

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Rey, Olivier. (2006). *A Foolish Solitude: The Fantasy of the Self-made Man*, [*Une Folle Solitude : Le Fantasme de l'Homme Auto-construit*]. Paris : Le Seuil. 329 pages
ISBN 9782020863803

Olivier Renard, Special Advisor to the Secretary General Research Council, Sultanate of Oman

Olivier Rey, a professor of mathematics at France's École Polytechnique who also teaches philosophy at Sorbonne University, uses a mundane observation as the starting point of a *tour de force* on education theory: the design of baby strollers changed in the late 1970s, with the new view being to let the infant face the world rather than being confronted by the parent's image, typically the mother's. This sudden modification illustrates what the author sees as the folly of a system dominated by the belief in not only autonomy but also self-construction. References from science-fiction, mythology, art history, psychology, the Bible and other tales are plentiful in Olivier Rey's *A Foolish Solitude*; the message is developed into an ambitious demonstration of the impossibility of self-building oneself, exactly as Baron Munchausen could not have escaped from a swamp by pulling himself up by his own hair (or bootstraps, depending on who tells the story).

The fact that self-construction of the self is impossible does not create a problem in and of itself, but the trouble comes in when social practices seem to ignore this impossibility and even argue that it may be otherwise. God being dead and the world disenchanted, techno-scientific and democratic principles have filled the gap left by disappearing social traditions. In particular, education science is furthering the destruction of what is needed for the little human being to become structured. Left on their own in a consumerist society that is eager to serve their every need, adults are no longer occupied by anything other than their unbridled fantasies.

The extremely well-researched journey starts with an anthropological detour around two themes. First is the necessary departure from an attachment to both oneself and the first "other" (the mother) based on the authority of a third party. The universal prohibition of incest and parricide are thoroughly reviewed as Rey argues that basic interdictions are not meant to constrain man but to provide him with the psycho-cultural support he needs to develop into an adult. The second theme concerns the sense of causality gained from genealogy, the negation of which leads to a potential destruction of reason as the distinguishing characteristic of humans. Through different, complex means, children come to understand that they are caused by their parents, themselves caused by their own parents. The learning process opening up to a deep understanding of the causality principle, and hence to rationality, is, in Rey's argument, based on the discovery

of the genealogical sequence. Pretend that there is no link between generations and you will end like the mythic Uroboros, the circular self-devouring snake.

The author then uses science fiction as an illustration to reveal archaic passions issuing from the birth trauma and the anxiety of death, fears that science, notably genetic and medically assisted procreation, proposes to address and perhaps solve. James Cameron's *Terminator* provides the unsurpassed example of a story in which a man self-generates through a special envoy into the past, with the father being eliminated in the process. Such stories substitute machines for animals and ogres that appear in traditional tales, and give evidence of unconsciousness-driven quest. In our contemporary psyche, bio-science will free us entirely from the genealogical burden and our shameful sexual origins.

Although science in general happily contributes to this tendency — quite often with an unbridled, market-based enthusiasm — it is education science that attracts its fair share of criticism. Referring to Kant, for whom education cannot be a science but an art because man is free and hence is opaque, Rey insists that human reason cannot be a scientific object, even if, paradoxically, freedom is acquired through education. A large part of contemporary theory, according to the author, aims at freeing educational actions from any form of authority in order to promote children's self-construction. The structuring power of educational institutions is set aside and replaced by methods that favor a spontaneous development based on the child's autonomous confrontation with *the* objective reality of the world. The teacher as a coach, a facilitator, must do what mothers are doing with baby strollers: not get in the way.

In a cruel comparison, Rey confronts Piaget's prescriptions with *The Lord of the Flies'* author, Golding. The latter explains that it took him half a lifetime, two world wars and years with children to write a tale of teenagers stranded on a deserted Pacific island. After the initial satisfaction from an unexpected liberty, the small society quickly sinks into chaos, violence, and fear. The general bloodshed is only avoided by the arrival of an adult. Arguing that the pre-teenagers had been corrupted by their early years in civilization would be misleading, Rey argues: remembrance of former rules is one of the only sources of salvation or at least of the temporary delay of carnage. "After all, we are not savages we are English and the English are good at everything" (Golding 1954, quoted at page 259). Without even commenting, Rey throws Piaget's thought against the fictional tale and quotes the father of developmental psychology: "Only a social life among the students themselves — that is self-government taken as far as possible and parallel to the intellectual work carried out in common — will lead to this double development of personalities, masters of themselves and based on mutual respect" (Piaget 1972, quoted at page 264).

Overall, many debates on education, authority or the weakening of the social link boil down to a quarrel between two schools of thought. For one, the individual is ready at birth: the goal is to free him from those things that constrain self-expression. The normative prescription is to escape the past and the oppressive authority of past generations. This is what Rey calls the fantasy of the self-made man: the transmission of knowledge is seen as a potentially dangerous activity that risks damaging the child's self-esteem and violating the child's nature. The clearest manifestation of this is that the verb teaching is seldom allowed, and replaced by learning. This theory almost completely dominates most modern teaching methods and is increasingly called 'best practice'.

The other approach assumes that the individual is to be made, cultivated and educated: individuals are not born free, they are destined to freedom. Olivier Rey offers a welcome and authoritative argument for the second approach in line with Illich's and Arendt's philosophy of education. He posits that authority has (or must have) a special place in human societies. Rey approvingly quotes Illich's perspective: "Contemporary man...attempts to create a world in his image, to build a totally man-made environment, and then discovers that he can do so only on the condition of constantly remaking himself to fit it. We must face the fact that man himself is a stake" (Illich 1971, quoted at page 219). Similarly, he agrees with Arendt who argues that "the problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition" (Arendt 1954, quoted at page 281).

Pre-empting accusations of conservatism, reactionism, or even *passéism*, the young author affirms that he does understand that the past has never succeeded, that "before" was no better; but this in itself makes it necessary for individuals and societies to keep tradition in mind. To forget the past would lead to hitting the same wall and the reproduction of what did not work before.

The book may not be groundbreaking for an anthropologist who would have a solid background in philosophy, mythical symbolism and education theory, as well as a decent knowledge of modern popular culture but, for the rest of us, it is definitely a valuable source of ideas and references. Olivier Rey manages to entertain his reader through a myriad of anecdotes while providing an in-depth presentation of the intellectual pitfalls and practical failures of modern student-centered theories.

Reference

- Arendt H, 1954, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future*. reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1977
- Golding W. 1954. *Lord of the Flies*. London, UK: Faber & Faber
- Illich I. 1971. *Deschooling Society*. London: Calder & Boyers
- Piaget J. 1972. *Où va l'éducation*. Paris: Denoël