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Marginal childhood

By Nassim El Kabli

Marginal and maladjusted childhood (which includes orphans, vagabonds, and delinquents) has a history. While the concept has been condemned, it has also been studied extensively and resulted in institutions designed to deal with it.

Reviewed: Michaël Pouteyo, *Fernand Deligny, enfant et institution. Pour une histoire de l'enfance en marge* (Fernand Deligny: Child and institution. For a history of marginal childhood), ENS Éditions, 2024, 389 p., 32 €.

From Plato to (more recently) Gareth B. Matthews,[1] by way of Locke and Rousseau, childhood is a topic that is well-established on the intellectual landscape. "Marginal childhood," as Michaël Pouteyo calls it, would seem, however, to be philosophy's poor cousin, even though it is intensely studied by psychologists, education specialists, and social work professionals. That said, it is important to note that while philosophical studies of this topic are rare, they are not totally non-existent.[2] Pouteyo's rich and stimulating new book is a useful contribution to filling this gap.

This very dense book, which includes a preface by Michel Chauvière, seeks to explain the practices and discourses that gravitate around children that society keeps at arms' length. "Insane," "orphans," "delinquents," "poorly adapted," "vagabonds"--the children that Pouteyo classifies as "marginal" occupy a distinct position in the social

[1] See Gareth B. Matthew, *Philosophie de l'enfance*, trans. Pierre Audran, Paris, Vrin, 2024.
[2] See for example Pierre-François Moreau (Michael Pouteyo's dissertation adviser), *Deligny et les idéologies de l'enfance*, Paris, Retz, 1978; and Catherine Perret, *Le tacite, l'humain. Anthropologie politique de Fernand Deligny*, Paris, Seuil, 2021.

body, since they appear as foreign and incomprehensible entities, threatening society's intellectual and moral equilibrium.

A multifaceted history of marginal childhood

Despite its title, the book is not devoted exclusively to Fernand Deligny (1913-1996), even if the great educator and theorist is central to its argument. The subtitle does a better job explaining what the book is about. How are we to read the history of maladjusted childhood? How should we write the history of a marginal childhood? The reader is immediately struck by the asymmetry between the two questions: the story that one must "read" is that of "maladjusted childhood" (a concept the book critiques), the story that one must "write" is that of a "marginal childhood" (the concept that Pouteyo uses). Each of the book's two parts is organized into two chapters: "Deligny and marginal childhood: an attempt at constructing a philosophical object" (chapter 1); "History of the domain: between rupture and continuity" (chapter 2); "The formation of a language and a grammar" (chapter 3); and, finally, "Deligny and social work: his oeuvre's work" (chapter 4). In this way, Deligny is both the starting point and the point of arrival of a story that extends from the early twentieth century to the 1960s and the guiding thread of the book's reflections.

But what history are we talking about? Pouteyo identifies three approaches to telling the history of social practices (p. 18-24): history "from above," which focuses on texts, laws, and decrees governing the domain being studied, as well as key figures; "local history," which draws on less prescriptive documents, such as correspondence, testimonials, public and private archives, and biographies while considering a greater and more diverse range of figures (such as Georges Heuyer, for example); and finally, "history from below," which starts with "the realities experienced by concerned individuals" (p. 22) and emphasizes "lived reality" and the "realities hidden behind" the institutional surfaces (p. 22). Pouteyo does not opt for one of these approaches over the others but makes use of all three. It must, however, be immediately noted that the book does not have a single theme. Pouteyo seeks simultaneously to study the relationship between practices and discourses, the ideologies underlying these practices and discourses, and the institutions that are responsible for "marginal children," with a diverse gallery of figures that circulate in the same "domain" as Deligny, the "provocative and free-thinking herald of marginal childhood" (p. 27). Yet the book's goal is not confined to these three considerations. Pouteyo also examines

philosophy's possible place in research on social work and contributes to creating a "history of materialist ideas," the theme to which he devotes his conclusion (p. 359-372). His emphasis on the corporeal (rather than behavioral) dimension of the question illuminates the materialism he advocates: "The bodies of marginal children are not entirely their own: they testify to the poor treatment apparent in scars, slums that have deformed the development of their physique, poverty that weakens muscles and hardens fists …. The body returns to its material nature" (p. 363).

The book seeks not to identify some kind of essence of marginal childhood, any more than it aspires to prescribe how to deal with children who lie outside the norm. The project proceeds from two key concepts: the child and the institution. These concepts are not independent of one another, but function within a dialectical game, in which the former impacts the latter and vice versa. Marginal childhood requires institutional measures, which evolve over time, and, in turn, institutions tend to shape children and thus contribute to representations of childhood--marginal childhood as well as childhood in general--that are laden with ideology (which, as we have noted, is one of the book's key concepts).

This connection is not necessarily metaphysical (as if childhood had an essence). This is why Pouteyo's approach is historical. This well documented book does not use historical research simply to support its argument. The turn to history, and particularly the history of the institutions that take care of maladjusted children, is necessary for understanding how children and institutions mutually construct one another. Pouteyo, as we have noted, subscribes to an "entirely materialistic history of ideas" (p. 17). There are two sides to this claim: to shed light on the history and representations of marginal childhood, but also, more reflexively, to articulate a possible materialist conception of the history of ideas. In this respect, the book is very much a work of philosophy. Epistemological reflection on the status of ideas in philosophy and their inherent relationship to reality makes it possible to identify three traits. First, ideas are embodied in the practical experience of the individuals who produce and sustain them. Second, ideas assume a concrete form in a "specific language." Third, ideas participate in networks shaped by other ideas, arising from realms as varied as politics, religion, morality, and science. The logic of "arrangement" contributes to "forming an ideology" (p. 17). This concrete relationship to ideas and thought is no doubt connected to Pouteyo's rich trajectory. In addition to being a philosopher and researcher, he is also an educator (see Chauvière's preface, p. 9).

One word for several things

Fernand Deligny occupies a unique place in the history of institutions handling marginal children. This is why Pouteyo's book gives him a central place: "This research began with the work and writings of Fernand Deligny" (p. 15). This intellectual affinity does not mean that the entire book is dedicated to the famous educator's thought. Origins are not destiny. The book is not a monograph, as Pouteyo notes retrospectively in the conclusion: "The goal has been not so much to retrace [Deligny's] trajectory or to present his work in its entirety … as to make it understandable in the material and ideological context in which it was born" (p. 360).

The book's title reflects a philosophical choice: the history of institutions does not follow a linear order. This dynamic and process-oriented history is the result of conflict and divergences as well as alliances that oppose or unite different actors involved in reeducation. From this perspective, institutions no longer appear as abstract realities imposed from above but as provisional and constantly renegotiated resolutions of problems emerging within social space. Pouteyo explains: "Before Social Assistance for Children (*Aide sociale à l'enfance*), the Legal Protection for Youth (*Protection judiciaire de la jeunesse*) and regional health agencies could divide up responsibility for children facing social, legal, and cognitive difficulties, marginal children had first to be identified as a population that was likely to have problems" (p. 26).

Due to his place in the world of social work and his philosophical positions, Deligny encompasses, as it were, a significant share of the tumultuous history of marginal childhood from the 1920s to the 1960s, a period central to Pouteyo's analysis. One might say about Deligny's name what Pouteyo says about Deligny's conception of the individual: a proper noun signifies far more than the individual who bears it, as it also refers to a network of relationships and interactions in which the individual is caught up and acts.[3] The individual may act scandalously, becoming, by the same token, a group's symbol. For instance, Roger Abel's scandalous death on April 1, 1937, after being placed in solitary confinement for 153 days, is a reminder of the terrible conditions experienced by all the children living in the same institution, the Eysses Penitentiary Institution. Pouteyo writes: "Far from having just one name, [the

[3] For an analysis of Deligny's conception of the individual, see the illuminating passage on p. 328: "between their interiority and the way they are determined individually, individuals can be understood in terms of their relationships, their contexts, their activities, the way they hold themselves in the world--a world that they share with troubled children."

individual] has several" (p. 239). What is true for marginal children is also true for Deligny, the philosopher of the "other pole" and "the other side" (p. 301). An essential difference must nonetheless be noted. For maladjusted children, the onomastic principle has, within a shared community, a unifying function, since they live in equivalent circumstances. The name "Deligny," however, also encompasses the institutional actors that he opposes. These actors are many and belong to different professions, including children's psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, magistrates, journalists, and reporters. While these actors all share a similar concern--maladjusted or "marginal" childhood--and all contribute to the elaboration of what Pouteyo calls the "domain," it would be misleading to think that the latter has been constructed in a homogeneous and seamless manner. This is why Pouteyo speaks of "territory," a term that he borrows from Andrew Abbott to call attention to the complexity of special education's history.

Among the many actors in the domain, two were at the forefront through the 1960s (see p. 95): judges and doctors.

In France, the medical profession's decision to address maladjusted children occurred "over the course of three very different historical and political contexts: the Popular Front, the Vichy regime, and tripartite France [of the postwar years]" (p. 102). This period gave birth to a specific discipline for treating maladjusted childhood: pediatric neuropsychiatry (*neuropsychiatrie infanto-juvénile*, or NPI), which was launched primarily by Doctor Georges Heuyer (1884-1977).

Whereas at the beginning of the twentieth century, schools were responsible for all children, regardless of their condition, the question was gradually raised of "tracking" children into "normal" students, "so-called abnormal students who can still be educated" (p. 106), and those whose psychiatric problems were such that they had to be confined to medical and social work authorities. It is in this context that doctors were charged with tracking students, notably through IQ tests, and determining the proper place for each (whether in regular classes, special classes, asylums, or medical-pedagogical institutes).

But the history of maladjusted childhood is also that of juvenile delinquency: it is only a short distance from maladjusted childhood to "so-called guilty childhood" (to quote the title of a book by Henri Joubrel, *L'Enfance dite "coupable"*). This is why judges also became essential. "Over some thirty years … supervised education has become highly structured around the position and function of the judge, to whom an empire within an empire--the justice of minors within justice per se--has been born" (p. 108).

These two jurisdictions (medicine and justice) are not hermetically sealed from each other. This was the insight that led Heuyer to associate abnormality with delinquency: "Identifying abnormality means seeing the parallels and placing on the same level abnormality and delinquency and perhaps, through sufficiently preemptive preventive action, preventing degenerate constitutions from acting" (p. 114).

Marginal childhood and the constitution of a new language

Besides law and medicine, the gradual emergence of the domain of marginal childhood can also be explained, quite surprisingly, by the rise of another institution: scouting. It is by drawing on the methods of scouting that the field of reeducation would develop and contribute to the emergence of a new profession: that of educator. The influence of scouting is due primarily to Henri Joubrel (1914-1984), a judge by training, a journalist, and an official at the *Éclaireurs de France* (the secular branch of French scouting, which is separate from the Catholic and Protestant scouting organizations). Scouting's influence has less to do with its forms of organization (the emphasis on the group, the individual's responsibility within the group, the leadership mystique, and the importance of the body)[4] than with its moral understanding of the child, based on a principle pioneered by scouting's founder, Baden-Powell, that "one must find and make blossom the 'five percent of good' in each child so that it can be applied to children in danger" (p. 145).

Deligny criticized this framework, as well as the institutions and practices associated with it. Yet it is from the standpoint of this theoretical and ideological framework that Pouteyo seeks to understand Deligny's work. Deligny's thought can also be understood from the standpoint of his opposition to the idea circulating in the field of so-called "maladjusted" childhood. "Infantile neuropsychiatry and scouting allow one to follow the main figures in the domain of marginal childhood, as well as their alliances and antagonisms--and the throughlines that their antagonisms suggest. Marginal childhood and the domain of maladjusted childhood, insofar as they are

[4] Pouteyo presents these four characteristics on p. 134.

institutional, have been constructed by the work and commitment of individuals acting at different levels: technique, science, practice, legislation, and politics" (p. 197).

What one fundamentally finds at the intersection of the various disciplines dealing with marginal childhood is a particular way of speaking and writing that varies across periods. Pouteyo places a lot of emphasis on names and titles, on the use of language, and writing. "One conviction on which this book is based is that different periods, institutions, and ideologies express themselves through different modes of writing. Put differently--and as Deligny would put it--the goal is to 'find one's way around" a period's words, in what they tell us about the conflicting ideologies and prevailing ideas that structure the practices of institutions" (p. 199). This point is important, as it is language's formative character that, according to Pouteyo, establishes the philosophical legitimacy of his project.[5]

The connection between language and institution is evident throughout the book, but it is in the second part that its full scope becomes apparent, notably in relation to Deligny's critique. The latter's critique of institutions is based on unveiling the words that are constituted within institutions and that, in turn, constitute them as such. While Deligny is known for his initiatives and experiments concerning marginal childhood, whether it be the Center for Observation and Triage (*Centre d'observation et de triage*, or COT) in Lille or in the Cévennes, where he worked with young autistic children, his originality is most evident in his unique approach to writing. Pouteyo analyzes three aspects of it: its skill, form, and tone. Thanks to his writings, particularly *Graine de crapule* (1945), Deligny became a name known to a generation of educators, as well as the name of a new philosophy of childhood that rejected closed and rigid categories and extracted from static institutional vocabularies anything that contributed to essentializing gestures. Two years after *Graine de crapule* he published another book, *Les vagabonds efficaces* (1947), consisting of stories from the *Centre ouvert de triage* of Lille, where "hoodlums, runaways, the emotionally disturbed, and frauds" came and went. Such individuals must first be given a language--that is, words that help them.

[5] "Institutions do not arise solely because of the material characteristics that underpin them, nor because of the ideologies that run through them; they also display themselves through their own words, which intersect with these two [other] dimensions. This is why a philosophical examination is more fruitful than others when it comes to connecting these two realms and revealing the way that they are embodied in a language's reality" (p. 269).

Conclusion

Due to its wide range of topics, wealth of information, and historical, philosophical, epistemological, and anthropological aspirations, Pouteyo's book will interest social scientists, philosophers, readers of Deligny, and more generally those who are troubled and preoccupied by marginal children and adolescents who live and suffer in the shadow of conventional and stereotyped representations of childhood. One cannot analyze childhood without considering its margins, and one must, consequently, be wary of words that deny access to a reality they should be opening up.

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