Préface. In. A.-N. Perret-Clermont & J.-M. Barrelet (Eds). *Jean Piaget and Neuchâtel. The Learner and the Scholar* (pp. x-xv). Hove and New York: Psychology Press

FOREWORD

The first edition of this work appreared in French in 1996 while we were celebrating the centenary of Jean Piaget's birth in Neuchâtel, his native city and the University, in which he took up his first professoral position. This book is neither a laudatory description nor a biography that relates the actions and the intellectual course of the savant. The latter has already been skilfully done, and Piaget's scientific contribution is still being translated, evaluated, analyzed, and reconsidered.[1] The intention is not to 'explain' Piaget, even less to discern his career as determined by social or personal destiny.

Our aim is otherwise: we hope, above all, to reconstruct the historical context, in the broad sense of the term, which gave birth to Jean Piaget's thinking. We have tried to recreate the 'climate' which that much favoured his learning and intellectual curiosity about everything relating to knowledge. Certainly, there is a great part of personal genius involved, but his work is also very much the result of a process, that of growing up in a particular social and cultural milieu, in a culture medium, to borrow a biological metaphor. Certainly Piaget would have enjoyed such a metaphor taken from biology, the discipline in which he prepared his doctoral thesis. Yet, our perspective here is another one. We want to borrow a historical cultural perspective from another psychologist, born in Russia on the same year, Lev Vygotsky. We will consider Piaget's activities as an adolescent, growing up to become a man of his time in close interaction with other younger and elder people within precise cultural and institutional settings marked by habits, values, goals, and legacies of identifiable conflicts and stakes.

Who crafted this socio-cultural milieu; who are the co-authors, the partners, the questioners at the source of Jean Piaget's early career? What events, what ideas confronted him? Against the background of the specific historical-cultural setting of Neuchâtel we will look at his family, their social life, his education and schooling, his interests as a student at university, his friendships and his participation in groups such as the Society of the young Friends of Nature (Amici Naturae), in Christian circles, and at scientific gatherings. The first part of this book is given to his years in Neuchâtel in the first quarter of the 20th century, decisive years for Piaget's future. If we focus on the roots of his socialization, it is to understand how much of Piaget's endeavours stemmed from his first questions as an adolescent and how much is owed to the richness of the intellectual and emotional interactions he experienced in his native country at a time of vivid religious, scientific and political debates.

In the second part of the book we will try to 'zoom out' of Neuchâtel and see how Piaget succeeded in placing himself on the international scene at the centre of a stream of questions that sprang to life in the second half of the 19th century particularly in the social sciences. Piaget was very quickly recognized as a valid interlocutor in a great number of disciplines, which comprised pedagogy, logic, philosophy, and sociology, as well as child psychology. From his first writings in the 1910s, Piaget was present in the debates. Notably, already in the 1920s, Vygotsky published a translation into Russian of Piaget's early book.

The authors of the second part show us how Piaget figures in the intellectual network of his day. Behind the birth of psychology as a science lies the work of the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov and that of Wilhelm Wundt, who founded the first laboratory of experimental psychology in Germany. Psychology also has its roots in the new approach to madness - or rather the unconscious - in psychiatry with Sigmund Freud in Vienna and Carl Jung in Zurich.

Finding part of their inspiration in theories coming from North America, the newly born paediatrics ‘reinvented’ the role of infancy and turned towards psychological conditions in education: Maria Montessori in Rome, Ovide Decroly in Brussels, Edouard Claparède in Geneva, where he founded the Institute Jean-Jacques Rousseau with Pierre Bovet as co-director, and then Jean Piaget. Public education, now compulsory, faced administrative problems that left their mark on the new psychology, notably via Alfred Binet’s efforts to build a test to assess intelligence in order to detect children with severe difficulties. It is in Binet’s laboratory that Jean Piaget carried out his first studies in child psychology, at the instigation of Theodore Simon. Back in Switzerland, Piaget no doubt remembered the psychoanalytical debates he engaged in as a student in Zurich and pursued for a while with Sabina Spielrein in Geneva pondering upon the young child’s pseudo-autistic behaviour and early ego-centrism. Invited by Claparède to organize research on matters relevant for education, Piaget recalled the connections between logic and the development of knowledge proposed by his Neuchâtel professor, the philosopher Arnold Reymond, and his own experiences in the youth movement founded in Neuchâtel by Pierre Bovet, a fervent Christian and a reader, like himself, of William James.

Scientific minds of the time were interested in the relationship of the individual to society, the evolution of the species and the growth of knowledge, the respective role of nature and nurture. Europe was in contact with its colonies and fascinated by the diversity of mankind. It had also been at the centre of the First World War. Piaget was a child of a complex era, in a deep quest to find meaning to life and society. He tried out his own answers. The reception of his work was quite diverse: as shown here by Daniel Hameline, there are many avatars of our hero.

JEAN PIAGET'S INTELLECTUAL ITINERARY

Jean Piaget was born on 9 August 1896 in Neuchâtel, the small capital city of a republic and Swiss canton that lies at the foot of the Jura mountain range. He is raised in a milieu of cultural and religious values, which are often in conflict.[2] School was easy for Jean and left him time for outside activities. His early passion for the natural sciences was soon noticed and cultivated by attentive and supportive researchers and professors. He made a number of friends among like-minded students; Piaget was also interested in the social Christianity preached by the pastor Paul Pettavel from La Chaux-de-Fonds, another intellectual, economic, and artistic city in the Canton of Neuchâtel marked by union activities. Piaget's early publications bear witness to this double passion for scientific matters and for philosophical and religious ideas.

Piaget seems to have carried out his studies at the Faculty of sciences at the University of Neuchâtel with the attitude of a dilettante, while at the same time following subjects taught in other faculties. His delicate health required him to make frequent visits to the Alps, where he took the opportunity to collect molluscs, which provided the primary material for his doctoral thesis. It was somewhat short. But the number of publications that he had already published had given him a solid reputation among specialists.

Trained as a biologist, Piaget was preoccupied with the philosophy of science and the relationship between knowledge and belief. He often spoke of himself as having made a detour via psychology and its new methods to address the central question of epistemology. Thus, it is perhaps in spite of himself that he is known today above all as a psychologist and a pedagogist.

After his solid education at Neuchâtel, Piaget went on to study in Zurich and in Paris. He found himself at the crossroads of French and German culture: Emmanuel Kant and Henri Bergson,

and also Sigmund Freud and Léon Brunschvicg. As Jean-Jacques Ducret suggests Piaget got involved in child psychology research not only because it offered him the possibility to investigate empirically his philosophical questions, but also, in a certain manner, for verifying the hypotheses of his master, Arnold Reymond.

Geneva, where Piaget settled in 1921, was to become the place where he did most of his work, with temporary appointments in Neuchâtel, Lausanne, and Paris. He returned to his native city to teach philosophy, history of science, psychology, and sociology from 1925 to 1929. In the French capital, from where his maternal ancestors had come, he first worked in Binet's laboratory. Much later on, in 1942, he returned to Paris to teach at the Collège de France, and in 1952 he replaced Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the chair of philosophy at the Sorbonne.

But Geneva remained Piaget's operating base. After Edouard Claparède and Pierre Bovet, founders of the Institute Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he became head of the institute, a role he fulfilled thanks to the help of his co-directors, the eminent pedagogues and compatriots Samuel Roller and Laurent Pauli, from La-Chaux-de-Fonds in Canton Neuchâtel. As of 1929, Piaget held the chair of history of scientific thought at the University of Geneva, where he also taught experimental psychology, and from 1939 to 1952, he assumed the chair of sociology. In 1929, he became president of the International Office of Education. In 1936 he also taught experimental psychology and sociology in Lausanne. It is in Geneva also that Piaget founded an International Centre for Genetic Epistemology in 1955. The creation of this original and multidisciplinary laboratory marked a new start in his impressive scientific career that would last 25 more years and would produce an abundant number of publications difficult to match. It is important to note how his work was sustained internationally. He received crucial research

funding from the Rockefeller Foundation; with discretion and efficiency, Jerome Bruner[3] participated in rendering possible for Piaget to pursue his work.[4]

Given the abundance and diversity of Piaget's work it cannot be summarized. Yet, it is rooted in one major question that prevails throughout, a question that Piaget takes over from Kant: 'how is knowledge possible?' He will try to answer it via an empirical observation of how knowledge develops.[5] His writings, covering some 70 years of work, have been vastly disseminated and have had a considerable impact with numerous translations in all languages that are reference works still used in universities and laboratories worldwide.[6] Controversial at times, yet for the most part admired, Piaget received more that 30 titles of doctor *honoris causa* and was awarded many prizes, among which were the Erasmus Prize in 1972 and the Balzan Prize in 1980. The Foundation of the Jean Piaget Archives[7] in Geneva still receives books and articles related to his work.

THE PROMOTER OF A SYSTEM

Jean Piaget appears clearly as a man of continuity, faithful to a coherent system, who patiently and laboriously stays within a groove, that he follows in earnest while making use of collaborators to construct a clearly specified work. From his first essays on molluscs to his most brilliant and fully elaborated works on the development of human intelligence, Piaget remained dominated by a single idea, expressed in multiple ways, faithful in that respect to the lessons of Bergson.

Piaget could, however, appear disconcerting for there were so many paths he explored. As it was for Piaget himself, it is necessary for his readers to look for the *system* that underlay all the

abundance. He described his epistemology as structuralist. One would like to call him a philosopher, but he had this major conflict with treating philosophers as 'wise men', refusing to grant any scientific credibility to writings that were not based on experimentation. Only the logicians among them stayed in contact with Piaget, although it was a somewhat tense contact.

Is Piaget a psychologist then? Yes, but psychology for him was only a way to approach epistemological questions. As René Van der Veer tells it, Russian psychologists were attentive to his work, yet they reproached him for not giving greater importance to social factors. Indeed Piaget did not show much concern with social realities (even while teaching sociology) and he left the field of psychoanalysis early on.

Nor is Piaget really a pedagogue. He maintained an ambiguous attitude towards education. Working for the International Bureau of Education and often referred to as a theorist of the New Education, he wished - paradoxically? - to study the child's thinking free of all external influences, in particular that of school, as Jürgen Oelkers writes here. Nevertheless, Piaget greatly contributed to progress in pedagogy: his theories and stages of development of the child's intelligence have been used by others to modernize schools and teaching practices in the benefit of children's pleasure to learn and of mutual understanding between adult and child.

Twenty-five years after his death and it is still difficult to make a precise assessment of the multiple formats of the impact that Piaget has had on our scientific culture: 'Piaget's work continues to be well regarded. Beilin[8] reckoned that his influence on Developmental Psychology was comparable to that of Shakespeare on English.'[9]

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[1] See, for instance, the latest translation : Piaget, J., Reason (translated and commentary by Leslie smith). New Ideas in Psychology, 24, 2006, p. 1-29. Of interest also for an appraisal of the present debates around Jean Piaget in English: Smith, L. *Jean Piaget: Critical Assessments*. London, New York, Routledge, 1992.

[2] Perret, N.L., Croyant et citoyen dans un Etat moderne. La douloureuse négociation du statut des églises issues de la Réforme à Neuchâtel, 1848-1943, Neuchâtel, Ed. Messeiller, 2006.

[3] It is interesting to note the key-role played by the same J.S. Bruner in parallel for the 'rediscovery' of L. Vygotsky's major contribution to psychology.

[4] The story of Piaget's relationships with Geneva and Switzerland is still to be written. He had made himself persona non grata in some academic circles after the publication of his polemical book *Insights and Illusions of Philosophy* (New York, Cleveland, the world Publishing Compagny, 1971). He had disappointed Pierre Bovet's expectations to see him expand educational research in concrete ways. He might have felt as a lonely prophet in his country as we remember his joy and his words when he announced to his students in 1970 that an international organization named 'Jean Piaget Society' had been established to explore the nature of the developmental construction of human knowledge.

[5] Smith, L., *Necessary Knowledge*. Hove, Erlbaum, 1993, p.35ff.

[6] Cole, m., Cole, S., & Lightfoot, C., *The development of children*, 5th edition, New York, Worth Publishing, 2005; Beilin, H., Piaget's enduring contribution to developmental psychology, *Developmental Psychology*, 28, 1992, p. 191-204.; Scholnick, E., Piaget's legacy: heirs to the house that Jean built. In E. Scholnick, K. Nelson, S. Gelman & P. Miller (eds.), *Conceptual Development: Piaget's Legacy*, Mahwah, NJ, Erlbaum, 1999.; Smith, L., Piaget's model. In U. Goswami (ed.), *Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Cognitive Development*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2002.

For further updated references, see the website of the Jean Piaget Society: http://www.piaget.org

[7] The Jean Piaget Archives, Uni-Mail, 40 Blvd du Pont d'Arve, 1205 Geneva – Switzerland. Website : http://www.unige.ch/piaget/

[8] Beilin, op.cit.

[9] Smith, L. Personal communication.