

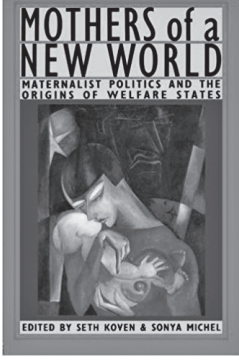
A History of the Sociology of Childhood: An Interview with Berry Mayall*

INTERVIEWER: TÜRKAN FIRINCI ORMAN**

Berry Mayall is Professor of Childhood Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE). She has worked for many years on research projects studying the daily lives of children and their parents. In the last 25 years she has participated in the development of the sociology of childhood, contributing many books and papers to this process, including Towards a Sociology of Childhood (Open University Press, 2002). You Can Help Your Country (IOE Press, 2011), co-authored with Virginia Morrow, is about English children's work in wartime, and is based on a sociological approach to history, and in particular explores ideas and practices about children and childhood at a time when children were not yet understood mainly as school-children, but as contributors to the division of labour.



Türkan Fırıncı Orman is an Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology of Baskent University in Ankara, Turkey. Her interest in the intersection of the Sociology of Children and Childhood began with her 12 years professional experience with specific reference on child labor, children at risk and the most vulnerable. She has worked for several EU Funding Programmes and international organizations such as UNHCR, ILO, LOSEV, as well as for governmental institutions ranging from MEU (Ministry for EU Affairs in Turkey) to MRDPW (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works in Bulgaria). Recent publication: Fırıncı Orman, T. (2017) "Bulgarian playgrounds in transition: Do children's and parents' perceptions differ?." Corvinus Journal of Sociology and Social Policy 8 (1): 71-94.



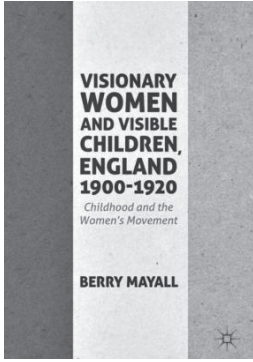
TFO: Maybe to start with we could reflect on the relationship between children's rights and the sociology of childhood that is at the center of your book. I notice that you suggested the sociological study of childhood is a political enterprise, aimed at improving respect for children's rights in society. You also argue that children should be seen socially and politically as active members of the society. Could you please also share with us your further thoughts about the relevance of UNCRC and the feminist movement in the new study of the sociology of childhood?

BM: I have been keen to stress that childhood should be considered with emphasis on children's rights.

This is because the dominant discipline dealing with childhood has been developmental psychology, which has (in the main) dealt with children not as a social group in society, but as individuals in a pre-social condition. Yet children take part in the social life of their society (notably in the 'majority' world, but also in the 'minority' worlds. It seems to me that we must recognize children as an important group in society, not just as objects of adult concern. That recognition will allow us to consider relations between children and adults, giving due recognition to each social group. As regards feminism (a huge topic), it is probably fair to say that women (in the 1970s feminist movement and also later on) have been reluctant to study women's relations with children, because women have wanted to avoid being categorized as the natural carers of children. On this topic, some of your readers may be interested to look at my latest book (listed at the end) which deals with a time (early 20C) when UK women, encouraged by the 'maternalism' thesis, did speak up for children and urged the state to take responsibility for the health and welfare of children.

TFO: You take on a determined aim in the book, with regard to historically presenting important factors triggered the formation of the new theory which originally came out in the early 1980s. It left me wondering what made you write such a book, dismissing the fact that you have been already a witness and an account yourself for its history?

BM: Why did I write it?? Nobody had done so! And since I was there at some of the early meetings and knew many of the key figures, I thought I had something useful to say. The other main reason for writing this book was because my colleague Priscilla Alderson and I had been running a master's degree in The Sociology of Childhood and Children's Rights since 2003 and I wanted to provide for the students (who come from all over the world) a short document that outlined some of



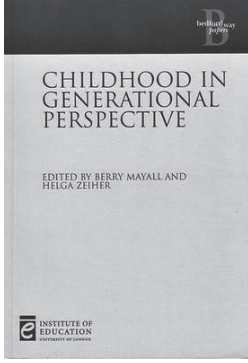
the main points. Both she and I rejected the stance of many development psychologists who (at the time) did not think of children as active participants in the social order. (Since that time, psychology has been catching up with us!).

TFO: *Your book deals with different contributions to the sociological view on children and childhood in the context of USA and UK but also gives place to the studies from the Northern Europe together with the other developments in the European context. I wonder if there was a particular reason for choosing such collective reading of the texts rather than specific themes or dealing with the important thinkers separately?*

BM: I don't have much of a reply to this! It seems to me that the sociology of childhood developed differently in different places; and the USA and northern Europe made differing contributions, which relate to their own intellectual and social histories. As I point out, for instance, it was probably Germany that provides the clearest account of how ideas and practices regarding children related to the social history of Germany; and it was in the Nordic societies that childhood probably had the highest social status (they need every child to do well!). The UK has a long tradition of welfarist approaches to childhood, probably because children suffered very much here from the injustices and inequalities encouraged by the first industrial revolution: we still have a lot of 'voluntary' organizations that aim to save the children from the worst effects of our unequal society. It is not an accident that it was an English initiative that led to the establishment of Save the Children (1919) and to the first Declaration of Children's Rights 1924. These were both written by Eglantyne Jebb and were quickly endorsed and popularised internationally.

TFO: *The background information that the book provides a good opportunity to see how the interconnected factors and also the interdisciplinarity of the study of childhood came into play in the emergence of a new social theory. I want to intentionally refer to the psychology here as there is a whole chapter on the importance of developmental psychology in shaping childhoods. On the other hand, you also pointed out that psychology is very different from the sociological theories and still far from seeing children in its political context. What would you say if one asks about most like and unlike aspects of psychology and sociology in childhood studies?*

BM: A huge question! Both psychology and sociology are developing sets of ideas and practices. I was asked to do a section on psychology by someone who read



my first draft! As Zuckerman points out (see ref list in the book), in an important (but little known) paper, whereas history as a subject for inquiry is fundamentally rooted in social history, psychology has often been a-historical; it has claimed universals, but has not recognized how its ideas are rooted in the society it aims to describe. (That is why the studies in Israel, China, and the USSR were so important in widening psychologists' understanding of their own discipline.) Developmental psychology has generally seen children as objects of the adult gaze but has not thought it important to listen to children's own views on their social position. (NB: there are many exceptions to this point.) The sociology of childhood, on the other hand, is essentially about children as a

social group in society; and about how it relates to other social groups. Key to understanding this point is the concept of generation: how do the generations relate to each other, given that people (children, middle-aged people, older people such as grandparents) each have a specific set of relations with the social order, with its history and so intergenerational relations derive from intersections of these differing perspectives.

TFO: *You discuss that in the UK, starting with numbers of empirical studies there has been a great interest to the methodological and ethical issues in the last 15 years of childhood studies. You also discuss the status and rights of the children and acknowledge the readers about the contemporary scholarly interests in the UK such as the childhood embodiment, children and media, globalization and children's geographies. It would seem a very broad question, but how do you think all these developments in academia affected children's situation in the UK? In other saying do you think the raising of interest in childhood studies was effective in forming a better child policy?*

BM: This is a very dismal story, as regards the UK. Politicians have not wished to endorse or put into practice the UNCRC; presumably, they see its ideas about childhood as a threat (to their own assumptions, to current social policies). There has been no serious effort to tell children about their rights. There is a very weak organization which is meant to foster children's rights, but which does very little to change things. We have a disastrous education system, which ignores children's rights and their being as citizens.... And so on.

TFO: *One other important theme in the book, regarding children and childhood studies could be seen as the impact of globalization. We understand that there are three important study trends such as schooling, international law on children (eg, UNCRC, UNICEF, ILO instruments), and migration which also seem crucial for the contemporary discourses on the child rights governance. What are the strengths and weaknesses you think today that globalization provides us to improve children's rights?*

BM: I don't know enough about this. An important international study is Young Lives (based at Oxford University) which works in four societies to study how childhood is developing, given that children are required both to do paid work (to help their family) and to attend school. There are now many studies of how childhoods in such societies are being lived (see especially the journal *Childhood*). In our minority societies, we are learning from such studies to re-think people's assumptions that childhood belongs in school and that childhood is (merely) preparation. So globalization has allowed international agencies to promote schooling as the proper activity of children, to which they have a right; but it has also taught us in the 'Western' world that there is more than one way of living childhood.

TFO: *In expanding the subject to the future of the sociology of childhood, could you please reflect on your vision about the future trends for the sociology of childhood? In other words, what topics do you think are going to be the most crucial/critical in the near future within the discipline?*

BM: Again, a really difficult question. Clearly, studying childhood from a sociological viewpoint has widened people's appreciation of children's relations with adults, and of their contributions to social welfare. It has forced people to recognize that children are people, not just objects of adult concern and manipulation. I think that the current stress in Western societies (and increasingly in developing countries) on schooling as the central fact of childhood must be challenged, in order to give due appreciation to children's rights to a good life in the present. So we need more studies of how children experience their childhoods.

TFO: *I would like to kindly ask about your further suggestions to the readers who already are engaged or are keen to study and/or work, in this field.*

BM: As I think I have explained, any study of childhood has to take account of the socio-political character of the society in which those children are living. This includes thinking about generational issues: how do children, parents and grandparents inter-relate, given their differing histories at differing periods in the society's history. I think it is important, too, to consider just what are the ideas about

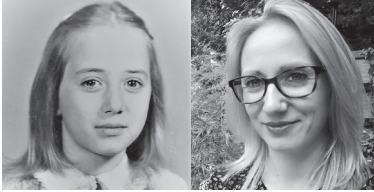
childhood held by those who make policies and practices. It is always important to balance detailed investigation with a wider view. For instance, in my recent book, I have considered how children assessed school in the context of how they assessed their home life. Above all, perhaps, it is important in a research project to extract children (theoretically!) from their family and to look across childhoods at a particular time.

TFO: *Lastly, could you please tell us about your latest works?*

My most recent book is *Mayall B 2018, Visionary Women and Visible Children, England 1900-1920: Childhood and the Women's Movement, London: Palgrave Macmillan*. Another useful book is showing how it came about those women in the early 20C (and cannot now) were able to speak up for children – the maternalism thesis – is *Koven S and Michel S (eds) 1993, Mothers of a New World: Maternalism Politics and the Origins of Welfare States. London: Routledge*. A book in which we discussed generational issues is *Mayall B and Zeiher H (eds) 2003, Childhood in Generational Perspective. London: Institute of Education*. I don't know if you can easily access books and journal papers from over here. Samantha Punch has recently written a long, useful paper on why generation has not been taken up as a key variable in analyzing childhood. It is due to appear in the journal *Children's Geographies*, with commentaries by me and by Leena Alanen. I hope all this is useful!



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