



Rethinking the Adult/Child Binary: Childism, Children's Literature and Epistemological Critique

Repensando o binarismo adulto/criança: childism, literatura infantil e crítica epistemológica

Repensando el binarismo adulto/niño: childism, literatura infantil y crítica epistemológica

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of childism as both a critical framework for identifying prejudice against children and a transformative perspective for rethinking social and political relations across generations. First developed in the 1970s in relation to psychiatry, psychoanalysis and children's literature criticism, childism initially referred to the adult presumption of superiority over children and to the stereotypes, microaggressions and asymmetrical power relations through which childhood is constructed as dependent, immature and subordinate. The article first discusses this interpretation, it then analyses the role of children's literature as a field in which adult-centred representations of childhood are both reproduced and critically questioned. Finally, the article turns to the reconstructionist interpretation of childism, understood not merely as a critique of adultism but as an epistemological and political tool. From this perspective, childism opens an interdependent political space in which children's agency, difference and participation can contribute to a broader rethinking of citizenship, democracy and social justice.

Keywords: childism, adultism, adultcentrism, children's literature

Resumo

Este artigo examina o conceito de childism tanto como uma estrutura crítica para identificar preconceitos contra crianças quanto como uma perspectiva transformadora para repensar as relações sociais e políticas entre gerações. Desenvolvido inicialmente na década de 1970 em relação à psiquiatria, à psicanálise e à crítica da literatura infantil, o childism referia-se, a princípio, à presunção adulta de superioridade sobre as crianças e aos estereótipos, microagressões e relações assimétricas de poder por meio dos quais a infância é construída como dependente, imatura e

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subordinada. O artigo discute primeiramente essa interpretação e, em seguida, analisa o papel da literatura infantil como um campo no qual as representações adultocêntricas da infância são simultaneamente reproduzidas e questionadas criticamente. Por fim, o artigo volta-se à interpretação reconstrucionista do childism, entendido não apenas como uma crítica ao adultismo, mas como uma ferramenta epistemológica e política. Nessa perspectiva, o childism abre um espaço político interdependente no qual a agência, a diferença e a participação das crianças podem contribuir para um repensar mais amplo da cidadania, da democracia e da justiça social.

Palavras-chave: *childism, adultismo, adultocentrismo, literatura infantil.*

Resumen

Este artículo examina el concepto de childism tanto como una estructura crítica para identificar prejuicios contra los niños como una perspectiva transformadora para repensar las relaciones sociales y políticas entre generaciones. Desarrollado inicialmente en la década de 1970 en relación con la psiquiatría, el psicoanálisis y la crítica de la literatura infantil, el childism se refería, al principio, a la presunción adulta de superioridad sobre los niños y a los estereotipos, microagresiones y relaciones asimétricas de poder mediante los cuales la infancia se construye como dependiente, inmadura y subordinada. El artículo discute primero esta interpretación y, a continuación, analiza el papel de la literatura infantil como un campo en el que las representaciones adultocéntricas de la infancia se reproducen y se cuestionan críticamente al mismo tiempo. Por último, el artículo se centra en la interpretación reconstruccionalista del childism, entendido no solo como una crítica al adultismo, sino como una herramienta epistemológica y política. Desde esta perspectiva, el childism abre un espacio político interdependiente en el que la agencia, la diferencia y la participación de los niños pueden contribuir a repensar de manera más amplia la ciudadanía, la democracia y la justicia social.

Palabras clave: *childism, adultismo, adultocentrismo, literatura infantil.*

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the two main interpretations of the concept of *childism*. The term emerged in the United States from the 1970s onwards, initially in the fields of psychiatry (Pierce and Allen, 1975), psychoanalysis and children's literature criticism (Hunt 1984), and has more recently circulated transnationally within the philosophy of education and pedagogy (Biswas et al., 2024; Tripi, 2025). In its first meaning, childism refers to an interpretive framework for identifying and deconstructing prejudices against children and childhood. In a second and more recent sense, it functions as a theoretical and political perspective capable of opening new spaces of social and cultural interdependence.

The term “childism” has therefore undergone a double development in the scholarly literature. On the one hand, it has been used to describe the ways in which children are subjected to adult domination through deeply rooted stereotypes, prejudices and asymmetrical relations of power. In this sense, childism is close to more established categories such as sexism and racism, since it identifies a specific form of discrimination directed against a marginalised social group. On the other hand, childism has been interpreted as an epistemological key through which to question the norms, institutions and socio-political processes that have historically reproduced adultism. In this second perspective, childism assumes a transformative function grounded in children’s marginalised experiences and may be placed alongside critical approaches such as feminism, decolonial theory and postcolonial thought.

This article analyses childism as both a critical concept and a transformative perspective for rethinking childhood, adult power and political participation. The first section discusses childism as a form of bias against children, showing how childhood has often been constructed through adult-centred assumptions, stereotypes and hierarchical relations. The second section explores the influence of childism within children’s literature, focusing on the ways in which literary texts and criticism have problematised the adult gaze, the representation of children and the possibility of making space for children’s voices. The third section turns to “reconstructionism” (Wall, 2019b) and interdependence as a new theoretical and political perspective. It argues that childism can move beyond the mere denunciation of prejudice and become a means of imagining more inclusive forms of agency, citizenship and democratic participation across generations.

CHILDISM AS THE SEED OF ALL FORM OF DISCRIMINATION

The first documented use of the term dates back to 1975, when the American scholars Chester M. Pierce and Gail B. Allen defined childism as “the automatic presumption of superiority of any adult over any child; it results in the adults’ needs, desires, hopes, and fears taking unquestioned precedence over those of the child” (Pierce and Allen, 1975, p. 15). It is significant that the concept emerged in the context of an inquiry into racist content in American commercial advertising. In that setting, the

authors identified not only racial and sexist discrimination, but also stereotypes and prejudices associated with childhood. Children were represented as dirty, greedy, inclined to lie and deceive, even within family relationships. The resulting image was that of children as bodily and instinctual beings, opposed to rational and reflective subjects.

Pierce himself had developed the concept of *microaggression* a few years earlier (1974), a term that is now widely used in psychology and social theory. He defined microaggressions as the interactions through which racism is enacted, characterised by the repeated denigration of Black people by white people through minimal, ambiguous and often automatic verbal or behavioural actions. These actions may be performed preconsciously or unconsciously, but their cumulative effects are substantial. In a similar way, childism is based on the *child-victim's* constant accommodation to a series of microaggressions enacted by the *adult-aggressor*. The child responds to these behaviours through a conformist and performative mobilisation that produces long-term effects, influencing the behaviour of future adults and contributing to the reproduction of discriminatory practices and asymmetrical power relations. From this perspective, childism can be understood as containing the seed of other forms of oppression, including racism and sexism.

The scholar Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, a student of Hannah Arendt, developed her analysis of childism by linking psychoanalysis, prejudice and childhood. Her work drew on the theory of projection elaborated by members of the Frankfurt School within the field of prejudice studies (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford, 1950). Several key elements can be identified in her approach. First, prejudices are not simply pathological or deviant phenomena. Rather, they respond to deeply rooted human needs and desires that are found in three widespread character types: obsessive, hysterical and narcissistic. Prejudices serve the function of preventing these needs from turning into openly pathological behaviours. Second, prejudices are formed through projection: individuals or groups externalise negative aspects of themselves that they do not wish to recognise as their own. In this process, the target group is devalued, controlled and, in some cases, eliminated, as occurred in the case of the Jews during the Holocaust.

Young-Bruehl's research on character types and prejudice converged in her posthumous volume *Childism: Confronting Prejudice Against Children* (2012). In line

with prejudice theory, she showed that pervasive prejudices against childhood are not the direct cause of child abuse and maltreatment, but rather their *conditio sine qua non*. To understand childism is therefore to reveal the modes and causes of offensive actions directed against children. Every prejudice is based not on objective classification, but on belief. This is true of sexism, racism and, likewise, prejudices directed against childhood, which often construct children as immature, dependent and belonging to adults.

For Young-Bruehl, childhood differs from other discriminated groups because it constitutes a “global target group”. This is the case for two reasons. First, wherever there are children, prejudices against them emerge. Second, the category of childhood includes within itself all other marginalised groups. There are, for instance, Black girls, Jewish children, disabled teenagers, homosexual children and children of homosexual parents, all of whom may experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

In this first meaning, childism functions as an umbrella concept capable of connecting different studies on discriminatory practices directed against children. It becomes a heuristic and synthetic tool that may also guide political action. At the same time, an exclusively negative interpretation of childism risks reproducing a deficit model, one that does not sufficiently value decades of research on children’s agency, their capacity for social transformation and their role as makers of meaning. The risk, in other words, is that of reaffirming an adult-centred perspective that assigns only to adults the possibility of acting for the empowerment of younger people (Wall, 2019b).

THE PROBLEMATIC ADULT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

In the second half of the twentieth century, a number of scholars approached children’s literature through a psychoanalytic lens in order to examine both the genealogy of the discipline and the conception and institutionalisation of childhood through literary texts (Bosmajian, 1996). In her influential essay *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose defines the production of books for children as a “fraud”, since figures such as Peter Pan do not represent something that exists for children. Rather, they reveal the ways in which adult writers consciously or unconsciously imagine childhood. Rose concludes that “children’s

fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child” (Rose, 1984, p. i).

The relationship between adults and children, embodied in the writer-reader dialectic, is therefore problematic to the point of being defined as “impossible”. Karín Lesnik-Oberstein develops Rose’s argument by problematising the English expression “children’s literature”. If the possessive “s” is understood literally, this literature does not belong to children. If, instead, the genitive is interpreted as an attempt to connect “children” and “literature”, one encounters a paradoxical situation in which attribution or appropriation coincides with a fraudulent practice. Adults claim to speak *on behalf* of children, while in fact speaking *about* them or *to* them through an adult gaze (Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994).

Sebastien Chapleau associates this critique with Roland Barthes’s analysis of toys, which Barthes describes as “an adult microcosm” reproduced on a reduced scale for a smaller human being, a “homunculus” who can only own and consume products designed for him, but never create them. The child, in this view, does not invent the world, but merely uses it (Barthes, 1957, cited in Chapleau, 2005).

A further and particularly influential parallel was drawn by Perry Nodelman (1992) between children’s literature and Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism. For Said, the “Orient” is not a neutral geographical object, but a cultural category constructed through the ways in which Europeans have imagined and represented otherness. Orientalism permeates discourse and practice, legitimising domination, government and the exercise of authority over the Orient:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 1978, p. 3).

Nodelman rewrites Said’s formulation in relation to developmental psychology and children’s literature:

child psychology and children’s literature can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with childhood –

dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, child psychology and children's literature as an adult style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over childhood (Nodelman, 1992, p. 29).

The features attributed to the Orient are thus reread in order to highlight their correspondence with dominant representations of childhood. Both processes and cultural products emerged within the same geographical and cultural area, and both are structured by similar assumptions: inferiority, objectification, silence, lack of speech and potential dangerousness. The Western paradigm and the adult-centred vision continue to shape childhood studies themselves and therefore require constant critical interrogation.

An important contribution linking children's literature criticism and childism was made by Peter Hunt, who introduced *childist criticism* into the field (1984, 1991). Hunt began from the recognition that both children's literature and literary criticism are produced by adults and often reproduce an image of childhood that does not correspond to the real child who reads literary works. Hunt was influenced by writers and critics such as Aidan Chambers (1978, 1985, 1993) and Margaret Meek (1982, 1988, 1991), who focused attention on the "implied reader" through reader-response theory (Benton, 1996). According to this perspective, literary works are fields of action for readers rather than spaces entirely predetermined by the author. The meaning and, in some sense, the very existence of children's literature lie in the practice and experience of reading by young people.

Hunt takes this position further by calling for a methodology capable of questioning adult-centred assumptions about what is appropriate for younger readers and about what they are capable of reading. Starting from the premise that children and adults read differently, one must acknowledge that every children's text is at least doubly read. It is therefore not possible to conceive of children's literature without considering the voices of real readers, who enter into relation with the literary text.

In *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (2008), Perry Nodelman identifies the main characteristics of texts belonging to the genre of children's literature. Among these, several reveal the extent to which this literary field is structured by the opposition between the adult world and childhood: adults sometimes assume childlike

traits, as in the case of Dr Dolittle; adult and child points of view appear in the texts and are often presented as opposed; adults in the narratives may exercise “colonial” power over children, from which the latter cannot easily escape. In this direction, Nodelman criticises Hunt’s position precisely because he considers the adult-child relationship to be an irreducible problem affecting children’s literature as such. Adults, especially those who work in literary criticism, know what they know and cannot understand or read texts in the same way as child readers. Unlike adult critics, child readers do not encounter literature as a vast historical and interpretive complex, but as an experience to be enjoyed.

According to Nodelman, Hunt assumes that it is possible not to know what one knows and therefore to read as if one were less expert than one actually is. Nodelman also challenges another assumption implicit in childist criticism: that adults can know how children read. This objection does not invalidate the importance of childist criticism, but it makes visible one of its central methodological tensions, namely the difficulty of decentring the adult gaze without replacing children’s voices with another adult discourse about them.

Within research on children’s literature, the concept of childism has not developed only in the direction promoted by Hunt, but has been adopted in different ways. Jack Zipes (2012), for example, draws on Young-Bruehl’s interpretation of childism as adult discrimination against childhood and as the *conditio sine qua non* of every form of oppression and maltreatment. He argues that fairy tales have contributed to culturally rationalising and justifying forms of abuse, maltreatment and abandonment of children. Focusing in particular on the repertoire collected and reworked by the Brothers Grimm, Zipes stresses that these tales remind us that childism is a global phenomenon. They also remind adults how they have treated, and continue to treat, children in the process of civilisation. He concludes that traditional stories must be questioned in their conventional forms, requiring a deeper awareness of adult authoritarianism and narcissism. In the field of storytelling, Zipes proposes using the shortcomings of traditional fairy tales for the benefit of children, their creativity and their critical capacities, thereby challenging the adult complicity that perpetuates discrimination and colonisation.

At the same time, as Grilli argues, children’s literature is an instrument of decentring from the adult condition not only artistically, but also philosophically. It is a

literature that also concerns adults, “because it brings to light aspects of our adult dimension, of our culture, society, civilisation and mentality, which, when confronted with the word ‘childhood’ and with the perspective it imposes, in some way explode, revealing their schematisms, their ambiguity, precariousness and relativity” (Grilli, 2021, p.7, my translation).

Critical research on children’s literature therefore questions not only the possibility of knowing and exploring the point of view of younger readers, but also the normative processes on which the production of literary texts is based and the possibilities for transforming them. Children’s literature may be understood at once as an antidote and as a poison in relation to the possible reconfiguration of the adult-child relationship.

Several possibilities emerge from this debate. These include dismantling the binary opposition between *adult* and *child*, *controller* and *controlled* (Rudd, 2005); moving beyond the implicit conception of the *constructed child*, that is, the ideological assumption that sees the child as mute; recognising instead that the child reader is also a *constructive child*; and identifying the concrete children present in the text, who appropriate the world from within their positioning in social, economic, linguistic and gendered discourses (Chapleau, 2005). Chapleau further emphasises that children themselves are authors of an enormous quantity of original texts, thereby drawing attention to literature by children (Chapleau, 2007). As Rudd observes:

in terms of children’s literature, though, it might still be argued that, unlike women and other minority groups, children still have no voice, their literature being created for them, rather than creating their own. But this is a nonsense. Children produce literature in vast quantities, oral and written, both individually wrought and through collaborative effort (sometimes diachronically), and in a variety of forms: rhymes, jokes, songs, incantations, tall tales, plays, stories and more. Yet, apart from a few collections and studies (for example, Fox 1993; Opie and Opie 1959; Rosen and Steele 1982; Steedman 1982; Sutton-Smith *et al.* 1999; Turner *et al.* 1978), plus the isolated publishing exceptions (such as nine-year-old Jayne Fisher’s (1980) Garden Gang series), it goes largely unrecognised – though some of it does feed back, intertextually, into subsequently published works (as, for example, did material that “Lewis Carroll” wrote in his own magazines, as a juvenile) (Rudd, 2005, p. 19).

Even in the rare cases in which literature by children is published, it is still shaped by the negotiation that children maintain with the adult world. It is often inspired by the reworking of surrounding discourses and is disseminated and institutionalised only through adult “authorisation”. The implication is both political and cultural: it invites us to question the institutional boundaries of the literary field and to play critically with its definitions (Chapleau, 2007).

A NEW PERSPECTIVE: AN INTERDEPENDENT POLITICAL SPACE

Starting from a renewed political conception of childhood and of children’s and young people’s cultural production, the philosopher John Wall has more recently elaborated a further interpretation of childism in a “reconstructionist” key (2019a, 2019b). According to Wall, childism should be understood in analogy with concepts such as feminism and decolonialism, rather than racism or sexism. This is because childism does not merely aim to include children more fairly within adult-defined structures. Rather, it seeks to critically restructure the historically rooted socio-political norms and processes of adultism, starting from the marginalised experiences of childhood.

Childhood is therefore not considered only as an object of research. In its different forms, it becomes a plural lens of social subjectivity through which any object of study may be examined. These lenses of inquiry can be applied to children themselves, to relations between children and adults, and to any social structure in which fundamental conceptions of childhood exert significant influence. Research adopting this approach makes it possible to analyse historical expressions of adultism through these prisms or microscopes, to deconstruct their structures and to reconstruct more generationally inclusive social imaginaries.

It is within this framework that the second interpretation of childism is situated, inspired by feminist philosophies and postcolonial approaches. Although this interpretation has so far remained marginal within childhood studies, it challenges the adult gaze and deconstructs culturalist, static and ethnocentric conceptions of children (Rollo, 2018). More recent research has turned towards practices that promote empowerment, active citizenship and political interdependence among adults, children and young people. Examples include debates on lowering the voting age (Wall, 2012),

children's protagonism in Latin American contexts (Voltarelli, 2022) and children's civil disobedience for climate justice (Biswas and Mattheis, 2021). These examples reveal the limits of democratic representation for children, whose participation often does not concretely affect decision-making processes. At the same time, they point to a cultural and political challenge to the deeply rooted belief that the political sphere belongs exclusively to adults.

From a theoretical point of view, this interpretation problematises the binary relationship between adults and children through the categories of *agency*, *interdependence* and *difference* (Wall, 2012, 2019a). The traditional idea of agency, understood as the autonomous and independent capacity of the individual, does not adequately take into account the power imbalances intrinsic to many relationships, particularly intergenerational ones. The perspective proposed by childism invites us to shift from a logic of equality as sameness, or "equality-as-same", to the notion of being "differently equal" (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Yuval-Davies, 1999). This formulation recognises the asymmetry of resources and experiences between adults and children without denying anyone's right to participation and active citizenship.

The participation of children and young people, although different from adult participation, makes it possible to rethink the forms of political action themselves. From this perspective, difference does not constitute a reason for exclusion or marginalisation, but rather the basis of citizenship. Participation becomes an expression of agency in the plurality of ways through which individuals and groups contribute to political and social space. Children's rights are therefore not limited to protection or provision, but include the right to participate, in differentiated forms, in the democratic and cultural life of society.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The concept of childism has developed along two main trajectories. In its first meaning, it names a specific form of prejudice against children, comparable to other structures of discrimination such as sexism and racism. This interpretation makes visible the adult presumption of superiority, the microaggressions directed against children and the symbolic conditions that make abuse, neglect and exclusion possible.

In this sense, childism provides a critical vocabulary for identifying the ordinary and often invisible forms through which adult power is reproduced.

In its second meaning, childism becomes a transformative and reconstructive perspective. Rather than simply denouncing adult prejudice, it questions the norms, institutions and epistemologies through which childhood has been marginalised. This perspective does not seek to assimilate children to adults, nor to imagine childhood as a pure or autonomous space outside adult society. Instead, it insists on interdependence, difference and relational agency as the basis for rethinking citizenship and participation.

Children's literature occupies a particularly important position within this debate. It reveals both the persistence of the adult gaze and the possibility of unsettling it. On the one hand, children's literature has often been a field in which adults construct, discipline and authorise childhood. On the other hand, it can also function as a space of decentring, critique and imaginative reconstruction. The tension between these two dimensions shows why childism is not merely a descriptive term, but a critical and political tool. It allows childhood to become a standpoint from which to rethink power, social relations and democratic life. The question is no longer simply how children can be included in institutions designed by and for adults, but how institutions, knowledge and political practices might be transformed when childhood is recognised as a constitutive dimension of social life. Childism thus opens an interdependent political space in which adults and children are not imagined as separate or opposed subjects, but as differently positioned actors whose lives, rights and capacities are mutually implicated.

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