

# The Social Construction of Youth and Childhood

Troubles of Youth

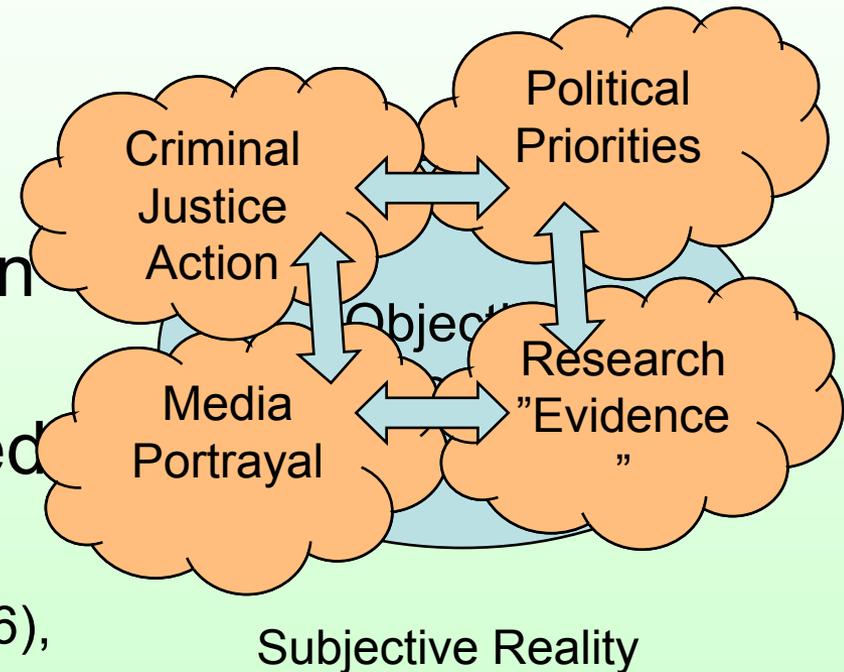
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# Lecture Outline

- What do we mean by “Social Construction”?
- Historical themes in the construction of childhood
- Moral Panics and Youth
- Case Study: James Bulger

# What do we mean by “social construction”?

- Importance of ‘meaning’
- Mediated reality
- The net effect of the meaning ascribed to action is to produce an institutionalized, embedded social structure
- Berger, P. L. and T. Luckmann (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*



# Philippe Aries

- (1962) “Centuries of Childhood”
- The essential differences between children and adults are (relatively) contemporary social constructions
- Children ‘little adults’
  - “Age of reason” => 7
  - Working by similar age
  - Art works show adult dress, expressions etc.
- Minimal emotional commitment to children?
  - Possibly, but may be simply that children not considered as a separate category
- 18<sup>th</sup> century: “Childhood” an upper class phenomenon
- 19<sup>th</sup> / 20<sup>th</sup> cen: solidified throughout class structure

# Aries: Construction of Childhood

- Theory of innocence
- Segregation of ages
- Institutional recognition of childhood
  - education
  - The Church
  - family
  - Employment

# Critique of Aries

1. Empirical data
2. “Prescription with practice”
3. Overstates the social construction:  
ignores differential needs and evidence  
of emotional attachment
4. Ignores economic and political factors,  
and prioritises moralists and  
educationalists

# Development and Debate

## Conflicting Constructions of Childhood

- **The Natural Child**

- “Tabula Rasa” – the blank slate
- Aristotle / Aquinas / Rousseau / Locke
  - “the human intellect...(is) like a clean tablet on which nothing is written”
- basis of much pre and post Enlightenment thinking relating to educational and moral guidance
- (as opposed to) John Wesley “break the will of your child .... bring his will into subjection to yours that it may be afterward subject to the will of God” (original Sin)

# The Evangelical Child

- Original Sin and the need for redemption
- The demand for cheap labour, combined with suppression of rights
- more pessimistic and alarmist view
  - “Is it not a fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings, whose little weaknesses may, perhaps want some correction, rather than as beings who bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil disposition, which it should be the great end of education to rectify?” Hannah More (late 18<sup>th</sup> cen)

# The Romantic Child

- Romantic movement: celebrated the true, untamed characteristics of nature, in the face of rationalized, scientific thinking
- Original innocence : childhood represented a time of being yet to be tainted by the evils of modernity
- Blake: childhood was a source of 'innocence' to be nourished in adulthood
- Wordsworth: a period of ultimately lost innocence

# The Delinquent Child

- A conflict between Innocence and Experience
- Children need protection and nurturing
- Delinquency was the result of the brutalizing aspects of wage-labour: class specific
- An 'innocent' child in need of protection, guidance, love and discipline: dependence
- Emergence of state intervention

# 4 themes in the historical trends

1. the gradual shift from the idea of a fragmented notion – by geography and class to one of a more uniform and coherent identity
2. the rise of the ‘domestic ideal’ amongst the 19th cen middle classes, prioritising the family as the dominant institution
3. the rise of the dominant State in relation to the family and child welfare
4. the political and cultural struggles to universalize the experience of childhood

# Moral Panics and Youth

- Youth as a Perpetual Problem
- Geoffrey Pearson “Hooligan: a history of respectable fears”
- Common complaint is that young people’s behaviour is worse than 20 or 30 years ago
- Reality: complaints of irresponsible youth is ever present throughout history

# Defining Features of a Moral Panic

“a condition, episode, person or group of persons **emerges** to become defined as a **threat to societal values** and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and **stereotypical** fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people.” (Cohen, 1972)

- Acts to justify specific political responses
- Amplifies deviance and social exclusion

# Construction of “Youth” as Problematic - example

- Jamie Bulger (1993)
  - Moral outrage expressed
  - Widespread sensationalist coverage
  - Demonisation of two 10 year olds
    - 8 years increased to 15 years by Home Secretary
  - Symbolic of a general ‘crisis’ in childhood
  - Used to justify a range of increasingly punitive responses to youth offending e.g. reduction of age of criminal responsibility to 10

# Key features of the Bulger case

- Essentialism
  - “The Evil and The Innocent” (Daily Mail 1993)
  - “How do you feel now, you little bastards?” (Daily Star 1993)
- Generalisation
  - ‘slippery slope’ of youth offending moving from bunking off school, stealing from shops, trespassing, abduction and finally murder
  - “WHAT I did on my holidays the 1994 version. Put concrete block on railway line, am; abducted toddler from supermarket and beat him to death, pm. Who said that today's youngsters do not know how to make their own entertainment?” Gerald Warner, Sunday Times)

# Key features of the Bulger case

- Doli Incapax: age under which children are considered unable of judging right and wrong
- Expert witnesses demonstrating intellectual maturity, not mental disturbance
- Would it have been acceptable to try them before a jury of 10 year-olds?

# Key features of the Bulger case

- Phil Scraton (1997)
  - 10 years previously:
    - 1 child under 5 had been killed by a stranger;
    - none by another child:
    - over 70 children under 5 had been killed by a parent or adult known to them
- a media focus on the randomness of risk, stranger danger and the dangerous of the public realm (not private)