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Crisis, Childhood and Children's Rights: A Modern Sociological Approach

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Crisis, Childhood and Children's Rights: A Modern Sociological Approach

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THEORY

PRACTICE

RESEARCH

Discussions around the current economic crisis have primarily focused on how it affects children's well-being, ignoring its consequences on the conception of childhood. Following the modern sociological approach to childhood, which argues that it is not just a biological fact of life but a product of the social context and that children have to be seen as social agents, it is examined how the current socio-economic situation affects the construction of childhood and whether this hinders children from being active subjects of social structures and processes. Similarly, taking into account the close relation between conceptions of childhood and perceptions on children's rights, this paper also examines the consequences of the economic crisis on the contemporary theoretical evolution of children's rights, which is mainly specified by the ascription of autonomy rights to children. The conclusion common to both the sociology of childhood and children's rights is that modern social reality fails to meet the expectations that have been raised by recent developments in the above fields, as crucial concepts, such as dependency, agency and capacity, are undergoing complex transformations.

Key words: *construction of childhood, economic crisis, children's rights, dependency.*

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Introduction

Although it is considered plausible that the delineation of age groups remains unchanged in place and time as determined by biological facts of human life, the concept of different age groups and, in particular, the concepts of 'children' and 'childhood' are conceptually different in every society and across time. This factor is indicative that childhood is a social and cultural construction (James & Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 2005), with its content being changed in time and space – a factor that makes it a social class and sociological category and a variable of social analysis, which therefore carries properties that can illuminate how both a variety of other social categories and various social constructions of childhood and adulthood are organized and understood.

Historical socio-economic construction of childhood

The changes that have occurred since the Industrialization form the background on which the socio-economic construction of childhood is based. Childhood – as an age range and from a social position – was socially and culturally constructed as an incapable, weak, dependent category that was usually defined by others. From a historical point of view, children have been treated more as objects of intervention and as a means for other purposes rather than as autonomous beings with their own value. Childhood has been considered trivial, transitory and teleologically connected with puberty, thus, as a result children have been ignored as autonomous personalities. More particularly, Aries (1962) argues that childhood has not always existed as a social and sociological category; rather it was invented between the 15th and 18th century.

The crucial feature that has characterized – since the late-19th century – state interventions in children's lives is the concept and necessity to construct childhood in such a way as to serve the purpose for which interventions have been intended, that is, there would be no disturbance of the existing social equilibrium. This is the very notion on which the functionalist theories of socialization (Parsons, 1951), which prevailed in the mid 20th century, were based – that is, the golden era of Fordism¹, the development of industrialism and the welfare state – which provided the appropriate theoretical framework for the construction of childhood according to the above concept. Combined with development theories such as Piaget's work (1955), which emerged during the same period, this resulted in a particular conceptualization of childhood that monopolized the interest of social sciences. Within this context, traditional theories of socialization have been the main preoccupation of sociology with childhood until early 1980, when the first papers started treating childhood in a very different way (Jenks, 1982).

Childhood within the new sociological context

Apart from the social construction of childhood, the second fundamental feature of modern sociological approaches to childhood is that it recognizes children as social agents, subjects rather than passive objects of social structures and processes (Prout & James, 1997). The theoretical background for this shift lies in theories of action developed in sociology in the 1970s. According to the approach adopted by the sociology of childhood, socialization processes are no longer one-way

¹ Fordism commenced in the 1920s as a new production model combining the principles of Taylor's scientific management with some innovation techniques in production. Slowly, it developed into a model of capital accumulation and, more specifically, during recent decades it has evolved both into a globalizing model and a systems-model of total institutional arrangement and regulation of industrialized societies.

but two-way processes in which children participate and interact as emerging, critical social subjects playing an active role.

Thus, children are transformed from products of social structures into acting social subjects who possess agency and can affect these structures through the transformation of the wider social context. In this way, within the context of sociological theory, space is created to highlight 'childhood' as both a product of adults' efforts to define children's lives and as a product of the action of children themselves as 'legalized' agents, social subjects.

Primarily the combined sociological theories and, more particularly, Giddens' oeuvre (1979; 1984) on the importance of social action have made instrumental contributions to, and become a compass and reference point for works written by sociologists of childhood. Giddens' particular contribution is that, by introducing the concept of 'structuration', he has dismantled the traditional dichotomous dualism of 'structure-activity' and made the term 'acting social subject' the core of his analysis, thus lifting the traditional dichotomy between structure and action. Social structures provide the framework within which people act as social subjects, but, at the same time, their activities and their actions affect changes or resist changing, in the wider social context. Thus, on the one hand, social structures are constructed by social action and, on the other hand, they are the means of this construction. Consequently, if adult society corresponds to the structure that socializes children and children respectively correspond to these actions, childhood is constructed with and by the actions of both children and adults, whilst the wider social context, i.e. adult society, is the means of this construction. Thus, children are transformed from products of social structures into acting social actors or agents, whose action is perceived as a source of social change (Daskalakis, 2009:378).

As perceptions of childhood within sociology have changed, in the same way a shift in the theoretical framework of children's rights has occurred. Under the influence of theories arguing how children's rights are construed and that age has been an arbitrary criterion for whether or not children have rights (Archard, 2004) as well as that the two orientations towards children's rights – that of protection and that of autonomy – which were seen in opposition until very recently but nowadays seem to be considered complementary (Eade, 2003; Freeman, 1994), children have been transformed from passive objects of protection into acting subjects or agents and autonomous rights-holders (Fasoulis, 2012). Granting rights to autonomy to children corresponds with their treatment as active agents by the sociology of childhood and is the most important element of convergence of the corresponding theoretical shapes and their respective disciplines, that is, those of the sociology of childhood and children's rights (Freeman, 1998). The past inability to view children as rights-holders restricted their social activity, as they were considered too immature to participate in social events resulting from rational adults' action.

The consequences of the economic crisis on children, childhood and children's rights

The current social environment – as shaped by the multidimensional character of the existing social, institutional, political, cultural, but primarily economic crisis – is multifaceted and has a two-dimensional impact on children and childhood. The first refers to the impact on children's rights and welfare, and the second on how the economic crisis has transformed the conceptualization and construction of childhood and children's rights.

The great economic crises of the 20th century have had a catalytic influence on societies. The Great Depression of 1929 and the interwar period led primarily to the rise of Nazism and fascism. However, they also led to the development of new versions of industrialism, the new productive model of Fordism, and new forms of doing politics as state intervention, welfare state and social

policies. Within this context, the League of Nations adopted the first international protective texts for childhood (Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1924). The policies that were used to overcome the crisis of the 1920s were embedded within, and found in, the external assistance of the Marshall Plan in their heyday, especially after World War II, during the reconstruction of post-war economies. Thus, within the context of Keynesian therapeutic social protection,² extensive social policies for the protection of childhood were also drawn up and expanded.

During the 1970s, the abolition of the Bretton Woods Agreement – which set the gold standard in international exchange rates and monetary transactions – the two successive oil crises, the widespread introduction to and use of new technologies in production and increasing globalization signaled the crisis and the need to overcome the Fordist model not only as a production model but also as a model of capital accumulation and regulating industrial societies. The new post-Fordist context was characterized by rapid changes in the economy, production, employment, consumer habits and by the gradual deregulation and retreat of the welfare state.

The 1929 crisis, the interwar period and the shadow of totalitarianism that covered the whole of Europe froze not only societies but also any efforts made to provide children's rights, which were confined only to fragmented interventions in individual states. The reconstruction after World War II and the golden era of Fordism and the welfare state meant that one more step was made at the level of international protection of children's rights, since a new relevant international text – that is, The U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child (DRC) was adopted in 1959. Nevertheless, the institutional process of international protection of children's rights at a first level was finally completed almost with the end of the 'Cold War' in 1989, when the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted.

The social implications of the 2008 financial crisis and the ensuing prolonged recession in the economies of many states are still not fully understood, both in terms of their depth and intensity, and more particularly their effects on childhood and the basic rights of children, such as the right to health, education, personality development, protection, social security as well as political and social participation.

The economic crisis and the conceptual reconstruction of childhood

The conditions of the current economic and multileveled crisis, producing a new society of extremes (i.e. a society of socially and politically extreme views and reactions), have significant and disproportionate effects primarily on childhood, violently throwing children into risk conditions created by modern adult society, as the latter is characterized by rampant competition, profitability, over-consumerism, anomie and crisis – if not bankruptcy – in the economy as well as in politics, which is subordinated to the market economy and hence any concept of rule of law, if not bankruptcy of democracy itself. Within this context, Postman's (1983) contention that, nowadays, we see the disappearance and the end or death of childhood seems highly relevant, despite the fact that Postman arrived at this conclusion through a different analysis and view, which focused on how, in modern times, the uncontrolled dissemination of information affects the age hierarchy based on the control of information by adults, with the result that the adult world is disclosed to children quickly, violently and in equal terms.

² As Keynesian economics became mainstream in the post-World War II years, Keynes's view that social protection can function as a stabilizer, stimulate demand and minimize exposure to risk was widely accepted. Keynes proposed to counter recession through an economic policy of increasing public investment and in parallel by increasing employment, which combined to achieve financial results (economic recovery) together with social and humanitarian objectives.

However, the effects of the aforementioned views are formed based on the variable of otherness, which is determined by a great number of other social and cultural parameters, amongst which – in addition to their social, cultural and demographic value – age and gender are of crucial importance.

First, through the effects of the economic crisis on next generations, there are underlying conceptions of children and childhood. The debate on the debt of nations, intending both to highlight its massive size and to impress the public, has taken children as a basic reference. Assuming that children as future citizens will inherit the public debt for which the past generation is to be held accountable, models have been designed that can calculate the amount of money that every child is doomed to inherit from birth. However, such reports show that modern economics – unlike classical political economy – has lost interest not only in humans – as a human being is equated with economic fundamentals – but also ignores the impact of the economic crisis both on children's wellbeing and on childhood, since children are only perceived as participants in economic events as agents of the current and future public debt. In this way, however, childhood is underestimated and social and scientific perceptions that prevailed in earlier times are now reemerging.

Moreover, children are used to illustrate the effects of the economic crisis on humanity's welfare. With research on children's poverty examining children within the context of their household, it is of particular importance and value to show that children of urban households are more vulnerable than those of rural ones, as well as that children of low and middle classes are the most vulnerable, since it is these children who have mostly been hit – first, by the reduction of social welfare and support services, and, second, by the escalation of the social crisis after the financial crisis of 2008. In contrast, *neither* the children of the already impoverished households – who have already been experiencing extreme poverty – *nor* the children of those households which have economic or educational capital have been affected to the same extent. In countries such as Greece, the lowest income groups of the population are likely to be in a very dire situation due to the fact that, apart from them experiencing extreme poverty, they also experience social exclusion. As it is well known social exclusion is a phenomenon, which is defined as 'the denial and non-realization of social rights of citizens and a fact that leads to restrictions on access to social goods and services' (Room et al., 1992, p. 14). Recent data confirm that, whilst the risk of children's poverty or social exclusion lies at about 27% in Europe and at 30.4% in Greece, the index of children's poverty amounts to 20% in the EU and 23.7% in Greece (Eurostat, 2011).

In addition, due to their physical weakness and vulnerability, children are the first victims of the current economic crisis, and frequent references in the public discourse to children's poverty aim – almost exclusively – to raise awareness and exert pressure on the political power to take relevant measures to avert children's 'victimization' and 'sacrifice'. Adults seem to have taken the view that children's welfare means their happiness, that is, that the determination of their happiness is not just made solely on economic factors but also on the perspective of their own perception 'of what childhood consists of', a view that is certainly framed by the mainstream western ideology that views childhood as an idealized period that children should experience (Morrow, 2009, p. 296).

Whilst it cannot be ignored that children are disproportionately affected by the economic crisis and, of course, poverty, the shift of focus in the study of childhood within this context leads to treating children solely as objects of intervention, whose welfare must be ensured. All this shows relationship of affiliation and dependence of children on adults, thus restoring more strongly the sense of adults' power over children.

Moreover, the economic crisis has identified an additional critical element of the construction of childhood that is its chronological delimitation. As shown historically (Aries, 1962), the duration of childhood changes and is bounded differently from society to society and from time to time. The financial crisis has a direct impact on this point. On the one hand, the impoverishment of households has forced children to work and drop out school, thus contributing to their early

adulthood and shortening childhood in this way. On the other hand, the period of childhood is *de facto* extended as more 'children' over 18 – the standard maximum length of time of maturity – still economically depend on their parents due to the extension of 'schoolization' or unemployment, which, in January 2013, was at 59.1% (Eurostat, 2011) for the 15-24 age group compared to an average of 23.5% across the European Union's 27 Member States. This trend reveals that, whilst these young adults (i.e. 'children' over 18) acquire full political and legal rights and obligations in terms of social and economic characteristics, they continue to maintain characteristics of non-adults (or, as they are called, atrophic adults in an extensive bibliography), thus pushing upwards the time when childhood ends (Daskalakis, 2009). Within this context, there is a setback, as a trend emphasizing adults' power in the contemporary sociological research of childhood comes back, as it was incorporated by traditional sociological theories and traditional theories of socialization, turning most adults not only into 'natural pillars' but also economic feeders of 'children' (or atrophic adults).

This focus on the concept of dependence on and power of adults consequently limits the scope of recognition of children as social agents (or actors) and, instead, treats them solely as objects of intervention.

An equally significant impact of the economic crisis is the demographic 'disappearance' of children, which is represented by the decline of births, compressing the number of children by age and as a social group. As known, Greece has been plagued by low fertility and shows an overall downward trend in the number of children, with the number of household members having decreased by one member over the last 50 years. This picture has recently been reinforced by the decreasing number of births in 2011 compared with those in 2008 (11,874 fewer births)³, whereas in 2012 compared with those in 2011, there were 10,000 to 15,000 fewer births due to the economic crisis (Bongaarts & Sobotka, 2011; Kathemerini, 2013). Furthermore, advancements in medicine, which have increased life expectancy, have created an imbalance between the number of children and adults. The result is that the increase in the threshold to adulthood is to be considered as a way of numerically rebalancing an ever-aging population with an ever decreasing children's population (Veerman, 2010, pp. 588-9).

As the place of childhood has declined economically, politically and demographically in the European Union over the last few years, this tends to become a social problem. In demographic terms, the number of children and young people is decreasing. In economic terms, as a social group by inference, compared with other groups, children are considered as people who are not active and not cost-effective. Whilst, from a political point of view, they have no political representation, those who are willing to defend them, unfortunately, get more and more confined. In the modern era of late capitalism in which there are widespread new forms of pathology, there are attempts to pathologize disobedience, misery and difference. The problem is old, but the debate has been modernized by focusing on the combination of special structures of pathology with broader political and cultural conflicts and a reasonable accumulation of capital. However, whilst in the past pathologization was restricted to those considered 'tainted' by race, ethnicity or class, nowadays the pathologization of youth is universally attempted (Stephens, 1995/Finn, & Nybell, 2001).

Another equally important consequence of the economic crisis on childhood lies in the change in the structure and functions of the family. On the one hand, the weakness of the family to provide economic security and support to children due to rising unemployment and, on the other hand, changes in the structure due to divorces and the increasing number of single parent families, which are typically more vulnerable to poverty, cannot but affect children. In the past, according to functionalist approaches (Parsons, 1971), the 'normal' family model – which was based on a

3 Eurostat Data.

monogamous relationship whose core was the marriage between a man and a woman that would last for their entire lives – was the standard that ensured children's successful socialization and therefore social balance. As it is conspicuous, the shift from the 'normal' family model to divorced and/or single-parent families has drastically changed the perception of the family, that is, the environment in which, by definition, children can get special care and attention – a model that has prevailed and featured in contemporary Western perceptions of childhood until now. Furthermore, in recent years, the fact that many families have turned to social services to ensure they have basic goods and services has changed the socially constructed concept that children should live in the safe and happy environment of the family, away from outside influences and risks.

Clearly related to the economic crisis, though, to overconsumption and to the overall value and cultural crisis is the 'crisis' of childhood that had already peaked in the pre-2008 financial crisis, a crisis that had already made children a public category of special buyers in the area of consumption and marketing (Palmer, 2006). Since 2006, Palmer has also been concerned with this direction; after introducing a critical perspective, she refers to 'toxic childhood', defining it as the imposition of consumerism and competitive screen lifestyle on our children. This trend, however, is now entering into a new phase of tension, which is characterized by the restriction or inability of consumption and, thus, the exclusion from specific consumer products and standards, with impact on children's mental health and the conceptual reconstruction of childhood.

However, nowadays, television and the internet not only take children into imaginary worlds away from the real one – even before their parents allow them to cross the street – but also initiate them into cognitive patterns, authoritarian and value models and into consumer goods they must have in order to maintain their place in peer groups and society. Of course, in the circumstances of the current economic crisis, this situation – beyond the spirit of over-consumerism and the extreme competition which it nurtures both between children and with parents – forms a tension between consumer potential and socially constructed consumer desires, which results in childhood being trapped 'between *Scylla and Charybdis*' (or between 'a rock and a hard place'). Thereby two childhoods are formed: on the one hand, the childhood of 'haves' and, on the other hand, the childhood 'have-nots', which cannot ever meet or cannot meet anywhere.

The economic crisis, children's rights and its conceptual orientation

Directly linked with its impact on childhood are the economic crisis' consequences for securing both the implementation and conceptual construction of children's rights (Fasoulis, 2011, pp. 168-169). First, the existing socio-economic situation can be used as an argument for the necessity of established rights for children. Nevertheless, the impact of the economic crisis on children's welfare has led to a deconstruction of the perception that childhood is an idealized situation that all children should experience or are experiencing, thus dispelling the mainstream belief in the universality of childhood. The construction of childhood as an ideal period – at least in the middle and upper classes of Western societies but also in the lower strata living prosperous lives during the golden period of Fordism and the welfare state – and the assumption that adults always ensure the best interests of children were – to a great extent at the time – an argument for children having no rights (Fasoulis, 2012, pp. 102-103). Nowadays, though, as these social classes and strata are most affected by the decline of the Keynesian therapy and the prevalence of extreme neoliberalism in the economic crisis produced by 'new capitalism', the reversal of this view confirms the assumption that it is urgent for children to have rights. Consequently, the prevalence of the view that childhood is no longer considered a period of joy and play signifies that rights ownership is necessary so that children's welfare is not only ensured but their living conditions and development are also minimally acceptable.

Furthermore, phenomena directly related to developments in financial terms, such as child labour, are a further point for consideration. In theory, the increase in unemployment over the financial

crisis and prolonged recession has the effect of reducing the demand for child labour and a corresponding increase in the demand for education. Access to education, the right to education and the acquisition of educational and cultural capital are undoubtedly crucial elements that define a person's life course, the intra- and inter-generational evolution of poverty as well as the development of a country in terms of social, cultural and development perspectives. As a rule, however, the economic crisis in developed countries has directed children towards education, increased school enrolment and reduced school drop-out. However, this does not apply in circumstances of extreme poverty and household poverty driving children into child labour or preventing them from being trained as well as in conditions that restrict public spending. Extreme poverty and restrictions in public spending usually lead to multiple, even infrastructural degradations of education, whose immediate result is children's repulsion and the appearance of a counteracting trend recorded in school abandonment and drop-outs.

The economic crisis, however, illustrates at the same time a clear trend to reduce production costs and labour, which means that children, due to their cheap labour cost, are an ideal workforce (Morrow, 2009, p. 295). The general rule is that, in times of economic crisis, child labour increases in agriculture but decreases in sectors such as commerce, construction and manufacturing, which are mainly located in urban areas (ILO, 2002, p. 26). This results in children's exposure to places and activities more hidden, less controllable and therefore more dangerous, such as the phenomena of forced labour, slavery and the phenomenon of street children.

Thus, children's right to safety and protection is directly undermined in times of economic crisis. Reduced parental protection due to parents' social problems or being overloaded with finding financial resources, children's overall exposure to hidden, uncontrollable and dangerous activities and their exposure to organized crime form the ideal conditions in which children can either become engaged in delinquency or become the victims of abuse, exploitation, slavery, trafficking or even prostitution.

Yet, as the financial crisis and recession produces unemployment, particularly in low-skilled sectors – in the construction industry, for instance, unemployment lies at 35% for men – it is conspicuous that the poorest strata and immigrants as well as children in these households are the primary recipients of poverty subsidy which is exacerbated by the reduction of public social expenditures on health, education and welfare. In this way, however, conditions are generated that widen the gap between the poor and affluent population, that increase hostility, xenophobia and violence against immigrants, that ultimately lead immigrants to leave host countries or that allow the reappearance of such phenomena as street children even in developed countries, despite that fact that in countries like Greece they have been reduced in recent years.

A main factor that has also been affected particularly hard by the economic crisis is children's health and, more particularly, the right to access to health care and to ensure adequate and healthy diet (Bougioukos, 2011). It is conspicuous that the reduction in both household income and public expenditures on health further burdens the health status of the population, especially, that of children, since it discharges these costs on households (*ibid*). Furthermore, as a consequence of economic fluctuations and deteriorating conditions (De Hoyos & Medvedev, 2009:20), there have been situations of malnutrition. As a consequence of the problem of malnutrition, outbreaks of pupils and students fainting have recently been identified in some schools in the country. Malnutrition in early stages of children's development poses very serious risks to their mental and physical health and their overall development (Georgieff, 2007). Thus, fainting, as a symptom, conceals severe malnutrition. Nevertheless, the fact that most children of the lower social classes may not be malnourished, does not mean that they are nourished properly. According to Eurostat data, since 2010 21.6% of poor households with dependent children have not had the finances to provide their children with a diet that includes every second day meat, chicken, fish or vegetables of equivalent dietary value (Eurostat, 2011), whereas, according to the most recent figures from the

Greek Statistical Authority (based on the 2011 data) 42.7% of the poor population lacks good nutrition.

The key problem, however, that households face in view of the crisis is not unemployment itself but rather the contraction of income derived from it. Anxiety and stress resulting from these conditions are likely to lead to the manifestation of various psychosomatic symptoms affecting the whole family (Linn et al., 1985, pp. 504-505), whereas the effects of maternal depression on infants and children seem to be extremely crucial. In recent years (2009), there has been an increase in individuals who have developed major depressive episodes and suicidal tendencies, especially among those facing financial difficulties (Madianos et al., 2011, p. 949), whereas, according to another research, 50% of respondents characterized their psychological and emotional state as 'somewhat up much worse' compared with a year before (Metron Analysis, 2011). These conditions of psychological instability in the family may lead to indifference, neglect⁴ or to even more violent reactions by parents (Finkelhor, et. al., 1990), and thus may cause psychosomatic injuries in children and reactive behaviours, such as school indifference or school drop-out, violence or, more generally, non-conformism (Lichter, et. al., 2002, p. 113). It is characteristic that children, victims and perpetrators of school bullying, mention that they are emotionally supported to a lesser degree by their parents than by other children (Kokkevi, 2011:4; Fasoulis & Kalogiannis, 2013). These conditions are likely to occur to some extent in households that do not face immediate risks, but react so through the influence of the surrounding atmosphere and general feeling of insecurity (Catalano, 1991) that exists in the wider social environment (Bougioukos, 2011). Simultaneously, children – in the case of countries such as Greece in such times – live in a more violent environment. More specifically, from 2008 to 2010, the crime rate in Greece rose above 40%, with further increases in 2011 and 2012 (Greek Police, 2012). Moreover, in the schools many children are intimidated and/or bullied by other children (who themselves are victims of intra-family violence), thus increasing school bullying by 74% between 2002 and 2010 (Kokkevi et al., 2011, p. 2). At the same time, there has been an increase in juvenile delinquency, deriving mainly from children who come from families of lower economic strata and immigrants, whereas there has been an increase in offenses committed by children of increasingly younger age (Kathimerini, 2011).

Epilogue

Economic crises and recessions may not be shown very clearly in their social consequences. Therefore, it is of particular importance to recognize that the impact of a crisis on certain population groups in society has long-term consequences and that, in areas such as health, exploitation, victimization, psychology of children or elsewhere, the effects may be more immediate, lasting, permanent and devastating.

The fact that the economic crisis afflicts many of children's fundamental rights that fall into the category of protection rights of children means that modern social reality is in stark contrast to the expectations raised by recent developments in the field of children's rights, which is indeed surrounded by attributing to the even autonomy rights, assuming at the same time that ensuring protection rights is a given *a priori*. Taking into account the current trend on the rights of the child, which supports the complementarity and mutual necessity of autonomy and protection rights, it is evident that the failure to ensure protection rights undermines the recognition of the value of

⁴ According to statistical data from the *Chamogelo tou Paidiou* (Smile of the Child), whilst in 2011 allegations of serious incidents of child abuse were stable compared to those in 2010, the figures of neglect-abandonment of children increased (see *Chamogelo tou Paidiou* (Smile of the Child) Assessment of the project for the year 2011, <http://www.hamogelo.gr>)

autonomy rights. As a result of this development, the concept of autonomy mutates and loses its original meaning, since it is coated – or rather absorbed – in the failure to ensure protection rights in practice (Fasoulis, 2012, p. 426).

The stakes, however, of the current crisis are not children's rights themselves but the very possibility for every child to have access to them. In essence, rights are socially guaranteed only if children's ability to access these rights is secured not only theoretically and legally but also in practice. In other words, if possibilities are removed from rights, what is then left is only the restriction of freedom and enlargement of dependence, which are features that cannot vitally stigmatize the new generation since these are the same features that characterize the so-called third age, that is, people over 70 years of age.

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