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How New Is the "New" Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift

John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Sigmund Freud, John Dewey, Erik Erikson, Margaret Mead, and countless lesser-known philosophers, social scientists, and political theorists have not only discussed children at length but also centered their view of humanity and society on the possibilities of childhood. One of modernity's cardinal features is the special importance that it has granted to childhood in the discourses on being human. As a result, the apparatus of the modern state is dedicated to unprecedented levels of service, regulation, protection, and segregation based on the age of individuals and modern ideas about their development, conditioning, agency, and innocence.

Yet, over the past two decades, a group of determined researchers (mostly sociologists) have created an increasingly self-conscious body of writing questioning some of the most commonly held opinions about children and youth. Leaders of this cadre of researchers have repeatedly claimed that their work constituted a "breakthrough," a "new wave," to quote Qvortrup. James, Jenks, and Prout have called it an "epistemological break," moving research away from a "pre-sociological child" premised on traditional theologies, romantic discourses, and developmental theories. Not long after the proclamations of "a distinct paradigm shift," or a "new paradigm," were trumpeted, leaders in this "new" field worked diligently to publish synthetic reflections upon its emergence, implications, and future.[1]

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1 For this school of thought, see Allison James and Alan Prout (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (London, 1990); Gareth B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (New

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Analyses of the new social study of childhood have typically begun by making claims about what childhoods and children are, and then constructing programmatic, interdisciplinary calls for how the subject should be studied. As sensible as this approach is, this essay challenges the idea that a paradigm shift or an epistemological break has occurred in the current study of childhood by showing its relationships to the types of claims writers have been making about children for centuries. For this type of analysis the distinction between differing opinions and more profound archaeological shifts in the discursive formation of childhood is key. In the Foucaultian sense, conflicting truth claims within a discursive community (opinions) do not themselves produce new "epistemes" or "discursive formations." In many ways, the Foucaultian terminology parallels Kuhn's distinction between debates within "normal science" and ground-breaking shifts in "paradigm." The contemporary turn within the social study of childhood draws upon certain elements within the modern discourses of personhood (individual agency and the construction of social categories and groups) to contradict the standpoints of orthodox socialization and developmental theories of childhood. For all of its significance, however, this difference of opinion does not constitute a paradigmatic or archaeological shift in either the Kuhnian or the Foucaultian senses.[2]

York, 1994); Berry Mayall (ed.), *Children's Childhoods: Observed and Experienced* (London, 1994); William Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood* (Thousand Oaks, 1997); James, Chris Jenks, and Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (New York, 1998). References to a "new paradigm" can be found throughout the literature, but see especially the articles and editorials in the journal *Childhood: A Journal of Global Research;* Jens Qvortrup, *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon: Lessons from an International Project* (Vienna, 1991), 11. See also James and Pia Christensen (eds.), *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (London, 2000), 3–4; Qvortrup, "Sociology of Childhood: Conceptual Liberation of Children," in Flemming Mouritsen and *idem* (eds.), *Childhood and Children's Culture* (Odense, 2002), 43–78. More recent reflections on the "new" field are Allison and Adrian James, *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy, and Social Practice* (London, 2004); Prout, *The Future of Childhood: Towards the Interdisciplinary Study of Childhood* (New York, 2005).

The current social study of the child is more diverse and less programmatically organized than the discussion herein can acknowledge. In his review of Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth, *Rethinking Childhood* (New Brunswick, 2004), Qvortrup claims, "A couple of decades ago a few scholars, most of them from Europe, began to talk about a new paradigm for research in childhood. It soon developed into a larger interest gathering hundreds of scholars around the world and from several disciplines." Qvortrup laments that only one of the collection's contributors is from the inner "circle," the "founding parents," of this new field of sociological study, thus setting up his criticism of Pufall and Unsworth's collection for failing to support the "main pillars" of the "paradigm" (*Children & Society,* XIX [2005], 338–339).

2 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); Michel Foucault

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The argument that follows does more than dispute the deployment of the term *paradigm* or *epistemology* by currently notable childhood researchers. It provides an alternative history of ideas about children and repositions our understanding of the contemporary social study of them. This review essay is valuable for historians because of childhood's centrality to both modern thought and the modern state. For historians of childhood, education, family, welfare, gender, and consumer culture, contemporary social research on the subject has much to offer. Brilliantly nuanced works by Hecht on poverty, Thorne on gender, Alanen on generational relations, and Buckingham on electronic media should encourage historians to depict children as actors and to think more critically about childhood as a complex of ideas. Some historians accept developmental and sentimental assumptions about children too easily. Contemporary sociological and anthropological research makes these assumptions seem less transcendent and more historically contingent than ever. Interdisciplinarity should proceed from historians to other social scientists as well. Historians of childhood have a responsibility to address how contemporary works about childhood relate to past ones. Strengthening the link between historians and the contemporary social scientists who study childhood is to the advantage of both groups.

THE NEW SOCIAL STUDY OF CHILDHOOD The framework of the "new" social study of childhood has been outlined in every issue of the journal *Childhood* since its inception in 1993. It has three tenets: The first is that the topic should be explored as a political and cultural construction rather than as natural phenomena. Corsaro and Qvortrup both argued that childhood is like other socially constructed categories (especially class)—a "permanent structural form or category that never disappears even though its members change continuously and its nature and conception vary historically." The second tenet is that children are active subjects operating within a social field rather than mere products of heredity and environment—in Prout's words, "social actors, with a part to play in their own representation." The third tenet is an outgrowth of the "paradigm shift" claim. By challenging the adult-child distinction, the "new" social study of the child will allow us

(trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith), *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York, 2003; orig. pub. 1969).

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to move beyond modern dualisms. According to Qvortrup, "The only answer" to why a new approach has crystallized as a "conceptual liberation" of childhood now is that "plain observations" about the experiences of children do not align with modern ideals of childhood. These gaps "display the classic problem in sociology, namely, that of dualism" between individual agency and structural form. For Prout, polarities are a conceptual trap; "childhood studies must take a step from this modernist conception (the dualities between childhood and adulthood), if they are to become closer to the open-ended, interdisciplinary form of enquiry necessary to present-day conditions."[3]

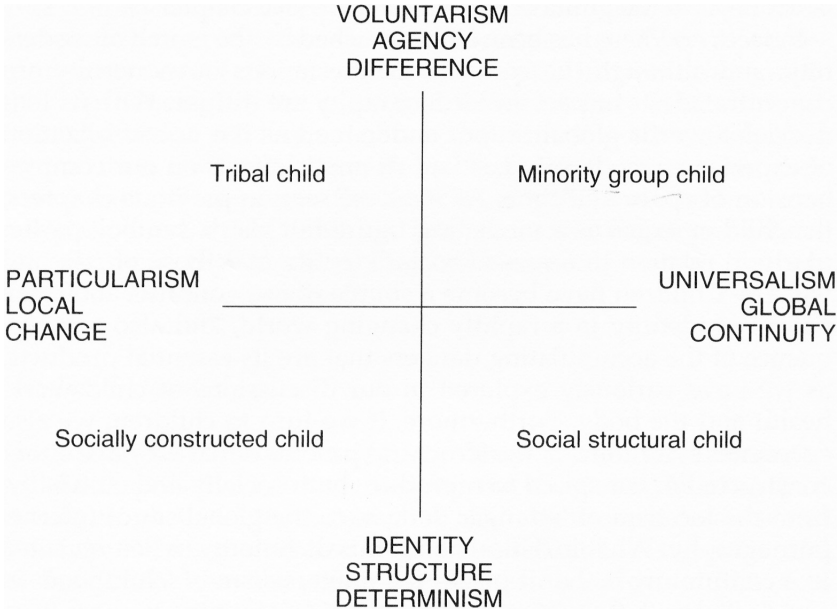
The third tenet, however, threatens to obliterate the distinctions that are necessary for the first two tenets to make sense. The very idea of a person as a competent agent emerged through modern child–adult distinctions, which comprise part of the "inescapable frameworks" of the modern worldview. Even more fundamentally, any discussion of individuals in such terms always presupposes the subject–object and politics–nature dualisms of modern thought. Viewed in this light, a field that purports to see children as actively participating in the construction of their own childhood cannot possibly transcend modern dualisms. This point is not intended to insult the modern study of childhood, or those currently operating within it. The distinctions between child and adult versions of personhood (product of society vs. rights-bearing subject, natural phenomena vs. political construction) are integral to modern analytical thought. Modern dualisms do not lead, necessarily, to a simplistic mind boxed into two, or four categories, instead they open a window upon the human condition and provide a vista for exploring it.[4]

3 Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood,* 4; Qvortrup, "Childhood as a Social Phenomenon Revisited," in Manuela de Bois-Reymond, Heinz Sunker, and Heinz-Hermann Kruger (eds.), *Childhood in Europe: Approaches-Trends-Findings* (New York, 2001), 217, 223. James and Christensen, *Research with Children,* 2000, xi; Qvortrup, "Conceptual Liberation," 45–50.

4 Childhood researchers have offered a number of different ways to deal with the dualisms. Qvortrup's approach closely parallels Anthony Gidden's concept of "structuration," in *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley, 1984). See Qvortrup's call for a "macroanalysis" of childhood in *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon* and in "Macroanalysis of Childhood," in James and Christensen (eds.), *Research with Children,* 77–97. A second route, advocated by Prout, *The Future of Childhood,* 10–11, and Nick Lee, *Childhood and Human Value* (New York, 2005), attempts to circumvent modern dualisms more fundamentally. Lee coins the term "separability" to articulate a space between the polar ideals of children as autonomous rights-holding individuals, and parental and state legal coverture of children. A

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Fig. 1 James, Jenks, and Prout's Map of the New Social Study of Childhood



SOURCE Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing* Childhood (New York, 1998), 206.

The continued use of modern dualisms in the contemporary study of childhood is illustrated in Figure 1—James, Jenks, and Prout's field overview of *Theorizing Childhood* (1998)—which is supposed to display the "new paradigm" in contrast to "pre-sociological" ways of seeing children developmentally, romantically, or through Judeo-Christian religion.

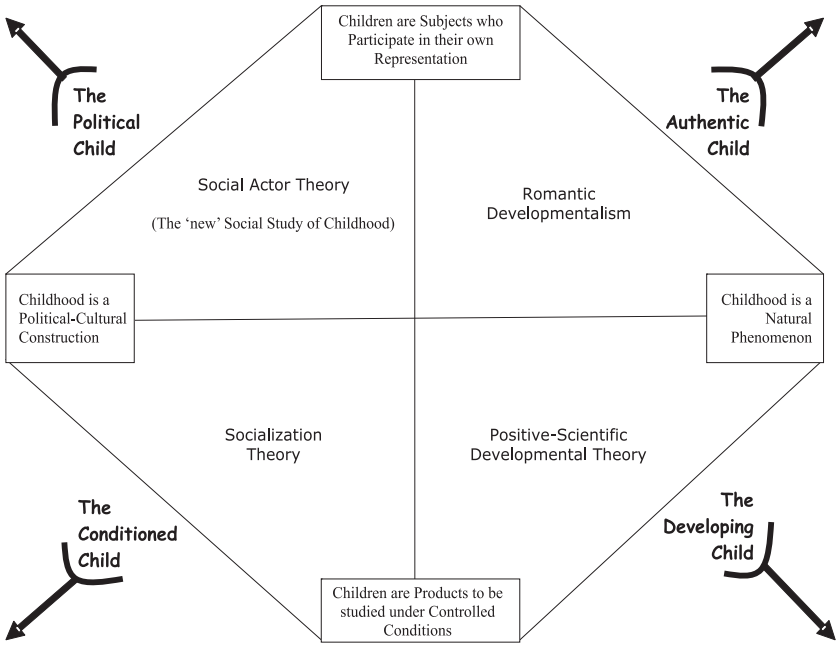
The main problem with the diagram is that it is not organized

third approach is provided by Hecht, *At Home in the Street* and *After Life,* who examines dualism's power to create the fictions by which we live.

Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 187–188, claims that natural science cannot dissolve "inescapable frameworks." According to Taylor, the most entrenched dualism is good/bad, which emerges from the human need to fashion an identity. Taylor situates the subject-object dualism within modernity, but he also seems to ground his metaphysics in ahistorical assumptions about identity and childhood that emerged from this dualism. The historical relationship between the liberal ideal of the competent individual and modern childhood, which Taylor takes as transcendent, is historicized in Holly Brewer, *By Birth or Consent: Children, Law, and the Anglo-American Revolution in Authority* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

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Fig. 2 The Landscape of Modern Childhood



according to the defining features of the new social study of childhood. Reconfiguration of the diagram accordingly, as in Figure 2, reveals major problems with the authors' views of their field: (1) The presociological vs. sociological distinction no longer fits, and, more generally, (2) relationships between currently competing theories of childhood are displayed, calling into question the paradigm shift of the third tenet. As this review essay argues, contemporary social research with children is a fruitful direction for work upon the terrain of modern childhood, rather than a postmodern departure into an entirely new world of personhood.[5]

The labels in Figure 2 need some explanation. The contem-

5 James, Jenks, and Prout, *Theorizing Childhood,* 3–36, 206. In 2004, Allison James and Adrian James refined Figure 1 by introducing law as a mechanism of temporal continuity and change between the four quadrants in *Constructing Childhood,* 48–77. Prout, *The Future of Childhood,* 68–69, has since criticized it as merely "heuristic play" that does not help to transcend the dualisms of modernity.

Cartesian diagrams can simplify complex realities, but they are not particularly useful in sorting out protean differences of opinion. For other examples of Cartesian charts, see Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, 1970), 201;

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porary social study of childhood centers on the quadrant labeled "social actor theory" of childhood—a view of childhood as a political-cultural construction, and of children as subjects who participate in their own representation. The remaining quadrants are labeled according to the lines of thought most implicated in the opposing theoretical assumptions. In the lower right-hand quadrant are theories that pursue objective knowledge of childhood as a natural phenomenon, the "positive-scientific developmental" theories of childhood. Exploring childhood objectively as a product of environmental conditioning shifts the theoretical approach from the lower right- to the lower left-hand quadrant, the "socialization theories of childhood." In the upper right-hand quadrant, the view of childhood as a natural phenomenon, romanticizes the subjectivity of children (for example, portraying them as "noble savages"), earns the label "romantic developmentalism."[6]

THE LANDSCAPE OF MODERN CHILDHOOD Cartesian diagrams require examples to be either persuasive or useful. One of the starkest images of the objectification of children in positivist developmental research (lower right quadrant of the map) is Arnold Gesell's observation dome at Yale University, shown in Figure 3. The dome establishes a shell within which a researcher can present a stimulus to a baby, as recorded by an objective observer—the camera on the left. The dome allowed researchers to imagine that they could remove the "biases" of contextual, personal factors and permitted repeated tests of many children. Quantifiable results were tabulated and variations across ages were compared to establish chronological and group norms. These "normative summaries," as Gesell called them, were offered as "natural" stages of early development. Parental-advice literature, providing not only milestones for physical development but schedules for feeding, sleeping, and playing, draw heavily on this chronological-stage

Richard J. Ellis, *American Political Cultures* (New York, 1993), which deploys Mary Tew Douglas' group-grid theory; Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York, 1970).

6 The appropriateness of the label "social actor theory" may be debatable because "social actor theory" is often used within the field to refer to those studies that stress children's agency. In addition, the term is intended to cover the discursive approaches that focus on the social construction of childhood, and the structural approaches treat children as members of age-based groups.

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Fig. 3 Arnold Gesell's Observation Dome, 1947 (Photo by Herbert Gehr, Time Life Pictures, Getty Images, #50768972)



framework. It remains the organizing principle of the "milestones" on which the American Academy of Pediatrics bases its advice even now.[7]

7 Gesell opened the Yale clinic in 1911. On "normative summaries," see Arnold Gesell, *The Mental Growth of the Pre-School Child: A Psychological Outline of Normal Development From Birth to the Sixth Year* (New York, 1925), 24–36, 376–397; Dan Beekman, *The Mechanical Baby: A Popular History of the Theory and Practice of Child Raising* (Westport, 1977), 154–160; Martin Woodhead and Heather Montgomery, *Understanding Childhood: An Interdisciplinary*

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Today, the common pronouncement that a baby is in the *nth* percentile for weight, length, head size, etc., provides countless parents with assurance about the normality or superiority of their children. Stage models of child development have gone beyond infant growth. They have framed our understanding of human beings in areas as complex as sex, intellect, and morality. Freud's model of psychosexual development, Piaget's model of cognitive development, and Kohlberg's model of moral development all posit universal, chronological stage progressions from a primal and egocentric child to an autonomous, principled, and subjectively reflective adult. Age guidelines appear on many toys or games, and age-grading frames social policy from compulsory schooling to the privacy to practice personal vices and to public political and legal rights.[8]

The often simplistic deployment of stage theories in institutional policies and their diametric relationship with the view of children as competent agents creates a stark opposition between positive developmental science and the contemporary sociology of childhood. But this opposition is not based upon separate paradigms; nor does it result from the construction of a new episteme within the human sciences. Scientific developmentalism is discursively connected to social-actor theory in several significant ways. Writers working from the developmental perspective have produced some of the most important texts in the historical construction of the ideal of the intellectually, morally, and emotionally independent human subject (the top quadrants on the map) Freud's first paragraph from an essay of 1907 is still exemplary: "The Freeing of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur . . . Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive

Approach (Chichester, 2003), 99; American Academy of Pediatrics, "Developmental Stages," http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/Stages.cfm (16 August 16, 2007).

8 Freud (trans. James Strachey), *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (New York, 1962; orig. pub. 1905). Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of Physical Causality* (New York, 1930); *idem, The Child's Construction of Quantities: Conservation and Atomism* (London, 1974; orig. pub. 1942). For a defense of stage theories of childhood, see William C. Crain, "Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development," in *Theories of Development: Concepts and Applications* (Upper Saddle River, 2003; orig. pub. 1980), 188–136.

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generations. On the other hand, there is a class of neurotics whose condition is recognizably determined by their having failed in this task."[9]

Freud was hardly alone in advancing the idea that the developing child is pregnant with hope for progressive politics. Although the developmental axiom that "the children are the future" has had the effect of supporting children's rights to care at the expense of their rights to participation and self-determination, the association between youth, political courage, and progress has deep developmental roots. In the words of Addams, an early-twentieth-century American reformer, "the most precious moment in human development is the young creature's assertion that he is unlike any other human being, and has an individual contribution to make to the world"—in other words, that he is a social actor. To Addams, the possibilities of escaping traditional prejudice and ignorance rested with the diversity of socially active youths as "the only possible basis for progress, all that keeps life from growing unprofitably stale and repetitious." Traditional paternalism had almost entirely lost legitimacy for progressive reformers like Addams. The possibilities of youth, however, offered a "last appeal against the materialism [of the world]" because, "the wonderful and inexplicable instinct for justice . . . [is] never so irresistible as when the heart is young." Addams' *Spirit of Youth in the City Streets* calls out like a savior to the damned, "I am the spirit of Youth! With me all things are possible!"[10]

For all of Gesell's efforts to measure children's growth objectively, the prize for objectifying children in modern research goes not to any of the major developmental stage theorists but to the outright rejection of human subjectivity in behaviorism, and to Skinner in particular. Skinner's work (contrary to developmental stage theory) collapses the distinctions between children and adults, but only by erasing those between humans and other animals. The "Skinner Box" experiment dramatically demonstrated that a rat could be programmed to push a button, thereby avoiding an electric shock and receiving a pellet of food. Skinner even

9 Freud (ed. Philip Rieff), "Family Romances," in *The Sexual Enlightenment of Children* (New York, 1963; orig. pub. 1907), 41–46.

10 Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth in the City Streets* (Chicago, 1972; orig. pub. 1909), 8–9, 161.

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showed that a bird could be taught to bowl through operant conditioning. In a *Ladies Home Journal* article entitled "Baby in a Box," Skinner extolled an "inexpensive apparatus" controlling the environmental conditions of his daughter's crib, because it allowed the Skinners to change their baby's behavior "to suit [their] convenience." When they reduced the baby's feedings from four to three per day, she began waking early for breakfast. "This annoying habit, once established, may [have] persist[ed] for months. However by slightly raising the temperature [in the box] during the night [they] were able to postpone her demand for breakfast."[11]

The behaviorist perspective on childhood has had wide implications, with particular resonance for structural-functionalist work in history and sociology. Inkeles found grounding in it for his view that the challenge brought to the social structure by children could be controlled with behavioral rewards and punishments. Structural-functionalists, however, could just as easily draw on developmental positivism. For example, Parsons argued that children became functioning members of society only when their superegos were sufficiently powerful to overcome primal drives. If Freud's psychodynamic developmentalism could provide biological grounding for Parson's historical models of socialization, the inverse was also possible. Erikson used ethnography and history to shift Freudian psychoanalytics away from biological determinism. With Inkeles, Erikson, and Parsons, we have the framework for the currently popular view of children as products of developmental socialization.[12]

The diverse uses and implications of Skinnerian behaviorism and Parsonian structural-functionalism suggest that socialization theory is far more complex than a two-dimensional chart can re-

11 Burrhus F. Skinner, *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis* (New York, 1938); *idem, Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (New York, 1972); *idem, Cumulative Record: A Selection of Papers* (New York, 1972), 567–572. For a recent debate about how to interpret "Baby in the Box," in *Ladies Home Journal,* 62 (October 1945), 30–31, 135–136, 138, see Deborah Skinner Buzan, "I was Not a Lab Rat," *The Guardian,* 12 March 2004; Martin Woodhead and Dorothy Faulkner, "Subjects, Objects, or Participants? Dilemmas of Psychological Research with Children," in Christiansen and James (eds.), *Research with Children,* 9–35. Radical behaviorism is by no means defunct. See Jennifer Gonnerman, "School of Shock," *Mother Jones,* XXXII (2007), 36–50.

12 For a discussion of Inkeles and Parsons, see Corsaro, *Sociology of Childhood,* 8–11. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1963; orig. pub. 1950).

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veal. Socialization theory also includes, for example, Margaret Mead's 1932 study of animistic beliefs among the Manus of New Guinea. Mead explicitly contradicted Piaget's claim that children had little ability to distinguish living beings from dead things. She showed that Manus children were less animistic and more "realistic" in their thinking than Manus adults. At the same time, Vygotsky was clearing intellectual ground between developmental and socialization approaches to childhood; he crafted an alternative to the "developmental stage" (a phrase that indicated a distinct sexual, intellectual, or moral reality for children) with his "zone of proximal development"—an arena of social interaction between children and adults for the optimal advancement of children's competencies.[13]

By the mid-twentieth century, the dissent against developmental positivism had risen to a new level. Iona and Peter Opie, attempting to reconstruct children's culture for its own sake, created an enormous inventory of children's folklore; 20,000 articles remain at the Bodleian Library. For the Opies, a subterranean youth culture thrived as "tradition preserved pure and uncorrupt." Children and youths were romantic subjects actively participating in their own representation, rather than trivial products of either the modernization process or biological development. The ground was well prepared for Ariès' bold thesis that modern childhood was not a matter of natural development at all, because it did not exist in the Middle Ages. What the developmental scientists and sentimental romantics had taken as the nature of childhood became in Ariès' hands the result of the internally disciplining school, and the privatizing middle-class family.[14]

The social perspectives on childhood fashioned by Ariès, the Opies, Mead, and others provided robust alternatives to the developmental psychology of the mid-twentieth century through their emphasis on culture, history, and subjectivity over biology, universality, and objectivity. However, this emphasis did not merely align one set of disciplines against another because, within any discipline, researchers interested in children had access to the entire

13 Margaret Mead, "An Investigation of the Thought of Primitive Children, with Special Reference to Animism," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland,* LXII (1932), 173–190; Lev Vygotsky (ed. Michael Cole et al.), *Mind and Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (New York, 1978).

14 Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford, 1959), v; Philippe Ariès (trans. Robert Baldick), *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York, 1962), 128.

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landscape of modern childhood. If a new social-actor paradigm of children appeared during the late 1980s, scholarly discourse that preceded it would not be expected to display the relationship between the four theoretical pillars of modern childhood. But, this is precisely what we find, especially within the discipline of history during the half-century following Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood*.

The historiographical significance of *Centuries of Childhood* lay in the questions that it raised: What is modern childhood? From where does it come? What is its significance? The answers that followed in the literature were figured upon the landscape of modern childhood itself; historians constructed images of children variously as political, authentic, developing, and conditioned. Those objecting most strongly to Ariès tended to take a developmental position (the right side of Figure 2). Hanawalt, for one, forcefully countered with "a strong biological basis for child development as opposed to decisive cultural influences."[15]

Ariès' critics often conflate his work with that of DeMause, who famously wrote in 1971 that "the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only begun to awaken." Unlike DeMause, Ariès did not argue that premodern children were neglected, unloved, or especially mistreated. Ariès' story did not highlight a modern progressive awakening from medieval brutality; it was about the loss of an "old sociability" between the generations under middle-class moralism. Scholars who study childhood from a fundamentally social and historical perspective are unlikely to confuse DeMause with Ariès, since they offered opposing views on the social significance of modern childhood. Yet, from a romantic or positivistic position their differences would hardly matter, because Ariès' emphasis on the historical construction of childhood and DeMause's claim for a radical change in generational sentiments challenged the assumptions of natural childhood and transcendent parenthood that frame the work of scholars such as Pollack, Hanawalt, Shahar, and Classen.[16]

15 Barabara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York, 1986), 171, 187.

16 Unfortunately for Ariès, the frequently cited claim that in "medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" is not usually quoted with the remainder of the sentence—"this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken, or despised" (128). Secondly, this claim only summarizes the first third of the book. The section in which it appears is entitled "The Two Concepts of Childhood," which conforms to the argument in the rest of the text that the "modern" concept of childhood—"the particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult"—"did not exist" in the Middle Ages. A truncated read-

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That *Centuries of Childhood* is the most harshly critiqued work in the historiography of childhood should not obscure the fact that Ariès and his critics together rode the tide of sociological and anthropological history emerging from the mid-twentieth century. Nothing could have been more fashionably "bottom-up" than families and children. A vast number of historical studies examined the social, psychological, and political implications of generational relations. Most of them appear to have been more influenced by the protean variants of socialization theory than the developmental or sentimental assumptions of those who hotly rejected Ariès.

Notable studies in the United States came from Handlin, Greven, Elder, and many others. One assumption that connects these texts is captured succinctly by the word *generation*. Changes in child socialization are a major historical force because they alter human beings on the most basic level. But, more importantly for this essay, within the framework of historiography—at least in the United States—the socialization approach toward childhood was inextricably linked with a social-actor theory of personhood. Oscar and Mary Handlin's *Facing Life* (1971) explained the strength of individualism in American culture by the weakness of the social hierarchies, structures, and protections for youths. One could say that youths are socialized into being social actors in America. This runs parallel to the idea that human agency flourishes when children construct their own identities.[17]

On an empirical level, reconstructing the social action of children and youth presented significant problems for historians be-

ing of Ariès remains current. See especially Albrect Classen (ed.), *Childhood in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality* (New York, 2005). For a critique of the backlash against Ariès, see James A. Schultz, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the Middle Ages, 1100–1300* (Philadelphia, 1995). For examples of the developmentalist reaction, see Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (New York, 1983); Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages* (London, 1990); Hanawalt, *Growing up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (New York, 1993).

17 Oscar Handlin (ed.), *Children of the Uprooted* (New York, 1966); *idem* and Mary Handlin, *Facing Life: Youth and the Family in American History* (Boston, 1971); Philip J. Greven, *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970); *idem, The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York, 1977); Glen H. Elder, *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (Chicago, 1974). Childhood and youth are central to the voluminous literature in sociology and history dealing with the American "tradition of individualism" and its contradictions. Recent examples include James E. Block, *A Nation of Agents: The American Path to a Modern Self and Society* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); *idem,* "The Politics of Modern Childhood: American Socialization and the Crisis of Individualism," in Jim Goddard et al. (eds.), *The Politics of Childhood: International Perspectives, Contemporary Developments* (New York, 2005), 32–49.

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cause young people, especially those outside the social elite, leave far fewer documents and artifacts than their elders. This problem was not insurmountable, however, once childhood was posited as a factor of change and children as producers of it. The most delightful effort in this regard remains Nasaw's *Children of the City* (1985). Nasaw recreated the ambiance of agentive, competent children at home on the streets by drawing heavily upon interviews and autobiographies, coordinated with newspaper accounts and visual evidence, and sifting them through a rich understanding of the sights, sounds, smells, and spatial environment of early century New York City. His reconstruction of the 1899 strike of New York newsboys against the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer is incredible. Yet, the children who emerge from this book (the hustlers, newsies, junkers, scavengers, petty thieves, and little mothers), cut figures remarkably similar to those appearing in the Horatio Alger novels. They saw their parent's exploitation as industrial laborers, but "their own lives on the street offered them a view of a very different world, a world where one could live by one's wits, where hustle counted, where work was rewarded. The social relations of the market-place, as the children experienced them, were not particularly onerous or exploitive."[18]

What supports this claim? The "authentic" voices of children filtered through the thick descriptions of social history. A latent romantic individualism penetrating deeply into modern historical imagination structures the method and narrative of the book.

18 David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (Garden City, 1985), 61; Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (New York, 1988). Joseph Hawes and N. Ray Hiner published a book-length annotated bibliography of the history of childhood, *American Childhood: A Research Guide and Historical Handbook* (Westport, 1985). On children, youth, and schools, see Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York, 1977), 38–62, 173–214; Julia Wrigley, *Class Politics and Public Schools: Chicago, 1900–1950* (New Brunswick, 1982); J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York, 1985); William Graebner, "Outlawing Teenaged Populism: The Campaign against Secret Societies in the American High School, 1900–1960," *Journal of American History,* LXXIV (1987), 411–435; Reed Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (New York, 1987); Paula Fass, *Outside In: Minorities and the Transformation of American Education* (New York, 1989); Graebner, *Coming of Age in Buffalo: Youth and Authority in the Post-War Era* (Philadelphia, 1990). For a more detailed review of the educational literature in the United States, see Ryan, "A Case Study in the Cultural Origins of a Superpower: Liberal Individualism, American Nationalism, and the Rise of High School Life—A Study of Cleveland's Central and East Technical High Schools, 1890–1918," *History of Education Quarterly,* XLV (2005), 66–95.

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Nasaw's children are self-made men; distinct from their parents, they are heroes of their own lives. This image of childhood is what might be expected to emerge from the autobiographies of successful twentieth-century Americans. *Children of the City* reveals a silent communication between the political and authentic child that is just as vital as the one between the conditioned and the political child in the works of Handlin, Greven, and Elder.

Children of the City was part of a widespread trend toward reconstructing the political and economic agency of ordinary people—workers, women, ethnic minorities, children, youths, and parents—allowing them to join professionals and other elites as actors upon the contested terrains of plantations, rural towns, and urban streets within contexts ranging from families to massive bureaucratic institutions. Gordon's 1988 title *Heroes of their Own Lives* captured this trend exceptionally well. On the topic of youths in American schools alone, notable contributions to this narrative came from Kett, Wrigley, Lukas, Graebner, Fass, Ueda, and many others.

The historiographical movement founded on this concept of "contested terrain" had implications for the landscape of modern childhood, which Figure 2 helps to understand. For example, Nasaw's romantic twist on children as social actors was bound to conflict with works committed to a developmental outlook. Thus, Trattner found *Children of the City* "perplexing" and "a difficult [book] to review." Given Trattner's advocacy for child protection and development in such works as *A Crusade for Children,* it is understandable that he read Nasaw's book as condoning street trading as "a healthy and useful activity whose disappearance was unfortunate. . ." and this view seemed to him ". . . not only baffling but quite frankly, bizarre." By his own lights, however, Nasaw had not actually argued that street trading was either "healthy" or merely "useful"; such functionalist concepts are in tension with both the authentic and the political child. Like that of Ariès' detractors, Trattner's critique of Nasaw suggests that the space between the social-actor and developmental understandings of childhood is the most discordant.[19]

19 Walter I. Trattner, "Street Traders: Little Merchants on the Road to Success? Or Exploited Youngsters on the Road to Oblivion?" *History of Education Quarterly,* XXVI (1986), 407–411; *idem, Crusade for Children: A History of the National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America* (Chicago, 1970).

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THE ORIGINS OF THE LANDSCAPE To this point, the discussion has explored the intellectual interdependencies that define the terrain of modern childhood, but it has not located a time of origin for the landscape itself, other than to reject the idea that it is recent. A full genealogy would be a formidable undertaking, and it would have to do more than analyze published works. Clearly, however, the positioning of adults as products of their childhood (a central claim of developmental socialization) has roots much deeper than the past century or so. Modern socialization theory can be traced at least to Locke's rejection of "innate ideas." In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), Locke's child is a well-conditioned one, a blank slate for adults to write upon so long as they do it with adequate finesse. Locke's tutor orchestrates regimes of control as basic as putting "nature on her duty" (going to stool) with strict observance after the day's first meal. The advice becomes increasingly complex as the text progresses. In example after example, he explained how to tutor a young gentleman in ways that would avoid the exercise of the master's brute force and make the desired habits "natural in them," without the child "perceive[ing] you have any hand in it."[20]

In the context of a widespread Protestant attack on hereditary hierarchies, Locke's conditioned child may have helped to provide a necessarily sharp edge for the construction of its authentic, developmental, and political counterparts—which, in turn, appears to have opened the entire landscape that currently lies before us. Locke's central point—that parents and teachers should create conditions whereby the love of reputation, "esteem and disgrace," could become the "rewards and punishments . . . [to] . . . keep children in order"—opened a space for Rousseau's romantic an-

20 For the origins of childhood in early modern Britain and Anglo-America, see, especially, Christopher Hill's chapters "The Spiritualization of the Household" and "Individuals and Communities" in *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York, 1967; orig. pub. 1964), 443–500; Greven, *The Protestant Temperament* (New York, 1977); C. John Sommerville, *The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England* (Athens, 1992); James Christian Steward, *The New Child: British Art and the Origins of Modern Childhood, 1730–1830* (Berkeley, 1995); Brewer, *By Birth or Consent*. Excellent overviews can be found in Colin M. Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times* (New York, 2003), 19–31; Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (Harlow, England, 2005; orig. pub. 1995), 41–80. Locke (ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov), *Some Thoughts on Concerning Education; Of the Conduct of the Understanding* (Indianapolis, 1996; orig. pub. London, 1693 and 1706, respectively), 24, 39–40, 51–61, 98.

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swer to him in *Emile. Emile,* like *Some Thoughts,* presented a series of stories in which a tutor manipulates (surreptitiously) the conditions for a boy to construct his own lesson. Yet, the overarching point was that individual virtue could emerge only when love of the self *(amour de soi)* was developed through engagement with "natural consequences," as opposed to the Lockean love of reputation *(amour-propre)* fostered by obedience to a politically correct world. Locke offered a child conditioned to control his corporeal desires, whereas Rousseau countered with an authentic child who "lives and is unconscious of his own life" *(vivit, et est vitae nescius ipse suae).*[21]

By the late eighteenth century, the generative tension between the conditioned child and the authentic child (as cut by Locke and Rousseau) helped opened a new vista upon childhood. Artists of this period repeatedly positioned children as part of a search for the conditions of authenticity. Unfortunately, the child of romantic art has often been read too simply as one without the corruptions and problems of power. In a brilliant recent analysis of European portraiture of this era, however, Johnson shows us children constructed as "independent beings with an individual identity and character that is already observable before the age of one." Fashioned with this robust selfhood, "as elusive, complex, and indefinable in children as in adults," they assumed a morally and socially competent responsibility. If Johnson is correct, the image of the authentic child emerging from romantic developmentalism has long been in conversation with the political child who is a moral and social actor.[22]

The novels of Dickens certainly evince plenty of active, competent children. Note the insightful competence of Louisa and the innocent truths that spring from the mouth of Sissy Jupe in *Hard Times.* When asked by her teacher whether a nation of fifty millions of money for each schoolroom of children was a prosperous one, Jupe refuses to answer without being privy to who actually receives the money. Although Louisa knowingly observes that,

21 Locke, *Some Thoughts,* 36; Jean-Jacques Rousseau (ed. and trans. Allan Bloom), *Emile or On Education* (New York, 1979; orig. pub. Paris, 1762), 65–69, 74, 80–95.

22 Dorothy Johnson, "Engaging Identity: Portraits of Children in Late Eighteenth-Century European Art," in Anja Muller (ed.), *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity* (Burlington, 2006), 15. See also the essays by Anthony Krupp on the psychology of children as social actors in the eighteenth-century journal *Know Thyself,* as well as the chapters by Christoph Houswitschka and Bernadette Fort.

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under the circumstances, this response was "a great mistake," the seriously mistaken characters are the obtuse, brutal, utilitarian adults. Dickens' children voice his ideas, often as self-reflective subjects. They are the heroes required of the novel as a literary form. In Coveney's judgment the "romantic child came from deep within the whole genesis of our modern literary culture."[23]

Searching for the conditions of authenticity in childhood was a significant part of nineteenth-century liberal theology and humanitarian movements. Bushnell's explicitly stated purpose for his 1849 *Christian Nurture* was to devise ways for "the child to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise." Contrary to the doctrine of original sin, as traditionally understood by Protestant Christians, Bushnell argued that a child could "open upon the world as one that is spiritually renewed, not remembering he went through a technical experience" of conversion. Child, an abolitionist and the editor of the first journal for children in the United States, was another humanitarian who believed that childhood was the vehicle for purification. Following Locke and Rousseau, she claimed that the Biblical methods of commandment were simply not adequate for rearing children in a free society. She had "a general aversion to catechisms," because "nothing is a safe guide but the honest convictions of our own hearts." She did not oppose the learning of polite manners and moral precepts but asserted that "when the form exists without the vital principle within, it is as cold and lifeless as flowers carved in marble." "Heart" was the keyword in Child's *The Mother's Book* (1831); she believed that "nothing can be real that has not its home *within* us." Raising children correctly was synonymous with teaching the "management" of the "heart," which released them from the "external distinctions of society" through the habitual inculcation of "self-denial."[24]

Like many later commentators, Child positioned the possibilities of childhood between the polarities of Lockean conditioning and Rousseau's search for authenticity. This same dichotomy is

23 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (New York, 1981; orig. pub. 1854), 76–83. Peter Coveney, *The Image of Childhood: The Individual and Society: A Study of the Theme in English Literature* (Baltimore, 1967), 29.

24 Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (Eugene, 2000; orig. pub. 1849), 10–11. Lydia Maria Child, *The Mother's Book* (Bedford, 1992; orig. pub. 1831), 72, 38, 110, 9, 22, 167, 128, 38; on self-denial, 4, 5, 134, 39, 15, 112, 113, 114, 120, 135, 109.

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evident in the titles of two widely read works by Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902) and *The School and Society* (1900). Dewey maintained that any school with a formalized curriculum removed from children's authentic experience is bound to fail. In objecting to the idea that students are the passive recipients of whatever formal content teachers and parents agree to have them fed, he positioned the child as an agent constructing his or her own learning experience. He began "My Pedagogic Creed" (1897) with the claim, "All education proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the race. This process begins unconsciously almost at birth." Dewey's writing is full of powerful passages denouncing passivity as anathema to learning to be free. In *Democracy and Education,* he likens life's spectator to "a man in a prison cell watching the rain out of the window, it is all the same to him," whereas the participant is "like a man who has planned an outing for the next day which continuing rain will frustrate." Dewey's emphasis on student agency continues to inform educational theory, even as schools struggle to practice it.[25]

Csikszentmihalyi's concept of "flow" and Arnstine's concept of "aesthetic experience" are two recent attempts to extend our understanding of subjective agency and student engagement in the learning experience from the Deweyian perspective. Students in "flow" or "aesthetic experience" lose consciousness that they are working; Rousseau might have said that they are alive without being conscious of their life. Their motivation is entirely intrinsic to the activity of the moment. This is "authentic" learning. Yet, the creation of this learning experience for children also has an important instrumental, developmental rationale: The acquisition of competencies is more efficient and profound than it is under conditions of external control.[26]

Viewing children as social actors with a part to play in the construction of their own intellect, abilities, and identities requires immersion in (rather than departure from) the landscape of modern childhood with all of its complications and dualisms. Bluebond-Langner's *The Private Worlds of Dying Children* (1978) makes this point even more cogently than Dewey's writings. Building upon a sociological tradition marked out early in the

25 Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York, 1916), 146.

26 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi et al., *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure* (New York, 1993); Donald Arnstine, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling* (Albany, 1995).

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twentieth century by George Herbert Mead, and informed by Goffman's dramaturgical approach and Blumer's symbolic interactionism, Bluebond-Langner reconstructed children's perspectives on their terminal illness of leukemia and uncovered their vital role in constructing the social reality of their own deaths. She begins her book with a play compositely written from the children's recorded words and observed actions. By keenly working the hierarchies of space and knowledge, the children were able to circumvent a medical system organized to deny them information about their illness and to silence their questions about life and death.[27]

The children of *Private Worlds* appear boldly competent when compared to the Piagetian children depicted by Carey in *Conceptual Change in Childhood* (1985). But they are not the authentic children of romantic autonomy. The understanding of illness and death that they managed to gain emerged within the hospital structure, despite the refusal of adults to acknowledge their desire for information. The mundane flavor of this adult evasiveness is evident in a nurse's attempt to cut off a seven-year-old boy's statement, "I can't play baseball anymore," by adding, "That's right, no ball playing in the rooms—hospital rules." She was denying his ability to voice an idea—to complete his own sentence with "because I'm dying." The consequences of adult subterfuge, however, were not always so uneventful. A physician who tried to coax a child to submit to a procedure by reminding him of his expressed desire to be a doctor when he grew up met with the heated response, "I'm not going to be anything." To a nurse who intervened to ask what he was going to be instead, the child replied, "A ghost," and turned away. In the end, most of these leukemic children accommodated a "mutual pretense" with adults that positioned all children in terms of an adult future. This pretense alienated them from the reality of their present as they came to understand it. It damaged their connection to others, especially their parents, and served to isolate them, both mentally and physically, from each other's deaths, and during their own deaths.[28]

27 Myra Bluebond-Langner, *The Private Worlds of Dying Children* (Princeton, 1978), 105; George Herbert Mead (ed. C. Morris), *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago, 1934); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, 1959); Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism; Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969).

28 Carey's children lack both the mental development required to understand the difference between life and death and the perspective needed to manipulate social institutions.

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It is not clear whether Bluebond-Langner was aware of how profoundly her study contradicted developmental views of childhood and deterministic theories of child socialization. Nor was she able to deal directly with what it implied about the denial of children's medical rights to information and consent. Yet, by applying Blumer's and Goffman's ideas about human agency in socialization to children, she laid bare the politics of childhood innocence and exposed the weakness of the centuries-old assumption that adults could orchestrate childhood without children perceiving it as such. A few years after *The Private Worlds of Dying Children,* Coles defected from the developmental view—renouncing Freud even more than Erikson had before him and decidedly rejecting both Piaget and Kohlberg. In *The Moral Life of Children,* Coles described children as "moral protagonists and antagonists." One of his most powerful protagonists was Ruby Bridges, who unflinchingly faced angry mobs of racist whites to become the first African-American child to attend a white school in Louisiana.

Coles understood Ruby's courage through the Freudian concept of "ego-ideal," though he no longer interpreted it as a prediscursive, unconscious structure of the mind, nor Ruby as merely the product of her condition. For Coles, the ego-ideal derived from the human agency required to practice and speak. Ruby knowingly gave "moral life" to existing bodies of thought—the Christian meanings of forgiveness, humility, and courage. She emerges as a hero of her own life, and a political actor within a movement that used the possibilities of childhood to transform the racial hierarchy of a nation.[29]

The road from Rousseau to Dewey, from G. H. Mead to Bluebond-Langner, and from Freud to Coles leads respectively from the authentic, the conditioned, and the developing child fully into a political child construed as a subject participating in the social construction of childhood. That this road was traveled prior to recent efforts to post a flag for a new paradigm is hardly surprising; in Kuhnian terms, paradigm shifts are neither promissory, nor predictable. Though the twentieth-century may have produced

Susan Carey, *Conceptual Change in Childhood* (New York, 1985), 17. Bluebond-Langner, *Private Worlds,* 210, 228–229, 119, 127–128, 204, 206, 234.

29 Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (Boston, 1986), 7, 9, 26, 31–53.

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Fig. 4 Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656)



particularly clear portraits of children as social actors in the humanities and social sciences, the most recent archaeological shift in childhood is centuries old. Its origins are evident in one of the best-known works dealing with the modern problem of representation—Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656) (Figure 4). The object of gaze is "you," the viewer of the object, but this tension becomes possible only by granting *Las Meninas* (the girl and the painting) the privilege of a knowing subject. The deployment of childhood for such purposes is not incidental. As Figure 2

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and the subsequent discussion shows, modern childhood played an essential part in creating the space between "being" and "representation," between the natural phenomenon itself and the politics of representing it. Unless the terms of modern selfhood collapse entirely, turning social-actor theory and the contemporary social study of childhood into nonsense, the child, like Velázquez's girl, will continue to occupy a paradoxical position as an object of knowledge and a subject who knows. And we can expect the debates that result from this paradox to be revisited again and again on the landscape of modern childhood.[30]

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30 Although he did not note the importance of childhood, my interpretation of *Las Meninas* and its relationship to the central paradox of human science is indebted to Foucault, *Order of Things,* 3–16, 312.