Е-списание СОЦИАЛНА РАБОТА
2018, брой 2, година VI, 1–17
www.swjournal-bg.com

Structural and legalized child abuse in Europe, from ancient times until now

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Summary. Is there a structural and, maybe even, a lawful element in child abuse in Europe? Has what is now assumed as objectionable and prosecutable been always considered as deviant behavior?

The author of this article searched back into the past for the information of adults' attitude towards children in former societies. As it turned out, the origin of child abuse had been rooted in laws and regulations of Assyrian and Babylonian Empire thousands of years ago. Later, through Egyptian and Greek civilizations, it settled in Roman legislation and culture. In its turn, Roman society was the most important supplier of the legislation for many European countries.

The attitude of adults towards children in those times fundamentally and profoundly influenced the European legislation. We are still confronted with it every day.

Key words: *Child abuse, Child abuse in ancient times, Origine of nowadays child abuse, Resentments of child abuse culture, Structural and legalized child abuse*

Creating youth policy without understanding where the former youth policy is coming from is rather unproductive. Youth policy shows a long history that partly determines the current policy. The present youth policy is not a *creatio ex nihilo*, it has not arisen from scratch and can not escape from the character traits, plus points and imperfections of the past.

To understand how governments now treat children, it is necessary to go back to the time we have the first written materials from.

Taking care of children is a modern invention. As it can be seen from the sources of such ancient cultures as Assyria and Babylon, children did not seem to be important. When we look back to that time, we are completely dazed how our ancestors treated (their) children. It turns out that the source of what we now call 'child abuse' was already established in laws and regulations thousands years ago. Later, through the Egyptian and Greek civilizations this ends up in Roman legislation and culture that in their turn are the most important suppliers for the laws and culture of many European countries.

The attitude from that time influenced the European youth policy and laws regarding children.

Classical antiquity

In classical cultures, children were not of vital importance, and even worse, - they seemed a minor matter. The Old Testament, compiled in the millennia before the Christian era, is evidence of this. Parents were free to sell, kill, sacrifice or even eat their children.

The most horrible passages in the Old Testament are the passages where parents feed themselves with their children, like in II Kings 6:28-29, where a serious famine in Samaria is described. Two mothers decide to kill both their children and eat them, so that both women have a chance to survive. They agree that mother A is the first and the next day mother B.

However, the next day after mother's A son has been killed and shared among the two women, mother B does not fulfill her appointment. Mother A complains to the king about this breach of contract. Verse 28 and 29 say, 'Further the king asked her: "What's the matter?" She answered, "This woman said to me, 'Give up your son so we may eat him today, and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So we cooked my son and ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son so we may eat him,' but she had hidden him."

Apparently, in the classical antiquity a culture existed in which parents – during famines – could eat their own children, as also other passages in the Bible prove (for example Deuteronomy 28:53 -56 and Leviticus 26:29).

Parents did not need to kill their children by themselves, they could also ask or charge other people to do this. In this connection, we can quote Deuteronomy 21:18-21, 'If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them, then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; and they shall say unto the elders of his city, this our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice;

he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones that he dies.'

There were other ways for parents to dispose of their children as well. It is known that the city of Carthage (not far from Tunis, the capital of Tunisia in Northern-Africa), the big rival to Rome, regularly sacrificed children; mass graves of thousands of children were found there (Sommerville 1982).

In addition, we also know the example of Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22). Obviously, to get rid of or sell children was not unusual, like in the situation when Sara forced Abraham to get rid of his son Ishmael and the Egyptian slave Hagar; or in the case of Moses (Exodus 2); or, for example, Joseph who was sold as a slave by his brothers (Genesis 37).

In the classical antiquity, sacrificing children, along with selling and abandonment was very common.

In the ancient Egypt children were rarely killed, but often abandoned. The Greeks were impressed by the fact that the Egyptians did not commit infanticide. The Greeks could see a causal connection with rich Egypt that was able to feed all mouths (Sommerville 1982). The Egyptians preferred to abandon their children; for this purpose, rubbish dumps were favourite places. Every day, many people attended those dumps therefore the child was likely to be found. According to the Egyptians (and later also the Greeks and the Romans) to abandon your child was expressly not murder, just because it was the parents' aim for the child to be found.

Greek philosophers like Plato, who is considered as the first pedagogue (Bakker *et al*. 2006:7), Aristotle and Epictetus took the position that having a child did not bring along the liability to nourish the child (Boswell 1990:67). The classical authors had the opinion that child murder was the undisputable right of the father, and even a duty in the case of a handicapped or a sick child (Sommerville 1982). Aristippus, one of the

pupils of Socrates, has the opinion that a man was allowed to get rid of his children because 'we actually also get rid of our saliva, our louses and so on'.

In the Roman period, the father has the right to kill his child too (Csikszentmihalyi 2004:104); particularly the killing of infants was widespread (Van der Veer 2011:104).

We are well informed, especially from the Roman period, about the practice 'to abandon' displeasing children, while most of the children in those days were 'displeasing'. In general, abandonment was seen as a decent way for parents to withdraw from parental tasks.

Abandonment could be carried out in three ways:

1. by selling the child,
2. by giving away a newborn baby to another woman,
3. by abandoning the child.

In ancient times, to abandon unwished babies was common practice. In Roman period, a city often had a permanent public place where children could be abandoned. For instance, during the ruling of Emperor Augustus this place was located at the market near the 'infant pillars'. Moreover, most children prematurely died of hunger, coldness or simply were eaten by dogs or birds of prey. Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria was one of the first to speak against abandoning children. He wrote: 'All animals that feed themselves with human meat, visit the place and unhindered feast on infants, a wonderful banquet, caused by their only protectors, those who prior to all others had to guarantee their safety, their fathers and mothers. Also carnivorous birds come down and gobble the leftovers, if those have not been discovered earlier, because in that case they get ready to enter into combat for the whole carcass with the animals of the field.' He states – as the first well-known person in Europe - that abandoning children is equal to murder. At this point, the first century of our era ends.

Athenagoras, the Church Father, living in the second half of the second century, followed Philo in his argumentation: abandoning children is equivalent to killing children (Boswell 1990:116). The first Christian Emperor Constantine the Great (about

280-337 after Christ) – known from the Constantine solstice: he speaks for Christianity and by that he ended the Christian persecutions – rejected the right of parents to claim their children after the abandonment: from that moment, the new 'owners' acquired the absolute authority by fostership or purchase.

Finally, in 374 Emperor Valentinian decided that all parents had to nourish their children. This decree however, did not have much influence because (the authority of) the Roman Empire collapsed in those days.

From that moment, the Christian Church started gaining more and more influence in daily life. The meanwhile institutionalized Church did not prohibit abandonment. Because of such an attitude, abandonment became a societally accepted solution for a child that was born at the wrong moment, of the wrong sex or in wrong circumstances. Abandonment was generally seen as a respectable way for parents to flinch from parental duties.

The Council of Vaison in 442 decided that parents could have ten days to claim their abandoned child back, provided that a financial compensation had been arranged.

When a child was abandoned, something special is often given to him/her so that later their identification was possible.

Fathers had the right to abandon their children and afterwards, at a legally determined financial compensation (often the costs of food during the period the child had been taken care of), to demand their child from the person who had taken care of the him/her.

Fathers had also the right to sell their children, because fathers owned their children. Presently or later on, they could demand their children back again, which was often happening if profit could be made by a new sale to someone else. The Roman laws stipulated that a father lost his paternal authority when he has sold the same child three times (Boswell 1990:47).

Many children, if they survived the abandonment anyway, ended up in prostitution. In that case, the Roman men met up with an important problem: What to do with the (unconscious) incestuous situation if for a Roman man the prostitute is his child. It is significant and revealing that the major part of the Roman legislation related to children concerned this particular issue.

In Greek and Roman mythology abandonment was a normal and usual reaction from both human and godlike parents to undesirable children.

As to the Greek: even the upper god Zeus and his children were foundlings. In addition, Oedipus was abandoned by his father's order, just like Ion and Paris by their mothers, and gods like Jupiter and Poseidon. Kronos and Saturn ate their own children; Pelops was cooked by his father, etcetera. The number of infanticide was countless.

For the Roman moral points of view and laws, the mythology was an important inspiration too. The foundation of the Roman state itself, where Romulus and Remus were given such by a she-wolf, the *Lupa Capitolina*, is an example of abandonment. The eternal city of Rome was, like Christianity itself, in some way a foundling: born from the Judaism, outcasted by it and later adopted by Rome.

Middle Ages (500-1500)

In the Middle Ages, there was actually no separation between Church and State as we know now. The Church was the State (Iedema & Wiebinga 2010:23). In fact during the Middle Ages in Europe just one upbringing authority was operating - the Church.

After the collapse of the Western-Roman Empire in the fifth century A.D., the Church was the only surviving institution (Vloemans 1960:156). Therefore, the Church got an increasingly bigger role in taking care and accommodation of abandoned children. The Church did not express any moral judgement with regard to the abandoning of children. The Christian morality was rather directed to the consequences of abandonments (attention to the baptism, claiming the children, provisions for dead or incest) than to the morality of the act itself (Boswell 1990:277).

Apparently, abandonments did not only occur with the heathen Romans, - it was an equally familiar phenomenon amongst the Christians. In some respects, the position of children worsened by the involvement of the Church: abandonments were institutionalized, whereby it became easier for the parents to free themselves of their children. Buyers or finders were allowed to raise the children in the way they wanted and used the foundlings or bought children as slaves.

Since the early Middle Ages, it became possible to leave abandoned children at the doors of the churches. Later, the Church took a more active role with respect to orphans. After the service on Sunday, orphans were put on a rain barrel (so they could be easily seen) and people in the church could make a bid. The lowest bidder got a child: he/she had to take care for that child for one year using the money paid by the church. The first written information in the Netherlands for instance regarding this goes back to 500 after Christ (De Rooy 1982).

Because foster parents often spent the money provided by the church for the foster child incorrectly, churches formed a kind of an inspectorate. Every year foster families were visited and checked whether the money benefited the foster child.

With the rise of the Christian church in Europe around the millennium change, a fourth way of abandoning was added: the oblation. Hereby the child was permanently given away to a monastery. Extensive regulations were made about the minimum age of an oblate, the monasteries could not take care of babies, toddlers and preschoolers. The playtime for young oblates was regulated by each monastery: some monasteries permitted half an hour once a week, other monasteries - half an hour monthly.

Oblation often was a strategic mean for aristocratic families to acquire control in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. According to the decisions of the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 (canon 49 and 55), if a child left the monastery after the oblation, the child would be excommunicated. This threat was often enough to keep all the foundlings in the monastery forever. It lasted up to the thirteenth century when Gregory IX in his

Decretales decided that children did not have to make their Monastic Vows before they are twelve (for girls) or fourteen (for boys) years old; when they are younger, they could leave anytime.

Despite the fact that in the sixth and seventh century after Christ all kinds of handbooks were published describing punishments for different sins (penitentials), the abandonment or even killing of own children was not punished.

In the beginning of the Middle Ages, Friesland (a part of the Netherlands now) had a law stating that mothers who killed their newborn children were released the usual fines for murder. Charles the Great, the king who reigned France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Austria, admired this Frisian law so much that he decided to legalize it for his whole empire: from the ninth century this law became generally accepted and mothers could unpunishably kill their own child (previously only fathers had this right) (Boswell 1990:156).

According to the *Siete Partidas*, a Spanish fourteenth century' compilation of Roman, German and other new laws, till far in the Middle Ages the theme of eating your own children occurs in Western-Europe, for example in the rule that the caste lord is not allowed to give up his castle in the occasion of a siege before he has eaten his own children) at first (Boswell 1990:231).

The reasons for abandonment were diverse.

- Poverty was for many parents a reason to get rid of their children. It was impossible for most parents to feed all their children. We have to be conscious of the societal circumstances of those times: there was no birth control with contraceptive pills and condoms. Even now, indigenous peoples like the Aboriginals in Australia, who often are very poor, have the practice of killing a second child when the mother is still breastfeeding her first child. She has not enough milk for two children and there are no other solutions, so immediately after birth the baby is spared the agony.

- For the middle and higher classes, inheritance and ownership issues were the most important motives for abandoning, so they preferred oblation.
- Next to that, the Christian culture with its generally negative attitude to sexual intercourse also boosted abandonments. Deformed children, children who suffered from epileptic attacks, deaf or blind children, children with vicious and mean character (the Christian Church viewed them as the result of 'parental violations to the conjugal relationships'). Sexual intercourse was forbidden during the menstruation, during the period of breastfeeding (until the eighteenth century this period had to be at least two years; this was solved by hiring prostitutes or appointing a wet nurse), during the fast, on Sundays or in 'wrong positions'. This encouraged parents to let such children discreetly disappear. Besides, at least one of the twins was in danger, because the popular belief said that twins were the result of adultery.

There were two other reasons for abandonments. From the thirteenth century Christian priests in Europe were forbidden to marry (in the second half of the thirteenth century the bishop of the city of Luik (Belgium) was proud of the fact that he had brought into the world 14 sons within 22 months), and this was another motive to abandon children. In addition, the overpopulation in the constantly growing cities with their low sexual morale led to many unlawful children.

We know that in the late Middle Ages in Ghent, a big, internationally important and modern city (at that time in the Netherlands, now in Belgium) parents had parental duties towards their children. These duties included providing children with food and drinks, clothes, living and sleeping facilities. Sometimes there were exceptions: parents did not have to look after the ill child (a child with a broken leg was one of such exceptions). A sick child did not need to be taken care of by their parents; only 21 percent of the parents promised to keep their child 'ill and healthy' (Danneel 1995:28).

The fact that Ghent had a progressive youth policy was also apparent from the attitude of parents towards physically or mentally handicapped children. As a rule,

these children were killed, but in Ghent this did not happen in specific cases. The reason behind this policy however was painful: these children were considered as the incarnate sin of the parents. This policy's purpose was not to benefit children and keep them alive, but rather served as the warning of Church and government for a strict sexual morality.

After Middle Ages (1500-now)

In the Middle Ages, the wet nurse becomes a popular person in the Netherlands. In other countries children were brought to the wet nurse too, but the Netherlands experienced the so-called 'walking wet nurses', who visited the families in their houses, or the 'home wet nurses', who lived with the families during the lactation (Bakker *et al*. 2006:112; Van de Veer 2011:144).

Another distinction can be made between wet nurses, who breastfed the baby themselves and the 'dry nurses': they did not feed the baby, but took care of the child (Visser 2009:25).

A wet nurse often breastfed several babies. Apart from her own child, sometimes another four of five children depended on her.

Besides, wet nurses were, often for a financial reward, active in orphanages. Some mothers abused this settling by abandoning their child and thereafter presented themselves as a wet nurse at the orphanage. In this way, they could feed their own child for a fee.

Sometimes the maximum number of feedings was regulated; in Paris, for instance, 34 feedings per day was the maximum. Therefore, a good wet nurse could serve five to six children.

Jacob Cats, one of the most popular Dutch seventeenth century poets, was a big fan of breastfeeding by the mother. He had important objections against the use of wet nurses. He was convinced that a child got the character and the nature of the woman whose milk they drank, a point of view that was internationally accepted in

those days (Sommerville 1982). Therefrom in some countries wet nurses with religion other than the Christian (Jewish, Muslim) were forbidden (Van de Veer 2011:238). For the same reason he was also against feeding babies with the cows' or goats' milk ; according to Cats, a child who drank goat milk would get 'a goat nature' (Brouwer 2010:101-102).

With these kind of arguments of the influential Cats, it is not surprising that most Dutch mothers fed their babies by themselves (Noordervliet 2003:41). Since then, the Netherlands took a special position in Europe: there was no other country in Europe where so many mothers breastfed their own children.

In France, for instance, it was arranged a bit differently. In the thirteenth century, Paris already had wet nurses agencies. The last agency closed its doors in 1876 (Van de Veer 2011:143). Only a small minority of babies (1.000 out of 21.000, i.e. less than 5 percent) was nourished by their mothers in Paris in 1780. The babies given to a wet nurse outside the city would not be sent back until their third or fourth year of life, if they would still be alive by then (Brouwer 2010:19).

When the father made the appointment with such a wet nurse agency, the representative of this agency attended the baptism of the related baby, and received the baby and the money for the wet nurse directly after the baptism. No one knew what happened after that. In the meantime, the parents celebrated without the baby the baptism party with their relatives and friends. Police Commissioner Prost de Royer of the city of Lyon wrote, 'The parents seem to be easy-going. The child is given into unknown hands and thereafter on the way changed, laid abandon or murdered, without parents presume anything or are worried.'

On the way to the wet nurse, many children suspiciously fell off the cart. Only in 1773, the police in France implemented the regulations to place a small fence around the carts that transported the babies to the countryside in order to prevent babies from regularly falling off the cart and are crushing under its wheels.

In addition, the customs related to a child's death were different from nowadays: the parents did not often bother to attend the funeral of a passed child. In those days, it was common that 80 to 90 percent of the given babies died in their first year of life (Beekman 1977:51). Visser (2009:26) mentions the extra big health risks that babies were exposed to at the wet nurses because of contagious diseases and infections. These circumstances were also found in Germany and England.

Still, in Paris at the end of the eighteenth century, a quarter of the children was being abandoned every year. Those children ended up in orphanages or hospitals; many children died there. It is a well-known fact that in the hospital of Rouen 90 percent of the infants died during the first year. Boswell (1990:288) writes, 'The bitter irony was that the society, in an attempt to limit the possibly tragic consequences of anonymous abandonments to a minimum, had arranged a system that guaranteed the death of the majority of the abandoned children, because it enlarged their collective vulnerability of common diseases'.

In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century, not so many changes were made. Actually, after the Enlightenment, especially after 1762 when Jean-Jacques Rousseau published his *Émile ou De l'education*, there was – for the first time – some attention for the importance of an emotional bond between parent and child.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1787), often considered the first pedagogue in Western Europe, the man who did not see the point of raising children before the twelfth year of life (Röling 1982:60; Kruithof *et al*. 1982:60), described in his *Confessions* (2000) with a certain glory that he has brought all his five children to a home for abandoned children. He wrote: (…) 'so my third child, like the first two, were put in a house for abandoned children, and I did the same with the next two: in total I got five children. This arrangement seemed to me so well, so clever, so appropriate, that I did not boast in public only out of respect for their mother. All together I had chosen what was the best for my children' (Boswell 1990:11).

In the nineteenth century, the attention focuses on adaptions of the child to the desirable standard patterns. The society gives more attention to the unsocial persons and workhouses, and the child protection in Europe starts.

Due to the liberal mentality of that time (the most important task of the government was enforcement of the laws) special attention arose for young criminals. More and more the authorities withdraw from the care for neglected children (abandoned children and orphans), while the private initiative withdraws from the criminal youth because it is not fond of the role of punisher. Thus, the children sector was divided: the state had to deal with criminal children and the private charity with neglected children.

Organisations for neglected children were frustrated by the fact that parents were always allowed to demand their children back; social services had no power to protest in such cases.

From 1890, the private initiative hammered on the necessity of child protection laws. Besides, the private initiative was not able to manage the increasing supply. The pauperization of cities caused an unprecedented increase of street children and begging children.

In many European countries, Children's laws became effective for criminal and neglected children; in the Netherlands for instance in 1901. Thanks to that, the authorities got a possibility to interfere into the family. The Children's laws connected the 'dangerous child' (the criminal child) and the 'child in danger' (the neglected child).

The societal care of the government with regard to children was limited to interfering if the external societal order was disturbed. Firm actions were taken against the phenomena of vagabondizing and begging among children, but there was not any attention to the cause (Clarijs 2013).

Not until the twentieth century, the adult world reaches out a helping, so-called, raising hand to the child. After killing, selling, abandoning, eating, neglecting, moulding

and dominating their children, now parents have reached the stage where they go cooperatively with them.

It took ages up to the middle of the twentieth century, before the majority of the adults definitely said goodbye to the idea of owning their children. Only in 1956, the incapacity of the woman disappeared from Dutch legislation, meaning that the fathers' almightiness rooted in law from the classical antiquity converted to parental shared power.

Conclusions

From ancient times until the fourth century after Christ, the child had no soul, he or she was not of any importance, he or she could be easily thrown away. DeMause (1974) mentioned this period as 'infanticidal'.

The era after the fourth century and untill the thirteenth century he addressed as 'abandoning': the child had a soul, but one should not value that too much.

From the seventeenth century, the child is 'sculptured' and from the nineteenth century 'societally socialized'. The creation of child protection in that period was especially meant to protect the society against unsociality and not to help children (Van Montfoort 1994). Only after the World War II, a helping hand was reached out to the child.

All that was said above is the cultural hinterland of the current (youth) policy in at least many Western European countries. This short retrospect shows that it has shaped the western civilization in many ways.

From this background, it is not surprising that one of the Ten Commandments tells children how they have to behave towards their parents, but the Ten Commandments do not tell parents how to treat their children.

Since thousands of years, children have been owned by their fathers and could at pleasure be sold, disposed of, abused sexually, killed or eaten. Nearly during the whole history, children especially had an economical survival interest. This historical

collective mentality still has its impact on the official legislation. Only over the last century, a sentiment of childhood is existing (Ariès, 1960:30).

It can be said that, when we look back at the past 5000 years, actually only in the past century changes in policy and practice in favor of children have become reality (Zwalve 2005). It may not be a big surprise that notwithstanding the current European laws and rules with their policy culture, still many resentments of that 'child abuse culture' are hidden in relation to children. Here are just two examples.

- When a woman is pregnant, in many European countries she is allowed to order a glass of wine, or two or three or more. Normally, the operator of the pub or restaurant will not refuse to serve this lady, even though everyone knows that alcoholic drinks damage the unborn baby. The right of the adult dominates the interest of the unborn child.
- When parents decide not to vaccinate their children (because of religious motives for instance), it is in their power to decide this. The (future) health of their children depends on the willingness of the parents.

It is not difficult to enlarge this list to dozens of examples; it is so common in the European societies. We are all so accustomed to this pattern that it is not seen as child abuse.

The famous Polish pedagogue Korczak, who defined the child earlier as 'the oldest underdog of the world', wrote: 'We fail to see the child, just as one time we were unable to see the woman, the peasant, the oppressed social strata and oppressed peoples. We have arranged things for ourselves so that children should be in our way as little as possible' (Brendtro *et al*. 1992:69-70).

It is interesting that the Scandinavian countries, that have never been occupied by the Romans, nowadays are known as the best countries of the world for children. It is important to find out if this is a matter of plausibility or causality.

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