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Images and representations of childhood in Mexico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

Alberto del Castillo Troncoso

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Abstract
This article analyses the rise of a modern urban concept of childhood in Mexico City at the turn of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The convergence of two factors led to this rise; the emergence of a new way of perceiving reality through photography and mass reproduction of images in *cartes de visite*, postcards and in the media, and the use of a new set of techniques and knowledge in areas such as education, paediatrics, hygiene, and criminology. Mexico City's networks and institutions made it ripe for the effects of these new developments.

Keywords: Childhood, photography, paediatrics

Abbildung und Darstellung der Kindheit in Mexiko um die Jahrhundertwende vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert

Zusammenfassung
Dieser Artikel analysiert die Herausbildung eines modernen, urbanen Begriffs der Kindheit in Mexiko Stadt um die Jahrhundertwende vom 19. zum 20. Jahrhundert, der auf dem Zusammentreffen zweier Faktoren basiert: dem Durchbruch der Fotografie als neuem Medium, um Realität begreifbar zu machen, und deren massive Verbreitung durch *Cartes-de-Visite*, Postkarten und die Presse; und die Popularisierung von neuem Wissen und Erkenntnissen, unter anderem durch Pädagogik, Kindermedizin, Gesundheitslehre und Kriminologie, die in Mexiko Stadt durch Netzwerke und institutionelle Einrichtungen begünstigt wurde, in denen diverse Formen des moderne Kindheitsbegriffs angewendet wurden.

Schlagworte: Kindheit, Fotografie, Pädiatrie

1 Introduction

An eleven-year-old girl in Sarajevo called Zlata wrote these words in her notebook in June 1992:

> Boredom! Shooting! Shelling! People being killed! Despair! Hunger! Misery! Fear! That's my life! The life of an innocent eleven-year-old schoolgirl! A schoolgirl without a school, without the fun and excitement of school. A child without games, without friends, without the sun, without birds, without nature, without fruit, without chocolate or sweets, with just a little powdered milk. *In short, a child without a childhood.*[1]

We have here, as in few other documents, the dramatic testimony of a child whose lot was to live and suffer in an extreme situation and who, writing in adversity, concisely expresses the idea that a childhood lacking a set of particular attributes and characteristics (school, absence of violence, play, friends, or treats, among other central elements) does not deserve the name. The very concept of childhood in the late twentieth century is inextricably linked with a set of implicit cultural elements, without which it lacks meaning altogether.

The examination in this article of the emergence of a modern concept of childhood requires an initial clarification. In this work, I consider childhood neither as a static entity or a "natural" essence nor as a period defined by a biological process, but primarily as a symbolic construction closely linked to a specific context and historical period.

In doing so, we share the conceptual premises of Giovanni Levi and Jean-Claude Schmitt, who in their recent book *A History of Young People in the West* state, "Nowhere, in any historical period, can youth be defined simply by biological or legal criteria. Everywhere, always, it exists only in a form invested with values and symbols" (*Levi/Schmitt* 1997, p. 14).

Children as such are part of the history of humanity. Nevertheless, what will be emphasized here is the fact that our view of them and our approach to them differs considerably according to the era, the type of society, and the culture in question. In this article, I begin with a concept of childhood embedded in a historical construction linked to a series of meanings and to a social, economic, political and cultural structure.

The pioneering reference for this type of work is represented by the now classic book by historian *Philippe Ariès*, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (*L 'enfant et la vie familiale sous I'Ancien Regime*), published in France in 1960. His central thesis is well known and has given rise to extensive controversy. According to *Ariès*, the concept of childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages, insofar as there was no symbolic space reserved for children, as can be seen by the absence of literature or toys designed especially for children.

One of the documentary sources he most relied on to support his arguments was the painting of the period, in which children were portrayed as miniature adults, without an identity of their own. In the four decades since *Ariès's* book was published, other researchers have questioned and tempered some of his central claims. In particular, his overreliance on certain sources, mainly those stemming from paintings, has been pointed out, as has the lack of comparative contrast with other documentary evidence. Some authors have shown that other cultures besides Western culture did have a concept of childhood (e.g. *Archard* 1993; *Gil'adi* 1992).

In the field of history of the family, *Lawrence Stone* has documented these voids, supported by a demographic and social perspective, while psychohistorian *Lloyd de-*

Mause claims that proper care of children began only in the twentieth century. His opposite number is represented by the work of *Linda Pollock*, who claims that parents have loved and cared for their children throughout history; documented since at least 1500 (e.g. *Stone* 1986; *DeMause* 1982; *Pollock* 1983).

Since the late 1980s, the trend in cultural history has been a revindication of some of *Ariès'* claims, which opens the door to new debate and discussion. Such is the case of *Nikolas Rose*, who has analyzed the origins of child psychology and its repercussions on education in England in the late nineteenth century; *Vivian Zelizer*, who emphasizes the process of restoration and re-evaluation of childhood in Europe and North America in the second half of the nineteenth century, often in contrast to the want and adversity experienced by the greater part of the child population; and *Peter Wright*, who investigated the way in which hygiene *invented* a concept of childhood in England in the late nineteenth century.

To close this brief list, we cite the work of *Anne Higonnet*, who analyzes the construction of a vision of Western childhood "innocence" from representations of childhood in European romantic paintings of the second half of the eighteenth century (e.g. *Rose* 1985; *Zelizer* 1985; *Wright* 1988; *Higonnet* 1998).

Philippe Ariès constructed his arguments in the early 1960s, and they are a product of their times in their optimistic, confident assumption of progress, quite unlike the intellectual and academic spirit of today, where the political-cultural point of view involves recognition of cultural differences and of the specifics and originality of every process, with a more sceptical reading of historical processes and the limitations of the concept of progress.

I believe that there exists today a consensus that every society has constructed its own concept of childhood, a contradiction to some of *Aries'* central theses. Nevertheless, some of his claims deserve to be reconsidered from current perspectives. A case in point is the emphasis on the originality of the process of Western modernity, which favoured the cultural construction of a concept of childhood different from that of previous eras.

In summary, it could be claimed that every society has constructed its own vision of childhood; ours is different from that of the past and leads back to the experience of modernity which took place at the turn of the sixteenth century. The printing press played a fundamental role for a number of reasons, which we will analyze below.

As historian *Neil Postman* (1994) has shown, an oral culture dominated in Europe during the Middle Ages, and writing was restricted to a minority. The vast majority could not read or write, and these activities were not considered a necessary part of life. In this closed universe, childhood ended at the age of seven, when the process of basic language acquisition was complete. In a literate world, in contrast, adults construct a separate codified space of "secrets," which form part of a cultural code shared only by their peers, and to which children do not have access until they become adults.

The printing press not only spread ideas, but transformed the structure itself of men's thoughts. Not only did print bring into the world new subjects to be thought of in a new way, but thought itself began to be influenced by the very structure of texts, which demanded precision, individual identity and introspection. By this means, printing laid the foundation for a wider horizon for adults.

The new concept of childhood is closely linked to the beginning of the modern educational system. Where the spread of primary education was greatest, the concept was more fully developed. The practice of reading and writing led its subjects into a higher level of abstraction, which in turn modified the perception of the adult world. As part of

this process, children were separated from adults in this path of differentiation, and an identity which they had historically lacked was created for them.

Previously – as mentioned above – childhood ended at the age of seven, by a criterion of full language development, at which point they could be incorporated into the activities of the adult world. But with the educational reform of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, childhood began to be seen by a cultural criterion, which prolonged its development as part of a much broader learning process.

The crucial factors that accelerated these transformations were thus the spread of schooling and the creation of a separate world of childhood distinct from the adult world; research in psychology and pedagogy that designed and conferred heretofore unconceived characteristics and attributes upon childhood; and the knowledge and practice of paediatric medicine arising in the nineteenth century as a distinct clinical practice which began to construct a set of concepts and representations about the body of the child.

According to the historian of science *Thomas Kuhn* (1996), it may be claimed that the epistemological bases for a new paradigm of childhood were constructed in this period, closely related to other knowledge and disciplines which emerged in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century; paediatrics, pedagogy, social psychology and anthropology.

The culmination of the process is represented by *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, who synthesized the conceptualization of this new order of ideas about childhood, as several leading historians in this area have noted. The *Copernican* revolution in studies of childhood meant granting childhood, for the first time, an independence and autonomy from the universe of adults.

This legitimization of this stage of life, which implied recognizing the rights of the child, had to swim against the current during the nineteenth century struggling against dangerous enemies such as industrialization and overexploitation of children. Nevertheless, it eventually took root in Western culture as a process of mass education was implemented in Europe and North America. Several authors have analyzed this process in detail, referencing the so-called process of "sacralization" (the act of investing objects with sentimental and religious elements) of childhood in the late nineteenth century to explain the rise of a modern vision of childhood characterized by an absence of economic profit and emotional judgment (e.g. *Zelizer* 1985).

2 Photography and the construction of a modern view of childhood in Mexico

In the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, this view of childhood reached its zenith in Western culture. It was supported by the modern state and the creation of the ideal political and cultural conditions due to the development of a set of institutional mechanisms in a variety of areas and disciplines, including paediatrics, sociology, child psychology and school hygiene.

Between 1880 and 1914, discourse and knowledge about the subject of childhood developed and diversified in a variety of fields. Paediatrics, which gained legitimacy as it was incorporated into the curriculum at many European, North American and Spanish American medical schools and made contributions to persistent, well-known problems such as infant mortality, appeared for the first time as a matter of national security within

the political scope of the state. Pedagogy, which incorporated the evolutionist view of Darwinian work and considered the school an ideal laboratory for important research on school hygiene, moreover triggered anthropometric studies of the child mind and body. Child psychology came into being and was responsible for the application of the first psychometric tests of intelligence (e.g. *Rose* 1985).

Late nineteenth-century paediatrics and pedagogy together formed part of an "episteme," that is, a systematization of knowledge which was in this case organized around the need to "look inward," to make "the invisible visible," and to administrate and create the administrative and discursive apparatus that would create the conditions for perception of the difference, the individual and the standard (e.g. *Foucault* 1981).

The scientific view of medicine and pedagogy enabled the observation of hitherto unseen aspects which changed the conception of childhood and the way of thinking of and reflecting on its characteristics and problems. At the same time, during this period cultural conditions were being created that enabled a different perception of reality. The tools which facilitated this transformation were lithography, engraving and photography.

Photography in particular made a decisive contribution to reinforcing confidence and optimism in technology and progress, ideas which characterized the expectations of the dominant groups and a significant sector of Western society during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to the predominant positivist canons of the era, photography was scientific in that it furnished a visible record.

The cognoscitive ambition of the era to make the "invisible visible," which we see in paediatric and pedagogical texts from the period, can also be observed in the very nature of the act of photography, or rather in the version which existed at the turn of the nineteenth century according to which photography was considered the most perfect imitation of reality possible. We see the application of a paradigm related to vision, when it was thought that the imitative property of photographs stemmed from technical procedures that enabled the automatic creation of the image.

Photography had been used with this powerful symbolic connotation in scientific books since the mid-nineteenth century, and in the following decades it was also incorporated into newspapers and illustrated magazines, causing the number of readers and viewers of these pictures to increase greatly during the 1880s.

In Mexico, the concurrence between the rise of a modern concept of childhood and the rise of photographs and pictures of childhood took place during the period between 1876 and 1911, known as the "Porfiriato," when the country was governed by General *Porfirio Díaz* and experienced a process of political and social stabilization. This enabled political and cultural continuity and material progress, in contrast with the unrest and instability associated with the successive coups that had taken place in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The political instability that prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century had held back the development of a modern state in Mexico. By the last quarter of the century, a new front was developing as a national state was being constructed, which achieved 40 years of stability with an acceptable level of governability and worked to unify regional markets and open the doors to foreign investment.

The resulting stability did not bring an economic bonanza to the majority of Mexicans; in fact the Porfirian "modernization" plan introduced considerable tension and social imbalance. Two particularly evident manifestations of these tensions were banditry and indigenous rebellions, a constant presence throughout the period (e.g. *Pérez* 1997).

This economic and political reorganization was accompanied by a centralization process which strengthened the role of Mexico City as the political and cultural arbitrator of the country. The final quarter of the nineteenth century can be thought of as the years in which the hegemony of the capital was consolidated. As its traditional image was transformed, Mexico City reached great heights of development to the detriment of the rest of the country.

During the years from 1867 to 1911, the population of Mexico City more than doubled from 230,000 to 470,000. A large proportion of immigrants to the city came from the surrounding central region of the country, some having been dispossessed of their land. They were attracted by new sources of employment in bureaucracy, business, industry, services, education, and cultural industries (e.g. *Gortari/Hernández* 1988).

In this context, the Porfirian regime constructed an important institutional mechanism which affected among other areas, education, in its various aspects related to childhood.

Manifestations of this significant process include the opening of the Normal School in Mexico City, which promoted the discussion of new ideas in education; four major Instruction Conferences, where hygiene and educational strategies were formulated; a new Primary Education Act which constituted a qualitative step forward from previous versions in its conceptualization of the child as a physiological, psychological and moral being; the opening of kindergartens, a new concept at the time, which brought the analysis of the nature of children to a step prior to their entry to elementary school; the founding of School Hygiene departments, which tested thousands of students, recording their individual physical and psychological data; the incorporation of texts of child medicine – most of them from the French clinical school of medicine – into Mexican medical texts and articles and theses by students of the Mexican National School of Medicine which analyzed these topics; and the incorporation of subjects and courses related to childhood into the curricula of the Normal School and the National School of Medicine.

In this context, the first medical inspections occur with the support of school networks to highlight the presence of a doctor in the school, as shown in the image below. It corresponds to a medical-educational official end of the Porfirian regime, which organized the whole operation, and shows the figure of a doctor at the centre examining a girl from a public school.

Photo no. 1

Medical-pedagogical inspection – The medical examination of children. Bulletin of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Mexico, 1909, Biblioteca Lerdo

Photography and its impact on society in Mexico City at the turn of the nineteenth century has only become a subject of study in recent decades. The incorporation of photography in illustrated magazines and the modern sensationalist press at the close of the nineteenth century produced a notable renewal of graphical language with a considerable impact on people's mental habits, attitudes and beliefs. Newspapers and magazines devoted large photographic spreads to a variety of topics related to childhood, through which some of the new ideas on childhood received wide circulation, including topics related to criminology, medicine and education. The qualitative change in printing enabled the modern press – whose prototype was the newspaper *El Impartial* and the magazine *The World Illustrated* – to cast its influence over a new type of reader and user much more diverse and heterogeneous than that reached by the political press of the second half of the nineteenth century.

Such is the case in the following image that shows the child barker or paper boy, which becomes a central character in this story, with the support and massive media divulgation mentioned. The photographs of child newspaper hawkers began to occupy the front pages of newspapers and magazines during the late Porfirian regime and the first years of the Mexican Revolution. The editorial impulse to exhibit this figure symbolizes the recognition of the presence of street children and the possibility of naming them without the negative stigma of degeneration and crime that accompanied the classes called "dangerous."

It is important to note that these processes were taking place simultaneously. On one hand, the logic of the lines of argument of various scientific disciplines, the construction of their conceptual contributions and references to childhood constructed around a set of institutional mechanisms contributed to defining the characteristics and attributes of childhood and distinguishing it from other stages of life. On the other hand, the staging of photographic images was contributing to the representations of and new ideas about childhood, both in the collective imagination of scientific or groups of experts and in wider, more diverse sectors of society such as readers of the new commercial press with its extensive print runs.

Photo no. 2

The paper boy,
José María Lupercio, Mexico, 1905, Private collection

The construction of this dual scientific and journalistic phase included many photographic representations and had a huge influence specifically in Mexico City. It was even more important inasmuch as there was a lack of legislation on the recognition and protection of the rights of children.

Given these facts, I believe that the scientific claims, media texts and variety of images relating to childhood began to sensitize public opinion in Mexico City to the serious problems faced by children, which led to a reframing of concepts of childhood.

Such is the case with some photographs that border on the picturesque or show childhood customs and visualize a far starker and more realistic child pornography. In 1901, the American photographer *Charles B. Waite* was arrested and imprisoned for a few days in Mexico City when he was found with some photographs of naked children which authorities described as 'pornographic'. The scandal was of such magnitude that it reached the pages of newspapers such as *The Mexican Herald*, which covered tourism and only in this case was forced to make a social protest (e.g. *Del Castillo* 2006).

The other case is the photographer Winfield Scott, who was selling postcards of girls like those shown in the picture (Photos no. 3-5). Here the staging of poverty and attitude of the child's body has a certain seductive effect on readers and users of these images in a strange combination of innocence and eroticism.

The convergence of these two points of view – the "experts," that is the physicians, educators and hygienists, and the "broadcasters," namely the press and the illustrated magazines – constructed a crucial set of concepts, images and representations of childhood which eventually shaped new parameters and a new framework for the analysis of childhood and ways of representing it. It is not in any way a matter of disregarding earlier eras by suggesting that they did not reflect on issues of childhood, but of showing the rise and consolidation of new fields of knowledge; paediatrics, anthropology, pedagogy and

Photo no. 3

Poor girls taking a bath, Charles B. Waite, Mexico City, 1901, Private Collection

Photo no. 4

Girl collecting water in the lake, Winfield Scott, Chapala, Mexico, 1909, Private Collection

Photo no. 5

Girl posing with a pitcher, Winfield Scott, Mexico City, 1908, Privat Collection

child psychology, together with the rise and spread of photography in the printed media, provided people with a previously nonexistent imaginary related to the definition and representation of these issues.

Among other fundamental aspects, this imaginary of childhood included the creation of stereotypes associated with innocence and purity and linked to elite groups; recognition of a professional point of view on health and the pathology of children's bodies and minds; development of civic education with the aim of moulding the child to develop his potential as a citizen in service to the state; an increase in and diversification of militarization of various institutions devoted to the care of children; and the unprecedented visual reportage of child participation in labour conflicts in Mexico City's newspapers and magazines. All these factors contributed to the construction of a modern inventory of childhood in Mexico City at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Reading of images and representations of childhood from the viewpoint of experts and the media is marked by alternating breaks and resumptions, which it is worth pausing to consider. The direction and movement of these readings changed, in general terms, from homogeneity to heterogeneity insofar as the cultural and academic assumptions underlying the clinical viewpoint shared to greater or lesser degree by physicians and their readers were diluted and fragmented in the journalistic point of view, which imposed a commercial focus on what was newsworthy. The quantity and quality of readers became more diverse, substantially increasing interpretations of the photographs.

Clinical examination methods led to a medical point of view that began to consider characteristics of the child's body as elements exclusive to the stage of childhood based on a conceptual construction. The most important use of photography by physicians of this period was to make visual records of illness, providing documentary proof of clinical diagnoses.

Physicians reconstructed and recodified children's bodies, granting them new content and meaning; in contrast, the viewpoint of educators was responsible for configuring a psyche designed according to the physiological and evolutionist parameters which predominated in the second half of the nineteenth century.

These two branches of scientific knowledge and technology – medical and pedagogical – formed part of the systematization of knowledge mentioned above, which we see organized according to the need to look "inward" and to make "the invisible visible." For these reasons, the act of seeing was implicit throughout this epistemological construction.

For example, these two photographs (no. 6-7) show the power of this scientific reading. The first shows the correlation between a child's face and skull measurements determined according to the system that was used in anthropometric Mexico in prisons and asylums in the second half of the nineteenth century. The medical reading of the second photo reinterprets a children's portrait photography of a girl of 10 years and emphasizes the right ear, offering it as supposed proof of 'racial degeneration' according to the scientific view of the time.

Photography answered these objectives and fully fulfilled the expectations placed in it. This does not mean that there was no resistance to change; such resistance was present among major social sectors and groups such as parents opposed to medical examinations in the schools and the use of photography in these examinations. Nevertheless, the medical profession eventually prevailed and school medical examinations employing photographs as a documentary record of the modernity of the regime gradually increased during the latter years of the Porfiriato regime.

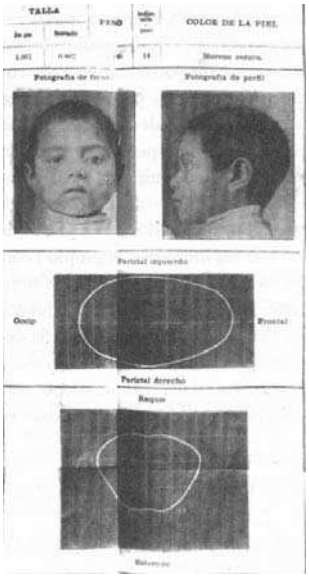
In the final years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, a fundamental technological process took place which enriched and diversified the new attitudes and thinking on childhood. This was the evolution of photography, which began to occupy an increasingly important place in the media at the same time as its formats and content were changing dramatically. Photography in the media reached a much broader and more heterogeneous readership, with issues of tens of thousands of copies.

These concerns were shared by professional elites regarding childhood, but this viewpoint was overwhelmed by the very different standards of the market on what was newsworthy, and by political interests. These took on great importance for the publishing of images and representations of children and for their reading by the public.

Photography in the media presented a great diversity of representations of childhood. The reading and interpretation of these images is extremely complex, insofar as they are intersected by diverse interests, from the commercial and ideological interests of newspapers to the many ways they may be received and circulated by their readers and users.

Among physicians and educators a more or less homogeneous code of interpretation predominated, constructed on the conceptual arguments of the scientific community itself. In contrast, in the case of the press, this link was fractured, giving rise to a variety of possibilities which competed with the powers behind the creation of news as well as different reader groups who read the images according to their various concerns and goals.

Photo no. 6



Anthropometric Card, Bulletin of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, Mexico, 1910, Biblioteca Lerdo.

Photo no. 7

José de Jesús González, abnormal children, "Girl with deformity of the ear pavilion", Mexico, 1914, National Library

Photo no. 8

The Mexican boy, Portrait of the child Julio Dávila, Mexico, January 19, 1896, Biblioteca Lerdo

Photo no. 9

Child revolutionaries in northern Mexico, 1911, Gutierrez Heliodoro, Private Col.

One of the potential threads for this cultural reflection on childhood consists in the use of images which change and recycle the meanings of childhood, providing different contexts for their reading. Examples of these singular transformations can be found in *cartes de visite*, the *nota roja* (sensationalist press) and crime tabloids, in studio portraits with the clinical view of physicians and educators, or in the blend of the civic with the religious in the photograph of a first communion labelled as an example of patriotism. All these are singular cases, but not exceptions; rather they illustrate a repeated tendency which needs to be taken into account in reading and interpretation of representations of this type.

One of the most interesting cases reflecting the closeness between the civic and religious world is shown in the photograph of a boy named *Julio Dávila* (photo no. 8), 10 years old, who won a civic oratory contest and was rewarded with the right to post his picture on the front page of a newspaper. The family chose a religious picture that symbolized the Catholic ritual of the "First Communion". This is very suggestive way of verifying that the ritual magic of reading is closely linked with the concept of child as a citizen in the making, integrated protectively and imaginatively into a homeland.

The graphic discourse which accompanied crime reporting around the turn of the century was part of the rise of a new perception of reality, which can be traced back to literary naturalism and society reports, and which continued in engravings and photographs until it spilled over into early cinema.

This perception formed part of the magnifying ideology of the concept of "progress" that lent a significant forward thrust to Western society during the second half of the nineteenth century. At the same time the foundation was laid for challenging and eventually overturning it, as it was gradually demonstrated that a claim to credibility constituted neither the essence nor the very purpose of the image.

The last part of this period is represented by the violent eruption of the Mexican Revolution between 1910 and 1920, with a civil war that devastated the country's economy and produced a million deaths. During this time children participated in the war effort and were part of the various revolutionary armies from that of Francisco Madero to *"Pancho" Villa* and *Emiliano Zapata*. In all these cases, children were integrated into the photographic imagery that radically transformed the country and reported scenes of infants without the negative stigma associates with the crime and political and cultural transformations of the new nation. Such is the case with the following image, which shows that child participation was completely linked to the new revolutionary identity (photo no. 9).

3 Final Considerations

This inventory of childhood in Mexico involved an extensive series of features and characteristics of this stage of life, which coalesced and became strategically important at the beginning of the twentieth century as the Porfiriato government began to consider issues relating to childhood as an affair that concerned the state.

Images and representations of childhood as described in this article publicly displayed a variety of aspects of childhood through illustrated scientific texts, and through wider-reaching means such as magazines, newspapers and trade publications. Important issues were raised such as the need for civic education for the 'little citizens', new knowledge about the child body including childhood diseases and disorders, recognition of its physiology and measurement of its anthropomorphic characteristics, and recognition of childhood as a key stage in human development susceptible to psychological trauma and genetic abnormality.

I agree with *Brian Turner* (1989) when he says that the changes caused by modernization in the nineteenth century were not linear, but partial and discontinuous. It was not a question of the simple disappearance of religious references and their substitution by a scientific code, but a much more complex process in which ancient religious convictions were reinserted and adapted to the logic of modern technology and science.

The photographs of young patients and school children converted into objects of study which illustrate the spheres of medicine and education; and the 'innocent' children of the Porfiriato elites, the small criminals, the 'nascent citizens' and the young workers in every trade are all different examples that reinforce the notion of the individual and the construction of a collective imaginary in which new figures such as the school doctor and the photographic journalist contributed to the creation of an inventory of modern childhood.

The debate among historians studying the rise of a modern view of childhood has grown considerably since the pioneering contributions of *Philippe Ariès* in the 1960s. To some authors, the modern concept of childhood reached its pinnacle and climax in the West between 1850 and 1950, and began to decline and even to nearly disappear in the second half of the twentieth century.

Legislative programs in some Western countries which expanded the age range of criminal responsibility and included juvenile homicide have played a part in this significant process. At the close of the nineteenth century, discussion centred on the creation of special courts and facilities for juveniles, but a century later the process seems to be moving in reverse (e.g. *Fass/Mason* 2000).

Photography is also tied to a historical context. The historical cycle of the photograph began with its dependence on painting and currently seems to be reaching an end with digital photography. Some authors speak of a post-photographic era. In Mexico, the most important reference is the photographer *Pedro Meyer*, one of the founders of the "new" Mexican photographic journalism in the 1960s. In the present century, consistent with his ongoing creativity, he has embraced the new technology and is one of the most enthusiastic proponents of digital photography (e.g. *Ruiz* 2002).

All these represent fundamental aspects related to this period of human life and form part of the portrait of modern society painted by *François Furet* based on wealth and on the concept of the future without fixed and stable definitions or boundaries (e.g. *Furet* 1995).

In 1920, the First National Congress of the Child was held in Mexico City. Divided into five major themes, the conference convincingly proved that childhood issues were now considered a topic for study and publicly perceived as one of the fundamental rights of humanity.

The congress was organized by the newspaper *El Universal* and represented the first time that physicians, educators and legal professionals met formally to discuss childhood issues. The products of the conference were three talks on eugenics, 17 on paediatric medicine and surgery, 24 papers on child hygiene, 31 on various topics in education and 11 on the new child legislation (e.g. *Memoria del Primer Congreso National del Niño* 1921).

The presence alone of some notable attendants at the conference demonstrated the cultural connections and scientific continuity between the Porfiriato and the Mexican Revolution with respect to childhood. Such was the case of *Joaquín Cosío*, who headed the Paediatric Medicine panel and presented a paper on dentition by *Roque Macouzet*, head of the Paediatric Surgery panel, and of *Rafael Carillo*, head of the Hygiene panel.

Many of the presentations gathered together, expanded and treated in greater depth several of the topics and concerns which had been laid out and developed by various experts during the preceding decades. Far from representing an original accomplishment of the Mexican Revolution, this synthesis – or at least a significant part of it – can only be understood from a review, reading and interpretation of the intense, complex activity of the physicians, educators, journalists, reporters and photographers of Porfirian Mexico and their construction of a modern concept of childhood.

Notes

1 *Zlata Filipovic*, cited in *Cunningham*, H.: "The History of Childhood", in *Hwang, P./Lamb, M./ Siegel, L.* (eds.), *Images of Childhood*, Erlbaum Associates Publishers, New Jersey, 1996, p. 1. (Emphasis mine.)

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