



The Erosion of Childhood*

Reviewed by
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This is an important book, written with compassion and engagement; a feminist book, written by a feminist who cares about the way we in our culture live with our children. It is written in clear, elegant English and, at the same time, is an excellent example of careful research and critical reflection. As Freire says in his foreword, "it demands to be read."

The first chapter "The idea of childhood" brings us immediately to the heart of the matter, "the quest for the meaning of a modern childhood" (p. 4). As the research study is about the actual state of daycare practices in the U.S.A., this chapter makes clear that this state has to be understood in the context of our culture: a culture which is in doubt about the meaning of childhood; doubts that are mirrored in the many ways we look at our children. Children are objects of endearment, but at the same time we put them in places like daycare where we hardly know what happens to them. Nowadays, as in the past, the cultural meaning of childhood is full of "paradoxes" (p. 17); these paradoxes are not only present in our theories about children but are in a sense paradoxes of real life. Children are in permanent danger of becoming the victims of our own ambivalences about life itself. As we are insecure about our own future, the future of the human race, we give them little reason for hope or faith in their future. As we are "underachievers" in our own life, we burden them vicariously with our own aspirations. But the author shows us convincingly that these paradoxes are the outcome of a history of cultural meanings of childhood.

As she acknowledges, the history of childhood is much more complex than Ariès originally could present on the basis of available historical evidence. For example, the Montaigne study of LeRoy Ladurie makes it impossible to make sweeping statements about the Middle Ages. In addition, authors like Flandrin (writing about sexuality) and many others contradict the idea that the Middle Ages was a kind of monolithic unity of ideas. As many of these studies are in French and German, there is a certain delay before these studies penetrate the Anglo-Saxon scholarly community. If the author had read books like Bonnie G. Smith's *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoise of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century*, she would have seen how different the lives of boys and of girls are in the same culture and how different their culture of childhood can be, particularly how different the North of France was in comparison with England. *Deutsche Kindheiten, 1700-1900, Autobiographische Zeugnisse*, would confirm the enormous diversity of children's experiences in England as does J. Burnett's *Destiny Obscure, Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820's to the 1920's*. But these unavoidable shortcomings in historical information don't hinder the fact that this chapter paints a remarkably clear confrontation of the historical images of childhood and the "feminist-constructed" images of childhood. The implications of this confrontation are then seen in their interwovenness with our scientific

*Valerie Polakow Suransky. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

and industrial society where children are domesticated for the benefit of our adult society. If we rediscover childhood, are we at the same time eroding "its very ontology as a life phase" (p. 27)? To avoid the typical alienation of social scientific practice from real life, the author decided to do her research as an "anthropologist of childhood" and to "enter into a dialogical encounter" with those whose lives we are attempting to understand and portray.

Hence in the second chapter "The question of method" is at the center. Suransky shows how an alienated science and a technological ideology fuse together in our educational system; she pleads for a "human science" that is "in search of meaning," a phenomenological and hermeneutic approach to the real "landscape of childhood."

In the third chapter the focus of her discussion concentrates on that "specific form of modern-day childhood—played out in the living theater of childcare institution" (p. 41). In order to do so, she gives us first a very useful historical overview of the schooling of childhood, of childcare, and of the "great ideological debate." It becomes clear that to answer the question about the quality of daycare, one looks not only from the outside but from within. At this point it "becomes appropriate to open the 'windows on daycare' and step inside and live there for a while, to breathe the air of this microcosmic landscape where 'small facts speak to large issues'" (p. 54).

Thus, the second part of her book gives five composite pictures. If the first part of *The Erosion of Childhood* is an example of brilliant theorising, this second part is an articulate and convincing narrative—as convincing as portraits in vivid colors can be. To summarize the pictures of these five centers would be to destroy the richness of the thick descriptions. Let us just mention the titles that speak for themselves: "Golda Meir Nursery School," "Busy Bee Montessori Center," "Lollipop Learning Center, Inc.," "Martin Luther King Childcare Center," "Pine Woods Free School."

Lifestyle and theory of education are both understood as daily realities of the child's lifeworld. One wishes that these chapters could be separately available for parents to become informed consumers of their children's daycare; they could very well be used as a preparation for parents or parent-teacher discussions. Commercial daycare would perhaps be screaming, but at least there would be a greater critical awareness about these vital issues affecting children's lives. Montessori orthodoxy would be challenged, but would that not be for the benefit of our children?

In the final chapters the author concludes: "Childhood is a natural state, a life phase of the human project, but the particular *forms* of childhood created through the social ideology of 'schooling' embedded in early childhood institutions have, in many ways, eroded that life phase and imposed a false structure of meaning on 'the ontological development of the child'" (p. 171).

She presents a convincing argument that children, especially the little ones (often not even considered in many studies of the schooling experience), get a chance to live "in open communion with the world" and are given the possibility to play without the restraints of an adult centered ideology of regimentation and coercion. The being of childhood should be met with respect and love: "childhood and adulthood constitute the primordial dialectic of our human experience" (p. 202).

Before concluding this review, I would like to make a last remark. In a book as socially meaningful as this, a detailed account of the methodological technicalities would be a further asset. I understand that a detailed account could harm the literary unity of the book, and not all readers would be interested in the intricacies of the methodological issues. However, it may be the case that some readers will wrongly think her participatory research is any easy task—not so. For those students in social sciences, interested in the qualitative approach, who may look for exemplary guidance, some practical methodological guidelines would be useful. This book should attract many readers, and maybe a second edition could include a methodological appendix or an elaborated note about all the practicalities involved in this kind of research.

Bookcovers are sometimes more flattering than the text deserves. Not so in this case. Thus, it is appropriate to conclude aptly with a quotation from the cover: "Her conclusions, carefully yet fervently argued, form a basis for a new understanding of childhood, pointing to childcare that will protect both the interests of children and the rights of women."

References

- Smith, Bonnie G. *Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoise of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Burnett, J. *Destiny Obscure, Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820's to the 1920's*. London: Allen Lane, 1982.
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