initiatives and investment (public and private) in early child development and parenting will pay off through a population with better competence and coping abilities for the new global economy.... This investment will

be much more cost-effective than paying for remediation later in life, such as treatment programs and support services for problems that are rooted in poor early development.

But the larger idea is clearly expressed in a recent article entitled *Time to change. Towards an active social policy agenda* (Martin and Pearson, 2005):

The evidence is there to show that active social policies can make a real difference to people's lives. And we must not forget that in doing so, active social policies not only help the poorest and most disadvantaged in society. More and more productive workers mean healthier economies, and everyone gains from that. Active social policies can benefit us all.

There are two ideas embedded in this position: that work is the route to maximising individuals' well-being and that the well-being of society and social cohesion depend on such activity. These two ideas lie at the heart of strategies for confronting new social risks, and have resulted in the popularity of instruments to promote activation and benefit levels being set to "make work pay."²³ These ideas are linked to the politicisation of childhood in two ways: via the increase in mothers' employment and via concerns about preparing "all" children for active working lives.

Women entering the labour force have prompted a number of items to appear on the list of "new social risks"; we have already documented the consequences for ECEC services. Gone is any distinction (except for the small minority that might afford it) between those who should be active in the labour market, "bringing home the bacon" and those who should care for hearth and home, kith and kin (Lewis, 2001). But such public investment in services is described as having a societal dimension as well as an individual one. They are also meant to reap the long-term advantage for the whole society that subscribers to the LEGO™ paradigm believe will come from

such spending. Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, is fond of repeating: "Our children are our future and the most important investment we can make as a nation is in developing the potential of all our country's children. Together we can ensure that no child is left behind" (quoted in Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2005: 208). Also from a country that has relatively recently discovered the need for more investment in child care services, the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs, A.J de Geus, put it this way: "... together we are working on the future of the European Union. A future which will benefit from good childcare!" (quoted in Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006: 443).

Policy change and the politicisation of childhood

An intensified politicisation of childhood has occurred with the move towards the LEGO™ paradigm, a set of building blocks that include learning as the route to security, a future orientation, and the ways in which investing in children benefit the collective good. The next step in the analysis is to explore the ways in which this paradigm has taken hold, displacing earlier policy perspectives centred on the male breadwinner and his family as well as redistribution to achieve greater equality. Two types of explanations for the change must be considered. A first and most obvious is the pressure coming from fundamental transformations in the economy, the labour market, and family and gender relations. Social changes in homes and at work have created the "new social risks" that generate a set of challenges for policy makers. A second explanation – the one developed here – while acknowledging the contribution of social change puts the emphasis on the development of new idea sets shared across policy communities as the impetus for paradigm change.

Sociology has a long tradition of analysing modernisation, and treating social changes as the drivers of policy design, especially transformations in family structures and practices, labour force restructuring and the age structure of society. When the welfare state first became an object of study, theories of industrialism were used to account for rising expenditure levels across the board and irrespective of party ideology (Myles and Quadagno, 2002: 36; Castles, 2005: 412-13). This tradition was then widely criticised from a multitude of “politics matters” positions; the influential studies of welfare regimes, state institutions, or varied patterns of class and gender relations and power resource approaches all gained credence. There is now a tendency to return to macro-sociological explanations, however.²⁴ Focussing on globalisation, post-industrialism or a gender revolution some sociologists are again deploying structural arguments. John Myles and Jill Quadagno (2002: 45) describe one popular version of such analyses, the “service economy ‘trilemma’ in which postindustrialism means that countries must sacrifice full employment, fiscal balance, or equality. Policy makers can pursue two of these objectives but not all three simultaneously.” This is a structural analysis par excellence. It leaves decision-makers to make choices only within the terms of the game set out by postindustrialism.²⁵ Indeed, Myles and Quadagno (2002: 46) ask: “Is postindustrialism the new iron cage for welfare states?”

This renewed enthusiasm for structural arguments can not provide an account of why there has been a politicisation of childhood, however.²⁶ Why have the challenges of post-industrialism generated a particular way of interpreting social risks and responding to them? If there is a “developmental tendency of precisely the kind predicted by the ‘new social risks’ hypothesis” (Castles, 2005: 420), it is still necessary to track the factors that have led to attention to the new social risks. As Hall (1993: 279, emphasis added) reminds us: “... policymakers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kinds of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also *the very nature* of the

problems they are meant to be addressing.” Beyond the definition of the problems, we must then trace their translation into strategies whose accent is on the future rather than the present, which display a willingness to promise spending more on “social investments” than on social protection as well as the other tropes of the LEGO™ paradigm. A focus on change in the labour market and even attention to family transformations can not provide full answers to queries about why there is a new paradigm. Social change does not, by itself, explain policy choices.

Political factors must be considered, including institutions and interests. Because the concern of this article is with paradigm change, ideas must also figure among these factors (Jenson, 1989; Hall, 1993). Ideas allow coherence of interpretation, from diagnosis to intervention. They work at the front end of the policy process to provide an interpretation of the problem and they influence practice because they “constrain the normative range of legitimate solutions available to policy makers” (Campbell, 1998: 385). But ideas do not, by themselves, make change. There must also be an institutional shift in the “locus of authority over policy, achieved when the supporters of the alternative paradigm are able to secure positions of authority over policy-making” (Hall, 1993: 280-81). In other words, there must be a change in policy communities, one that *may* follow from adjustments in the configuration of interests of political parties and eventually governments.²⁷ These newly empowered actors will bring their own interests to bear in making policy choices within key institutions. Therefore, to track the emergence of the LEGO™ paradigm we should look for the development, within policy communities, of coherence in interpretation of the challenges and the appearance in positions of authority of the promoters of the ideas.

We can see the emergence of a coherent position around the LEGO™ paradigm by the mid-1990s. It was anchored in a number of international institutions and national settings. At

that time both international organisations and centre-left political parties began to turn away from the classical neo-liberal stances associated with Margaret Thatcher's British Conservatives, Ronald Reagan's Republicans in the United States, and the Washington consensus for the global South. They sought an alternative (Porter and Craig, 2004: 387-88; 391). Straightforward neo-liberalism had come to an ideational and a political impasse; the Thatcherite dictum that "there is no alternative" lost its political resonance, and this for several reasons. The promised cutbacks in state activity and massive savings in state expenditures had failed to materialise (Huber and Stephens, 2001: 2).²⁸ Social problems intensified. Poverty rates steadily mounted, especially among lone-parent and young families (Saraceno, 2000: 165-66). Fears about social cohesion began to preoccupy policy-makers. Almost simultaneously, in a few years in the mid-1990s, institutions as widely diverse as the governments of France, the Netherlands, Britain and Canada, international organisations such as the OECD and the Council of Europe, and the European Union made social cohesion a focus of their policy thinking (Jenson, 1998: 4-5; Saraceno, 2001; Levitas, 2006: 124; 131). Instruments to foster social cohesion and ensure social inclusion joined their long-standing attention to employability and competitiveness, retained from the neo-liberal years,

It was not long before the politicisation of childhood emerged within this idea set. By 1996 the high-level conference of ministers and senior officials, *Beyond 2000: The New Social Policy Agenda* was calling for a modernised welfare state which would require:

that social expenditures be focused on areas where returns are maximised in the form of social cohesion and active participation in society and in the labour market. As with all investment, this implies taking a long-term view of the costs and benefits ... Such an approach implies greater investment in children and young adults, as well as

the maintenance of human capital over the life course (quoted in Dobrowolsky and Jenson, 2005: 205).²⁹

Such thinking is part of “after neoliberalism,” when the accent shifts from simplistic commitments to cutbacks to strategic “social investments,” particularly investment in human capital, and when supply-side employability analyses give way to notions that activation requires some attention to the demand side of the labour market and the kinds of jobs it is creating.

These ideas circulated widely within international organisations. But beyond that, they were also taken up by numerous national governments (Deacon, 2001; Porter and Craig, 2004). The ideas made headway in influencing the design of policy when their promoters took over positions of authority in policy-making. They were particularly appealing to centre-left politicians and parties whose “modernised” programme depended on the promise to eliminate weaknesses in post-1945 systems of social protection that neo-liberals had identified and that had gained the latter popular support. Centre-left political actors relied on the themes of the LEGO™ paradigm, including about childhood, in order to transform their political identity, thereby serving their fundamental political interest in gaining and maintaining political power. They could take their distance from the traditional positions of their own party by claiming to reject any return to the “bad old days” of taxing and spending. They could claim to be “modern” by announcing what they had learned from the best of neo-liberalism. But they could also stress that new spending to fight child poverty and on social care meant they still retained their most basic traditional values and commitments to social justice. As Bonoli puts it, they could make a virtue of the vice of spending, allocating public funds to programmes that had not gained the patina of familiarity from the post-1945 decades (Bonoli, 2005: 442ff.).

In Britain, for example, the Labour Party had been striving since its disastrous defeats by the Thatcher and Major Conservatives to recast its identity, to become a “modern” party.

“Modernisers” gained substantial ground during John Smith’s brief tenure (1992-94) at the head of the party. He set up the Commission on Social Justice (CSJ – sometimes termed the Borrie Commission) in 1992, symbolically choosing the 50th anniversary of the Beveridge Report. Many of the themes of the LEGO™ paradigm were present two years later in the Commission report, which was also a major site for the politicisation of childhood. For example, it declared: “the investment we make in babies and young children is wholly inadequate” (CSJ, 1994: 122), and asserted that “children are not a private pleasure or a personal burden; they are 100 percent of the nation’s future” and that “the best indicator of the capacity of our economy tomorrow is the quality of our children today” (CSJ, 1994: 311). There were two action conclusions drawn: (1) “The first and most important task for government is to set in place the opportunities for children and adults to learn their personal best. By investing in skills, we raise people’s capacity to add value to the economy, to take charge of their own lives, and to contribute to their families and communities” (CSJ, 1994: 119-20); and (2) “the best way to help the one in three children growing up in poverty is to help their parents get jobs” (CSJ, 1994: 313). The CSJ was a source of many of the ideas and institutional innovations implemented by New Labour after 1997.

In 1997 the Liberal Party of Canada was struggling to regain some of its lost authority within the federation and chose to mount its struggle by relying on the themes of the LEGO™ paradigm. The 1997 Speech from the Throne (the government’s statement of priorities) was one that clearly politicised childhood: “An optimistic country is one that chooses to invest in its children. Investments in the well-being of today’s children improve the long-term health of our nation. A growing economy that creates jobs is the best guarantee for our children’s future.”³⁰ Such understandings led directly to policy action to redesign income security programmes, via the National Child Benefit and other measures (Jenson, 2004: 182-83).

But it was not only the centre-left that had an interest in childhood being more politicised. In countries where the centre-right succeeded social democratic governments, they too could make use of the fact that childhood was politicised. Centre-right coalitions could finally achieve some of conservatives' long-standing goals of supporting parental care and privatising services, all in the name of re-equilibrating policy values.³¹ They could appeal to the discourse of “quality child care” when supporting payments to promote parental care. However, the power of the activation themes in the LEGO™ paradigm, as well as the centrality of the notion of investing in human capital meant that the centre-right coalitions could not simply advocate a return to the past. Any incentives for parental care were confined to infants and toddlers. Non-parental care was not rarely rolled-back; indeed, in some cases it was extended (Ellingsæter, 2003: 439-40). In part this was due to the power of the ideas, and in part to the fact that parties were frequently compelled to create coalitions and compromise around the ways to address new social risks (Ellingsæter, 2003; Bonoli, 2005; Hausermann, 2005). The consensus around a LEGO™ paradigm thereby took shape within state institutions under the aegis of these parties, seeking to broker a broad spectrum of interests and appeal to a wide variety of groups and categories of voters.

The European Union has come relatively late to the LEGO™ paradigm (Jenson, 2007). It has been more of a “policy taker” with respect to it, importing ideas and policy analyses from Member States and international organisations and then repackaging them as an interpretative frame for all member states. With respect to ECEC, for example, it has tended until recently to emphasis the reconciliation agenda more than the advantages of investment in pre-school programmes (Moss, 2004). In 2006, however, the Commission issued two communications in which a LEGO™ style of analysis was clearly present. One on education and training made the

now familiar arguments about the payoffs of investing in ECEC (European Commission, 2006b: 4-5) and the communication on the rights of the child advanced the notion of the long-term risks of child poverty (European Commission, 2006a). In both cases the EU institutions were aligning their understandings of new social risks with the paradigm now predominant in many countries and international bodies.

Concluding remarks

In the last decade the politicisation of childhood observed within a variety of disciplines and across many public policy domains has not been a chance event, nor is it *sui generis*. Rather, this article has documented the extent to which the politicisation of childhood is a key pillar of a new social policy paradigm taking shape in numerous countries and promoted within a wide range of international organisations as well as by the European Union. Recognition of and responses to new social risks by policy communities has prompted change of three types. Benefit levels have been adjusted to be sure. But beyond those the instruments of policy intervention and the very objectives of policy have been altered. Movement on the latter two, and especially the third, marks, according to Peter A. Hall's (1993) classic analysis, a paradigm shift. A coherent set of ideas has developed around the three dimensions of the LEGO™ paradigm, and these ideas have been carried into key political institutions by actors, especially parties in government, that have an interest in identifying themselves as with “after neoliberal” policy stances or building a stable coalition with those who do.

The goal of this article was to document the coherence of the new norms, so as to render the extent of the change more visible. It is not, by any means, an analysis of the consequences of the politicisation of childhood. All this talk about children does not mean that because they are the object of policies children are thriving. Policies to fight “child poverty” leave many children

and their parents with low and often inadequate income. Instruments to promote social inclusion result in many children and their families being little more than marginal insiders. Even talk about the importance of early childhood education and care does not translate everywhere into adequate access to quality services for all the children who need them or all the parents who want them. Promises to provide assets to all children do not do much to undermine the income differences that support unequal class structures. And so on. While this article has described the paradigm shift, a next step is to assess its consequences.

¹ That year 1997 was one in which “... a range of critics assailed neo-liberalism’s legitimacy, many from within the headline international financial institutions” (Porter and Craig, 2004: 391). It was the year of the Asian financial crisis and the year the World Development Report called for a more capable state as well as the year New Labour defeated the British Conservatives, that the OECD worried that structural adjustment policies were undermining social cohesion (OECD, 1997), that the Canadian government redesigned social assistance programmes via the National Child Benefit (Jenson, 2004), the Mexican government introduced its conditional cash transfers to support poor households with school-age children (Barrientos and DeJong, 2006), and so on.

² For analyses using the concept of new social risks see, among others, Bonoli (2005), Taylor-Gooby (2004), Jenson (2004; 2007), Armingeon and Bonoli, 2006: Chapter 1.

³ Benefits paid as wage supplements may be “work-tested” (available to any worker whose earnings level falls below the line) or may be “child-tested” (available only to workers with low earnings *and* a dependent child). Britain’s Working Tax Credit is an example of the first, and the Canada Child Tax Benefit is an example of the second.

⁴ In his classic article on policy paradigms, Peter A. Hall (1993: 278 and *passim*) defines a change in policy paradigm as a shift in overarching goals as well as techniques and precise settings. Change only on the latter two would lead, in his terms, to second or first-order policy change.

⁵ Reliance on many of the same policy instruments – income supplements; conditional cash transfers; child-testing of benefits – is not discussed here. For some discussion, see Barrientos and DeJong (2004; 2006).

⁶ From <http://www.lego.com/build>, consulted 26 July 2005.

⁷ From <http://www.lego.com/eng/info/default.asp?page=lifelong>, consulted 18 July 2006.

⁸ This may seem an unnecessary point, but debate over whether the politicisation of childhood should involve children “in the here and now” or “adults in becoming” is a lively one. See, for example, Lister (2003) and OECD (2001: 8).

⁹ Barrientos and DeJong (2004) describe a very similar politicisation of childhood involving many of the elements of the LEGO™ paradigm in the global South and focused on human capital. There, however, the shift is termed one towards “social protection” rather than social investment.

¹⁰ For examples of the LEGO™ paradigm’s focus on learning by adults see Jenson and Saint-Martin (2006: 435-37).

¹¹ EU analyses have often focused on this risk. See, for example, *The Social Policy Agenda 2000-2005* (European Commission, 2000: 14-15).

¹² The EU targets are to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age. Report of the Barcelona European Council, 15-16 March 2002, p. 12. Available on: http://europa.eu/european_council/conclusions/index_en.htm

¹³ The situation of infants and toddlers is most relevant here, because almost all pre-schoolers are in the educational system by age 3. However, but many of the subsidies provided are available for care of older children as well.

¹⁴ A recent overview of public support for child care costs shows France to have the most elaborate subsidy programmes directly targeted to informal care. Most other countries either do not fund it (providing subsidies only for formal care) or provide a general subsidy that may be used for some forms of informal care (Immervoll and Barber, 2005: 59-62).

¹⁵“This type of policy orientation, which also includes ‘in-work’ benefits or work subsidies, is sometimes seen as ‘neo-liberal’ and coercive, but actually has a long and honourable history as part of Swedish social democratic active labour market policy” (Ferrera and Rhodes, 2000: 5).

¹⁶ Final communiqué, Meeting of OECD Social Affairs Ministers, 1 April 2005. Available at: www.oecd.org/document/47/0,2340,en_21571361_34360727_34668207_1_1_1_1,00.html. Consulted 28 August 2005.

¹⁷ On the social investment and child poverty link in British social policy analysis see Dobrowolsky and Jenson (2005). For an overview of several international examples see Jenson (2004: 170).

¹⁸ The emphasis on investing in ECEC services so as to counter the detrimental effects of growing up in low-income is not new, of course. After 1945 publicly funded child care was a meant to respond to “exceptional” cases – poor children at risk of inadequate parenting or children whose mothers had no “choice” but to seek employment (Jenson and Sineau, 2001: 246). However, as the OECD now notes (2006), ECEC is seen as a key preventive measure. See for example the recent Communication of the European Commission (2006b: 4-5), where the investment benefits are graphed or the OECD’s summary of its work on ECEC (2006), where the theme is constantly present.

¹⁹ See “Why Invest in Children and Youth?” On <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTCY/0,,contentMDK:20243901~menuPK:565261~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:396445,00.html>. Consulted on 31 July 2006.

²⁰ For an overview of asset-building initiatives see OECD (2003: 15-35).

²¹ For example, in the mid-1980s Belgium created a paid Voluntary Career Break to allow workers to meet family or other circumstances. They were not “saved for,” and employers had to replace the worker on leave with another from the unemployment rolls (Jenson and Sineau, 2001: Chapter 3). In the case of maternity – and in contrast to “parenting time” – all countries in the EU 15 (except the UK) provide paid maternity leaves. This has been the case for several decades, since childbirth has always been treated as a health – and therefore “old” – risk. For details see www.childpolicyintl.org/maternity.html

²² Since the Pact was not signed by the largest union confederation, its relevance may be more symbolic than real.

²³ *The International Reform Monitor*, #9, 2004: 8 reports that activation strategies have been adopted in virtually all the 15 countries it monitors. See <http://www.reformmonitor.org>.

²⁴ For one discussion see Castles (2005).

²⁵ This notion of the trilemma is popular. See for example its use in Esping-Andersen *et al* (2002: 187). Anne Wren (2001) argues that countries in each regime type might have made a different political choice, but all were basically constrained by being in the same “game.”

²⁶ They might, of course, help to understand the convergence around one dimension of it – public support for non-parental child care, as the service economy calls on women’s work.

²⁷ Obviously, not all changes in government lead to a change in paradigm. One of the very definitions of a stable paradigm is that its principles and practices are widely shared across the political spectrum (Jenson, 1989).

²⁸ In the 1980s rates of growth in spending were 3.2% of GDP and it was only in the first half of the next decade that they began to decline (Castles, 2005: 416).

²⁹ The report of this conference is found in OECD (1997).

³⁰ Available in the Chrétien archives of the Privy Council Office, on: http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/default.asp?Language=E&Page=archivechretien&Sub=FactSheets&Doc=fact_sh19970923639_e.htm. Consulted 23 July 2006.

³¹ Ellingsæter (2003: 426ff.) describes how the victory of the centre-right in Norway in the mid-1990s brought such a move, in the name of “reinstating a balance” between non-parental and parental care as well as public and private provision.

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