

©1997 The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.  
 The Journal of Mind and Behavior  
 Winter 1997, Volume 18, Number 1  
 Pages 99-102  
 ISSN 0271-0137

**B.F. Skinner and Behaviorism in American Culture.** Laurence D. Smith and William R. Woodward (Eds.). Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1996, 348 pages, \$47.50 hard.

*Reviewed by Robert Epstein, Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies and San Diego State University*

---

*B.F. Skinner and Behaviorism in American Culture* is one of a small but growing library of volumes that focus on the life and contributions of the eminent behavioral psychologist. During Skinner's lifetime, these volumes included *B.F. Skinner: The Man and His Ideas* (Evans, 1968), *Festschrift for B.F. Skinner* (Dews, 1970), *The Skinner Primer: Behind Freedom and Dignity* (Carpenter, 1974), *What Is B.F. Skinner Really Saying?* (Nye, 1979), *Skinner's Philosophy* (Sagal, 1981), *Skinner for the Classroom* (Epstein, 1982), a special issue of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (Catania and Harnad, 1984, 1988), and *B.F. Skinner: Consensus and Controversy* (Modgil and Modgil, 1987). In 1977 John A. Weigel published a brief biography of Skinner, and Skinner himself published a three-volume autobiography between 1976 and 1983.

Since Skinner's death at age 86 in 1990, two biographies have appeared (Bjork, 1993; Wiener, 1996), as well as a special issue of the journal *American Psychologist* that reviewed Skinner's professional legacy in education, psychology, and other fields (Lattal, 1992). In addition, Richelle (1993) has published an interpretive "reappraisal" of Skinner's scientific and philosophical work, and Todd and Morris (1995) have edited a volume of "modern perspectives" on Skinner and behaviorism. Presumably, related works are in progress.

Smith and Woodward's (1996) own edited volume is a welcome addition to the Skinner shelf, mainly, in my view, because of the special combination of skills that the editors have brought to the project. Smith and Woodward are both accomplished historians of psychology, and Smith also has training in experimental psychology. It's clear from beginning to end that their intention was to examine Skinner using the highest standards of historical scholarship, eschewing personal reminiscence, glorification, and sensationalism. In this regard, the Smith and Woodward book is, in my view, the most successful of all of the Skinner volumes yet produced.

Skinner himself was wary of historians; he used to say that you can only write history after all of the important facts have been forgotten. But contemporary views are typically far more distorted than the views of the historian — distorted by faulty

memory, by gossip, by strong emotion, by personal vendettas, by ulterior motives. The lens of the historian is necessarily cloudy, but at least it's free of thunderstorms.

Woodward's introduction lays some of the groundwork for the standards used to produce the volume: that good biography avoids idolatry and presents its subject "warts and all" (p. 10), that claims made in interviews "must be used with circumspection" (p. 11), that every aspect of the person's life, personal and professional, should be given some attention. Woodward correctly notes that Skinner himself avoided talking about his own emotions and many aspects of his personal life and that Skinner's extensive autobiography was limited in that Skinner intended it primarily "to depict his life as an example of his theory of scientific method" (p. 9).

Smith and Woodward embark on a more ambitious journey. Parts One and Two of the book focus on the expected — Skinner as social philosopher (in chapters by Daniel W. Bjork, Laurence D. Smith, and Nils Wiklander) and Skinner as scientist (in chapters by S. R. Coleman, James H. Capshaw, and Eckart Scheerer), respectively. But Part Three, entitled "Skinner's Personal World," takes some interesting new turns, looking at Skinner's wife in a chapter by Rhonda K. Bjork, at the Skinners' approach to parenting in a chapter by Elizabeth A. Jordan, and at some of Skinner's early relationships at Harvard in a chapter by John J. Cerullo.

Part Four takes a brief look at some of the impact of Skinner's work: first, in a chapter on programmed instruction by Julie and Ernest Vargas, then in a chapter on research at Harvard by Woodward and John K. Robinson, and finally in a review of the secondary literature by Terry J. Knapp. The book concludes with an essay on Skinner's impact by Laurence D. Smith. In a surprising and welcome appendix, Harvard archivist Clark A. Elliott gives an overview of the Skinner holdings in the Harvard libraries.

Each of the four sections contains only three chapters, so by no means can this book be considered comprehensive, but what it does it does well. For example, Smith's essay on "The Baconian Routes of Skinner's Social Meliorism" (Chapter 2) persuasively links Skinner's scientific/technological ideology to Francis Bacon's works, most notably Bacon's remarkable (and unfinished) utopian essay, *The New Atlantis*. Smith notes Skinner's fascination with Bacon and asserts — correctly, I believe — that "the effects of Skinner's immersion in the Baconian ideology are everywhere evident in his work" (p. 63). Smith then explores the tension one sees in Skinner's writing when, late in his life, it was clear that technology was no longer acceptable to the public as the way to cure social problems.

In Part Two, S. R. Coleman takes on the nearly impossible task of mapping out in detail young Skinner's scientific progress during the 1930s. The chapter even includes a three-and-a-half page, month-by-month chronology of Skinner's scientific activities! This was a momentous decade for Skinner — the period when he learned to distinguish reflexive behavior from operant behavior and when he published *The Behavior of Organisms* (1938), his first major work. Coleman's discussion of Skinner's intellectual growth during the period is laudable. In the chapter that follows, James Capshaw takes us on an always-fascinating journey through Project Pigeon, Skinner's top-secret attempt to train pigeons to guide missiles for the military during World War II.

The one chapter that seems out of place is Scheerer's "Excerpts from a Textbook Treatment" (Chapter 6), which is, alas, what its title suggests: a condensed version of an English translation of a German textbook on the analysis of behavior — by a self-proclaimed cognitive psychologist, no less. The chapter promises to show how

Skinner is viewed in non-English-speaking countries, but, as far as I can tell, it presents little more than the views of yet another textbook writer.

The chapters on Skinner's personal world are a step in the right direction. Skinner was a fascinating person — as friend, husband, and father — not just a fascinating scientist. It will be many years, of course, before historians can write with candor about Skinner's personal life. In this respect, Skinner's facetious remark about historians was entirely wrong: the important facts about people's *personal* lives can only be told long after the coterie has become part of history. Nevertheless, Rhonda Bjork's essay on Eve Skinner sheds some light on the tensions in the Skinners' marriage, and Jordan's chapter gives the reader a glimpse of dilemmas the Skinners faced as parents — especially with permissiveness the new vogue in parenting.

Although somewhat technical, the chapter by Robinson and Woodward (Chapter 11) is perhaps the most fascinating in the book. In a well-documented, almost lock-step fashion, it shows how research on behavior at Harvard shifted dramatically away from Skinner's own interests and emphases during his long tenure there. Mainly through the efforts of Skinner's former student, Richard J. Herrnstein, the experimental analysis of behavior that Skinner had created in the 1930s became an entirely different animal. Skinner abhorred formal theory, statistics, and mathematics — almost to the point of absurdity (for example, see his 1964 essay on statistics in *The Worm Runner's Digest*). From the beginning of his career, Skinner's focus had been on the prediction and control of the behavior of the individual organism, moment-to-moment in time, with minimal interpretation.

His successors at Harvard, however, built formal quantitative models of behavior; they used "group" data; they spoke seriously about "choice"; they incorporated concepts, models, and quantitative methods from ethology and economics in their work. In 1977, in a reply to an *American Psychologist* article by Herrnstein, Skinner expressed his concern about this shift (also see Skinner, 1976b). Skinner's own scientific emphases have survived and flourished in many behavioral laboratories around the world, and they certainly dominate the applied fields, but his influence at his own stomping grounds was minimal from the late 1960s onward. To insiders the shift away from Skinner's research paradigm is known, curiously, as the move from pigeons to squabs; SQAB is the acronym for the Society of the Quantitative Analysis of Behavior.

In all, this is a superb book. It's one of a series, I hope, that will begin to examine Skinner and his impact by employing the tools and standards of historical scholarship, ideologies and emotions aside.

### References

- Bjork, D. W. (1993). *B.F. Skinner: A life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Carpenter, F. (1974). *The Skinner primer: Behind freedom and dignity*. New York: Free Press.
- Catania, A.C., and Harnad, S. (Eds.). (1984). Canonical papers of B.F. Skinner. *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 7, 473-724.
- Catania, A.C., and Harnad, S. (Eds.). (1988). *The selection of behavior: The operant behaviorism of B.F. Skinner*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Dews, P. (Ed.). (1970). *Festschrift for B.F. Skinner*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Epstein, R. (Ed.). (1982). *Skinner for the classroom: Selected papers*. Champaign, Illinois: Research Press.
- Evans, R. (1968). *B.F. Skinner: The man and his ideas*. New York: Dutton.

- Lattal, K.A. (Ed.). (1992). Reflections on B.F. Skinner and psychology [Special issue]. *American Psychologist*, 47.
- Modgil, S., and Modgil, C. (Eds.). (1987). *B.F. Skinner: Consensus and controversy*. Sussex, England: Falmer Press.
- Nye, R.D. (1979). *What is B.F. Skinner really saying?* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Richelle, M.N. (1993). *B.F. Skinner: A reappraisal*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sagal, P.T. (1981). *Skinner's philosophy*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
- Skinner, B.F. (1938). *The behavior of organisms: An experimental analysis*. New York: Appleton-Century.
- Skinner, B.F. (1964). On the relations between mathematical and statistical competence and significant scientific productivity. *The Worm Runner's Digest*, 6(1), 15-17. [published under the pseudonym F Galton Pennywhistle]
- Skinner, B.F. (1976a). *Particulars of my life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Skinner, B.F. (1976b). Farewell, my LOVELY! *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*, 25, 218.
- Skinner, B.F. (1977). Herrnstein and the evolution of behaviorism. *American Psychologist*, 32, 1006-1012.
- Skinner, B.F. (1979). *The shaping of a behaviorist: Part two of an autobiography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Skinner, B.F. (1983). *A matter of consequences*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Smith, L.D., and Woodward, W.R. (Eds.). (1996). *B.F. Skinner and behaviorism in American culture*. Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses.
- Todd, J.T., and Morris, E.K. (Eds.). (1995). *Modern perspectives on B.F. Skinner and contemporary behaviorism*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Wiener, D.N. (1996). *B.F. Skinner: Benign anarchist*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Weigel, J.A. (1977). *B.F. Skinner*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.