



Book Review

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A Battle Over Children: Nonformal Education in Norwegian Uniformed Children's Organisations, 1910-1960

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This published thesis intervenes in both the histories of childhood and education by centring uniformed children's organisations in Norway from across the political spectrum, and asking how, through these organisations, 'adults made the political identities of children an object of struggle' (p. 33). Nodeland argues that organisations such as the Boy and Girl Scouts, the national socialist NSUF, the social democratic Framfylkingen and the Communist Pioneers had radically different ideological orientations, but used many of the same methods to build children's communities across this period, such as 'an oath of loyalty, a law, a uniform and summer camps' (p.81). As Norway was the first European country to extend compulsory schooling in the same kind of schools up to the age of fourteen for almost all children, these uniformed organisations saw themselves as providing an educational alternative to the state system. These groups experimented with 'nonformal education': in particular, they were interested in practical, hands-on education, the outdoors, and skills that were useful for future adulthood, which might include domestic education for girls. In this way, these uniformed organisations echoed 'child-centred' and 'progressive' developments in pedagogy across Europe

and the United States, which also focused on 'learning by doing', 'relevance' and rurality (see, e.g., Cunningham, 1988; Tisdall, 2020).

Like progressive education movements elsewhere, however, these organisations had different concepts of childhood, and different understandings of children as political actors. In the inter-war period, the Pioneers emphasised the importance of child-led 'school cells' which should produce newspapers and flyers with as much content as possible written by children themselves. They were taught to question 'bourgeois' teachers and their curriculums, and at summer camps, they arranged children's congresses. In this way, Nodeland argues, they challenged 'the dominant view of childhood at the time as an innocent state of play and exploration' (p. 105): this reflects the treatment of childhood in kindergartens in Soviet Russia at the same time, where the image of 'the self-disciplined, instinctively creative small comrade' became significant before the mid 1920s (Kirschenbaum, 2001, p. 105). On the other end of the political spectrum, NSUF framed children as active recruiters to the fascist cause after Nazi Germany's occupation of Norway in 1940, with magazine stories continually returning to the trope of the brave child who confronted the passive majority and was physically assaulted. Like the Pioneers, they adopted the school cell approach, and their focus on 'work service' in their summer camps also moved away from the idea that childhood should be focused on play.

In contrast, the Scouts and Framfylkingen were more likely to frame their

organisations as character-building, or in post-war rhetoric, fostering personal growth, framing children as future citizens rather than present-day activists. In the 1930s, Framfylkingen did encourage children to recruit others into the organisation to help in the fight against fascism, but ultimately they 'saw children as supporters of the adult struggle' (p. 147). They defined themselves against the obedience to authority required by the Scout movement, but were still expected to see themselves as part of a wider working-class fight that required members to voluntarily subordinate themselves for the greater good.

This thesis is organised roughly chronologically. The first two chapters focus on the period 1910 to 1933, the second two on 1933 to 1940, before a single chapter on the war years of 1940 to 1945 and two chapters on the 'reconstruction and change' period of 1945 to 1960. This structure is effective in tracking changes within the individual organisations and attitudes to children's uniformed organisations within Norwegian society as a whole, although it occasionally becomes a little repetitive. Nevertheless, Nodeland convincingly shows how these organisations were an important arena for the development of both nonformal education practices and conceptions of childhood in Norway. This thesis also intervenes in wider debates about the history of childhood in Norway in this period, arguing that, contrary to the claims of scholars such as Henrik Berggren, 'adolescence' was an important category in Nordic countries. Children aged eight to fifteen were targeted by these organisations and viewed as an important political constituency.

This is an important contribution to international histories of progressivism

as well as histories of Nordic childhood. It demonstrates how educational experimentation flourished outside formal pedagogical spaces, but also how the outwardly similar forms of uniformed organisations might mask very different concepts of childhood. As Nodeland argues at the end of the thesis, there is also further scope for considering how children themselves engaged with these adult-created spaces.

References

- Cunningham, Peter. *Curriculum Change in the Primary School Since 1945*. London: Falmer Press, 1988.
- Kirschenbaum, Lisa. *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001.
- Tisdall, Laura. *A Progressive Education? How Childhood Changed in Mid-Twentieth-Century English and Welsh Schools*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020.

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