

## **Correspondence:**

### **The Baumgarten Children's Home**

*This letter is a response to the translation of an extract from Siegfried Bernfeld's article on the Baumgarten Children's Home, posted on this site in September 2008.*

Bernfeld's writings played a prominent role in the debate about alternative education in Germany in the late sixties, early seventies. His report about Baumgarten is a very important document.

Bernfeld states quite clearly that the new pedagogy relies on a new attitude on the part of the teacher. In his eyes what is important is not the technique a teacher applies, but rather the teacher's attitude to the pedagogical situation, from which the technique derives.

On pages 8 and 9 of your translation there is a passage in which the attitude which Bernfeld sees as desirable is exemplified in clear terms. It describes a new relationship between adults and children, involving unconditional love and respect, but also requiring honesty and self-knowledge on the part of the teacher. The teacher that Bernfeld has in mind is a person who is self-assured, can reflect on the own behaviour, has a knowledge and understanding of their own childhood and can distance her- or himself from their own childhood legacy.

The whole organisational side of a school is of secondary interest – what must come first and foremost is the attitude (calm, patience, friendliness, etc.) of the adults. Even a school where all forms of student-centred organisation (school councils, self-regulation, self-directed learning etc.) are installed can be easily converted into a dead place, an empty shell of formulas, if the teachers lack these qualities.

Yet there need to be mechanisms in place also to make sure that 'dead teachers' (in other words the embedded hierarchical and organisational structures) cannot kill the spirit of a school. Bernfeld shows clearly how the lack of organisational clarity (or one may say lack of support) leads to the failure of the experiment.

Bernfeld furthermore is very aware of the historical-materialist situation of education in a given social context. He says, "Es gibt keine Insel der Seligen in unserer unseligen Welt" ("There is no isle of the blessed in our unholy world.") He understands 'new education' as a way of changing society, and changing society as a way of arriving at a 'new education'.

Eventually he is also a protagonist of a new technique which derives from the attitude he promotes. "The educator," he says, in a passage you have not translated, "is a bungler when he does not understand what emotions are expressed in children's behaviour, and thinks he can indiscriminately disregard its implications, when what is really important is developing the emotions, that is to say first of all to allowing them to emerge, so that they become comprehensible and open to development."

All this is, in a nutshell, the basis for the development of a psychoanalytic approach to education.

Bernfeld's writings are a rich source of material for everyone who wishes to take a profound reflective look on educational practice. He is highly critical of the ambitions of pedagogy, which he says is nowhere near being a science. In his text *Sisyphus - the Limits of Education* he shows how little they are actually built on. It was written in the mid-1920's, a good bit later than *Baumgarten* and one can see that some of his enthusiasm had been lost.

The 1920's were a turbulent time in Germany with a lot of educational experiments going on. It was a period of high intensity with great hopes for liberation and social change. All political groups had their own ideas on how to create the new society, and the various strands of progressive education were not necessarily in agreement with each other either. In *Sisyphus* Bernfeld maintains that education can only become a science if socialism has been established, and that only on this basis can a 'new education' be established, but at the same time harshly criticises the socialists for not realising that political change entails institutional change and a change in attitudes towards education.

Edwin Hoernle was writing about 'proletarian education' at the same time as Bernfeld. Hoernle was associated with the communist party. Bernfeld defines the establishment of a socialist society (a socialist Jewish Palestine, to be

precise) as his objective. Hoernle's aim was also the establishment of socialism but, if you compare the two there is a striking difference. It is almost comical to read Hoernle's text, when he states the difference between bourgeois and communist education. Basically he says that we (the communists) do the same things as the bourgeois, but there is one big difference, namely that it is we who are doing it. It is a completely simplistic worldview – bourgeois bad, communist good.

It reminds me of the debate about nuclear power plants. When I lived in the Federal Republic of Germany, the official propaganda was that 'our' reactors were safe, while the ones in the German Democratic Republic were unsafe. For many communists, however, the Western plants were the work of evil forces, while the plants in the East were completely safe and harmless. Two sides of the same coin.

What Bernfeld represents is the call for a new currency – or perhaps no currency at all?

Robert Hamm