

Critical Theories of Psychological Development. John M. Broughton. New York: Plenum, 1987, 313 pages, \$39.50 hard.

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John Broughton is worried. Children of the modern world are dying younger and younger, at the hands of his own field of study, developmental psychology. He wants to warn you about it so that you will join him in stopping the slaughter.

Broughton presents his children's manifesto in this collection of essays in which Broughton and his colleagues contend that developmental psychology has become little more than religious dogma, replacing the study of history as chief interpreter of human change. The rigorous program of research developmental psychologists have pursued has ignored the whole context of human being and acting: the grand sociohistorical and political matrix that gives our lives their meaning. For Broughton, developmental psychology, finally, has no soul.

The purpose of this volume is to present a thoroughly scathing critique of developmental psychology and to suggest ways of restructuring the whole process of studying human development. Broughton's own historical encounter with the largely European movement of critical psychology (passionately described in the "Postscript," which one should read first to provide a personal context for the whole volume) gave him both intellectual and professional inspiration to extend this important work to his own field. *Critical Theories of Psychological Development* is the first attempt at examining developmental psychology from the perspective of critical theory.

For those unaware of this movement, critical psychology evolved from various academic discussion groups organized primarily in Germany during the early 1970's. The group members, from whom Broughton draws his own intellectual genealogy, wanted to blow the whistle on all the pseudoscience going on in psychology at least since Binet began developing tests to measure "intelligence." A truly human science would seek to uncover all the social, historical, and political assumptions inherent in constructing any psychological theory or conducting any psychological research. These critical psychologists worked together first to expose assumptions buried underneath the theoretical, methodological, and interpretive analyses of the research, then reposition the whole inquiry on the basis of explicit assumptions drawn from philosophers. In this manner critical psychology has sought first to deconstruct and then to reconstruct conventional psychology.

Critical psychologists are of course following a broader trend within the philosophy of science: it is now widely believed that one's relationship to one's object of study inevitably influences what scientists once considered objective scrutiny (cf., e.g., Polanyi, 1964). Physicists of the early twentieth century demonstrated how even in a "hard" science subject inevitably influences object. How much more so in a "soft" science like psychology, where human beings both construct theories about and conduct research on other human beings at a certain time in history, within a specific culture, under a particular

political regime. Critical psychologists seek to kick the shaky stepladder out from under conventional psychologists—who still have faith they are doing “science”—and make them grope around on their hands and knees in decidedly more subjective terrain. Broughton argues that an uncritical psychology merely reinforces prevailing cultural, historical, and political attitudes via self-fulfilling prophecy: psychologists “see” only what their unconscious, unchallenged assumptions allow them to see. The task of the critical psychologist, then, is “to identify the ways in which psychology serves to extend and elaborate the societal and institutional effort to produce a certain kind of object [of study]” (p. 15).

Nowhere is conventional psychology more dangerous than in developmental psychology, where the objects of study are children too vulnerable to stand up against their own institutional indoctrination by those who believe they have discovered the universal paths of development for all children. Broughton and the first four contributors that follow him persuasively argue that developmental psychology necessarily isolates and alienates children from society, preparing them instead to enter a specialized, individualized, compartmentalized, monetarized, and homogenized world of sterility. In particular Broughton condemns cognitive functionalism, the prevailing theoretical orientation among developmental psychologists, for betraying children’s interests, indeed their very childhood, by imposing on them an adult-centered view of the world to which all things not adult must eventually submit. The program of research implied by this orientation—and practiced by nearly every developmentalist from Berry Brazelton to Lev Vygotsky—has the utilitarian effect of treating children as means and not ends, of packaging love and affection as quantifiable mental phenomena, of tossing children into a cast-iron mold that manufactures assembly-line kiss-ass robots unable to conjure up a single dissenting thought. Yes, children are dying, and Broughton wants you to know about it.

The four contributors that follow Broughton underscore this childish brutality perpetrated against children. Adrienne E. Harris alerts us to the increasingly mechanized understanding of mother-child togetherness, which effectively rips the living guts out of that organism. In perhaps the most disturbing essay of this volume, J. Jacques Vonèche decries the objectification of modern childhood in which we understand children as commodity investments to support the military/industrial complex. Valerie Walkerdine demonstrates via comic book themes how we socialize girls to adopt the conventional oppressive female stereotypes, even as we have forcibly adopted these girls from their “unsanitary” childhood. Richard Lichtman takes the dogma of stage theory to the woodshed, even as it tries to cover up the pain of a society mourning the absence of a truly meaningful maturational process.

The remaining five contributors modify and expand the explanatory scope of developmental psychology to encompass critical psychology. Ed Elbers and David Ingleby both critically examine the integration of Freudian and Marxist theory to understand more clearly human development in context. Jessica Benjamin exposes Freud’s Oedipus to the light of feminist criticism, thus blinding him again and rendering him powerless. Susan Buck-Morss deconstructs Piaget by arguing that his theory simply reflects Enlightenment rationality used to exploit the unsuspecting. Finally, the philosophical trio of Rainer Döbert, Jürgen Habermas, and Gertrud Nunner-Winkler constructs a highly abstract synthesis of ideas on identity formation. Ironically, the authors use elements of cognitive developmental psychology, the shaky stepladder John Broughton had earlier urged us to abandon.

Indeed, *Critical Theories of Psychological Development* does not present a unified vision of how developmental psychology should be. But according to Broughton, we must beware of theories impervious to debate or criticism. Unfortunately, this volume fails to take critical inventory of its own perspective. By its own tenets it must be true that critical theory arose out of a particular sociohistorical and political matrix to meet the needs of the

people living within it. Broughton outlines the origins of critical psychology but denies us the social and political history that gave it birth. Perhaps such a critique makes the theory too subjective and therefore weakens it; however, the contributors to this volume have taken this liberty with the conventional theories they criticize. Ironically, Broughton condemns “relative approaches” (p. 6) endemic to the modern era. By candidly addressing this problem the authors could have boosted the reader’s confidence in the theory’s integrity.

Furthermore, Broughton’s brutality toward that ultimate evil of developmental psychology – cognitive functionalism, with its rigorously “objective” program of research – must necessarily turn toward critical psychology as well. Although a critical developmental psychology “is obliged to resist that tendency to objectivism” (p. 17), it must also “retain respect for research and . . . continue an empirical research program” (p. 20). The present volume fails to suggest how to begin resolving this obvious tension.

Despite, or Broughton might argue, because of, these criticisms, critical psychology has both a place and a future in developmental psychology, which may yet have a place in society – but no future. It is precisely this critical mindedness that will make developmental psychology worthy of study. And children won’t die young anymore; they will grow up in their own time. Broughton urges the younger generation of students to throw off the shackles of oppressive mainstream developmental psychology and unite under the invigorating banner of critical theory: this is truly a manifesto for the young and young at heart.

Reference

Polanyi, M. (1964). *Science, faith and society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.