



CHC EPISODE 12: GOVERNMENTALITY

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Interview with Karen Smith is available [online](#)

CHILDHOOD: History and Critique (CHC) is a series of interviews, commentary, and happenings in historical studies of childhood by Dr. Patrick J. Ryan, Kings University College at Western University, Canada.

Karen Smith's [The Government of Childhood: Discourse Power, and Subjectivity](#) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) provides a synthesis of three major bodies of literature: (1) the governmentality studies inspired by the later works of Michel Foucault [1]; (2) the sociology of childhood – utilizing Christ Jenks' distinction between the Dionysian and Apollonian images of the child [2]; (3) and vast range of works in the history of ideas and politics – with a particular debt to the work of Michael Allen Gillespie. [3] I was struck by the range of Karen's competencies and her ability to forge links between distinct – sometime difficult – fields of study. Her notes alone (over 1,600 of them) should be useful for anyone interested in the many intersections between the history of childhood, the sociology of childhood, governmentality studies, political theology, social policy & legal studies, and related fields.



The central claim of *The Government of Childhood* is historical: contemporary childhood can not be adequately grasped without an appreciation of the rise of biopower and the “governmentalized” state during the early modern period. Here, Karen sees herself following a “well-trodden” path. This is true, but she

does so by navigating existing research in interesting ways. Her synthesis utilizes an impressive range of existing historical literature on childhood, families, and the state to outline what the concept of governmentality implies for childhood. In doing this, she draws upon Gillespie's *Theological Origins of Modernity* (which might be read along side other important synthetic works, such as Charles Taylor's *A*

Secular Age or Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*). Her efforts carry two important implications: (1) secular modernity can not longer be imagined simplistically as the death of God. By extension contemporary childhood is recognizable only if one has a better understanding of the theological politics of modernity; (2) the history of ideas and discursive practices is indispensable when we address larger questions about the shape of modern childhood as a whole. [4]

The book recounts the ways renaissance humanism, the Protestant reformation, and enlightenment science contributed to an increasingly intense concern with childhood socialization. These movements arose as part of a shift in pastoral religious forms and state sovereignty and produced novel disciplinary armaments. These disciplinary techniques thrived most notably within changes to schools and families between the 15th and 18th centuries. Drawing on Foucault, she writes about the movement of the family serving as a “model” corresponding to the state's sovereign power toward it becoming a “tool” in the state's package of governmental regulations.

The Government of Childhood argues that the increasing disciplinary sophistication of early modern schools and families strengthened and drew upon an image of children as wilful, pleasure seeking, and irrational. Karen uses terms first advanced by Chris Jenks to name this image, the Dionysian child. In my own view, there was an ancient association between the child and irrational folly. What seems more novel and disruptive is the early-modern confrontation between the rationalist/reformer Dionysian images of childhood and their Apollonian opposites: the romantic pictures of children innocent of passion and jealousy, authentic, and well-ordered from birth. Be this as it may, the book persuasively situates



Jenks' Dionysian-Apollonian contrast historically. The Dionysian image of childhood becomes intensified during the 16th- and 17th-centuries, before the development of a Apollonian response in 18th- and 19th-century childhood thought and practice. The well-known contrast between rationalism and romanticism would be a sensible way capture the timeline. The book's description of the opening-up of a Dionysian-Apollonian opposition suggests that it has been a point of long-term continuity working itself into the present. The two might be thought of as part of a conditioning-authenticity couplet. [5]

In the last chapter of the book, "Governing the Responsible Child," Smith argues that a late-20th-century shift toward seeing children as competent agents who participate in their own representation altered and partially displaced the structure of discourse framed by the Dionysian-Apollonian dialectic. Indeed, some have hailed that a "paradigm shift" as happened when we see children as social subjects. And they tie this shift to a 'new sociology of childhood.' [6] To capture this movement, Smith names the agentive child, the child as a social actor, an Athenian child.

I asked her why she chose the term "Athenian." If the Dionysian-Apollonian childhood opposition developed from the early-modern shift within Christian pastoralism which produced disciplinary forms of power, I wonder if she might be suggesting that the contemporary agentive child has a family resemblance to what Foucault called the games of citizenship rooted in the ancient polis – Athens primary among them? [7] Karen did not have that connection in mind; she was thinking of the story of Athena – a god who emerged fully formed from the forehead of her father – Zeus. The Athenian child is a figure who has little use for growing up.

It seems to me that by casting a major theme within contemporary childhood research as a pre-figuring category of a child born fully formed, Smith has presented an important opportunity for researchers to rethink their assumptions. While reading the book, I thought there might be a potential bite to this concept that was not fully delivered. Implicitly the Athenian child historicises the promises of progress that are advanced when social scientists say they offer a new and improved (or post-whatever) way to explore childhood.

This is only my reading of what the Athenian child might do, and I am not neutral on these matters. When I asked Karen Smith about this, she wished to specify the target carefully. Calling attention to the uncritical ways that the idea of the agentive child can be utilized, she said:

"It's really easy for discourses around children's agency to get colonized and... taken-up within discursive strategies that are rooted in salvation and malleability and potentiality. So [the Athenian child] is not necessarily a critique of the new sociology of childhood (which I find very stimulating and interesting) but perhaps I suppose there's a neglect in some of the childhood literature in terms of the link between freedom and agency and the exercise of power... I think there's probably a political naiveté in some of this literature... [but] it is incredibly difficult to untangle ourselves from relations of power-knowledge at any point in time."

She continued by pointing-out that the governmentality literature casts a light upon the links between an essentialist understanding of human agency and neo-liberal politics. In the United States, and increasingly in Europe, she emphasized that social policy "...is very much rooted in activation, and individual responsibility for self-improvement." Whatever merits these ideas have, they occlude the operation of power-knowledge under modernity. In Smith's words, "...what the new sociology of the child hasn't done is help us escape very far from the liberal model of subjectivity... it's challenging it, but it doesn't represent a serious enough challenge to it."

In sum, *The Government of Childhood* takes on a wide range of ideas across multiple disciplinary concerns. The scope of reading required to compose such a book is impressive. From my perspective, the result draws forth a couple of significant themes. It advances the notion that a serious engagement with the history of ideas is a fruitful avenue for the critical interdisciplinary study of childhood. In the process, it also calls childhood scholars to reconsider the liberal maxim that research should proceed around the circle that children are best understood as competent agents who make their own worlds.



Recent articles and chapters by Karen Smith:

Smith, K. "Producing Governable Subjects: Images of Childhood Old and New" *Childhood: a journal of global research* vol. 19, no. 1 (2012):24-37.

Smith, K. "Sociological Perspectives on Childhood" in *Early Childhood Education and Care: An Introduction for Students in Ireland* edited by M. Mhic Mhathúna and M. Taylor (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2012).

Notes:

[1] In addition to leading interpretations and applications provided by Mitchell Dean, Colin Gordon, and Nikolas Rose, those interested in governmentality should see Picador's excellent series that reconstructs and translates the lectures given by Foucault at The Collège de France from 1972-1984. Several of these books are of acutely important here, including: *Society Must Be Defended* (1975-76); *Security, Territory, Population* (1977-78); *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-79).

[2] Chris Jenks, *Childhood* second edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005).

[3] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[4] Gillespie's work is utilized conceptually throughout, but see especially *The Government of Childhood*, 76-101.

[5] See Patrick J. Ryan, "[Discursive Tensions on the Landscape of Modern Childhood](#)," *Educare Vetenskapliga Skrifter* (2011: 2): 11-37.

[6] For a review see, Patrick J. Ryan, "[How New is the 'New' Social Studies of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift](#)," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Spring, 2008): 553-576.

[7] Foucault formulates the contrast between pastoral power (shepherd-flock game) and the polis (city-citizenship game) in *Security, Territory, and Populations* edited by Michel Senelbart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).



Karen Smith lectures on social policy/childhood studies at Dublin Institute of Technology and on childhood inequality in University College Dublin. She has carried out detailed studies of child/family law and policy in Ireland over the last hundred years. Her recent work applies Foucauldian perspectives to the study of childhood in the West from the sixteenth-century to the present.



Patrick J. Ryan is Associate Professor at Kings University College at Western University – Canada with appointments in the Childhood and Social Institutions Program and the Department of History. He is a co-founder of H-Childhood (est. 1998) and author of *Master-Servant Childhood: a history of the idea of childhood in Medieval English Culture* (Palgrave, 2013).