Social Policy for Inclusion of Children and Adolescents. The meanings on citizenship.

LLobet, Valeria.


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Social Policy for Inclusion of Children and Adolescents. The meanings on citizenship.

The current paper presents a theoretical discussion by analyzing data produced in the research project: “Los discursos de las políticas sociales sobre la adolescencia y las instituciones. La ampliación de derechos de adolescentes.”

I intend to argue that, while in general terms the mainstream approaches to issues related to youth and social inclusion have put an important focus on the severity of the present reality, they do not fully portray its complexity. If social citizenship as it has been conceived is being dismantled among the youth, it is necessary ask what would be replacing it or even what would it be transforming into.

This paper seeks to understand the meaning of citizenship from the perspective of male and female teenagers living in impoverished metropolitan areas. In doing so, it intends to place the focus, on one hand, on the articulation between the meanings of social integration that are promoted by institutions and, on the other, on the processes of citizenship expansion that include the teenage population in socially vulnerable situations in urban contexts.

I claim that it is possible to raise the issue that it is necessary to “re-embed” the discourses of this population in institutional contexts in order to clarify the tensions and synergies between the institutional practices and discourses and the discourses of adolescents. Institutions, in the context of this paper, refer to implementation of social inclusion strategies deployed by the State in specific contexts. This process accompanies an idea of citizenship that complements the
entitlement to rights with the meanings acquired by the exercising or infringement of rights in daily life.

2. The theoretical debate

This presentation focuses on the preliminary results of the aforementioned research project, whose central question is: in what ways and to what extent do the strategies of social inclusion implemented within the framework of social policies influence processes for the expansion of social and cultural citizenship for the new generations.

Studies on adolescent and youth populations have focused on the problems and issues of citizenship for the new generations from four perspectives.

First, cultural studies, whose impact on the analysis of adolescent and youth populations is very important in Latin America, have developed debate around the subject of cultural identities, specifically from the ideas of performativeness in its varied uses among post-structuralist approaches. From this approach, at least two ways of conceiving citizenship have come forth: cultural citizenship (Reguilllo, 2001, Dagnigno, 2005), in which subjective adscription is prioritized in migratory contexts, and participative citizenship (Machado Pais, 2008), which is conceived as a way of expressing the desire to participate through leisure activities that intervene in the urban space.

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1 Which is to say, following J.L. Austin, acts that within themselves contain and define their own meaning.
Second, from contemporary social theories we have conceptions such as intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003) which addresses the expression of social problems in terms of personal life problems, or “intimate troubles.” On the other hand, conceptions related to biographic trajectories (Chamberlayne, Rustin y Wengraf, 2002) and citizenship trajectories (Virilio, 2000; cited in Machado Pais, 2008) point to the link between life opportunities, access to rights and the configurations of quotidian meanings or biographies.

Third, from the field of political studies and studies of the state, youth and adolescent citizenship have been linked to, on one hand, the breadth and depth of social rights and, on the other, the modalities of political participation or the representation of “the political” by young people.

Fourth, heirs to the debate of gender and development who question the abstract universality of citizenship from the standpoint of concrete inequalities, find conceptions of citizenship that are experienced (Lister, 2005) whose articulating dimensions are the consideration of a problem in terms of justice and the possibility of identifying with strangers as equals, in terms of autonomy and solidarity.

From these axes, diverse aspects of what could be defined as the current socio-cultural situation of the new generations are emphasized. The cultural perspectives aim to debate the conceptions of participation, inclusion and citizenship of an adult-centric and state-centric nature. They point out the contradiction between the universality of rights and the particulars of the life styles of youth. They oppose
these with the multiple strategies of inclusion and participation of “youth cultures,” by means of naming as citizenship actions that, as expressions of social identity, manifest themselves in a way that is more or less disruptive in the public sphere. To this extension of the concept’s use, we can pose two questions: 1) does the concept maintain its explanatory value upon being extended to a multiplicity of phenomena whose conceptual connection seems to be more contingent than intrinsic? and 2) is it relevant to name as citizenship a grouping of this multiplicity of expressions in the public space – a usage that does not necessarily recreate the idea of the public sphere in the sense of relocating or interpolating the actors present in it?

The institutional perspectives and those of political science, are on the other end of the spectrum. They tend to treat citizenship and political participation as equivalents. From these perspectives, the most innovative approaches analyze the various forms of participation, from the perspective of youth groups (Serna, 1997) as much so as from the institutional perspective (Krauskopf, 2003). In this way, they reduce the complexity of politicization of needs and demands to its most formal expression, from the classic expression of civic republicanism, in which the citizen is a political actor who exercises his civic rights in the public sphere, to the communitarian version of social value and contributions, for example through volunteerism. Within these contexts, the actions of those who have fewer

\[Such\ as\ skate\ boarding\ in\ the\ city.\]

\[Mención\ expresa\ merecen\ los\ trabajos\ que\ intentan\ sostener\ una\ tensión\ entre\ formas\ y\ espacios\ de\ participación,\ acciones\ de\ recreación\ de\ la\ identidad\ social\ y\ expresión\ de\ necesidades\ y\ demandas.\ Tal\ el\ caso\ de\ Gaiser\ y\ de\ Rijk\ (2008).\]
possibilities for reaching the canonic space of participation is interpreted as a lack of interest in these channels, an expression of disbelief in the value of politics as they don’t link themselves to political parties and become part of this network of “clients.”

It seems that neither the indiscriminate extension of the concept nor its circumscription in the sphere of institutional policy allows us to understand the complexity of social processes.

In the field of sociological reflection, the Marshallian construction has been put to question by the different nature of the types of “social things” that have been grouped together such as civil, political and social rights. In the feminist tradition, citizenship is a contested concept, theoretically as well as normatively (Lister, 2003). In this sense, the debates have focused on redefining citizenship as status, membership or cultural identity, on one hand, and on the other as practice, responsibilities and modes of participation. Lister (1997, 2003) proposes, in an attempt to synthesize the debate, that citizenship as rights the subjects the exercising of agency as citizens.

In the last twenty years, there has been a process of formal and normative expansion of rights for children and adolescents. In it the interweaving of perspectives on rights with the formation process of public policies have converged with the growth and extension of the forms of restriction of welfare and of the conditions for full participation. At the same time, these new generations constitute, for the adult world, a kind of new threat: they are creating a
transformation of the modalities of social relationships and, in broad terms, of forms of subjectivity that explain the concern through culture. The questioning of the efficacy of the mechanisms of social cohesion explains, for its part, the expansion and centrality of the approaches to citizenship that are considering the social question of the new generations.

Nancy Fraser, in her analysis of justice, points to the idea that the material dimension and the symbolic dimension of the social overlap in such a way that they determine the specificities of the inequalities. To what extent have the approximations to the phenomena of citizenship for adolescents disarticulated these dimensions in a way that the merely cultural, paraphrasing Benhabib, blocks our comprehension of its complexity? What is the current role of social policies in achieving a substantive citizenship and in the deployment of meanings that weave together the forms of social inclusion through citizenship, understood as an expression of agency?

Without any pretension at fully representing or responding to the questions, this paper presents some results from an investigation that aims at portraying the tensions between the representation and significations that citizenship and inclusion acquire, and the processes that are eluded to be these symbolic constructions.

The forms that the processes of inclusion, exclusion and cohesion adopt, in our society, are complex, and they seem to be further and further from expressing themselves as oppositional poles. This implies that the relationship between
substantive citizenship, the processes of social vulnerability and its subjective correlatives in uncertainty and insecurity have repercussions in the trajectories and transitions as much as they present questions in themselves. Meaning, these relationships are not linear and it is not possible to know them through a fragmented analysis of the processes that compose them.

3. Towards a characterization of narrations of citizenship by adolescents.

Substantive citizenship is expressed to the degree that people have access to the available welfare for all the inhabitants of a territory. Evidently, this is one of the most problematic aspects when it comes time to defining the current state of social citizenship. Not withstanding this theoretical complexity, it is of interest to our proposal purposes to know which processes of vulnerability that affect the daily life and future trajectory of adolescents are addressed by social policies and how adolescents conceive those processes.

The adolescents interviewed in this study are participants in two programs: The Adolescent Project (Proyecto Adolescente), a social program of the Ministry of Social Development, as implemented by a grassroots social movement in the districts of Almirante Brown and Florencia Varela, and the Youth Activities Centers (Centros de Actividades Juveniles) of the Ministry of Education in the district of Almirante Brown. The first group consists of adolescents between the

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4 La investigación se concentra en el área Metropolitana de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. En ella se concentra casi un tercio de la población total del país, con al menos un cuarto de la misma conformada por personas de entre 10 y 19 años. Combina zonas de las más ricas y de las más pobres del país. Fue la
ages of 13 and 19 who are inhabitants (“squatters”) on very poor plots of land. The children of cartoneros (who make their living scavenging garbage for recyclable materials), the majority of them attend public schools in the region with high levels of grade repetition, in some cases repeating the same grade for four years, and come from families whose only stable income is from a social plan (Plan Jefes y Jefas, Programa Familias and the before mentioned Proyecto Adolescente). The second group consists of adolescents between the ages of 16 and 20 who live in a residential complex – Barrio Don Orione – with a population of approximately 60,000. All of the participants attend school and are from families that are lower or lower middle class, generally with only one adult drawing a stable income.

**Security, life, transit, public space.**

An initial activity for the production of data has been the mapping of the neighborhood with its relevant places for the adolescents, followed by the adolescents’ individual selection of positive and negative places. The objective of this strategy was to understand what institutions prove to be spontaneously relevant for adolescents and which the spaces of participation are.

The only state institution present in the area is the school,\(^5\) valued in every case as a positive place. In some cases intermediate organizations, for example clubs, and local businesses were included.

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\(^5\) Con la excepción de una mención del polideportivo municipal.
The positive places were characterized as such due to their importance in affective terms. The negatives were valued as such because they are considered to be dangerous places. It is a disturbing result that three times as many negative places were identified as positive places and, further, that they are either places of transit or public and open spaces such as plazas, parks, and block centers. This situation requires adjustments to individuals’ daily lives: there are adolescents who cannot go to the area where their health center is located, others who had to give up high school because it was necessary to take two buses to reach the nearest school and the area of one of the bus stops is one of the most dangerous, others who don’t leave their neighborhood except for taking care of official paperwork or visiting family, and still others who will not travel alone.

From the point of view of adolescent girls it is safer to be a male on the street, a construction that is validated by the idea of confrontation: “if you are a man you can defend yourself” “if you are a girl who goes out alone you don’t have anyway to defend yourself” “it’s not the same if you go out with a man”. It was extremely rare for the males to view this situation differently. In only one case did a 16 year old male said that for him it was worse to be male, because it made him the target of aggression by gangs.

In considering how it would be possible to transform these dangerous situations, they mentioned the police presence. Equally, this was considered by one group as a first measure for improving security. In opposition, another group disparaged the idea due to police corruption, without offering an alternative.
The dangers that they identified in the neighborhood have to do with gangs of young illicit substance consumers and with assaults in the public sphere, also by young people. In one case a girl stated: “I think this place is dangerous because all the drug addicts are here, although I always go through there and no one has ever done anything to me.”

Gender and age in the neighborhood public space combine to increase a differential vulnerability in which adolescent appear as victims but also as victimizers. Nevertheless, the solitude of the neighborhood is surprising. Institutionally and socially, their neighborhood is a virtual. There are almost no adults to whom they can ask for help, only other adolescents who are seen as enemies.

These narratives allow us “to understand the relationships and significations experienced that are constitutive of marginal citizenship in daily life. (Wacquant, 2007: 21, 22). Likewise, it becomes necessary to connect these experienced relationships and significations with data from system tendencies and that comes from institutional analysis. The processes of violentation that the adolescent and youth populations of the poor and lower middles class sectors experience include various dimensions: the 300% increase in the detention of minors of 18 years of age during the decade of 1990, torture and violent treatment in police stations and at the hands of the police, and the mortality rate for accidents in transit, suicides

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6 Ello permite inscribir las narrativas en su texto social, y considerarlas en sus funciones simbólicas respecto de tales procesos sociales más alejados de la experiencia de las y los sujetos (Wacquant, op. cit; y Bourdieu, 1980).
and violent causes, in which the 15 to 24 year old age group accounts for more than two-thirds of the cases for 2006.

The narratives about the danger and its multiple efficacies in modifying life styles and restricting civil rights only partially reflects these processes of social violence against poor adolescents and youth. Nevertheless, this would not begin to question the identities of gender: masculinities and femininities would continue being constituted around belonging or exclusion in public space.

The adolescents don’t feel protected by the adults, and the neighborhood institutions are not open to the youngest. This suggests, also, the questions about the forms in which adolescents see themselves supported in the institutions that are supposed to guarantee their access to social rights, and about the solidarity among young people as a group.

**The just, the unjust, solidarity, non-solidarity.**

We were able to know the type of situations and issues valued as just or unjust, through group representations with an open debate. The representations rounded out into scripts such as: abusive parents or adults that obligated the children to beg or prostitute themselves, violent boyfriends that abandon their girlfriends when faced with a pregnancy, children living on the streets (translator’s note, literally: “in street situations”) and begging.

The explanations of the causes of these situations and their possible solutions produced paradoxes. On one hand, they express a dimension of social sensitivity, a valuing of justice with a relative degree of abstraction and an obligation of
solidarity – everyone displayed a desire to or the belief that one is obligated to help in such situations.\(^7\) On the other hand, this level of abstraction\(^8\) becomes, upon further exploring the cases, in positions fairly conservative. They morally judge poverty as a lack of will, laziness, and incivility, and they consider that the solution is linked to tapping into hope, persistence and a “self-starter” quality. For example, in one of the dramatic situations represented, an alcoholic woman, a street child, and drug-consuming adolescent are redeemed by an epiphany, a vision of hope, “the light.” This vision compels them to transform their lives, and the three immediately get work, quit their substance abuse and arrive to a happy ending.

For the adolescents interviewed\(^9\) the grasp of the problematization of these situations as degrees of injustice seems to be solely abstract. This would imply that they would only consider truly deserving of help and actively commit themselves to those within their closest networks. The kind of justice that they deal with does not suggest a political dimension but rather a moral and religious order.

**Laboral insertion, educational expectations**

A group activity for the production of data has been the reading of stereotypical sentences, followed by taking individual positions with respect to the sentences, and finally a discussion of the reasons and explanations behind individual

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\(^7\) Se trataba de manifestaciones desiderativas o del deber ser: al ser preguntados por situaciones concretas en el último mes, ninguno recordó haber visto un evento que requiriera de ayuda. No obstante, tal limitación igualmente permite interpretar que la solidaridad es un valor presente para las y los adolescentes, aún cuando no lo logren traducir en actos.

\(^8\) Lo que para muchos teóricos supone la expresión más acabada de la ciudadanía, en tanto abarca no sólo a los cercanos.

\(^9\) En este caso todos del CAJ.
positions. One sentence that was used for discussion was, “The people who don’t work here are the ones who don’t want to.” Faced with this sentence, almost all of the adolescents of the Youth Activities Center (CAJ) showed their agreement.

The meanings surrounding the future trajectories or insertions are linked to the idea of will power and personal effort by these schooled adolescents. Getting a job, starting a career, and successfully developing a personal project, for example, would be the result of personal characteristics such as perseverance, determination and effort.

The contrast between these expectations and the data of unemployment and the precariousness of the youth labor situation does not seem to result in the revision of these beliefs. In all of the cases a discussion of the rates of juvenile unemployment were presented, but nevertheless the arguments continued around the adequacy of expectations and education - “you can’t expect to become a lawyer, nor work for a big company” - and the need to work without critically considering the conditions of employment – “even if it’s a little job as a waitress ... its still some money.”

These are meanings derived through an ideology of meritocracy seemingly reinforced by the academic institution. These meanings are linked with conceptions that make inequality invisible. In effect, the adolescents are admitting that it is not realistic to expect to complete a university degree in contexts such as their own, but they are not able to glimpse another way of facing this limitation other than what they called effort and personal achievement. In this way, the
differences in success for more or less advantageous insertion are not explained by systemic characteristics but rather strictly personal ones. In the case of adolescents who are connected to projects of social organizations, the meanings associated with failed educational trajectories are linked to the personal cognitive conditions that explain the failure.

What in some sectors is considered uncertainty, in others is the certainty of difficulty. Luis, 14 year, wrote: “Work helps to buy the thing you need to live, but it is very hard for the kids to get work in the neighborhood. Signed: Photographer Luis.” Luis quit high school and got a job making pavements in a golf club, for which he travels almost three hours in each direction, leaving at five in the morning from his house and returning around nine. Manuel, 16 years old, says that he wants to be a policeman when he finishes schools, because he is fairly sure that he can get a job this way. He works during summer vacation at the vegetable stand where his father works and with his uncle as a bricklayer’s assistant, until he could no longer do it due to a persistent and strong pain in his lower back.

For these adolescents, the reality of exclusion requires an added burden, one of such magnitude that even their participation in a project organized by a protesting, grassroots social movement is not a help in the appreciation of inequality and injustice. It becomes very costly to see reality in other ways than experienced as personal conditions for failure or “the way the world is.”

For the adults with institutional functions, it seems that it is only possible to face the exclusion of the youth invoking values relative to a supposed “culture of
work.” But this does not offer an answer to the precariousness of employment, the inequality of access to quality employment, and the same exploitation or self-exploitation with the available jobs on any wrung of the ladder.

**The good citizens**

Some questions focused on the kinds of problems which the adolescents were interested in participating in the solution to. Other strategies presented into the discussion were a list of stereotypical affirmations that justify laziness or apathy in the face of problems of social importance in the neighborhood, for example, garbage. Finally, we consulted as to what would be a good citizen and about which issues the adolescents would have to protest or make demands of the state.

The first problems mentioned were the youths who are members of gangs that consume illicit substances and youth unemployment. After these, the garbage in the neighborhood and, in Don Orione, the demand for the transformation of the health center into a hospital. Upon being asked if it makes sense and is socially useful to push transformations in the neighborhood, more than half thought that it didn’t make sense because “the people don’t take care of thing and make things dirty anyway,” and a small group thought that “things could be started by setting the example.” Asked about group strategies for achieving this goal, their answers were likely to add individual actions rather than to realize a group organization. Further, to ask about membership in groups is first answered by denying that groups were related to “bandas” (street gangs”).

We managed to cross examine the group about these comments and it was noteworthy that the ways in which they responded to the idea of organization seemed to be related with exemplary action: “if we come together to clean up, the others may see and want to stop making things dirty.”

On the other hand, faced with problems such as children on the streets or people who must beg to survive, some adolescents mentioned television programs such as “Dancing for a Dream” (“Bailando por un sueño”, a very popular Argentine reality-competition show). For the adolescents, this type of program in which a person “with a dream or hope” is “helped” by a television star in a competition in which the winner can “to achieve the dream of helping” is a source of solutions to the social problems previously mentioned.

Finally, asking “what it is to be a good citizen,” the answers were: to have a house, a family and a job.

4. Discussion

The feminist debate on citizenship brings a number of fruitful considerations for thinking over these preliminary findings. The processes of broadening the rights of women, youths and children suppose, for its substantive efficacy, a debate in the territory of the politics of the interpretation of needs (Fraser, 1991). This means, in the first place, that the socially available discourse for naming and framing a problem are questioned, and the subjects propose alternative modes of discussing them. In the second place, this means that something that was considered a private
or personal matter now becomes considered a public problem. In the third place, it means that a public environment should be established as a privileged space for debating with respect to the needs and problems of distinct social groups.

In what ways are the narrations of citizenship explored by the interviewed adolescents linked to the politicization of needs? What do they politicize and transform discursively in a sense of greater response and confrontation?

The anguish that broadens the problem of the inclusion and the threat of future exclusion seems evident: “what I know is that I don’t want to grow. I don’t want to be an adult.” What travels through the adolescent universe doesn’t seem to be political apathy: moved by the situations of those who are more unprotected than themselves, they do not seem to have the discourse for addressing this reality. The interpretations that are used seem to be in relationship to the ways supported by the institutions in which they are included. The school seems to provide directions more towards meritocracy and the possibility of the future than the social movement does. In this same sense, for the adolescents of lower middle class and lower class that are still in school, it is almost a refuge.

It deals with a discourse that individualizes inequality and social conditions. In this sense, this refuge is at the same time a trap: it seems also to contribute to the hegemony of an “imaginary” in which exclusion and inequality are natural.

This linkage between the modalities of interpretation of the social processes contributed by the institutions and by the very necessities can convey parallel traditions of citizenship (Ndegwa, 1997, cited in Kabeer, 2002). The identities and
self-definitions based on social relationships – friendships, relatives, neighbors, group membership – seem to be the sources in which the adolescents constitute their most meaningful worlds. They don’t work with the abstract and universal definition of citizenship, and with a single trajectory of social inclusion, sustained by the institutions. On the other hand, they make the appreciation of the effective tenets of access to resources and positions difficult. The abstract and meritocracy-based conception as an access to economic resources and the idea of institutionalized political participation as access to the political sphere can have negative effects. The access to employment is given through social networks based on belonging to family and the neighborhood. The forms of having a bearing upon political decisions vary from social relationships to collective actions of protest. Finally, the neighborhood processes of increasing of vulnerability require a process of politicization of social relationship, that is naively treated by notions such as exemplary action, which denies the conflicts of interests.

The Latin American debate over citizenship, initially centered on the deficits of the democratic institutionalization (O’Donnell, 1993) and then later in Latin America faced with globalization, continues without resolving the tension between the symbolic and material planes, or that of the particular and universal. As was pointed by Calderon, Hopenhayn and Ottone (1996), the extended citizenships have implicated an expansion of equity centered on the symbolic plane. In this same plane, from diverse tendencies the linkage between citizenship and social
legitimacy and recognition attributed to determined identities and claims have been pointed out (García Canclini, 1995; Sojo, 2002, Fraser, 1997).

We have attempted to present the double argument that, first, at the level of theoretical development, the available conceptions of citizenship of the adolescents interviewed seem to have neglected the imbrications between symbolic and material processes, and, second, the treatment of narratives or discourses and the adolescents cultural practices which are disconnected from the institutional contexts. This treatment may be resulting in relatively naïve appreciations of adolescent citizenship, its limitations and the impact of the processes of exclusion that threaten it.

The processes of inclusion pushed by the analyzed social policies, are cultural and group spaces that seem to consolidate processes of belonging but with very limited capacity for providing processes of economic autonomy.

The corporeal autonomy, achieved through the concretion of sexual and civil rights, to nutritional food and health, to the displacement in public space, seem to be the center of the limitations of citizenship of the adolescents, and for this same reason, the challenge to the traditional manners of conceiving citizenship and social policies.

In the final analysis, what would allow adolescents and youths to question the processes of social exclusion that they experience?