

Shmidt, Victoria: Child Welfare Discourses and Practices in the Czech Lands: The Segregation of Roma and Disabled Children During the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.

Masarykova univerzita, Brno 2015, 127 S., ISBN 978-80-210-7834-5 (URL: <https://munispace.muni.cz/index.php/munispace/catalog/download/537/1679/288-1>).

Currently, “childhood” is gaining increased attention from academia, and historical perspectives have become an integral part of research. For a long time, neither children as subjects of past events nor childhood as a social category shaped by collective perceptions, scientific discourses, and state institutions played a major role in historiography. Instead, the rich investigations conducted by other disciplines, mainly pedagogy and sociology, which in many cases included historical perspectives, aroused new interest in the topic.¹ Thus, the variety of implications connected to “childhood” have recently been rediscovered by historical research: discourses on “appropriate” care and education as well as public associations, social movements, or state institutions that, in different ways, claimed to do something for children when they were actually pursuing their own specific goals. The focus on childhood turns out to reveal more than just insights concerning the specific group of children. It tells us about the modern state, the role of science, the history of modern societies and their institutions, and power relations in general.²

The book at hand derived from a pedagogical background but nevertheless integrates historical concepts such as “longue durée” or “path dependency”. Victoria Shmidt, senior researcher at the Institute for Research in Inclusive Education at the Masaryk University in Brno, traces forms and implications of child welfare in the Czech lands over 150 years, with a special focus on Roma and disabled children. Her motivation is rooted mainly in the contemporary state of special care and the discourses and practices between segregation and integration regarding the two specific social groups: “The interpretation of the past directly affects contemporary discourses and provides the grounds for accepting the responsibility towards the sustainable practice of integration of Roma and disabled children” (p. 6). In short, Shmidt aims to reveal the failures of the past in order to avoid them today and in the future. For historians, this in itself may not be a proper justification for research; it also questions the objectivity of the investigator. Nevertheless, Shmidt conducts a source-based, clearly structured, and systematic analysis of the subject. In a very impressive way, she analytically connects the discourses of different actors, politics, science, and public associations.

In the beginning, the author introduces “eugenics” as a central category for the discourses and practices of child-welfare. According to her, limiting eugenics to the Nazi occupation would be a misleading option. Rather, eugenics as the idea of a biologically healthy national population was an inherent aspect of the Czech national

¹ Baader, Meike S./Eßer, Florian/Schröer, Wolfgang (eds.): *Kindheiten in der Moderne. Eine Geschichte der Sorge*. Frankfurt am Main 2014.

² Zahra, Tara: *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe’s Families after World War II*. Cambridge/Mass. 2011.

movement. In addition, concepts of eugenics from the late nineteenth century on influenced ideas and institutions of childcare and education.

Regarding the First Republic, Shmidt recognizes a radicalization of the discourse that, in particular, referred to disabled, “abnormal” children, focusing on the “nomadic” Roma: “In the late 1930s, the previously two separate eugenic views, that is the assimilation of the Roma people and the special education for delinquent children, were brought together into a new approach towards treating the Roma children” (p. 41).

The postwar years, especially after 1948, witnessed a more sophisticated classification of disabilities. Medicine and biology in socialism introduced the typology of disabled children who were nevertheless considered able to be educated and “cultivated”. These children were separated from the rest and kept aside in special institutions. At the same time, the socialist state began to launch a huge settlement program targeting the Roma population in order to assimilate and integrate them. This included the large-scale separation of children from their “asocial” parents. Integration of these children into the majority failed and was actually not even attempted since they were sent to special educational institutions, often combined with long-term accommodation in boarding schools or joint children’s homes.

Shmidt interprets these practices of increasing segregation accompanied by racist degradation of the whole Roma population as a revocation of the eugenics discourse of the First Republic:

In line with the interwar triangle of principles regarding the Roma children “backward family – socialized institution – negative effect of social and hereditary factors”, the socialist experts construed their arguments in favor of special education which had evolved towards the most extreme degree of segregation – marking all Roma children as “mentally retarded”. (p. 87)

In the last chapter, the author compares contemporary forms of “special education” and the new goal of “inclusion” of disabled children in different member states of the European Union. In the final summary, she returns to her starting point, presenting the outcome of the historical analysis for the contemporary discussion underlining the particular relevance of history for a critical self-image of social sciences such as (special) pedagogy, which, in the case of the post-socialist Czech Republic, would be widely missing.

All in all, Shmidt offers a concise and mostly readable overview of 150 years of child welfare in the Czech lands including Slovakia in the socialist period. The book indeed responds to an argument within the field of education about the need to confront the contemporary discourse and practices with history. Apart from that, Shmidt carefully reveals similarities of discourses and institutions considering “disabled children” in different political and social contexts of the Czech lands. She thus invites readers to further investigate forms and implications of childcare and education in (socialist) postwar Europe that will definitely lead to highly innovative insights, especially in a comparative perspective.