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Book review

Childhood in Crossroads: Cognition and society in South Africa (1989)
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Protest literature and post-Apartheid society

INTRODUCTION

There is, supposedly, a Chinese curse in which "to live in interesting times" is wished upon the victim. The interesting times in which many, if not most, black children in South Africa have lived since about 1976 could certainly be made into the stuff of curses - or books about growing up in a society in crisis. One such book is **Childhood in Crossroads: Cognition and society in South Africa** (1989). The author, Reynolds, writes in the introduction to her book, "...two themes that run through the study (are): the relationship between individual and society, and change as a continuous individual and social occurrence. A third theme describes and analyses situation and context specific to the nature of cognitive processes" (p.3). This focus is not only of interest to those working in the theoretical domain demarcated by Vygotsky (1978), but also promises to throw some light on the lives of children caught in the eye of the South African socio-political storm. Reynolds characterises the book as "the result of an ethnographic study of 7-year-old children in a South African squatter settlement" (p.1).

Our immediate reaction was to scan the bibliography for Luria (1976), Ong (1982) and Vygotsky (1978) - to find that none of these names appeared. Not only the themes which run through the work but also the author's interest "... in tracing links between child thought and the states of consciousness

represented in adults' formulations about society" (p.4) seem to demand attention to these milestones in the (psychological) study of the very object of knowledge the author chose.

VERBS AND NOUNING

"Mind" and "culture" as nouns are misleading; both mind and culture are woven into and underneath (in a causal or productive sense) the actions of people. Such actions "show" mind and/or culture to an observer from a different space-time-rule configuration to that of the actor. Moreover, what may count as evidence for mind and/or culture - in the actions observed - are "decided" not only prior to the transaction between actors but also on grounds other than those which make action possible. In more general terms, therefore, and prior to discovering culture or mind in the actions of another, it is already one's own "mind-ing" and "cultur(e)-ing" that determines what we will look at and see, or listen to and hear, and so on (as every anthropologist certainly knows!). Whether we "see" culture or mind, therefore, seems to have less to do with the actions observed or the mind-in-action and culture-in-action, than with the level of our analysis. Phrased differently, mind and culture are not to be read off from the same epistemological level. Imagine a face-to-face transaction between two actors, one that involves an analysis of the other's facial topography. On the other hand, imagine one of these actors being on top of a skyscraper, looking down onto the other actor. In this case the analysis includes the topography of the area below the building which includes the other as one feature. These two imaginary situations are analogous to the two different (epistemological) levels of analysis which will yield, in the first case, mind and in the second case, culture. Human action may, therefore, be read as the text of mind's constraints, and/or culture's constraints. The one does not determine the other but both produce action which is typical of an individual or a (cultural) group, and both - in action - are what makes people uniquely historical in their psychological and social constitution.

For actors, "minding" or "culturing" are really the unity of being that we come to take for granted. Reynolds like others before her, falls into the trap of the spurious question: Does culture determine mind (or vice versa)? It has become a rather tired, if popular project, to repeat Piagetian tasks from Geneva to Toronto and back to Crossroads in an attempt to answer this question and to locate specific groups/individuals within the cognitive stages described by Piaget. Some of these studies are of interest theoretically (see Miller, Pascual-Leone, Campbell & Jukes, 1989) while others lack attention to the crucial issues which make the interface between the psychological and social domains of analysis an area of interest.

The relationship between mind and culture is, on the one hand, not a relationship between two separable "things"; this makes the study of it more

complex than merely adapting tasks from one learning history, eg. Piagetian tasks, to the needs or conditions of another learning situation, eg. the children studied in Crossroads. On the other hand, and depending on the level of analysis, the very same action or performance on a task could be understood as a manifestation of culture or mind. Miller (1984) laid down the ground rules for a project which acknowledges this difficult intertwinedness of "mind" and "culture": ground rules in the sense that one could not enter this domain without at least addressing the important issues which he highlights. Since this work, a number of other projects in the same tradition have followed (see Craig, 1985; Craig, 1987; Craig & Miller, 1984; Miller & Craig, 1985; Miller, 1987; 1989;). We, therefore, read Reynolds as fellow scholars but with a very particular approach to the study of the interface between the psychological and the social. Our reading may, therefore, do Reynolds' work an injustice, but then, that is the nature of the dialectic of social science and academic debate.

Reynolds "borrowed from the psychologist" (p.1) "tests" which would have been better off in a project which does not turn Piaget upside down **theoretically**. In other words, the author's reading of Piaget's genetic epistemology is suspect, while her empirical use of his tasks is finely executed. The children's performances, however, are under- and also mis-interpreted given Piaget's theory of cognitive development (see Kitchener, 1986). It will be an enormous and thankless task to go through Reynolds' report on the tests, one by one, to support this criticism. Suffice it to point out a set of frequent conceptual moves (albeit often implicit) that she makes in this regard: When the children are given Western tasks, they either (i) under-perform, (ii) perform the same as children in the West or even (iii) over-perform. This she explains as indicative of (i) their limited access "to the props of Western society" (p.201), (ii) the innate creativity and resourcefullness of children, and (iii) her "adaptation" of Western, Genevan tasks for Xhosa speaking children in a squatter settlement (or to the marvel of "naturalistic" (p.125) field procedures ?). These manoeuvres would have irritated us less if she had not written of her own book, "The book does more (than merely record the impact of apartheid on the children's lives). It documents the impact of the system on the children's fantasies, dreams and play. It links current social mores to the children's ideas (for instance about birth and the origin of dreams), their use of kinship terms, and their behaviour. It documents the inequalities of poverty as it affects children's opportunities for learning. Some psychological tests have been shown to be culturally biased in small particulars so that not only are the children deprived of a sound learning environment but the development of their cognitive abilities cannot be reliably traced" (pp.199-200). Thus does Reynolds review her own contribution to a field of study where angels like Vygotsky tread many years before! And from Vygotsky (1978) she could have obtained a theory-method for research and a theory of the relationship between the individual and society that would not violate the

central tenets of the Piagetian opus but rather add substantially to it. Whereas Piaget addresses the knowing subject's capacity for constructing knowledge/reality through praxis, Vygotsky focusses his theoretical work on the internalization of social communication. Phrased differently, the psychological mechanisms driving praxis are, according to Vygotsky, social in origin. Vygotsky's empirical focus was on the process of instruction between the cultural guide (eg. mother or more capable peers) and the neophyte (eg. child). This process is, for Vygotsky, the key to psychology as a whole, muck like the concept of "value" unlocked, for Marx, the door to an understanding of social history. Had Reynolds not cheated Piaget and had she been familiar with Vygtosky's work (which is rather closer to her intended project than Piaget's) she might have moved closer to an answer to the question she poses for others after her: "How best can children be introduced to the structures of mind that are valued and rewarded in current society ?" (p.201). Furthermore, Piaget's focus on the epistemic subject could have grounded her data which support the notion that even children in the most abysmal circumstances can be innovative, resourceful, clever, creative and so forth.

Readers, perhaps those unschooled in the Piagetian and Vygotksian traditions of doing research, interpreting and explaining the data may, however, find the book a veritable basket of data on "childhood in Crossroads". This alone makes the book worth reading; the many earnest descriptions of the author's and children's activities, and events during the study period (and after), the quoted utterances/verbal exchanges between the author, the children and other significant figures in the stories of their lives, as well as the other (dated) references to children's "passage through time, and their notions of space, kinship, dreams and order" (p.9) are certainly interesting. The book contains some telling photographs. We found the one entitled, "A mother and child selling chicken feet" a rather stark reminder of the differences between the worlds of the "Xhosa children living in 1980 in an urban squatter settlement on the dunes of the Cape Flats" (p.199), and white middle-class suburban children's introduction to what may be regarded as economic activities. The illustrations depicting the construction of games and toys, "Houses in the sand" (p.57), "Wire cars" (p.61), "Games" (p.66) and other "Items Created by Children for Play" (p.69) will be eye-openers for those unfamiliar with the creativity of those children who live away (and excluded) from the toys and games that money can buy. The author also records some very interesting data in the appendices to her book; "Pondoland herd boys' comments on the learning of the names of things (Appendix F)" (pp.226-230) is notable in this regard. Reynold's record of the songs "children in Crossroads sing" (pp.72-86) give the reader some insight into the children's construction of, and access to, culture and consciousness. We would have appreciated some "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p.100) of these songs and children's enactment of them as we would have of most of the data included in the main text and in the appendices. Phrased differently, the book seems to fail in luring the

reader into the richness (if traumaticness) of the lives recorded, the data being portrayed too "thinly" - perhaps in an attempt to be "scientific"? For example, the author gives the following description of a song: "One song was particularly moving. It had a chorus of "turu rurururu turu..." that sounded like doves in the bluegums. The children would bend low from the waist as they sang the chorus and shuffle their feet in quick, fancy rhythm. The meaning of the song contrasted sharply with its gentle sounds and steps:...[We have no nanny (comforter), our nanny is burnt. Send us Lazarus and where is God?]. And so it was with many songs. Behind the harmony, hidden in the beat of the little fat thighs of the girls and the quiet foot shuffle of small boys would be words of anger and loneliness and despair" (pp.72-73). The point we would like to make regarding the absence of a rich interpretative account in the text as a whole ("thick description"), relates to what appears to be an interesting observation - the dysjunction between the "appearance" of the song and dance of children (perhaps adults too), and the import of the words of the songs. And the movement of the dance. If the author is serious about recording "experiences in detail and in relation to a socio-historical moment" (p.199), we would suggest that the data that she records demands analysis which not only describes the "said and done" but that also attempts to "rescue the meaning of the unsaid" (Geertz, 1973, p.100). The author's handling of the data in general, especially given that "... their (the children's) families are forced to build shacks in the sand; that their shacks are demolished before their eyes; that their parents are imprisoned for being in white man's territory; that their education is grossly inadequate; that their mobility and opportunities are rigidly confined" (p.199), is disappointing. Moreover, her statement: "Mind does not determine culture; therefore, the constraints of a particular culture cannot be taken as representing the limitations of mind" (p.210) deserves comment. Luria (1976) and Vygotsky (1978) who operated in a "socio-historical moment" (p.199) very similar to that which Reynolds attempts to confront, made it their business to address the complex nature of the link between mind(-ing) and cultur(e)(-ing). They could not produce an easy algorithm for theories focussed on the effect of mind on culture, and culture on mind. Reynold does not vindicate her claim that "mind does not determine culture", unless of course this is to be found in a relatively uninteresting observation regarding fourteen 7-year-old children confronting pre-existing social forms (see Bhaskar, 1979). We would suggest that Reynolds (re-) considers the differences between individual (psychological) development, such as is accessible through the Piagetian and other tasks she included in her study, and social (institutional) development, and the transaction between social and psychological history (see Ong, 1982), before closing her book on "...the relationship between individual and society."

CONCLUSION

Events in South Africa over the last few weeks necessitate a closer look at that body of literature (academic or otherwise) which has as its basis for existence, "the struggle". We have to state immediately that we certainly do not regard De Klerk's speech on 2 February 1990 as heralding the end of transformatory politics and academics nor do we think that protest has no place in this stage of transition or in post-apartheid South Africa. (Nor, of course, do we think Reynolds ought to have waited with her work until the momentous events of the last weeks.) The point we would like to stress, however, is that mere **catalogues** of the sequelae of oppression or knowledge about "the real impact of discrimination, migration, re-location and repatriation ...on children" (p.201) may be an insufficient analysis if the aim is to enter the era of constructive politics, nation building and progressive research. In other words, we need - each from his/her platform and/or constituency, academics included - to engage in what **is**, in order to help bring about what all people desire and what some have died for. Reynolds certainly engaged admirably in the lives of fourteen "7-year-old children in a South African squatter settlement" (p.1) over a period of eighteen months, but the introduction and conclusion to her book not withstanding, she does not say or show clearly what **is** the case with the children's cognition (perhaps she protests too much ?). In order to begin to unravel the issue of what can be done in those cases where children, like the ones Reynolds studied, fail to be interested or competent in the tasks and demands of modern industrial and schooled society, researchers (even politically aware ones) must describe, interpret and explain their data precisely, rigorously and conceptually coherently. The informal and formal educational needs of the young for the present and the future in this land is, an immensely compelling domain of study. The kind of society and nation which might develop here depends on close scrutiny of the needs in this regard. Reynolds correctly assumes that questions and answers about the educational needs of children will be informed by the study of "the relationship between individual and society, and change as a continuous individual and social occurrence" but she fails to describe and explain the cognitive constraints which any future education system - which will and must include children like these - must address if it is to be fair and empowering to all. Our quarrel with Reynolds is not that she **intended** to add to the protest literature on "the impact that apartheid has on each child's life" (p.199) - even though such projects seem to contribute little to projects or desires aimed at building a better future for all - but that she did not actually achieve this modest aim. Reynolds' failure to address the possible interface or link between the appalling circumstances that the children she studied were forced to live in (and which she does record), and their performances on the tasks she set them (where she is at pains to defend the case that their performances do not illustrate "the inferiority of children in non-Western countries" (p.4)) is academically painful. These are harsh words which should not obscure our

shared concern for children, and interests in cognition and "links between society and the individual" (p.2).

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