

# Historical reframing of childhood

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"The grown-up squatted down to be at the child's level, doing so in an ungraceful manner."

From: 'Bint. Roman van een zender.' by F. Bordewijk, 1934, p. 111, Utrecht: De gemeenschap.

*Rector Magnificus, ladies and gentlemen,*

Western man is a Child of the Enlightenment. Being a thinker, speaker and writer about children, I have no choice but to come to terms with the Enlightenment. However, because of the legacy of post-modern French philosophers in particular, one could be inclined to assume that the wonderful ideas of the Enlightenment have become outdated.

## Not Post-Modern

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), arguably the most famous post-modernist, warned against the fatal pursuit of certainty, which he thought was closely related to the tradition of Enlightenment, a pursuit he disapprovingly referred to as "*logocentrism*". "Derrida's thinking did not develop any propositions *of its own*, but opened up themes and strategies *undermining* Western tradition from within", as can be read on a web site<sup>1</sup>, aimed at school children. This type of philosophy is called *deconstruction*; Derrida *deconstructs*. Roland Barthes (1915-1980), the first to proclaim "the death of the author", claimed that texts are multi-interpretable, and even worse, implied that there can *never* be solid grounds for holding some interpretations more true than others (see Postman, 2000). Post-modernism at its best! The French post-modernists are not alone in this, though, the social constructivism of the American psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) being another example of this line of thinking. "Words do not reflect reality, but are expressions of group conventions." (p. 119).

It is striking that many post-modern French philosophers were eager to use complex physical and mathematical reasonings. They seem to have done so mainly to impress, as authors nor readers could have understood much of it. Fortunately, this has been challenged effectively.

One of the first books to attack this reprehensible profundity was: "*Higher superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science*" by Gross and Levitt (1994, 1996). In response to the first print of 1994, the *New York Acad-*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://drcwww.uvt.nl/~ljansen/filosooof/gesch/index.htm>

emy of Sciences in 1995 held a conference named "The Flight from Science and Reason", the report of which was published in a book (Gross et al., 1996). After reading this report, Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, realised that post-modernism is based on absurdities (Hulspas, 1998). He collected a great many nonsensical quotes from post-modern philosophical works and turned these into a bulky fake article, which he submitted to *Social Text* magazine. His article was given the very post-modern title of "Transgressing the Boundaries: towards a transformative hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" (Sokal, 1996a). The magazine editors were very pleased and published the article without any reserves. They considered it a godsend for a theme issue, intended to parry criticism of physicists on post-modernism. Prior to publication, Sokal had his intention drawn up by a solicitor and on the very same day that the article was published, he gave an explanation in a well-read scientific magazine, *Lingua Franca*, acknowledging that his *Social Text* contribution was actually a hideous pack of fashionable post-modern sounding rubbish (Sokal, 1996b). Like no other, Sokal exposed the post-modern emperor's clothes, or if you like: *deconstructed deconstruction*. An awful commotion ensued, the effects of which are still reverberating today, more than 10 years later. At first, there was no or little response from French philosophers. This changed after Sokal, together with Bricmont, published the book "Impostures Intellectuelles" (1997), in which they elaborated upon the physical nonsense in many post-modern texts. This book was a great success and was printed and reprinted in many languages (e.g. Sokal & Bricmont, 1997, 1998a,b, 1999). When it received attention from *Le Monde*, all hell broke loose, much to the disadvantage of French post-modern philosophers, particularly Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Paul Virilio.

For a balanced view it may be good to add that the editors of *Social Text* are not unique in accepting a fake article. You may have the mistaken idea that such a thing is particularly likely to happen in the field of social sciences. I feel impelled to strongly refute this, as it can also happen in other fields, like physics, of which the Bogdanov affair<sup>2</sup> is an example. Twin brothers Igor and Grichna Bogdanov wrote six articles on theoretical physics and had them published in peer reviewed magazines like *Annals of Physics* and *Classical and Quantum Gravity*. The articles were accepted, some after adjustment of mere details peer reviewers disagreed with. The articles were deliberately *completely* "fake". This affair shows that editorial failures are not restricted to magazines like *Social Text*, but also occur in other scientific disciplines. I anxiously and emphatically urge you to *never* believe in the authority of a scholar or of a scientific magazine, but to always study with critical distrust the texts you wish to use and to declare what you do not understand *unclear* and therefore *not* useful.

## Enlightenment: Kant and Rousseau

This call takes us to the greatest Enlightenment philosopher of all, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who said: "... autonomous thinking is finding the ultimate test of truth in oneself (i.e. in one's own reason); and the fundamental principle of repeated autonomous thinking is Enlightenment." I recommend you to reread his pamphlet "*Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung*"<sup>3</sup> from 1784 (see Kant, 1799), containing the appeal: "Habe Mut, dich deines eigenen

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<sup>2</sup> [http://quantumfuture.net/quantum\\_future/bogdanov1.htm](http://quantumfuture.net/quantum_future/bogdanov1.htm)

<sup>3</sup> In English: "An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment"

Verstandes zu bedienen!"<sup>4</sup>. "*Sapere aude!*" Even, to make a contemporary addition, when reading claims in "peer reviewed" "top" journals.

From the foregoing you will have gathered that I am happily inspired by the Enlightenment and take little or no notice of post-modernists, who I do not understand. As my scientific work is mainly concerned with children, I will focus on child development and upbringing when describing the course of history from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Kant's admiration for Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) will serve as the basis of this description. Rousseau's "*Émile, ou de l'éducation*"<sup>5</sup> from 1762 was called "the birth certificate of pedagogy" by Kant (see Prins, 1963, p. 139) and was later received with at least equal enthusiasm by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) as "the natural gospel of education", and by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) as a "divine work" (see Soëtard, 1989, p. 144).<sup>6</sup> I believe that no educationalist or developmental psychologist can bear this professional title with honour without having determined his or her own standpoint in relation to Rousseau's *Émile*. Until some 50 years ago, my colleagues would have endorsed this without a doubt. I am afraid that now they may ironically raise their shoulders, for what importance has history to modern empirical researchers?

What message did Rousseau wish to convey? He claimed that pedagogy should be child-oriented, that there are age-related stages, to which the approach towards the child, including the pedagogical and educational approach, must be tailored. And that children must only be offered knowledge when they display a need for it. Moreover, knowledge must spring from a child's own explorations, from hands-on experience, preferably not from books. It should certainly not be exposed to wisdom from books before the age of 12! Despite all enthusiasm, of Kant among others, Rousseau's book should in the first place be regarded as a revolutionary Enlightenment text, *not* as a pedagogical handbook. His book stemmed from the tradition which Jonathan Israel named *Radical Enlightenment* (Israel, 2001, 2005). According to Israel, the key figure of this radical Enlightenment is Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677), *our* Spinoza. The "Epilogue" of Israel's book is entitled: "*Rousseau, radicalism, revolution*". Spinoza by way of Denis Diderot (1713-1784) led to Rousseau and the French revolution. The *Émile* was indeed radical. In the *Émile* the author pointed out that he did not only rebel against French society, but also and foremost against its *reproduction* (Soëtard, 1989, p. 97). Rousseau thought that children should be taken "back to nature" (however, this expression does not appear in Rousseau's writings<sup>7</sup>), that is as far away as possible from Parisian decadence. Children should learn to think autonomously, without being led astray by French culture, without following other people's wisdom from books. This Enlightenment idea is the radical expression of the primacy of the autonomously thinking individual, which had great appeal to Kant. And this is the reason that Rousseau's *Émile* is a book for philosophers, *not* for educationalists, fathers and mothers, as Rousseau emphasized (Bloom, 1979, p. 28). However, to no avail!

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<sup>4</sup> In English: "Have courage to use your own understanding!"

<sup>5</sup> Hereinafter referred to as the *Émile*.

<sup>6</sup> Hardly any philosophers have been written about as much as Rousseau, including voluminous literature on the reception of Rousseau's thinking as such (e.g. L'Aminot, 1992). Classical works on Rousseau include: Cassirer (1932,1955), Burgelin (1952), Rang (1959). An accessible and abundantly illustrated biography is Soëtard (1989). Sound Dutch introductions include: Roland Holst (1918), Brugmans (1951), Van der Velde (1967). Furthermore, there is a series entitled *Annales de la Société Jean Jacques Rousseau* from Geneva (since 1905).

<sup>7</sup> In the preface to his work, Rousseau did, however, write about human beings as plants: 'On façonne les plantes par la culture, et les hommes par l'éducation.'

The first 4 books (parts) of the *Émile* describe the stages of a child's cognitive and moral development, and also how the upbringer must respect and be in keeping with these stages. The correspondence with the theory of the future founder of developmental psychology, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), in his lifetime director of "*l'Institut J.-J. Rousseau*" in Geneva, is striking. Thanks to Piaget's research of cognitive development, the Institute became the most prestigious centre for pedagogical and developmental psychological research worldwide for the largest part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Piaget's and Rousseau's stage theories are like two peas in a pod. At first glance, this may not seem odd. After all, Rousseau was from Geneva and the Genevan Institute must have been named after him for some good reason. That, however, is *too* simple a line of reasoning. It should be realised that Piaget's stage theory is deemed to be the result of unprecedented large-scale and worldwide, be it mainly Western, empirical research. Particularly, observing his own five children was a rich source of scientific ideas to Piaget. Contrastingly, Rousseau abandoned his 6 children immediately after birth; he did not like children of flesh and blood at all. The boy *Émile* is a mere literary concoction. So how can it be that Piaget discovered in empirical research what Rousseau had made up in the process of writing? I think there is a simple answer: European education, particularly in public schools, was shaped according to Rousseau's ideas, despite Rousseau's warnings. Below I will describe this process in a nutshell.

### **The *Émile* and community schooling**

The most important source of Rousseauian education was located in Dessau, Germany, home to the *Philantropinum*, a model school, also teacher training school, founded by educationalist Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790). The fact that these educationalists called themselves "philanthropists" displayed a pedagogical enthusiasm, very much in accordance with the Rousseauian belief in a benign human nature. They were dedicated to "natural education" and aimed at "... developing a child's possibilities as freely as possible, creating a cheerful development and learning atmosphere, stimulating autonomous thinking, and facilitating a world orientation and practical attitude to life which are focused on the present." (Reble, 1977, p. 62).

Johann Friedrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), an educationalist who was inspired by these Philantropines, implemented Rousseau's educational ideas in Switzerland. He and his wife Anna read and commented on the *Émile* and preferred to call their son Jacob by the name of Jean Jacques. Although Pestalozzi rejected the *Émile* as an "unpractical dream book" (Noordam, 1975, p. 227), he was greatly influenced by it. Like Rousseau, he emphasized a child's self-motivation, spontaneity and natural development. The pedagogy influenced by Pestalozzi is generally referred to with the slogan "*Vom Kinde aus*" (Gläser, 1920) and is very succinctly expressed in his following quote: "Alles was du bist, alles was du willst, alles was du sollst, geht von dir selber aus" (quote from Van der Velde, 1967, p. 39).

The ideas of the Philantropines and Pestalozzi not only influenced each other, but also reached the homes of modern upper-middle class citizens. A fine example is the upbringing of Otto van Eck, which Baggerman and Dekker (2005, 2006) have reported on. The enlightened environment, in which Otto was raised in The Hague around 1800, had been introduced to modern educational methods. This boy's everyday life, which has remained accessible through his diaries, is much like *Émile*'s life. He has his own garden, in which he seeds and plants and

harvests. He walks around carrying his weeder, hammer and chisel, accompanied by a goat. Clearly, his father, a patriot and Batavian revolutionary, had learnt a lot from Rousseau. His son Otto had to be raised on the land, in close contact with nature, far away from what Rousseau had called “the sewers of the human race” (see Baggerman and Dekker, 2006, p. 39). The Philantropines adopted these principles from Rousseau, although they did make them more bourgeois. Being a radical Enlightenment, Rousseau in his *Émile* made it clear how much he rejected the decadence of prevailing French culture, and in doing so he paved the way for the French revolution. The Philantropines, however, did not take their children to the depths of the woods, as far away as possible from urban life, like Rousseau did with *Émile*. Rather, they built school gardens in the urban areas in which their schools were located.<sup>8</sup> Rousseau deemed simple craftsman work much more important than what he condescendingly called armchair learning. The Philantropines agreed, but very much unlike Rousseau they did not let their pupils work autonomously. They organised trips to workshops, farms and factories. It is true to say that Rousseau's radical enlightened educational ideas were turned into bourgeois variations by the Philantropines, who practised urbanised variations and reflection based on books. These refined variations of Rousseau are encountered when one has the opportunity, thanks to Baggerman and Dekker, to browse through Otto van Eck's diaries. Otto's example also shows how the middle class slowly developed a breeding ground for organising community schooling.

The second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century marked the beginning of the establishment of Primary Schools (de Swaan, 2004) in Prussia. They were inspired by both the Philantropines in Dessau and Pestalozzi in Switzerland. In the Netherlands, the initiative was mainly taken by the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen*<sup>9</sup>. This organisation<sup>10</sup> was founded in Edam in 1784 (see Mijnhardt and Wichers, 1984) by Jan Nieuwenhuyzen (1724-1806), mennonite preacher in Monnikendam, who was among others assisted by his son Martinus. Johan Hendrik Wildens (1745-1809) most likely was the *auctor intellectualis* (instigator). He was a fervent patriot and professor in Franeker, whose ideas can be recognised in *Het Nut*: striving for general public schooling, educating children to become democratic citizens, and child-rearing in a general Christian spirit of tolerance and love for one's home country. *Het Nut* founded many primary schools and a number of teacher training schools, published numerous educational books and took to translating and editing foreign pedagogical works (mainly from Dessau and Pestalozzi's Switzerland). Also, it established public libraries and savings banks, and held courses for adults, providing systematic information on vital questions and general knowledge. In 1796, *Het Nut* submitted a proposal to the National Assembly to centrally organise education and to found a general national school. It is in this spirit that the first Dutch School Acts for primary education of 1801, 1803 and 1806 were adopted. The Community Seminary for Pedagogy in Amsterdam, in 1918 founded at the instigation of Philipp Abraham Kohnstamm (1875-1951), must be mentioned separately. Physicist Kohnstamm became extraordinary professor of pedagogy on account of *Het Nut*, and is generally considered as the father of Dutch pedagogy. However, I think much is in favour of giving that honour to Johannes Hermanus Gunning Wzn. (1859-1951),

<sup>8</sup> The Dutch school garden can also be traced back to Dessau. About 10 years ago, from my room in the Free University building I saw one of the last Amsterdam school gardens fall prey to the “prestigious” Zuidas project.

<sup>9</sup> Society for the Community/Benefit of the Public, hereinafter named *Het Nut*.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nutalgemeen.nl/>

who in 1898 became the first private lecturer of pedagogy at Utrecht University. In 1900, Gunning commented on his discipline "... that it has many meddlers and doubters, shaking their heads over their profession" (Gunning 1900), which is still a very relevant remark today. A little ironically, in 1907 he called his profession an "*ars conjecturalis*" (a "guessing art") (Gunning, 1911, p. 297). Between 1923-1929 he was extraordinary professor of pedagogy in Utrecht.

My nutshell description of the history of education and upbringing so far can be summarised as follows. German, Swiss and Dutch modern pedagogy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be traced back to Rousseau and, by way of a Rousseauian organisation of the Primary School (originally a Prussian initiative), institutionalised and in a culturally historical way realised the ideas on child development Rousseau devised at his writing table. So much so that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Piaget's empirical research reveals a developmental course which is very similar to the prototypical development of Rousseau's *Émile*.

### Progress in Enlightenment and Romanticism

About one thing the Enlightenment critics – including the post-modernists – were right: Enlightenment was riddled with an unjustified belief in Progress. The monumental work from the Enlightenment, the Encyclopedia by Diderot, d'Alembert and co., intended: "... to further develop our descendants and at the same time make them more virtuous and fortunate." ("Knowledge is a virtue", was the motto in *Het Nut* circles). Both history and Rousseau's *Émile* were thought to be characterised by a spontaneous, natural development for the better. I think there are two objections to this. Firstly, learning does not automatically lead to a higher morality and, secondly, there is no reason to assume that reality develops into something better and more beautiful by law of nature. By now these objections have been generally accepted, so much so that many contemporary intellectuals consider the Enlightenment superseded. Drawing on an acute and rapturous essay by philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, I would like to forcefully object to this notion to prevent the baby from being thrown out with the bathwater.

In "*La défaite de la pensée*"<sup>11</sup> Finkielkraut (1987, 1988) displayed the sad consequences of the introduction of the term *Volksgeist* by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) in 1774. Before exploring the fatal thinking of Herder and German Romanticism in more detail, it should be realised that German Romanticism was motivated by the Prussian defeat at the battle of Jena in 1806. In Jena, the Prussians (joined by allied forces) suffered a crushing and unexpected defeat against Napoleon. It was not without reason that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) spoke of "the end of history" (see Fukuyama, 1989, 1992), implying that history had been completed with the permanent establishment of the principles of the French revolution, of the liberal democratic state.<sup>12</sup> In Prussia, the intellectuals responded by withdrawing into a Romanticism which was primarily based on Herder, thereby creating a counter-movement to the French Enlightenment. A counter-movement in honour of the unique German *Volksgeist*. A counter-movement to the French Enlightenment, which contradictorily was also founded on Rousseau's sentimentalism. This intensified post-Jena Romanticism

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<sup>11</sup> In English: "The undoing of thought".

<sup>12</sup> In 1989 Francis Fukuyama was to announce the end of history for the second time, the fall of the Berlin Wall marking a permanent victory of economic and political liberalism, not only in Europe, but also around the world (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992).

centred on the romanticised Child personifying the hope for a better future. The finest abstract of this new creature is a lost drawing by Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810) from 1809, shown on the cover of this booklet. According to art historian Robert Rosenblum (1988), this drawing is *the* symbol of the Romantic Child, just like Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of a naked man in a circle and square has become the symbol of Renaissance man. "... This drawing of 1809 can also be seen to evoke a state of natural innocence and religious purity so primal that the vision of a sacred beginning to a radiantly new and magical world can hover in our imagination above the baby's fixed gaze." (Rosenblum, 1988, p. 9).

Notwithstanding the beautiful wordings of German Romanticism, in the wake of Alain Finkielkraut we must be extraordinarily fearful of its ideological core. As his name reveals, Finkielkraut was born in [Alsace-Lorraine](#) and has, at least so he alleges, like no other philosopher access to the unique social environment of this particular area, representing the clash between German Romanticism and French Enlightenment. After Herder, says Finkielkraut, the term culture is *no* longer associated with science, does no longer refer to diminishing prejudice and ignorance, but expresses the irreducible individuality of the unique soul of the people (Finkielkraut, 1987, p. 13 ff.). Herder's Germanic Romanticism provided what Finkielkraut expressively called "the maternal warmth of prejudice" (p. 27). The *Volksggeist* proved to be "the most dangerous explosive of modern times"<sup>13</sup> and resulted in two world wars.

After the Second World War, the United Nations in London created a special division which was to devote itself to science and culture, UNESCO. They intended to create an organisation which would protect against abuse of power "... and which would arm people with knowledge and understanding permanently against demagogical attempts at leading their thinking astray" (p. 54). This implies, says Finkielkraut, that government officials and intellectual authorities in London intuitively endorsed the spirit of the Enlightenment. However, in one respect they did not, and this still has an impact today. In the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* the universal subject of man has been replaced by actual people, in all their diverse modes of existence.

This was prompted by a text, *Race et histoire*, written in 1950 by cultural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-present), upon the request of UNESCO (Lévi-Strauss, 1951). Firstly, Lévi-Strauss states that the term race has zero scientific value. Differences between human groups stem from "geographical, historical and social circumstances", not from "anatomical or physiological conditions". Secondly, he tells us to resist value hierarchy. "The many shapes adopted by mankind in time and space cannot be categorised in an order of increasing perfection: they are no beacons lighting the road to triumph, no stages on the way to the highest form of civilisation: Western" (based on the translation by Finkielkraut, p. 56). This is the very temptation the enlightened philosophers succumbed to: placing human communities on a scale of values, occupying the highest level themselves (p. 56). This repugnant conviction laid the foundations for colonialism, and formed the basis of the closely connected 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnological science. However, when ethnologists discovered the complexity of traditions and modes of living in so-called primitive societies, they did not take part in it anymore, as Lévi-Strauss made clear. Ethnology became *cultural anthropology* and the general Enlightened notion of man was replaced by a non-hierarchical diversity of culturally specific characters (p. 65).

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<sup>13</sup> This expression is from the French historian Ernest Renan (1823-1892), in response to the German conquest of Alsace Lorraine in 1870. See Finkielkraut (1988, p. 133).

The essence of Finkelkraut's essay now is that it makes clear that Lévi-Strauss strikes out at hierarchising so strongly that in doing so he also abolishes the universality of Enlightenment thinking. And Lévi-Strauss has gathered a following. Following structural anthropology, all life sciences have opened the hunt for ethnocentrism, leading to what Finkelkraut dramatisingly calls "the second death of mankind" (p. 59) (the first being that of Romanticism). Contemporary fanatics of cultural identity have continued to glorify the collective soul, a glorification stemming from the term *Volksgeist* and culminating in racial theory and Hitlerism (p. 76-79).<sup>14</sup>

## Child development in Enlightenment and Romanticism

The described course of history from Herder to Lévi-Strauss is also applicable to thinking about children. Developmental psychologist Bill Kessen made clear that the modern child and the mere concept of child development to a large extent are cultural constructions. Developmental psychology itself can be characterised as "... a peculiar invention that moves with the tidal sweeps of the larger culture." (Kessen, 1993; see also Kessen, 1979).

Enlightenment and its notion of progress (Rousseau) believed that the child itself, through natural education and development, would work its way to the highest level: that of adult Western cultural man. Rousseau's adoration of the "noble savage" (see for example Rousseau, 1755 and 1762) formed the basis for a hierarchical organisation of peoples and of child development stages. Piaget endorsed this line of thinking as is illustrated by the influence exerted by the cultural anthropologist he frequently quoted, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), who wrote classic works on "... les sociétés inférieures" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1910) and on "*La Mentalité primitive*" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1922). In this last book, he described the thinking of "primitive" man as being "pre-logic", a characterisation which Piaget applied to young children. In its development a child passes through different phases, from primitive to developed. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this concept was biologised (Morss, 1990). The biogenetic law of Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) from Jena, which was as influential as it was controversial, stated: "ontogenesis is a recapitulation of phylogenesis". This fundamental law gave child development the status of a firm phylogenetically embedded structure and became the basis of Western developmental psychology (see Koops, 1983, 1990). William Thierry Preyer (1841-1897), a friend of Haeckel's, is generally considered the author of the first thorough developmental psychological study (Preyer, 1882). Although exaggerating a little, I am inclined to say that developmental psychology could not but originate from the battlefield of Jena. In the works of many key figures in the history of developmental psychology a strong echo of Haeckel's biogenetic law can be discerned (Koops, 1983, 1990), very much so in the work of Jean Piaget. This implies that the child in its individual development rises from the primitive level to the highest level, that of Western European cultural man, by law of nature.

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<sup>14</sup> And, I am inclined to add, which in the current multi-cultural debate in the Netherlands has taken the form of anti-Muslim activism. Such tragic *Volksgeist* thinking is justified by a fine Enlightenment principle: freedom of speech. By now it has become clear that the universal tenability of this principle is open to question (see for instance: Giesen, 2008).



After the Second World War, the idea of hierarchical organised stages has been challenged little by little. Lévi-Strauss has done away with the reprehensible idea of the primitive state of natural peoples, which formed a justification of colonisation. He has done so in such a radical way that in modern cultural anthropology the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater for shame of the incomparability of pre-logical thinking by so-called savages and by children. In a fine article on the question of *"Why don't Anthropologists Like Children?"* Hirschfeld (2002) recalls an extract from the essay by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) on *The Anti-Semite* (Sartre, 1954). Following an unpleasant experience with a Jewish furrier, Sartre's Anti-Semite started hating Jews, not furriers (Sartre, 1954, p. 14). Similarly, cultural anthropologists felt very awkward about comparing children with natural peoples and as a result gave up studying children, not peoples.<sup>15</sup> Applying Lévi-Strauss' view to the stages of child development dismisses the idea that these stages are hierarchically interrelated (see Van der Veer, 1985, p. 108; Van IJzendoorn et al., 1981, p. 66), and results in age groups being considered groups with an independent "culture". Ultimately, the concept of childhood loses its meaning. According to authors who will be discussed below, this has indeed happened since the seventies of the last century. A fine example of this new *de*-infantilising thinking is a book by the Dutch children's book author Guus Kuijer, who describes a stage theory equivalent to Piaget's as "a series of locks ensuring that not a spark of "childlikeness" accidentally passes into adulthood." (Kuijer, 1980, p. 15). In such a view, the classical idea of childlikeness primarily consists of contempt of childhood. Relinquishing this contempt would imply humane respect for children, resulting in the disappearance of the child. Has this indeed happened?

### **The disappearance of childhood**

According to culture critic and media specialist Neil Postman (1931-2003), the Western child started to disappear in the early sixties (Postman, 1992). Following the widely known beliefs of historian Philippe Ariès (1914-1984)<sup>16</sup>, Postman observed that without education, or better without schools, there are no children in the modern sense of the word. After all: "In an illiterate society (like that of the Middle Ages) there was no need to sharply distinguish between children and adults, such a society harbours few secrets, and civilisation does not need to supply education in order to understand itself" (p. 22). The notion of the "child" is redundant if everyone shares the same information environment and lives in the same social and intellectual world. In the wake of many media experts and historians, Postman believed that the art of printing created a new world of symbols, which in its turn required a new interpretation of the notion of "adulthood" (p. 28).

The invention of the printing press, presumably by Gutenberg (1394-1468), most likely in 1440, resulted in "adulthood becoming a symbolic achievement, not a biological phenomenon. With the invention of the art of printing, children were required to develop, which would be effected by learning to read, by entering the world of typography", said Postman. As a result, children needed

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<sup>15</sup> Hirschfeld does exaggerate a little. Although there is no such thing as a well-established sub-discipline of the "cultural anthropology of the child", some interesting studies have been carried out. The most important of these studies are included in a very beautiful anthology. See Levine and New (2008).

<sup>16</sup> Ariès' book from 1960 (English translation from 1962) instigated historical research of childhood worldwide and led to the historical specialism of "*history of childhood*" (see also Koops, 1996, 1998, 2004; Koops & Elder, 1996).

education and were compelled to go to school. This made the notion of the "child" inevitable (p. 43). We can join Postman in observing that this notion had its "finest hour" between 1850 and 1950 (more appropriately a "finest century"). Children had to work in factories as little as possible and were sent to school without relent. They were given their own clothes, furniture, literature, games and social world. A process I have called "*infantilisation*" took place, a historical lengthening of childhood (see Koops, 1998). The person who according to Postman is responsible for the "childless era" starting after 1950 is Morse (1791-1872). Morse's invention of the telegraph (in 1837 demonstrated in public for the first time) further denaturalised information from "personal possession to merchandise of global value". "Telegraphy marked the beginning of the process of information becoming uncontrollable" (p. 74). All this affected the notion of the child immensely.

The child originated from an environment in which the information in books was controlled by adults and was gradually supplied to children. However, anonymisation as a result of telegraphy caused a development which would ultimately take away information from the authority of parents and the family. After the invention of telegraphy, this development was boosted by a continuous stream of inventions: the rotation press, camera, telephone, gramophone, film, radio, television (Postman, p. 76), culminating in what was not described by Postman, the launch of the *Internet*. Mainly because these modern means of communication primarily use image language, the typical characteristic of child-likeness, illiteracy, loses its meaning. Knowing the alphabet is not a requirement for understanding images (p. 81). Television, for example, removes the dividing lines between children and adults to a large extent: "Supported by other electronic media which do not rely on the written word, television re-creates communication conditions like those existing in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries" (p. 82); "... in the new media climate everything is available to everyone at the same time: electronic media "cannot keep secrets ..." and "... without secrets the notion of the "child" is void ..." (p. 83). Postman thoroughly demonstrated the actual disappearance of the child by presenting a large amount of (anecdotal) information on: the portrayal of young people as miniature adults in the media (p. 122); the disappearance of children's songs (p. 123); the fading of the Disney view of the child (p. 125); the disappearance of children's clothes, while adults have begun to wear clothes that were previously intended for children (p. 127 ff.); the disappearance of children's games (p. 129), while top-class sport has become normal to children (p. 129); and the decline of good manners (p. 132). All this together points to the decline of the notion of the "child", said Postman, "and accordingly to a weakening of the nature of adulthood".<sup>17</sup> Postman's book is concisely and powerfully summarised in the final sentence of the cover text: "The basic notion of this book – that our electronic information environment makes the "child" disappear – can also be read as follows: an electronic information environment makes the adult disappear".

Interestingly, the period discussed by Postman in relation to the disappearance of childhood, the seventies of the last century, also witnessed an un-

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<sup>17</sup> Significantly, many books have been published which intend to free the child from the chains of its immaturity. An example of these books is the book by Kuyer. Other examples are Illich's book, calling for a "de-schooling" of society as it hinders children from participating in an adult society (Illich, 1971); Holt's book, consistently pleading for freeing the child from the chains of a three-hundred-year-old tradition of servitude (Holt, 1976); and, finally, Farson's book, interpreting the rights of the child very literally and broadly, e.g. by demanding that children are given the right to vote, "because adults do not stand up for their interests and cannot vote on their behalf" (Farson, 1974, p. 179).

precedented large global research effort, centring on undermining Piaget's structural cognitive theory. In other words, the non-interconvertible developmental stages, referred to as cognitive structures, were gradually replaced by continuous domain-specific developmental processes. Neo-Piagetian research from that time undermined the presumptions of the Rousseau-Piaget tradition, which emphasised the *inaccessibility* of childlike thinking, like never before. The fanaticism with which the origins of all kinds of childlike rationality were explored, caused many a researcher to end as an *infancy expert* (Koops, 1990, 2003). This post neo-Piagetian research, among other things, resulted in research of *The Child's Theory of Mind*, experimentally demonstrating how two- to three-year-old children already have a command of current lay psychology, based on a simple theory of desires and beliefs. Meanwhile, the search for the increasingly younger origins of generally human means of communication has not come to an end. Onishi and Baillargeon (2005), for example, demonstrated in a fine article in *Science* magazine that 13-month-old babies basically have a command of generally human, ordinary communication principles ("beliefs" and "desires"). Remarkably, cultural historical developments – the disappearance of traditional childhood – go hand in hand with the experimental empirical scientific search for (and finding of!) generally human and age-independent means of communication. To put it briefly, developmental psychology moves with the tides of culture.

### **New possibilities**

It will be clear that the modern Western child, construed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – the Enlightened child – disappeared in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marking the end of the historical process of infantilisation. Traditional upbringing, which was based on this infantilisation, was referred to as "*Bringing up by keeping down*" in a much quoted publication of Dasberg (1995). In essence, it boiled down to setting the child apart from the adult world and leading it step by step into that adult world by what was called upbringing. This style of upbringing has become outmoded: infantilisation is behind us in the sense that borders and border guards have become inoperative. Mainly through electronic media, today's children have access to the adult world from the beginning, including the world of violence and sex, areas in which children on the basis of the then current pedagogy were not allowed access for two and a half centuries. Given the child's access to the Internet, it is an improbable atavism that American parents as late as in 2006 pressed charges against teachers persisting in marking school work with red ink (Stearns, *unpublished*). The parents feared that the feeble self-esteem of their vulnerable children would be damaged.

Raising children will have to be re-invented. We are assisted by a tremendous amount of sophisticated and splendid scientific research on child behaviour and on that of their upbringers. Today I will *not* elaborate on that. Modern behavioural genetic research (Rutter, 2006) into development will go undiscussed, as well as research using fMRI, recently pointed out by Michiel Westenberg in a fine lecture commemorating the Leiden University foundation day (Westenberg, 2008). However, I would like to point out that all this research will only prove advantageous *if we know what our objective is with regard to children*, and that is what we are in the dark about. Worse still, modern academic pedagogy is hardly occupied with it. People who like me are followers of Kant's much maligned successor, educationalist Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), are convinced that pedagogy as a science cannot do without ethics at the one hand and (developmental) psychology at the other (Herbart, 1841). The first helps to for-

ulate objectives, the latter offers the means to achieve them. An evolutionary view like Bjorklund's (2007), however relevant, will not help out. Bjorklund explained why a lengthy human youth is necessary to be able to adapt to an ever-changing culture. This view only makes clear why we should cherish an extended explorative childhood, but not if and how it should be oriented.

Let us return for a final time to the example set by Rousseau. His incredibly effective book on education was a book on a new ethical person in a Utopian society. This very context turned his book into such a success. Of course, we are not in a position nor do we wish to write a book in which a successor of Napoleon in a contemporary Jena establishes a child image using armed forces. Nevertheless, we could develop a vision of an ideal society in the spirit of which we would like to raise our children. In doing so, I recommend to restore the Enlightenment principles of rationality and autonomous and critical thinking; high-grade ethical principles forming the basis of a modern "*Contrat Social*" (Rousseau, 1762); and commitment to a democratic society in which freedom of speech and interhuman respect are balanced. All this needs to be worked out. However, it is good and reassuring to know that we can fall back on Enlightened classical literature.

## Plans

Many an orator sketches his or her current research and research plans. I will not do so. I have too many plans and they are rather variable, which forces me to be careful with what I reveal. Nevertheless, I would like to mention a few priorities.

In the next 6 years I intend to complete two books. The first one will bear the title: "*Image of a child*", that is if Gerrit Breeuwsma, respected colleague from Groningen, allows me to use it. He came up with this title for a book we were to write together at NIAS<sup>18</sup>, but which never saw the light of day. Meanwhile I have worked on it some years. It explores what I presented to you today in a nutshell. Subsequently, I would like to write, or rather organise, a second book, a book on the history and theories of developmental psychology and pedagogy, or in the words of our American colleagues, a book on "*history and systems*". This book will contain many contributions from experts from all over the world, who will write about the historical development of their specific research niche, but who are prepared to do so within the historical framework I presented to you today. Such a book on history and fundamentals does not exist yet and would constitute a major basis for the study of upbringing and development. I am sure you will forgive me for dreaming that after completion of that book nobody will ever study developmental psychology or pedagogy without reading *the Koops*. In other words, this book is a "must-write".

I would also like to mention that I keep myself busy with work for international academic societies in my field of study. Not only because I enjoy doing so, but also because it enables me to witness scientific developments first-hand and at interesting locations.

Within a national context, the chair the ADNG (Archive and Documentation Centre for Dutch Behavioural Sciences) I recently accepted, suits my new position very well and I expect to draw much inspiration from my work for this archive. My engagement is further fostered by the fact that the ADNG was established by two of my great teachers from Groningen: professors Piet van Strien and Willem Hofstee.

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<sup>18</sup> Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Locally, much "outreach" from my part can be anticipated. For example, the organisation of the annual *Studium Generale* series of lectures from senior experts from all kinds of disciplines related to children (see Koops, Levering and de Winter, 2007). If it is up to me, we will continue to present these lectures for a couple of more years, at least as long as there are convincing numbers of attendants, and as long as colleagues Micha de Winter (Distinguished Professor of Social and Behavioural Sciences holding the Langeveld chair) and Bas Levering (Hogeschool lector of pedagogy and erudite Langeveld pupil) enjoy contributing to these lectures. Furthermore, I will regularly organise public debates on behalf of my Faculty, in such a way that scientific insights and socially relevant policies become as well attuned to each other as possible.

I am proud to mention a unique initiative taken by my Faculty: the organisation of an academic primary school teacher training, which will supply teachers with a university degree. I am grateful for the cooperation with Hogeschool Utrecht, making this possible, and of course also for the enthusiastic contributions of Theo Wubbels, Professor of Education and Vice-Dean of our Faculty, who apart from that I owe a lot of gratitude. After my passionate description of the *Philantropines*, Pestalozzi and *Het Nut*, it will not come as a surprise that I believe that further scientification of primary education is necessary. Nor that I am determined to establish an *experimental school* on our campus, which can develop models of educational systems shaped by scholars. In my opinion, a *Utrecht Elementary School* deserves more priority than a *Utrecht University College*. And if I am able to win support for this idea from our Chair of the Board, Ms. Yvonne van Rooy, I would be prepared to name this school the *Utrecht Elementary College*, with "honours tracks" for the brightest children.

What I wish to use my chair for above all is to convince my colleagues in child studies to place the child again within the context of time, that is to say, to pay attention to the cultural historical context when doing scientific research. Developmental science and pedagogy should seriously pay attention to a historical reframing of childhood. I feel very much supported by the researchers of the interdisciplinary *Descartes Institute* for comparative science history, which is inspiringly led by my colleague Wijnand Mijnhardt.

As you can see, I have too many plans, as usual. It is about time to say some traditional, but nonetheless sincere words of thanks.

### **Words of thanks**

This is my third inaugural address. This alone shows that I am a repeated starter. Fortunately, I am not unique in this: an influential philosopher of the previous century, Edmund Husserl, was a deliberate and, mainly in a fundamentally methodological sense, perpetual starter, or *Anfänger*, as he used to say (Zwart, 2002, p. 81). Also in the sense that he wished to return again and again to the beginning of philosophy and science. In my first address (Koops, 1983) I traced developmental psychology back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century recapitulation theory, in my second address to the phylogenesis of anti-social and pro-social aggression (Koops, 2002), and today to the cultural historical origins of our thinking about children. I keep looking for starting points. It is heart-warming to notice that so many people show patience for my budding ideas. It befits me to be humble and above all to be thankful to many people.

I hope you will forgive me that I cannot mention all of these people. I will only mention the first and last, those who witnessed the beginning and the prob-

able end of my academic career. The beginning is situated in Heymans' Groningen, the birth place of Dutch psychology. It was there that I was stimulated to adopt a sensible and fundamentally critical scientific attitude. My supervisor Koos van der Werff was very good at reducing the conceptual complexity of many a developmental psychological author to something very simple and common. His original dissertation of 1964 on self-concept and self-ideal, for example, shows that much writing and speaking about "The Self" is primarily based on bad grammar (Van der Werff, 1964, p. 7). It has taught me to refuse to talk, let alone write, seemingly profoundly about something called "the self", whether or not with a capital S. Self-concepts and self-reflection are subjects that can be discussed and researched. Koos van der Werff did not engage in deconstruction, but in everyday disenchantment, so common to Groningers. Willem Hofstee, my co-supervisor, taught me that a practitioner of science must be recalcitrant and self-willed, or *stubborn*. Or in the words of philosopher Bachelard: "*Il faut être iconoclaste*" (1938, blz. 77), be it in the Hofsteeian knowledge that "*Het Universeel Gehoor*"<sup>19</sup> (1975) will have the final say. (Fortunately, this Universal Audience can only silence you upon the return of eternity). Except for their mutual inspiration from the work of B.J. Kouwer, Hofstee and Van der Werff shared an aversion to "snakken" (see Hofstee 2001, footnote 19), a word from the Groningen dialect which means bragging, showing off. Scientific authors should simplify, not complicate. For the sake of brevity I will stick to the typically Kouwerian observation frequently endorsed by both of them that psychology is "a weird discipline" (Hofstee, 2000, p. 8; Kouwer, 1973). I thank them for this fundamental insight which is as simple as it is shocking.

After my Groningen period, I spent over 20 years at the Free University Amsterdam. In my previous address I dwelt upon these splendid years. Meanwhile, I have become *too* much of a Utrechter to repeat that part. Therefore I proceed without delay to thanking the Executive Board of Utrecht University for the great faith they say they have in me. A non-age discriminatory prolongation of my Deanship was very stimulating, but this was nothing compared to my subsequent appointment to Distinguished Professor of Utrecht University. The members of the current Board will forgive me for extending a special word of thanks to the former Rector Magnificus Willem Hendrik Gispén for his stimulating enthusiasm and warm and amicable collegiality. I would like to particularly thank the President of our Board, Yvonne van Rooy, for inviting me to a second Deanship term and for the appreciation displayed by it. These appointments have given me the feeling that I get the chance to do what I like most: engaging in so-called primary processes and, besides, having or taking time for self-willed reflections on the disciplines most dear to me: *developmental psychology* and *pedagogy*.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues of the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences for the fantastic, inspiring and successful working community we form together. Being a Dean, nothing is more pleasant than reporting on and selling your successful academic teaching and research results. When doing so, I can often be a very contented *pars pro toto*. I hope that you will allow me to continue to do so for a substantial number of years and I will do my utmost not to disappoint any of you.

I have spoken.

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<sup>19</sup> "The Universal Audience"

The author dedicates this text to Daphne, Mathilde, Veerle and Helena, (grand)children to be Enlightened.

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