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What is This?
The rise and fall of icons of ‘stolen childhood’ since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Abstract
In the past two decades, the iconography of victimhood mobilized by child rights advocates has changed significantly. In particular, the child victim of violence has replaced the street child as the dominant icon on the international agenda. Based on data from more than 300 documents produced between 1989 and 2009 and interviews with leading advocates, this article explores the diverging trajectories of iconic child victims. It follows the traces of the successive translations of the idea of ‘stolen childhood’ and locates them against the backdrop of evolutions in the children’s rights field.

Keywords
Children’s rights, icons, international advocacy, street children, translations, victims of violence

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International efforts aimed at promoting greater respect for the rights of the child have their own well-established iconography. While the child is often invoked by leading international advocates as ‘a kind of sacred icon of global civil society’ (Nieuwenhuys, 2010: 294), children may also be easily damaged by time, circumstances or human behaviour, such as when they are abandoned, sexually exploited or enrolled into fighting forces. In these cases, their childhood – conceived as a period of innocence and happiness – is usually said to be ‘lost’ or ‘stolen’ and damaged children come to constitute a varied iconography of victimhood (Burman, 1996, 2008: 188–191). Icons of ‘stolen childhood’ are particularly crucial devices in activists’ strategies aimed at demonstrating the urgency of certain problems and at mobilizing scarce resources on behalf of children. Like captivating stories (Bruner, 2002), they create a dramatic tension between what was expected and what actually happened, they unsettle our feelings and thoughts and call for some sort of restoration.

As this article shows, the iconography of victimhood mobilized by leading child rights advocates has changed significantly since the adoption, back in 1989, of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Figures that occupied a prominent role in the early 1990s, such as the street child, have slowly disappeared from the agenda, while the child victim of violence has gradually become the dominant icon. How can the diverging trajectories of the icons be explained? And what do these trajectories tell us about the factors that influence the processes of prioritization in international child rights advocacy?

Questions such as these have so far received little attention by practitioners and scholars interested in children’s rights. Available scholarship on human rights practice highlights that the issues that reach the top of the international agenda usually concern violations of civil and political rights by clearly identifiable perpetrators (Bob, 2009; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). It also suggests that, in order to reach international prominence, local claims must meet the worldviews and demands of leading organizations and larger systems of values and beliefs. According to Pare (2003), the disappearance of street children from the agenda would be linked to a lack of pressure groups and to uncertainties and disagreements about labels, definitions and possible solutions. In addition, research into the practices of specific organizations, such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) or Amnesty International, shows that thematic priorities are also influenced by considerations of efficacy, internal politics, media visibility and competition for financial resources (Carpenter, 2009; Rodio and Schmitz, 2010; Ron et al., 2005). More broadly, Daiute (2008) draws attention to the fact that children’s rights are often qualified and framed according to states’ political priorities.

Building on this increasing body of knowledge, this article analyses the rise and fall of iconic figures of ‘stolen childhood’ on the international agenda since the adoption of the CRC. This evolution is one of the most salient and intriguing findings of a larger research project into the priorities of international child rights advocacy. The research conceives international advocacy as a process of translations (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, 2013; Hanson and Poretti, 2012; Verschueren, 2007), defined as a complex succession of consecutive and/or overlapping communication acts aimed at giving meaning to children’s rights. The enquiry, which adopted a pragmatic evidence-based approach, patiently followed the traces of the actors’ translations and strived to avoid, as far as possible, imposing the external, supposedly more objective or totalizing perspective of the researcher (Boltanski, 2009).
The study gathered and analysed, through qualitative and quantitative methods, a corpus of 328 texts (including treaties, resolutions, thematic and annual reports) produced between 1989 and 2009 by the UN system and selected international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). The findings from the mixed-methods analysis of the sources were complemented by interviews with advocates who have contributed to shaping the international child rights agenda of the last two decades. Interviewees spoke under the condition of anonymity and are referred to only through their professional background.

In this article, we first summarize the main research findings, focusing in particular on those icons that have presented the most significant changes, namely the street child and the child victim of violence. We then locate the diverging trajectories of icons against the backdrop of evolutions in the children’s rights field during the period under review. Next, we discuss the findings from three angles: the capacity of arguments to resist critique and advance consensus; the role of power asymmetries; and the links between the trajectories of icons and the dominant narratives about children’s rights. In the conclusion, we suggest some paths for strengthening the legitimacy of international child rights advocacy.

Translating ideas of the child victim

We have identified in the sources seven icons of ‘stolen childhood’: the child victim of violence, which comprises physically and psychologically abused children; the child soldier; the commodified child, including the sale of children or their organs; the sexually exploited child; the street child; the abandoned child; and the orphan, counting for children having lost at least one parent. Taken together, these themes represent, on average, one-quarter of the international agenda. This section describes first the evolution of the attention to these iconic figures between 1989 and 2009. Focusing more specifically on the child victim of violence and the street child, it traces their successive translations and the related narratives.

Trajectories

Figure 1 displays the evolution in time of the relative attention to the icons in the corpus of sources. As the chart mixes data from different documents, such as treaties, resolutions or INGO reports, it obviously fails to do justice to the existence of texts of a different nature and pursuing different goals. This perspective provides however a valuable starting point for exploring the trajectories of issues.

In the early 1990s, all these iconic figures received a significant share of international attention. The street child was however a prominent, if not dominant, figure of efforts aimed at restoring childhood. Since then, the street child, the abandoned child and the orphan have almost disappeared, while the child victim of violence, whose spectacular rise on the international scene began in the mid-1990s, has reached unprecedented visibility. The share of attention dedicated to child soldiers also increased during the period under review. Finally, while the attention to the sexually exploited and/or commodified child presents significant ups and downs over the period, the two figures roughly maintain their share of advocacy.
The diverging destinies of the street child and of the child victim of violence, respectively dominating the early 1990s and the late 2000s, are telling of the complex processes of translation at issue. They highlight, in particular, how issues’ and narratives’ construction intersect in shaping the trajectories of child rights themes. The fact that these two categories have often been associated with other icons – the street child with the abandoned child and the child victim of violence with the sexually exploited child and the child soldier – also provides the analysis of these two icons a broader relevance.

The construction of priority icons

According to child rights advocates, the *scope* and *gravity* of social problems are key factors in deciding which issues should be given priority attention (Project interviews, 2011). The assessment of these variables is however a matter of debate, if not of dispute. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the iconic child victims analysed in this article, as the concerned phenomena are often difficult to investigate and the numbers of affected children are frequently drowned in uncertainty.

Notwithstanding the repeated claims that the phenomenon of street children would be on the rise, the figure of 100 million, originally put forward by UNICEF in the late 1980s, has remained unchanged over the period under review and continues to be a reference for numerous actors (Thomas de Benitez, 2011: 4). The numbers of child victims of violence display instead a troubling and constant increase. In 1999, UNICEF estimates that ‘nearly 50 million children and women are victims of armed conflict, violence and exploitation’ (1999: 3). The number of children ‘subjected to violence, exploitation and abuse’ rises to 300 million in 2005 (UNICEF, 2005: para. 76). Finally, in 2009, the children experiencing physical violence would be between 500 million and 1.5 billion and

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**Figure 1.** Evolution of the relative attention to icons of ‘stolen childhood’.

In order to better highlight medium- to long-term trends, the period 1989–2009 has been divided into seven sub-periods of three years each. For each sub-period, the chart displays the share that the themes occupy in icons-related advocacy.
86% of the world’s 2- to 14-year-olds would be victims of physical punishment and/or psychological aggression (UNICEF, 2009: 7). Moreover, violence against children is increasingly presented as ‘widespread’ or ‘routine’, in contrast with the perceived geographic localization of the street children phenomenon.

While the above statistics suggest that children grow up in an increasingly and alarmingly violent world, figures are to be interpreted in light of the evolving meanings attributed to the idea of violence. Over the past two decades, in fact, the definition of violence against children has been progressively broadened. The Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA) contain the most salient traces of these successive translations. In the texts negotiated during the early 1990s, the term ‘violence’ is often confined to extreme forms of harm such as torture, rape, killing or sexual violence, while ‘abuse’ is preferred for less clearly identifiable harmful practices. As from the mid-1990s, however, the definition of violence is gradually extended to include trafficking and sexual exploitation as well as a broad range of previously loosely connected forms of interpersonal violence, like harmful traditional practices, psychological violence, domestic violence or, more recently, bullying (see, for example, UNGA, 2007: para. 52).

Summarizing this evolution, a child protection specialist argues that violence has become ‘the umbrella for everything that we do’ (Project interview, 2012), a way of expressing the perceived common nature of different violations of the rights of children. In contrast with the smooth and gradual broadening of the meaning of violence, suggesting the existence of a broad consensus about children’s experiences of interpersonal violence, the street child is embroiled, since the early 1990s, in complex definitional disputes. Indeed, while the street children label is still widely used, several alternative categorizations – such as children working and/or living on the street, children on/of the street or children in street situations – have been proposed. These definitional arguments are not a mere cosmetic or rhetorical exercise: they highlight the existence of significant disagreements about the category’s boundaries, its linkages with issues such as working or abandoned children and, ultimately, the very nature of the problem.

The consideration of the perceived gravity of violations sheds additional light on the diverging destinies of the street child and of the child victim of violence. Indeed, while all experiences of victimhood are associated with trauma and suffering – which, in turn, may lead to increased vulnerability and/or developmental problems – the consequences of violence against children tend to be portrayed as both more fundamental and widespread than those of other phenomena. Violence is perceived as a direct attack on children’s physical and/or psychological integrity. Its most severe forms may also threaten, as the UNGA puts it, ‘the most fundamental right of all, the right to life’ (1992: preamble). Along similar lines, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) contends that ‘the survival of the child is of paramount importance and a precondition for the enjoyment of any other rights’ (2005: para. 82). Despite the dominant doctrine on the indivisibility and interdependence of children’s rights, leading advocates seem therefore to have established a widely shared hierarchy of rights, at the top of which stands the child’s right to life and survival.

But violence does not only affect entitlements of alleged higher importance, it also allows to link more effectively children’s development with that of the nation (see, for example, UNICEF, 1997: 2). This connection is established in different ways. Because
of violence and the ensuing trauma, we are told, children will become less productive adult citizens. Moreover, children experiencing or witnessing violence may in turn become abusers themselves (CRC Committee, 2006: para. 46). This argument – underpinned by the idea of a cycle of violence – portrays violence as a sort of epidemic spreading, through imitation or direct exposure, from person to person. It takes no great leap, according to this logic, to represent violence against children as a threat to peace and tolerance in society (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 1999). Since the turn of the millennium, violence against children is indeed increasingly constructed as a sort of primary root cause, the prevention of which would have positive effects extending far beyond child well-being, to include national development, peace and security.

**Narrating ‘stolen childhoods’**

Norms always come with narratives that give them meaning. As Bruner eloquently put it, ‘For every constitution there is an epic, for each decalogue a scripture’ (2002: 12). The stories of ‘stolen childhoods’ concern, in particular, their root causes, the remedies and the way these are related to the long-term realization of children’s rights.

Street children’s advocates usually ground their approach in a ‘holistic’ perspective and establish causal links with ‘multiple deprivations’ of children’s civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights (Consortium for Street Children UK [CSC-UK], 2000; Street children advocate, 2011). For them, violence against street children is the symptom of deeper root causes, not the primary concern. While narratives sometimes point to the incapacity of families to care for children, they also blame states for implementing socioeconomic policies that increase families’ vulnerability and social inequalities, and call for strengthening family support and/or development cooperation. A report on street and abandoned children published by the International Secretariat of Defence for Children International (DCI-IS) in 1989, although not fully representative of the arguments put forward by other actors, provides a powerful illustration of the critiques associated to these narratives. The authors argue, in particular, that ‘The problem of abandoned children is a problem of social injustice’ (1989: 5), that ‘it is a permanent and sustained form of structural abuse that forces … children onto the streets’ (p. 5) and that ‘until a new, international social and economic order is established, States must be urged by the international community to … uphold their obligations towards the family in general and children in particular’ (p. 31). With the gradual silencing of the street child – and the parallel adoption, through the Millennium Development Goals, of a minimalist approach to development prioritizing the satisfaction of basic needs over long-term socioeconomic change – this kind of ‘structural’ critique has basically disappeared from international child rights advocacy.

While the narratives of violence do not deny the influence of socioeconomic factors (see, for example, Pinheiro, 2006: 19), the actors attribute violence against children primarily to deviant adult behaviour – be it in the family, the school or the community (including state-run institutions) – and/or to widespread social acceptance of certain practices. At best, abusers, usually adult men, are portrayed as ignoring the consequences of violence on children and/or alternative child-rearing practices. At worst, they are qualified, along with their acts, as ‘cruel’, ‘brutal’ or ‘barbaric’. The blame sometimes falls
directly on individuals (such as parents or teachers resorting to corporal punishment), leading to calls for effective investigations, prosecutions and punishment. More often, however, the crux of the problem is located in culture and, specifically, in patriarchal traditions (see, for example, HRW, 2003; Save the Children Sweden, 2006: 8, 10). Significantly, in contrast with the street child, who is usually portrayed as an adolescent boy, the child victim of violence is most often a girl. Typically, the ensuing corrective measures are legislative, informative and educative (CRC Committee, 2006: paras. 45–46). A corollary of this account, which constructs deviant cultures in opposition to the culture of children’s rights, is the necessity of a joint effort of the broadest possible coalition of people or organizations ‘to create a culture of rights reaching from the top layers of government to every household’ (UNICEF, 1998: 5).

The anti-violence agenda is also supported by a broader modernist ideology articulated around three interrelated claims. First, the problematization of increasingly subtle forms of violence, such as certain forms of psychological abuse, are signs of progress and civilization. Second, thanks to an increased understanding of the root causes of violence and of the related remedies, we would allegedly know what should be done. All forms of violence against children can be eradicated (Pinheiro, 2006: 6), we are told, and what is needed is genuine political will. Third, violence is seen as a ‘fundamental status issue, … completely symbolic of children’s low status as objects, possessions, not people’ (Child rights advocate, 2011). Children have the same rights as adults to be protected from violence and the anti-violence campaign is to be understood as a key pillar of a wider project aimed at extending rights, democracy and citizenship to the most marginalized groups of society.

The shifting priorities of an evolving field

The different trajectories of the icons must be located against the backdrop of the growing and increasingly dense interactions between actors and overlapping networks of activists. Schematically, the period under review can be divided into three phases, corresponding to different levels of institutionalization and different iconographies: 1989–1995, 1996–2002, 2003–2009. Figure 2, obtained through correspondence analysis, outlines how key actors have positioned themselves, during the three phases, with respect to selected icons. A fourth chart – which ‘zooms in’ on the upper-left corner of the chart representing the 2003–2009 period – is added in order to provide a clearer picture of this critical phase, when the coming together of all actors around violence would lead to an illegible graph.

The early 1990s are characterized by a general euphoria and by the exploration of the concrete implications of the CRC (Project interviews, 2011). During this period, leading advocates follow roughly the same thematic priorities they pursued during the late 1980s. Within the sample, for instance, the International Catholic Child Bureau (ICCB) is the strongest promoter of the cause of street children, while Save the Children – and particularly its Swedish member – is particularly vocal on violence against children. Cooperation between actors is at first relatively informal, but the early 1990s witness an initial institutionalization of networks, in particular through the formal constitution of the NGO Group for the CRC, the creation and strengthening of national child rights coalitions and
the gradual formalization of NGOs’ working relationships with the newly established CRC Committee. The institutionalization process reaches a turning point in 1995, with the creation of the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) and the adoption of the first UNGA yearly Resolutions on the Rights of the Child and on the Girl Child. It is also around this time that the competition between a growing number of NGOs starts exerting pressure on the budgets of many organizations.

Figure 2. Evolution of the relations between actors and selected icons.
The distance between the points in each graph corresponds to the frequency of their co-occurrences. The proximity of two themes means therefore that they were frequently associated in the sources, while the closeness of an actor to a certain theme means that the actor was particularly active in promoting the related agenda. For the sake of clarity, the charts display only five of the seven icons presented in Figure 1. The exclusion of the commodified child and of the abandoned child is motivated by their very close association to, respectively, the sexually exploited child and the street child. The size of the triangles (themes) and circles (actors) in the above charts varies according to the number of words coded, which depend on the number and length of the sampled sources.
The period 1996–2002 witnesses a unique collective effort aimed at strengthening the legal framework. During this phase, the icons occupy a particularly prominent place on the international scene (around one-third, on average, of each source). Indeed, most treaties adopted during this period – such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999), the two Optional Protocols to the CRC (2000) and the Palermo Protocol against the Trafficking in Persons (2000) – aim to strengthen the protection of iconic child victims. Networks are further extended, namely through the creation of thematic international coalitions. While the field’s legitimacy is strengthened by the adoption of several new treaties, negotiations crystallize disagreements. The stakes are often high and disputes have potentially divisive effects (Project interviews, 2011).

This intermediary phase is decisive for the destinies of the street child and of the child victim of violence. Their rising and falling trajectories intersect and two actors, the UNGA and the CRC Committee, appear to play a crucial role in this evolution. After adopting specific resolutions on street children in the early 1990s, the UNGA gradually abandons the issue as from 1995, serving instead as a key instrument of the anti-violence agenda. The CRC Committee, for its side, never dedicated much attention to street children, despite frequent requests, including by the UNGA (1992, 1993), for raising the profile of the issue on the international scene. Conversely, through two successive days of general discussion dedicated to violence (2000, 2001), the Committee was a crucial instigator of the process leading up to the 2006 *UN Study on Violence Against Children* (Pinheiro, 2006).

The 2003–2009 period is a period of expansion, facilitated by a stable international economic situation. It is also a period of soul searching, as leading actors re-think their priorities and gradually move from issue-by-issue programming towards prevention, namely through the elaboration of ‘holistic’ or ‘systemic’ frameworks (Project interviews, 2011, 2012). These approaches are accompanied by discourses emphasizing the need to establish alliances with the broadest array of partners, extending far beyond child rights advocates. UNICEF, for instance, presents its child protection systems framework as a way to foster cooperation between the human rights and the development community (Landgren, 2005: 244–246). The *UN Study on Violence Against Children* – which mobilized during three years an impressive number of actors specializing in child protection, human rights and public health – is doubtless the most outstanding achievement, to date, of this ‘holistic’ approach. This evolution culminates with the appointment in 2009, at the highest possible level of the UN, of a Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) on Violence Against Children, who ‘acts as bridge-builder and a catalyst’, cooperating with a ‘wide range of strategic partners’ (UNGA, 2011: 3). These include child rights organizations, intergovernmental and regional organizations and civil society. Violence against children reaches thereby a key strategic position on the ‘global governance’ agenda. In the process, leading actors gathering around violence, through ‘systemic’ approaches and increasingly extended partnerships, almost completely cease advocating on behalf of street children and orphans. This is powerfully illustrated by the distance separating, in the lower-left chart of Figure 2, these two icons from the other themes and from all actors.
The successive translations of the idea of the child victim of violence seem therefore to have provided, to an increasingly wide variety of actors, a shared position to express a broad range of different grievances. Should this evolution be taken, as a child protection specialist contended, as a positive step towards the realization of children’s rights, a sign of progress towards ‘getting to what lies beneath’ (Project interview, 2012)? Or is this gathering of actors around a broadened definition of violence, as others suggested, driven by ‘international hype’ (Child rights specialist, 2011) or by other reasons not necessarily linked to the well-being of children? It is to these questions that we turn in the next section.

Explaining divergent trajectories

No story – including the one being written here – is innocent: facts, definitions and narratives are partial and subjective translations that come with a normative message and (implicit or explicit) assumptions about how things should be (Bruner, 2002: 5–6). Some stories are however more convincing or successful than others. As Keck and Sikkink contend, human rights activists ‘cannot make just any category stick’ (1998: 172): in order to rise on the international agenda, issues must make sense and capture people’s imagination. What, then, made the formidable rise of violence possible? And what factors led to the concomitant fall of the street child? The intricacies of the translation processes taking place at the international level call for caution in attempting to answer these questions. The above findings, however, suggest that the shifting trajectories of icons may be attributed to the interplay of three factors: the arguments’ ability to withstand critique and foster consensus; asymmetries of power; and the solidity of the connections established between icons-related narratives and the dominant accounts about children’s rights.

Converging around a consensual iconography

Notwithstanding the general consensus around the CRC, child rights activists often face strong opposing forces. As disputes, disagreements and internal divisions threaten their capacity to mobilize resources and political will on behalf of children, consensual issues tend to be prioritized (Project interviews, 2011). Thanks to their emotional charge, iconic child victims play a key role in this respect. Yet, this research suggests that, despite their general appeal to rescue children, the different icons are unequally able to rally actors around a common agenda. More crucially, agreement should not be postulated but explained, as convergence appears to be the result of a long and uncertain process in which critique, disagreements and disputes could have produced different outcomes.

According to Chateauraynaud (2011), the trajectories of public causes depend, to a large extent, on the arguments underpinning them and on the ways these are mobilized in contexts open to critique. He convincingly shows that, in order to rally others to a cause, the actors tend to build their arguments on three interconnected planes (2011: 109–110): at the ontological level, they aim to establish facts and truths about the world, namely by the production of data, statistics or studies; at the epistemological level, they ground their truths on the effectiveness and legitimacy of data gathering methods and processes; and
at the axiological level, they refer to shared values, principles and representations or, as Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) put it, to ideas of a ‘common good’.

On the three planes, the arguments underpinning the anti-violence agenda appear to have resisted critique much better than those put forward on behalf of street children. At the ontological level, the increasingly alarming statistics of violence produced by UNICEF are more easily mobilized in advocacy than the vague estimation of the number of street children. Similarly, the direct link between the abuser and the victim, at the core of the anti-violence campaign, is less exposed to critique than the long causality chain between the street child, families’ vulnerability and states’ policies (Boltanski, 2007 [1993]: 40–41). More crucially, perhaps, the construction of violence against children as a potential threat to development, peace and security, as a sort of ultimate cause to be prevented through ‘holistic’ approaches mobilizing the widest array of partners, locates the issue at the crossroads of several fields. It is therefore easier, for anti-violence advocates, to show the broad relevance of their endeavours, to establish stable links with a variety of actors, and to mobilize truths and objects produced elsewhere, such as texts or approaches which have been effectively tested within the public health, development or security fields.

The epistemological validity of the competing truths produced in the children’s rights field greatly depends on the credibility of sources, especially when it comes to interpreting the law, and on the extent and quality of the participation processes through which facts are constructed. In this area, in particular, the child victim of violence benefited from two major UN studies – the 1996 ‘Machel Study’ on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children and the 2006 Study on Violence Against Children – which have provided actors with an unequalled amount of evidence upon which to build advocacy. The 2006 study additionally has a particularly strong legitimacy, thanks to the ‘genuine and lively participatory process’ (Pinheiro, 2006: xvii) underpinning it, including the extensive consultation of children and families. Significantly, no interviewee expressed any critique with regard to the Study’s findings and recommendations (Project interviews, 2011, 2012), which have the status of undebated truths.

At the axiological level, the child victim of violence embodies better than the street child the prevailing understandings of rights, which prioritize the protection of bodily integrity over systemic forms of abuse, such as social inequalities, exclusion or class hierarchies (Merry, 2009; Rajagopal, 2003: 194–202). Violence also fits particularly well the hierarchy of rights shared by leading advocates, since its most severe forms may literally take the life away from children, nullifying any attempt at restoring their childhood and at realizing their rights. Finally, the child victim of violence appears to be a more convincing figure of victimhood than the street child: street children are both victims and perpetrators of petty crimes and are less suited than the child victim of violence to mobilize shared representations of the vulnerable and dependent child (Street children advocate, 2011).

Between 1989 and 2009, through successive and interconnected translations, the children’s rights field has given shape to a simpler, more coherent and consensual iconography of victimhood. Indeed, the four icons remaining on the agenda, largely falling under the violence ‘umbrella’, appear to be a sort of lowest common denominator between the complex realities of children, the actors’ necessity to translate these into ideas of a
universal child victim and the interests and representations of multiple stakeholders, including governments, donors and the media (Dauvin, 2009). Yet, in a world where difference prevails, this simplified iconography is fragile and the trajectories of child rights themes remain uncertain and unpredictable, as suggested by the remarkable comeback of the street child, since 2011, on the international scene (namely through dedicated discussions within the UN Human Rights Council).

Translating in asymmetric fields

Positions within the field and resources – in the form of funds, experience, competences, knowledge and networks – are key in defining who will translate, what, when, for whom and the extent to which the object(s) emerging from the translation will influence other actors (Latour, 2006). In this respect, the whole children’s rights field is centred around the UN system, which is the depository of the CRC and the guardian of its interpretation, and towards which INGOs constantly look. Through its Charter-based and treaty-based bodies and its specialized agencies, the UN has indeed an unequalled capacity to mobilize a wide variety of actors around the production of key texts, such as treaties and major studies. The INGOs’ mobilization capacity is hardly comparable to that of the UN, although Save the Children International (SCI) and HRW have gradually positioned themselves as legitimate translators of children’s voices. The objects produced by key players enter – often as the main source of information – into the decision-making processes of (I)NGOs, regional organizations, states or donors, and are relayed to the public by the media, contributing thereby to shaping collective representations.

Building alliances and joining forces with other actors may however change the balance of power (Chateauraynaud, 2011). Asymmetries of power are indeed in constant evolution, as networks and partnerships are continuously reshaped and extended, as we have seen, far beyond the children’s rights field. Yet, strong coalitions take shape only if the actors are drawn together by arguments that resonate with their representations. More fundamentally, in increasingly interconnected and overlapping fields, asymmetries of power and knowledge are likely to be mutually reinforcing, as the knowledge provided by relations with other actors is both the result and the condition of the enlargement of the network (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2011 [1999]: 184). In this context, it is relatively unsurprising that small organizations like DCI-IS or ICCB, which were particularly vocal on street children issues in the early 1990s and have produced at times original critique, have gradually lost their specificity and now largely align their thematic priorities with those promoted by the UN and other big players.

The centrality of the UN in the children’s rights field and its pivotal role in the production of collective representations of victimhood underscores the decisive role played by states, actors that our study only touched indirectly (through the analysis of the UNGA Resolutions), in international translations of children’s rights. It also highlights the highly politicized fields in which child rights advocates deploy their efforts. States occupy key positions in the Security Council, in the drafting of the UNGA Resolutions, in the nomination of the members of the CRC Committee and in the UNICEF Executive Board, which approves the entity’s strategic plans and budgets. Governments are also essential financial contributors to the UN and key donors to many INGOs, making up, for instance,
almost half of the budget of SCI in 2010 (Save the Children International, 2011: 15). The shifting attention to the icons should therefore be located against the background of evolving political agendas. The decreasing attention to street children may indeed be related, as some interviewees suggested, to their being a ‘very embarrassing’ presence (Street children advocate, 2011) for states who want to be seen as progressing on the path of development and respect for human rights and, thereby, earn their share of international aid. For its part, the rise of violence against children may be linked, as Mucchielli (2011) has shown for the case of France, to growing ‘moral panic’ around security issues and youth’s involvement in violence.

Violence: The ultimate frontier

Like social sciences, child rights activism seems to have undergone in the past decades a sort of ‘cultural turn’: children’s rights have been increasingly depoliticized and cultures, in particular the ‘culture’ of the poor, have been the object of rising concern (Hart, 2008). More specifically, antagonisms – such as the one opposing the culture of rights to ‘local cultures’ – have been growingly played out under the moral register (Mouffe, 2005: 72–76; Pupavac, 2001). The dominant narratives underpinning the anti-violence campaign embody particularly well this ‘turn’. Violence actually seems to have become a sort of ultimate frontier, a model test which, if successful, will prove the legitimacy of children’s rights, perceived as a progressive energy confronting conservative and evil forces.

According to Boltanski and Thévenot (1991: 181), such tests – which mobilize substantial resources in particularly symbolic struggles – highlight the inherent logic of a field. By framing the anti-violence campaign as a ‘status issue’, advocates represent violence – which is dealt with in the CRC as one among many other issues – as standing at the very core of the human rights project. The statistics of violence also suggest that the antagonist forces are everywhere, in every household, around each community’s corner, and call for uniting the widest possible coalition of forces against this formidable and crucial adversary. While these narratives paint a fairly bleak image of the world, they also provide salvation, as the progressive forces engaged know how to create a violence-free society. Although an external perspective may qualify this construction as utopian, the narrative structure is very powerful and the tension between the backward past, the uncertain present permeated by a sense of urgency, and the promises of the future could hardly be more dramatic.

The image of the child victim of violence, of the perpetrator and of child rights activists who, like the heroes of good stories, will restore childhood, are mutually constitutive. In this sense, violence against children represents particularly well what Mutua (2001) has termed the ‘metaphor of human rights’, that is the triangular relationship between the victim, the savage and the saviour. By blaming the savage, in the form of patriarchal cultures or widespread societal attitudes, this triangular construction erases the state from the list of the decisive duty bearers. To be sure, advocates require governments to take appropriate remedies – such as adopting or enforcing legislation, awareness raising or education – but local practices remain the crux of the problem (Mutua, 2001). Governmental support to the anti-violence agenda appears therefore in a new light: state policies are not really at stake and, as legislation and moral crusades alone
rarely bring about the expected change (Becker, 1985), communities and families can continue to be pointed as the main focus of concern.

While the dominant narratives may comfort child rights advocates in their position of global moral agents, the moral grounds upon which they build the ‘us and them’ dichotomy are highly problematic for at least three reasons. First, as Mouffe put it, ‘with the “evil them” no agonistic debate is possible, they must be eradicated’ (2005: 76). Indeed, in spite of an increasing rhetoric of dialogue, the relationship between child rights advocates and local communities always aims at changing the norms and values of the latter, while those of the incomers are assumed to remain unchanged. A more genuine and constructive approach to dialogue, acknowledging the equal legitimacy of antagonistic ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives (Chateauraynaud, 2011: 162–164), would open the space for producing a more complex account of children’s problems and, possibly, for devising more appropriate solutions. Practices, such as parenting or schooling, emerge in fact in given social, economic, cultural and political contexts and the links between these should not be underestimated (Pupavac, 2001: 107). Second, by essentializing both local cultures and the culture of rights – perceived as discrete, isolated and unequivocal realities – child rights advocates also fail to recognize the unstable and evolving nature of culture (Goodale, 2009). They also erase the influence on childhood of history (Burman, 2008: 54; Hart, 2008) – including, for Third World countries, the violent experience of colonialism (Balagopalan, 2002). Third, the far-reaching criticism of traditions and patriarchy should be balanced with an equally radical critique of the culture and ideology of capitalism, especially when it implies the implementation or the imposition, through processes embedded in unequal power relations, of policies leading to increased poverty and social inequalities (Hart, 2008).

Conclusion

This article has tracked the trajectories and translations of different ideas of ‘stolen childhood’ on the international child rights agenda. We have highlighted a progressive simplification of the iconography of child victimhood under the influence of three interconnected factors. First, arguments related to violence against children have proved to have a greater capacity to resist critique than those underpinning advocacy on behalf of street children. Second, asymmetries of power and knowledge between the field’s key players have gradually rallied all actors around the priorities of well-established and authoritative UN entities and large child rights INGOs, both backed up by states’ vested interests and powers. Third, the total eradication of violence against children appears as a model test for the whole children’s rights field, highlighting both its dominant ideological foundations, enshrined in the savage–victim–saviour metaphor, and the field’s reduced capacity to challenge extant relations of power. All in all, as a critical informant commented, violence appears as an almost perfect advocacy construct ‘because it covers all without saying anything, it condemns all without condemning anybody, and it is also indestructible’ (Human rights specialist, 2011).

While leading advocates present the simplified iconography centred on different forms of interpersonal violence as a sign of progress towards implementing a ‘systems’ approach, this evolution has paradoxically been accompanied by the gradual silencing of critique
against the effects of the expansion of the capitalist system. The advocacy of the early 1990s, although already partly depoliticized, allowed more diversified narratives of victimhood and a broader space for critique addressing forms of violence considered as ‘structural’ and related state responsibilities. While activists face today a tough enemy, in the form of cultures and attitudes denying the equal status of children and adults, their capacity to challenge the power asymmetries characterizing international relations seems to have diminished. To be sure, the construction of more complex narratives, involving longer causality chains between child victims and governmental duty bearers, is more exposed to critique than the interpersonal conceptual architecture mobilized to support the anti-violence campaign. It would also oblige child rights advocates to face states, including their main donors, with their duties, leading to possible tensions or disagreements. By challenging a broader array of power inequalities, beyond the dominant opposition of abusive adults and innocent child victims, such an approach may however strengthen the legitimacy of the actors’ endeavours. After all, as Marks and Clapham put it, ‘While children’s rights can usefully be invoked to isolate injustices affecting children, their greatest value may lie in connecting these injustices with larger patterns of hardship, exclusion and violence’ (2005: 32).

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Notes
1. The sample of actors comprised: the Committee on the Rights of the Child; the UN General Assembly; the United Nations Children’s Fund; Save the Children International (formerly the International Save the Children Alliance, including two of its affiliates with the largest field presence: Save the Children UK and Sweden); the International Secretariat of Defence for Children International; the International Catholic Child Bureau and Human Rights Watch.
2. The transformation of multiple two-way relationships between the elements on the chart into a two-dimensional graph leads to inevitable losses in information. The sum of the factors indicated on the horizontal and vertical axis provides information about the reliability of the relationships outlined in the charts. When this sum is above 50, it signals that the chart is an acceptably reliable picture of the actual relationships contained in the data.

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