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Privatized Childhoods: the decreasing role of the state in childcare services¹

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With the dismantling of the welfare state, Europe has witnessed a significant retrenchment in the provision of educational, social, and health services, and a shift towards a patchwork of providers (Ball, 2012). The global financial crisis of 2008 provided new impetus for the retrenchment of social protection systems and the dismantling and privatization of public health, education, and early childhood care (Lawn, 2013; Jones & Traianou, 2019). In Central and Eastern European countries, the economic downturn was coupled with a demographic crisis and the long-lasting effects of the economic crisis of the 1990s (Kurpas, 2020). Governments typically responded to the financial crisis by introducing neoliberalizing reforms and austerity regimes in public services and increasingly transferring the delivery of services to a competitive market of non-state providers (Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015; Verger et al., 2016; Jones & Traianou, 2019). Alongside the outsourcing of public services through the mechanisms of exogenous privatization, endogenous privatization, the promotion of private sector ideas, techniques, and practices, has become a central shaper of public service infrastructures (Ball & Youdell, 2008). Privatization has emerged in various areas where public services used to dominate, such as healthcare, aiming to address deficits in public budgets, and including the rise of private health insurance (André et al., 2016). In Central and Eastern Europe, these processes have been strengthened by a massive outmigration of labor from the region towards Western Europe, causing further crises in ensuring state-run provision and opening up an opportunity for private providers (Stan & Erne, 2016).

On the consumer side, the increasing demand for privatization corresponds to growing citizen distrust of state-run services (Kopasz & Boda, 2018), a strong source of motivation of capable families, who in their search for privatized solutions increasingly tend to view child-rearing as an individual investment and not a collective matter (Szőke & Kovai,

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2022). Research on educational privatization has expanded its scope beyond the activities of governments, multinational corporations, and private organizations, turning to explore forms of 'micro-neoliberalism' that drive individuals and families to adopt market-oriented behaviors regardless of state policies (Zhang & Bray, 2024). Some families choose to refrain from engaging with formalized institutions entirely and pursue private pathways exclusively from birth to higher education, while others complement state-run services by buying additional services from the private market. But even for those opting into the public sector, it is impossible to escape the systemic impact of privatization.

This vast structural transformation of public service provision triggered significant scholarly interest in the early 2010s, with researchers exploring the various forms and modalities of privatization across sectors and geographical locations with significant theoretical and conceptual value (Verger et al., 2016; Walford, 2015; Hogan & Thompson, 2020, the latter two who are reviewed in this special issue). Notwithstanding, these studies have tended to have a relatively narrow regional scope (with particular focus on Western European, North American, and some South American systems), which have become the dominant empirical sources for the conceptualization of public sector privatization and marketization, while other contexts remain less researched (Zancajo et al., 2025). Our special issue had the explicit aim of exploring regions that have attracted less research interest so far, such as Central European countries, India, and South Africa.

While the interconnection between economic and/or political globalization and privatization processes remains a focus of much academic work (Zancajo et al., 2025; Edwards & Means, 2019), the current debate has shifted from addressing structural and institutional transformations and their social justice consequences to the effectiveness of regulatory responses (Zancajo et al., 2022). Recent studies have reaffirmed that not only do the declared purposes of education shift under the growing influence of private actors or philanthropists (Au & Lubienski, 2016), but the informal management cultures of schools are also increasingly permeated by the logic of privatization (Klein & Shimoni-Hershkoviz, 2016). Furthermore, educational privatization is often not a research theme in its own right, but rather discussed as an important dimension of topical research themes, such as the impact of technology and the digitalization of the public sector (Williamson et al., 2025).

Research on public sector privatization processes is conventionally strongly aligned with sectoral boundaries. In this special issue, we propose looking at the privatization of childhood within an integrated framework, understanding how privatization processes and the retrenchment of the state construct and constrain new understandings of good parenting and experiences of privatized childhoods. As editors, we did not aim to undertake the ambitious task of offering a comprehensive overview of the recent developments in the privatization of services. Instead, we have collected studies that highlight emergent modalities of privatization. We now turn to introducing the content of the special issue by bringing these modalities to the attention of the reader.

Some authors explore the dynamics and political drivers behind privatization under autocratizing and de-democratizing political contexts governed by radical-right political forces. The literature suggests that autocratizing states embrace neoliberal governance strategies regarding public service provision in a specific way. Neoliberal marketization in Hungary, for instance, unfolded in a politically laden way, led by strong tendencies towards nationalization. The outsourcing to the private sphere, therefore, took place under

strong, centralized political control (Scheiring, 2022). While autocratizing states retreat from public service provision by outsourcing it to politically loyal GONGOs, they also sideline private actors and NGOs associated with agendas deemed politically critical or threatening (Toepfer et al., 2022). This special issue contains studies about such processes in contemporary India and Hungary.

Therese Boje Mortensen explores the restructuring of the Indian child protection sector and the narrowing space for non-profit service providers through the case of the national Childline. The author argues that through a 'selective privatization' process, the state has retreated and excluded NGOs, which are seen as a potential threat to the state, while retaining privatization for for-profit companies. The article draws on an ethnographic and policy analysis of India's national helpline for children, tracing its trajectory from being in partnership with the state for more than two decades to becoming a fully state-controlled service. In 2022, the NGO-state collaboration model was dismantled, and civil society was diluted to 'volunteers' and 'communities' who struggle to walk the tightrope between being implementers and advocates. Mortensen argues that while 'loyal NGOs' and 'service-providing non-profits' receive regime support, it is not only 'claim-making' NGOs that are targeted, but even erstwhile 'service-providing non-profits' are experiencing closure and becoming silenced because they are seen as potential agents of democratization.

The study of Szandra Kramarics highlights the fiscalization of child benefits as a key policy instrument of the pro-natalist Hungarian government. This strategy aligns with a broader trend of restructuring funding schemes to achieve contentious policy outcomes while distancing the government and obscuring or downplaying its role. Such forms of attenuated governance include subsidizing segregated or religious education through funding arrangements and voucher schemes, or involving third-party organizations or tax-system funding arrangements (Hackett, 2020; Zancajo et al., 2025). Fanni Puskás's article provides a snapshot of how local education markets were rearranged and racial boundaries consolidated by introducing financial incentives that favored faith-based education and care providers in Hungary. Szandra Kramarics's contribution focuses on how the Hungarian right-wing government has marketized social policy, phased out classic family policy benefits, and replaced them with state-subsidized loans designed for better-off families. This selective pronatalist policy approach was introduced to boost fertility. The article focuses on one of the most popular schemes, the 'baby-expecting loan,' and argues that market-oriented social policy entraps recipients in a doubly dependent situation: on the symbolic level, the claimant owes the state the 'promised' children, while they also become indebted to banks. Kramarics concludes that through the financialization of social policy, individuals become vulnerable, and luck, individual ingenuity, and the ability to assert interests have become increasingly important determinants of families' situations. Double dependency, the lack of social rights, and the conception of children as a form of currency create a new type of debt that has not yet been thoroughly discussed in the literature on the role of loans in social policy. Another emerging modality that the special issue addresses is the strengthening of new forms of private service delivery, such as homeschooling. Kaščák and colleagues conducted interviews with homeschooled parents in Czechia and Slovakia. The article engages with the American debate about the relationship between conservative ideologies and neoliberal governance in homeschooling and

explores the extent to which parents' perspectives align with the neoliberal ethos in a policy context closely controlled by the Czech and Slovak states, respectively. One cluster of parents was characterized by secular motives centered on perceptions of risk and the necessity of protecting their children. Another group exhibited a form of religion-driven privatism. They were typically motivated by a mix of ideological and pedagogical drives, including views strongly correlated with the neoliberal ethos. The authors argue that homeschooling should be interpreted as a privatized but not necessarily neoliberalized form of education in the Czech context. In Slovakia, strong convergence between neo-liberal governance and conservatism was identified in the homeschooling sector, where religious motivations led parents to use the resources associated with neoliberal education governance.

Several papers engage with the affective dynamics of privatizing childcare and education services. Malin Bennerdal, Linda Rönnberg, Joakim Lindgren, and Sara Carlbaum's article explores Swedish early childhood education and care (ECEC) governance and delivery, focusing on the affective relations between private preschool providers and local municipal authorities. They discuss how private preschool operators perceive, express, and 'feel' different municipal market stewardship activities, and how local affective atmospheres and market care (or the lack thereof) shape private-municipal relations in local quasi-markets as key dimensions of the governance of privatized ECEC. The analysis focuses on affective dimensions, employing the notion of 'market care' and introducing a two-dimensional grid wherein predictability and conflict serve as analytical focal points. The paper concludes that experiences and perceptions are enabled, provoked, and felt differently depending on their embeddedness in diverse local 'affective atmospheres.' The paper contributes to the predominantly national and state-focused literature on ECEC governance by highlighting how national regulations are enacted and interpreted locally by individuals who meet, interact, and form relationships, and how these relationships and trust evolve (positively or negatively) through these interactions.

Other papers extend the vast legacy of researching parental choice and the drivers behind the steadily growing interest in private institutions. Like Kaščák and colleagues, who found that homeschooling parents feel solely responsible for raising and educating their children, in one way or another, all these papers touch upon how parents experience individual responsibility and the self-responsibilization imposed on them in the wake of the retreat of the state and austerity measures (Peters, 2016). In all cases, the image of under-resourced and declining quality state education has been a primary driver that prompts parents to seek alternative schooling options and increase their investment in their children's education, often by taking on extraordinary financial burdens.

Analyzing how parents justify their choice of leaving the state sector and opting for private alternatives, Ingvil Bjordal and Mette Nygård contend that privatization is a complex phenomenon that cannot be fully comprehended from an economic consumer perspective. In Norway, the education policy context has been characterized historically by the strong position and high valuation of public schools. The authors' interviews highlight that parents who opt for private schools comprise a diverse group with different opinions about school, values, and wishes stemming from diverse previous school experiences. Those who chose a private education from the start differ in crucial ways from 'transfer' parents. While members of the former group make informed and planned decisions about specific schools, members of the latter are generally less informed and knowledgeable and

typically motivated by resignation or necessity rather than choice. Furthermore, even though the profiles of the private schools play an important role, parental choice is often associated with the perception of a decrease in the quality of public schooling, extending to inadequate material, financial, and external conditions. Therefore, educational privatization and the steadily growing interest in private alternatives are closely associated with the growing mistrust in state schools as a pedagogical project prompted by centralization and deregulation, as well as the endogenous privatization of public education (the introduction of performance management and outcome- and competence-based curricula). The authors challenge the widely held view that privatization is a typical right-wing political phenomenon. The Norwegian case illustrates that social democratic politicians who oppose the privatization of education have often promoted privatization *in* education, and thus unintentionally contributed to fostering an educational environment that stimulates parental support for private alternatives.

Fanni Puskás's study reveals how marginalized Roma parents experience educational privatization in a small town. This research presents a new perspective on the impact of outsourcing public education to faith-based organizations in Hungary. Applying the lens of critical race theory and its focus on counter-storytelling to deficit positionings, the analysis amplifies the voices of Roma parents and explores how they have experienced and interpreted the impact of the churchification of the education system in a Hungarian town. Roma parents highlighted that declining state funding and the privatization of schools have created a context that has increased the material burden (extra travel costs and contributions, and correspondingly, the loss of community attachment to the local school) on them. Their choices were indeed constrained, and in the local setting, the 'loving' segregation offered by one of the church-run schools seemed the best, safest, and most viable choice. The churchification process also diverted resources from the public sector that would have ensured a safe, caring, and supportive institutional pedagogical environment. As boundaries based on private resources have been radically redrawn within the local school system, Roma parents have been subjected to sharpening 'deficit' positionings and racialization.

Finally, Boldizsár Szentgáli-Tóth and Orsolya Zita Ferencz explore privatized schooling from the perspective of constitutional case law and students' rights in private schools through a detailed exploration of the Pridwin judgment of the Constitutional Court of South Africa. The authors argue that the Pridwin judgment created a proper distinction between the rights and interests of the four main actors: students, private school management, parents of students, and state authorities. They contend that once private stakeholders take part in fulfilling constitutional tasks such as providing schooling, they should comply with the same constitutional standards as if state authority were involved, since no differentiation should exist between students based on the background of their service providers. The authors formulate recommendations concerning the prioritization of students' educational rights, provided that they are carefully balanced with the legitimate rights and interests of other relevant stakeholders, including private school management, parents, and state authorities.

This special issue explores how different modalities of the privatization of public services have reassembled societal relations and prompted the emergence of new subjectivities. The articles highlighted that privatized institutional choices are no longer a middle-class privilege, but rather markers of aspirations and investment in becoming or sustaining a

middle-class position. While we were originally interested in children's experiences, the manuscripts we received predominantly focused on the perspectives of providers and parents. This suggests that privatized childhood subjectivities are still an uncharted research area. Several authors concluded that the extraction of public funding from classical public services and the expansion of the market is supported by a dominant public discourse that stresses parental responsibilities and diminishes the state's role as a provider. Breaking down the force of such a responsibilization discourse will be essential to reimagining education and childcare as a collective good.

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