CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

Sociological and Comparative Perspectives

KATERINA BODOVSKI

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CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA: SOCIOLOGICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the children of the United States and Russia,
and to their parents who were once children

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Introduction

"I was a Nazi mother to my children," a woman exclaimed laughingly. The elegant woman speaking at an informal house party was in her late 50s, born and raised in the heart of Western Europe but now living elsewhere. She has three grown children pursuing various educational and career goals all over the globe. She proceeded to explain that she forbade any TV in her house while raising her children. All three of her children played musical instruments growing up and practiced a lot, exactly the way she and her siblings had done a quarter of a century earlier. "I wanted to give my children my values. It cost me a lot, it took many years of my life," she continued. "I didn't want them to watch TV, I wanted them to read books, to draw. Discipline is the most important thing. It all starts with discipline. You can't become good at anything unless you practice. I forced them to do a lot of things." This conversation started quite innocently when another guest at the party said that her daughter is a pianist and lives very far away, to which I replied that we don't choose the talents of our children and have to accept and admire who they have become. "Of course we do choose their talents. Who else does?" asked the self-proclaimed Nazi mother.

This conversation left a deep impression on me. Raised in a well-educated upper-middle-class family in Western Europe, the woman at the party voiced sentiments once popular in America (*Dead Poets Society*,[1] anyone?), that at the same time resonate well with the old Russian tradition, as well as with the roar of Chinese Tiger moms.[2] What is going on here? A full display of the universal, once widely accepted idea that adults know better, that children would be up to trouble if left unattended, and that children hate to learn and need to be forced to do anything productive (that is, of any value for their future life).

I have witnessed firsthand parenting, childhood, and education in three very different countries, situated on three different continents, surrounded by vastly different cultural, political, economic, and social contexts. I was born and grew up in Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, where I graduated from high school and started college. I lived in Israel for 10 years, receiving my undergraduate and master's degree in sociology from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. My son

[1]https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/.

[2]This particular parenting philosophy is articulated in Amy Chua (2011) *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*.

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was born there and attended preschool during the second year of his life. I pursued a doctoral degree in sociology in the US where I am now a tenured professor at a large, research-oriented public university. My son is attending university having gone through the K-12 system in the US. I have been studying childhood and educational outcomes of children for about two decades. For over 10 years, I have been teaching a graduate class titled Childhood and Education in Sociological and Comparative International Perspective.

In this book, I discuss education and childhood in sociological perspective, pointing out similarities and highlighting differences by time and place. I build upon the knowledge accumulated in the field both in terms of theoretical development and empirical findings, and present additional evidence, particularly zooming in onto two seemingly different contexts of the US and Soviet Union/Russia. Specifically, I aim to explore three main questions:

First, to what extent does the institution of education intersect with (or even overtake) the institution of childhood in these two countries? Over the last several decades, with the rapid expansion of higher education, we observe a greater emphasis on academic outcomes throughout childhood which, in turn, makes parenting further geared to academic success. We understand and often measure childhood in terms of academic achievement; there is an increasing emphasis on preschool education both at the individual level of a family and the macro level of a country.

Second, sociological research shows profound inequality existing within and between countries that affects children's everyday experiences, as well as their lifelong chances. To what extent is childhood stratified by the social background into which a child is born in Russia and the US? Finally, to what extent (if any) do we observe the strengthening of children's agency, both in theoretical developments in sociology of education and childhood, and educational practice and parental strategies? The interplay between the agency of children (and parents) and the structure of education under different national contexts is a fascinating area of inquiry.

This book is not the first attempt to explore childhood in America side by side with childhood in Russia. In 1970, renowned developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner published the first edition of his book *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R. Today*, reading his juxtaposition of the Soviet and American childhood of the 1960s is a truly fascinating endeavor. While not over-romanticizing the Soviet reality with its crowded housing, asymmetrical family relationships with often absent fathers, and staying clear from discussing politics, Bronfenbrenner was clearly taken by many aspects of the Russian way of raising children. The concept itself, "*vospitanie*," that the author calls a "virtually national hobby in the U.S.S.R" (p. 13), by his account, is not easily translatable and means more than just education or upbringing but "the development of the child's qualities as a person—his values, motives, and patterns of social response" (Bronfenbrenner, 1972, p. XXI). The author emphasizes a highly important place children hold in the societal discourse and practice, with the variety of Soviet institutions dedicated to raising children (nurseries, day care, schools of prolonged day, and various boarding schools).

Bronfenbrenner describes the dedication of the Soviet staff (teachers, youth leaders, directors of children, and youth programs) to character development of children as much, if not more, than their concerns about academic outcomes. He comments on consistency between declared ideological goals and the actual behaviors and actions he witnessed in schools and informal educational settings. These behaviors include high level of self-discipline exhibited by children, strong collective aspect of upbringing, a prominent role of a peer group in regulating the dynamics of social relations, and thoughtful adult mentoring of the peer group. He juxtaposes this account to what he argues is a decreased role the American society plays in educating its youth. This deterioration manifests itself in disintegration of community and weakening institution of the family (working mothers, long working hours of fathers, diminishing role of extended family and a relative isolation of nuclear family, and age segregation). This may sound as a rather conservative take on the changes that took place in America of the 1960s and 1970s. This perception corresponds with the works of another prominent American social scientist, sociologist James Coleman. In terms of the theoretical constructs described in Chapter 2 of this book, both Bronfenbrenner and Coleman lament the deterioration of social capital within the US families and communities. Interestingly also, Bronfenbrenner highlights the role of TV in the process of a further decline of quality time parents and other family members otherwise may have spent with children. In the twenty-first century, the concerns about TV have been almost fully replaced by concerns about detrimental effects of too much time children and youth spend playing video games, participating in social media, and in other activities readily available on their smart phones. Bronfenbrenner's arguments about alienation of American youth, the increased risks of delinquent behavior, weakening the family, and communal life in the country in the 1970s provide a fascinating baseline to which one may compare the current processes within family and children's upbringing in the US. I will revisit the meaning and interpretation of individual versus collective in these two national contexts and its consequences for understanding children's agency.

At the time of Bronfenbrenner's study, the US and U.SSR were the two most powerful nations in the world with diametrically opposite regimes and polar means to achieve their greatness and strengths. Each country also served a leader of its own camp (capitalist/democratic vs. communist/socialist). What purpose does a comparison between Russian and the US contexts serve today? Childhood reflects social reality of a particular time and place; education is deeply embedded in the realities of that specific context. The current political climate and international developments of the past few years highlight a deep ideological divide between the East and the West with Russia trying to maintain its unique place on the historical and political stage. Looking at the ways childhood and education manifest themselves within contemporary US and Russia, as well as looking at some of the trends and developments in Russia during the last 100 years (thus, zooming out of Bronfenbrenner's study and capturing a broader view), sheds light on many issues in the social texture of these two countries. In such investigation, the differences are as insightful as the similarities.

In his analysis of Russian education during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Robert Harris argued that since Peter the Great, the educational system in Russia has been driven by national defense interests, as well as economic advancement, which were necessary to support a competitive military machine (Harris, 2010, p. 18). At each critical historical point, Russia was opening itself to "Western" ideas as long as they served a military purpose. The curriculum was heavily focused on science and engineering, whereas humanities, social, and political studies were largely marginalized. An advancement in mathematics, science, and engineering was tightly connected to the state goals, and the regime dictated and controlled "who was allowed to access education and in what manner learning should take place" (Harris, 2010, p. 19). This created a contradiction because the advancement in science requires critical and creative thinking; thus, the State had to control and prevent any questioning of the social order within the country. Harris wrote that:

> Unswerving loyalty of Russian subjects to the leadership, and reconciliation with the order of society was in part predicated on a minimum of critical thinking and ignorance of other options, especially the liberal democratic political structures of Western Europe. The chronic and irresolvable tension between the necessity to establish a robust international strategic defense policy while preventing the growth of internal questioning and dissent would continue to hold throughout the history of Russian education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (2010, p. 18)

But the situation seems to be even more complex. Historically, Germany and France have had a tremendous cultural influence on Russia in general and on the establishment of its educational system in particular. Russian education has been influenced by the German educational system since its inception and these connections go as far back in history as the early eighteenth century. Under Peter the Great (1682–1725), new groups of elites were established in Russia, including German and other foreign-born nobility. During the reign of Elizabeth I (1741–1762), the French language began to appear within the elite circles and its position was firmly solidified under Catherine the Great (1762–1796). The French language was closely associated with the ideas of progress and Europeanness (that were widely, if selectively, welcomed by the nobility), and its status was well preserved up to the Revolution of 1917. French was the language of culture and diplomacy throughout Europe up to the beginning of the twentieth century when it was gradually replaced by English, so Russia was no exception. French theater, novels, and poetry deeply penetrated Russian cultural life to the point that the Russian aristocracy used French as the main language of communication throughout eighteenth and the first half of nineteenth century, with Russian language having an inferior status (Offord, Ryazanova-Clarke, Rjéoutski, & Argent, 2015). This shows that there have been nuanced pull and push forces at play when it comes to the Russian national ideas and cultural preferences, above and beyond the necessity to keep up to date the military complex.

Those mixed sentiments are echoed once again in the most detailed account to date of the last months of the existence of the Soviet Union, in which Serhii Plokhy (2014) writes:

> Ever since the rule of Peter the Great in the early eighteenth century, Russian elites had sought to adopt Western models in order to catch up with the West. Again and again these models would come into conflict with Russia's society and non-Westernized populace… Gorbachev's reforms were the latest attempt to catch up with the West by emulating it. (p. 395).

Russian intellectuals have been acutely aware of this contradiction for the last 200 years. One of the most influential Russian philosophers of nineteenth century, Peter (Pyotr) Chaadaev wrote in 1829: "We are neither from the West nor the East, nor do we possess either of their traditions. We are situated, as it were, outside of time, and the universal education of humanity has not reached us" (Chaadaev, 1913). Interestingly, while the Communist Revolution of 1917 did question and dramatically change the social order of the Russian Empire, once the new social order was established, education was once again used to legitimize the power relations, to keep citizens in order, and to advance only those fields directly related to the defense machine. Both the tsarist regime and the Soviet (and, one may argue, the post-Soviet) government maintained control over teachers, curricula, and access to educational institutions "as political instruments to maintain social conformity, to ensure loyalty to the ruler and state, and to manage modest conservative change, even while increasing numbers of students entering the educational system" (Harris, 2010, p. 39).

Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the processes within the country are brewing along a similar contradiction. On the one hand, many in Russia are nostalgic for the status of the country as one of the two super powers in the world. Russia today clearly desires an equal player status in the international arena, including in science and education. The Russian National Research universities are encouraged to participate in the world knowledge production, to attend international conferences, and to publish in the international journals. The productivity of Russian faculty is increasingly measured by the Web of Science citations. Russia participated in the Bologna process aimed at standardizing the higher education curriculum in order to facilitate a cross-national exchange of students and credentials and is cultivating its position as the educational destination for the international students (albeit, most are coming from the former Soviet republics). On the other hand, the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent violent conflict that followed in Eastern Ukraine evoked the international sanctions against Russia which, in turn, were met with Russian counter sanctions against the West. These developments created a rather confusing educational space in which there are multiple pull and push forces toward the Western ideals/collaborations and back to the unique Russian way.

By contrast, American education has contained in its core a strong foundation of the liberal arts education. The purpose of education, at least at the declared

level, has been toward widening horizons of the students, developing their critical thinking, and preparing actively engaged citizens of the new generation. Undoubtedly, there are tensions between these ideas and ideals, and the discourse of the current US administration (the "America First" rhetoric of the inauguration speech and many subsequent actions of Trump's administration, including tariffs wars, anti-immigrant sentiments and actions, heavy emphasis on privatization of education and health fields, to name a few). It is unclear how the goals of inclusion, tolerance, or understanding the other that are in the core of progressive education can be fulfilled in the current conditions of the autocratic state in Russia and in America under Trump.

The questions guiding this book are explored through an extensive literature review bringing together insights from different fields (sociology, education, history, and political science), as well as by quantitative analysis of the data drawn from several large datasets, both national and international. Chapter 1 presents the evidence of the tight connections between the institution of modern childhood and education. In addition to theoretical arguments, the international documents that guide educational policies and policies regarding childhood are discussed. Chapter 2 surveys the sociological tools that help conceptualize and understand childhood and schooling. Particular attention is paid to the theoretical constructs of capital—human, social and cultural capital, and a more recently developed construct of emotional capital. Chapter 3 sheds light on the processes of stratification in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Exploring this context provides the foundation for better understanding the processes within the Soviet Union and postsocialist Russia. Chapter 4 dives deeper into the history of the Soviet and Russian childhood and education. These topics are tightly connected with and thus explored together with the processes within the Russian family, within the context of historical and political transformations in the country over the last 100 years. Chapter 5 discusses childhood in the US, focusing on the ever-increasing economic inequality that spills over to the family life, including parental resources and practices, and ultimately to educational outcomes, shaping children's experiences at home and in school. Chapters 4 and 5 utilize the analytical constructs of capital, in particular cultural and emotional capital, to make sense of the experiences of children and their families.

Chapter 6 illustrates the arguments presented in the previous chapters using the data on both countries that are drawn from all available waves of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 1995–2015 and the Program for International Students Assessment (PISA) 2000–2015. The data pertaining to student empowerment are drawn from the World Value Survey (waves 1995–1998, 2005–2009, and 2010–2014) and from the International Dating Violence Study (2001–2006). The Civic Education Study (CIVED) 1999 is utilized to gather information on students' civic engagement in both countries; the International Civic and Citizenship Study (ISSC) 2009 and 2016 are used to compare students' attitudes and activities in Russia. In addition, a more detailed picture on the family resources and parental practices in the US is obtained from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten

Cohort 1998 and 2011 (ECLS-K). Trajectories in Education and Careers (TREC) study, the first longitudinal study of a representative sample of high school students in Russia, is used to illustrate the trends in contemporary Russia. Finally, in Chapter 7 the arguments of the book are brought together in an attempt to draw conclusions, to point out challenges in both countries, and to suggest future directions.

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