

The child and the asylum (19th and 20th centuries)

Call for articles

Revue d'histoire de l'enfance irrégulière, No. 23

Under the supervision of Jean-Christophe Coffin and Anatole Le Bras

Children in an asylum? What a funny idea! Those alienists with their habit of locking people up again? Perhaps; still, at the end of the 19th century the choice of committing the child to a locked institution is hardly seen as an easy choice; at most a necessity. First of all, it involves placing him among adults, which is quite risky. This type of placement cannot be a permanent solution, at most a transitory response. Of course, some children must be placed in institutions; the idiot child, the “degenerate by excellence”, is one of them. But is the asylum for the insane the best place? As some alienists such as Paul Moreau de Tours (1844-1908) allow themselves to describe what the hearts of men refuse, *i.e.* the mental pathology in children, the idea is taking shape.

After the First World War, the idea is no longer contested, although it is not yet fully accepted. The child's “maladjustment” is not quite mental illness. Some alienists are willing to consider psychosis, while others, like the psychiatrist Sancte de Sanctis (1862-1935), propose a new entity, “dementia precocissima”. The terminology of adult mental pathology inspires the language of child psychiatry, as evidenced by the notions of “child psychosis” (or infantile psychosis), “childhood psychosis” and “infantile schizophrenia” which become widespread in the 1950s.

As categories emerge, the issue of caring for these children appears as increasingly complex. Professionals discuss, hesitate and fabricate solutions without the emergence of a clear consensus. Institutionalizing the child, of course, but of what type of institutions: locked or open? Away from the family or with the family? After all, doesn't the family have a role in certain disorders affecting the child? Is the solution only medical or also pedagogical? Many of these questions are still relevant today.

This issue of the *RHEI* invites to revisit the history of psychiatric institutions through the prism of childhood. The aim is to study the placement of children in the asylum and then into the psychiatric hospital during the 19th and 20th centuries. It also involves understanding to what extent the asylum represented an anti-model or was considered a repellent place that determined many actors in the field of childhood to remove children from its grip, against a backdrop of professional competition between psychiatrists, psychologists, specialized pedagogues, etc. One might think that, in return, the question of childhood played a triggering role in the transformations of the psychiatric institution, which underwent several upheavals during the 20th century.

The contributions can therefore relate both to psychiatric institutions and to institutions that thought of themselves as an alternative or a complement to the psychiatric internment of children. In order to guide the contributors to this issue, we propose the following topics which are not exclusive:

- Thinking childhood madness

Is the child's madness conceivable? Beyond an internalist history of psychiatric knowledge, what historical and social factors made the emergence of this notion possible? During the 20th century, how did the interaction between the categories of illness and disability shape different institutional responses?

- Taking care of children

The study of children's wards and the first specialized institutions in the late 19th century is expected because they are still little-known. In the meantime, it is necessary to question the centrality of psychiatric institutions since other modes of intervention (educational, judicial, welfare) characterize the field of "maladjusted" and "abnormal" childhood.

- Biographical background and children's experiences in psychiatry

What type of children were placed in psychiatric institutions during the 19th and 20th centuries? What does the study of the biographical backgrounds of these young patients reveal? What social and gender factors determined the confinement of girls and boys? The issue of discharge seems particularly crucial here.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, is there a specific child experience of psychiatry? This aspect brings into play the question of testimony and access to speech. Is history 'from below' or 'from the patient's point of view' still relevant in the context of child psychiatry?

- International and transnational perspective

This issue invites us to reflect on international differences in the modes of care and the transnational dynamics of the construction of psychiatric knowledge on childhood. The issues raised by the psychiatric care of children were not country-specific, as shown by the interventions at the 1937 International Congress of Child Psychiatry and the international meetings held in the aftermath of the Second World War or under the aegis of the WHO in the 1960s.

Since there are fewer academic works on twentieth century psychiatry as a whole, we are keen to encourage them. And while historical studies are naturally expected, we consider that this journal issue should comprise contributions coming from other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

The proposals (one page) should be sent to jean-christophe.coffin@cnrs.fr and to anatole.lebras@sciencespo.fr until **March 23rd 2020**. Please indicate your affiliation and contact information.