ABSTRACT. In this essay, Robert Davis argues that much of the moral anxiety currently surrounding children in Europe and North America emerges at ages and stages curiously familiar from traditional Western constructions of childhood. The symbolism of infancy has proven enduringly effective over the last two centuries in associating the earliest years of children’s lives with a peculiar prestige and aura. Infancy is then vouchsafed within this symbolism as a state in which all of society’s hopes and ideals for the young might somehow be enthusiastically invested, regardless of the complications that can be anticipated in the later, more ambivalent years of childhood and adolescence. According to Davis, the understanding of the concept of infancy associated with the rise of popular education can trace its pedigree to a genuine shift in sensibility that occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century. After exploring the essentially Romantic positions of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and Friedrich Fröbel and their relevance to the pattern of reform of early childhood education in the United Kingdom and the United States, Davis also assesses the influence of figures such as Stanley Hall and John Dewey in determining the rationale for modern early childhood education. A central contention of Davis’s essay is that the assumptions evident in the theory and practice of Pestalozzi and his followers crystallize a series of tensions in the understanding of infancy and infant education that have haunted early childhood education from the origins of popular schooling in the late eighteenth century down to the policy dilemmas of the present day.

Much of the moral anxiety currently surrounding children in Europe and North America emerges at ages and stages curiously familiar from traditional Western constructions of childhood. It is with the passing of the phase commonly known as infancy, perhaps at around seven years of age — or the onset of the old scholastic “age of reason” — that a marked ambivalence appears frequently to accrue to children in contemporary popular culture, associated it would seem with their supposed possession of a rudimentary capacity to assume some degree of rational responsibility for their actions and, especially, for their morally reprobate conduct.1 These developmental transitions remain of course as blurred within modern cognitive psychology as they were within medieval theology, and it is therefore not surprising that much philosophical, legal, and educational energy continues to be expended determining what might meaningfully constitute the proper character of each stage in the young child’s life and the appropriate adult attitudes toward the child. Despite this broader uncertainty, the symbolism of infancy arising out of such generalized judgments of childhood and growth has proven enduringly effective over the last two centuries in associating the earliest years of children’s lives with a peculiar prestige and aura — almost as if infancy had come to represent aesthetically and ethically a kind of essence or intensification of childhood before

the contemplating adult gaze. Infancy is then vouchsafed within this symbolism as a state in which all of society’s hopes and ideals for the young might somehow be enthusiastically invested, regardless of the complications that can be anticipated in the later, more ambivalent years of childhood and adolescence.

The word “infancy” — revealingly derived of course from the Latin *infantia*, or the inability to speak — enters the English language in the early modern period in texts associated with the raising of courtly children. It is applied specifically in manuals of manners and elite conduct, such as Sir Thomas Elyot’s illuminatingly titled *Book of the Governor* of 1531, to refer to a chronologically imprecise yet critical phase when the very young (invariably male) child is presented as at his most impressionable: when he is in the process of developing speech and therefore ought to be surrounded by the most enriching and beneficial adult exemplars of language use and behavior. From its entry, then, as a focal point of moral solicitude, the idea of infancy, along with the vaguely formulated age-banding to which it alludes, is implicated in the processes of becoming educated and is subject to a pattern of governance and supervision. The key site of infant socialization at this historic juncture is the early modern family, but it is the family understood in largely aristocratic terms, in which relatively distant parental figures have outsourced their educational and emotional responsibilities to a range of semiprofessional nurses, tutors, and mentors. This semantic slippage in the uses of the word infancy continues into the present, suggesting that the term is routinely a discursive construction of shifting regimes of governance regulated by the gaze of adult authority. In common modern English usage, infancy refers to the stage from birth until around three years of age. This is also the definition favored in pediatric medicine, particularly in the discussion of phenomena such as infant mortality or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). It can, in fact, in certain technical medical taxonomies be constrained still further, to the period from birth to only one year. In standard educational discourses, however, infancy has had a long association with a quite different age-banding, ranging from approximately three years of age to seven or eight. As we shall see, the term “infant school” originally referred to institutions for the care and education of children aged from

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three to five or six. But as long as these facilities sat entirely outside the structures of compulsory education, “infants,” paradoxically, also indicated — at least in British educational parlance — the first years of primary or elementary schooling, from ages five to eight. This was reflected in, for example, the design of specialist “infant” qualifications in the United Kingdom and elsewhere for teachers wishing to concentrate their expertise on this specific developmental stage.6

Despite its shifting valences and occasionally indistinct borders, the understanding of the concept of infancy associated with the rise of popular education can trace its pedigree to a genuine shift of sensibility that occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century. This was linked in turn to a wider revolution in the manners and values of a newly emergent European class of economically active and politically influential merchant and land-owning elites integral to the rise of commercial society. Cultural historians have come to understand this development as part of a larger embourgeoisement of European society centered on the revaluation of the family as the key institution of the social and moral order and expressed in the growing “separation of the spheres” within rapidly expanding networks of prosperous middle-class households from the 1750s onward.7 This so-called “industrious class,” the considerable prosperity of which afforded its membership abundant access to the products of print culture, education, and the arts, proved uniquely receptive to the currents of thought in the later European Enlightenment that we associate with the first stirrings of Romanticism.8 The steady segregation of gender roles within the domestic economy created, most importantly, a newly literate tier of middle-class women whose tasks as carers and nurturers were the focus of much renewed interest in the latter half of the eighteenth century and which we now recognize as part of the broader reappraisal of the place of sentiment and feeling in setting the emotional compass for a flourishing family life. Barbara Gelpi and others have pointed, in particular, to a European-wide “cult of maternity” evident in the surge of cheap publications between 1770 and 1820 by and for middle-class women and preoccupied with the minutiae of early child care.9 This literature, which ranged from ladies’ magazines, through print volumes of epistolary correspondence, to serious philosophical treatises, advocated characteristically modern innovations such as the abandonment of swaddling, the promotion of maternal breastfeeding over wet

nursing, nonpunitive approaches to toilet training, and the importance of physical contact between mother and baby in the initial stages of the child’s existence. Within the structures of late-eighteenth-century bourgeois family life, this movement accorded women a new level of authority over the nurture and parenting of very young children. Its distinctive style of empowerment soon also imparted to them an enhanced status in the elementary education of their babies and infants.

Several elements of critical importance to the subsequent development of early childhood education emerge from this cultural milieu. Shaped unmistakably by the climate of early Romanticism and its vitalistic view of childhood, serious inquiry began across European letters into the possible effect of very early childhood experiences on the formation of the individual personality and on the socialization of the very young into the moral and political order. Sharing their broadly empiricist view of character formation championed a generation before by figures such as David Hartley and Claude Adrien Helvétius (and deriving ultimately from Lockean empiricism), but departing from their heavily masculinist views of both teacher and learner, this fresh perspective on the education of infants took as its paradigm the relation of mother to baby, highlighting above all else the importance of the life of feeling to the initial development of the child. \(^{10}\) The key thinker in the orchestration of this shift was of course Johannes Pestalozzi, whose popular educational treatises, derived from his reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, accorded mothers a crucial role in the teaching of their infants and sought to sequester the space of primary parental interaction with the child as the special preserve of mothers, around which exposure to male, paternal influence ought to be carefully limited. \(^{11}\) It is important to note, as Mary Hilton has recently reminded us, that “Pestalozzi configured motherhood as essentially instinctual,” at one and the same time expressly empowering yet subtly circumscribing the role of women in the care and instruction of their young. \(^{12}\)

The Pestalozzian system of education, which took Europe by storm in the latter decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, thus rested on a series of implied (and sometimes explicit) dichotomies. Responsibility for the initial phase of infancy lay with the mother, in the essentially private nurture zones of the family and the nursery (a term that becomes current around this same point). This phase was to be rapidly followed, however, by the young child’s entry into the much more public and civic zone of the infant school where, under the tutelage of formally trained gentleman masters, the child would be duly initiated into the modes and norms of society at large. Moreover, in an ironic twist on his own radical inclinations, Pestalozzi recognized that huge sections of society

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in the newly emerging industrial and urbanized population centers of Europe were economically incapable of providing the forms of maternalized care on which the subsequent flourishing of children depended. To remedy this, from about 1800 onward Pestalozzians across Europe and the United States vigorously advocated, in terms consistent with wider liberal-reformist objectives of the time, the provision of infant schools specifically focused on the needs of the poor and supported by philanthropic employers, such as Robert Owen at New Lanark in Scotland, as well as by local government. Privacy and mother-baby intimacy, it was concluded, were luxuries for the provision of which the laboring classes possessed neither the material nor emotional resources. It is sometimes difficult for modern liberal educational opinion to appreciate the scale of state intervention anticipated by thinkers such as Owen. “The child will be removed, so far as is at present practicable,” noted Owen in 1813, “from the erroneous treatment of the yet untrained and untaught parents.” All classes, it was safely assumed, would acquiesce in the eventual inclusion of their youngest children in the new infant schools and nurseries, taken out of the interior realm of the family and subject in the transparent spaces of the school to public forms of governance and socialization. For the affluent this was a second stage of infant formation. For the poor, it was proposed by necessity as the only stage. As Jill Shefrin has observed, for the laboring classes

Infant schools were the first philanthropically driven large-scale attempt to provide a structured educational environment for pre-school age children while their mothers were at work. They also represent the first attempt to apply the newly articulated child psychology to the education of the poor in Britain.

My central contention in this essay is that the assumptions evident in the theory and practice of Pestalozzi and his followers crystallize a series of tensions or polarities in the understanding and treatment of infancy, and infant education, that have haunted early education from the origins of popular schooling in the late eighteenth century down to the policy dilemmas of the present day. At the heart of these tensions is the question of the governance of infancy and how the lives and educational destinies of the very young are made subject to public scrutiny. More than any other stage in child development, infancy foregrounds the relations of private to public, family to community, maternal sustenance to civic welfare. Far from demonstrating a final resolution of the issues raised in the earliest phases of its emergence, contemporary policy debates around state-sponsored infant education in the democratic polities seem fated to rehearse the same controversies and the same struggles for legitimate authority over the private

sphere at the point where its long-hallowed obligations to the rearing of children interface with the demands of wider society. At its point of historical origin, the construction of infancy in this discourse was predicated upon a progressive schooling movement away from the intimacy of the home and the mother-child dyad out to the “masculine” sphere of society and community, with its manifold modes of official public surveillance. This vector remains visible to the present day in the understanding of infancy, though it is, as we shall see, complicated by other, countervailing tendencies.

Hallowing Infancy

The first phase of the infant schools movement unraveled suddenly in both Britain and America in the years following 1820. In Britain, longstanding antipathy from religious authorities toward Pestalozzian naturalism and secularism finally overtook the movement, subsuming it into wider changes in the expansion of mass education in which its original philosophy was almost entirely eclipsed by a return to the dominance of older, more punitive methods of teaching the very young. In the United States, a parallel religious conservatism became increasingly hostile to the intrusions of the state authorities in family life seemingly implied by the operation of the schools, causing their effective dissolution in their original form by around 1840. At the same time, however, the appeal of the Pestalozzian model of infant education provoked a quite distinctive reaction on the European mainland rooted in the same kernel of Romantic ideas from which Pestalozzi’s thought had itself originated. This was the movement centered upon Pestalozzi’s one-time disciple, Friedrich Fröbel. Devoted unswervingly to Pestalozzi’s populism and inclusivity, Fröbel nevertheless came to harbor misgivings about two aspects of the Pestalozzi method — its pedagogical program, which he felt had descended into a decadent and stultifying intellectual procedure, and above all the attitude toward motherhood inherent in the Pestalozzian account of healthy child development.

Fröbel’s Romanticism was far more atavistic than that of his master. Convinced Wordsworth-like that the prelinguistic child, wrapped in the all-encompassing security of the maternal bond, participated in a underlying unity of being that was lost in the later stages of development, Fröbel committed himself to the preservation and enhancement of the infant’s prerational appetites as the cornerstone of learning and growth. This entailed, for Fröbel, a counterintuitive recognition of the importance of play in the development of the youngest children, requiring that their adult carers and teachers nurture the instinct to play as the foundation of the “acting, thinking, and feeling” human person.

Equally, the demand that teachers actually foster rather than repress play restored for Fröbel the vital role of the family and of the female educator in the nurture of infants — because play was a supposedly natural habit of the domestic domain — thus prompting a renegotiation of relations between the private zone of the home and the public spaces of the school. As the established Pestalozzian infant schools faced intense pressures from their religious opponents in the 1840s, Fröbel postulated an alternative model of early education in which native feminine skills and experience were once more empowered and validated. In this way he announced to European education the arrival of his principal educational innovation — the kindergarten. 20

Even more than his mentor, Fröbel threw himself into a program of educational reform one of the keys to which was the mobilization of women to train as teachers for his new institutions. Accepting Pestalozzi’s view of maternal instinct, Fröbel went further in arguing that the exercise of this instinct had a legitimate place in the operations of the school, critically enriched by the kinds of intellectual reflection attendant upon formal training and subsequently affirmed as an authentic female vocational practice. Only thus, he believed, could he “rescue the female sex from its hitherto passive and instinctive situation and, through its nurturing mission raise it to the same level of the male sex.” 21 We see in this core ambition of Fröbel’s the origins of the principle of “professionalized femininity,” which continues to be debated heatedly in areas such as nursery care provision and early childhood education down to the present time and which goes to the heart of the paradox of private nurture and public governance within which sometimes incompatible modern perceptions of infancy are now located. 22

In contrast to Pestalozzi’s object lesson teaching strategies, Fröbel developed a pedagogical theory founded upon his “Gifts and Occupations” methodology, which, he claimed, created a kindergarten environment in which the best features of the multisensory household — with its shapes, colors, and textures and its motivating principle of joint, playful discovery by mother and child — were sedulously imitated. The informal nature of the kindergarten setting made it appealing to educated women as a place to work with children: a natural extension of the home and a protected site where otherwise undervalued female capacities (whether learned or innate) could be exercised and women teachers cast confidently in the role of substitute mothers to very small children.

In the 1850s and 1860s, Fröbelian conceptions of infant education were embraced in Europe, Britain, and America with a wave of enthusiasm surpassing even that enjoyed a generation previously by the Pestalozzians. 23 The kindergarten

movement disarmed its potential religious critics in Great Britain by its emphasis on the underlying spirituality of childhood and its close partnership with the values of the home. It overcame likely American resistance by appealing to conservative constructions of domesticity, by stressing family values, and by rooting itself in the needs of pioneer agrarian communities tested by the demands of child care. In the longer term, the most tangible legacy of kindergartens in both countries lay in two major reforms: the identification of the nursery as a context for the creation of a new kind of female educator and the pedagogical stipulation of play as a cornerstone of effective infant learning. In England, books such as Bertha Ronge's *A Practical Guide to the English Kindergarten* and Baroness Bertha von Marenholtz-Bulow's aptly titled *Women's Educational Mission: Being an Explanation of Fröbel's System of Infant Gardens*, both published in 1855, closely identified the movement with both female emancipation and progressive liberal interventions to alleviate the immiserated conditions of the urban poor.\(^{24}\) Pestalozzi-inspired infant schools in Britain had in their time sought similarly to improve the plight of a brutalized urban proletariat, effectively by confiscating infants from their putatively dysfunctional parents and placing them in the care of either their parents' enlightened employers or the state. The advocates of Fröbel-style kindergartens promoted a subtler form of intervention, relying upon the close partnership of nursery and home to rebuild by example the moral fabric of family life and to repair the spiritual damage inflicted on infants by the deprivations of industrial living. "The natural powers have been mournfully laid waste," complained Marenholtz-Bulow, "in morbid excitement that is termed obstinacy, passion and naughtiness — words so frequently misapplied to energies struggling for emancipation, to faculties craving for expansion."\(^{25}\) Although the numbers of kindergartens and nurseries did not grow in Britain on anything like the scale seen in Europe and North America until well into the twentieth century (and the word itself never fully replaced the older English term "nursery"), the impact of the movement in creating an infant education culture was immense and helped establish and sustain a philosophy of child care and a system of nursery care provider training that survived more or less intact until the reforms of the 1990s. The peculiar synthesis of progressive political interventionism and conservative, heavily gendered domesticity perhaps echoed the hierarchical sentiments underlying the early evolution of the British welfare state, serving to confirm an essentially ameliorative understanding of government interest in the lives of the young.

In the United States, the initial response to the arrival of kindergartens was even more positive. Fröbel's Romantic idealism resonated with the indigenous transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, which had already been embraced by energetic educational reformers such as Elizabeth


Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann. Transcendentalist political thought as expressed in classic texts such as Thoreau’s *Walden* of 1854 defended the institution of the family and the role of maternal tenderness as points of resistance to the aggressive encroachments of the materialism of urban-industrial society. According to Peabody, the Fröbelian kindergarten served as welcome adjunct to the beleaguered home by extending maternal values out into a dehumanized society. “Every good kindergartener,” remarked Mann, “finds the motherly element in herself, and by adoption makes every child she deals with her own.” Similarly, in those areas of society most afflicted by want, the kindergarten according to its proponents assumed an almost missionary purpose, bringing to the victims of capitalism the kind of moral self-direction on which the renewal of social cohesion would depend. The “sense of free personality” promoted by the kindergarten, Peabody claimed, “is perfectly consistent with and even dependent on the simultaneous development of the social principle in all its purity and power.”

In the hands of its American supporters especially, the Fröbelian method became integral for many years to the conception of the kindergarten as a unique synthesis of private flourishing and public good. Fröbel’s philosophy of Gifts and Occupations combined an emphasis on the child’s freedom of action with an enhanced awareness of the interpersonal solidarity on which all communities depended. This idealism of the kindergarten was underpinned by Fröbel’s romantic metaphysics of “diversity within unity,” which equipped its pupils to overcome the two most destructive tendencies of capitalist society as the Fröbelians saw it: personal acquisitiveness and social conformity. The kindergarten hence reinforced the overarching moral message of the classical American family — that fulfilled individualism and social cohesion could be happily reconciled within a larger ethical purpose conferring authenticity on both. If for its supporters the Fröbelian pedagogical method represented the epitome of the kindergarten experience, it also became, however, as the movement rapidly progressed across the United States, the central issue on which it was questioned by a growing number of critics. Pestalozzian infant education had succumbed in the United States to an alliance of Christian evangelicals and libertarians. The Fröbelian system came under attack from quite a different alignment of educational theorists and philosophers

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who were much more openly allied to what they saw as a liberal-progressive educational project with the potential to transform and democratize a highly unequal and conflict-ridden American social order.

MANAGING INFANCY

Between 1890 and 1920, driven by what they perceived as far-reaching changes in the makeup of American culture and the unjust operations of its social and economic systems, networks of progressive educators subjected the kindergarten movement to sustained interrogation precisely on the defining question of infancy and its governance. Alarmed by what they regarded as its outdated ruralist idealism, thinkers such as G. Stanley Hall and Luella Palmer challenged the privatized, maternalized model of learning and child rearing that operated within the Fröbelian kindergartens as increasingly irrelevant to the needs of an industrializing and still largely immigrant society. Echoing Robert Owen, Palmer went so far as to state that small children were ready to “pass over” from family to community upon entry into kindergarten, arguing that interaction with equals was more important to the child’s development than mystical subservience either to parents at home or their mother-substitutes in the nursery. Nina Vanderwalker criticized Fröbel’s commitment to play and singing on the basis that they embodied an antiquated “emotionalism and sentimentality,” asserting that in the modern age, kindergarten teachers required instead of a mother’s “agreeable disposition” formal instruction in child psychology and sociology.

Arguably the most thoughtful and coordinated critique of the kindergarten movement came from two sources themselves broadly typical of the technocratic vision of social reform gaining dominance in the management of education in America and elsewhere at the dawn of the twentieth century: the psychological behaviorism associated with the rise to prominence of G. Stanley Hall, Edward Thorndike, and John Watson and the pragmatism of John Dewey. In certain respects, Thorndike and Watson’s turn-of-the-century promotion of IQ measurement and stimulus-response habit formation as instruments of a new performative construction of educational attainment recapitulated familiar technico-rationalist attacks on the supposed romantic emotionalism of the traditions of European nursery education. Dewey’s criticism was, however, far more subtle, wide-ranging, and challenging to the kindergarten philosophy as the American Fröbelians had constituted it over a period of some fifty years. Dewey questioned what he called Fröbel’s false notion of “an exact correspondence between the general properties of external objects and the unfolding of the mind.” According to Dewey, infants developed most productively when they studied the social properties and values

of objects through “acting out” in play and games the actual uses to which these objects and roles were put in their community:

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guaranty of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious.\(^35\)

In Dewey’s experimental kindergartens in Chicago and in the pioneering initiatives of his followers at Columbia University’s Teachers College, kindergarten activities revolved around carefully contrived “social” situations in which play was made essentially imitative and infants mimicked the social practices and intercourse of the adult world. The whole idiom of Dewey’s revised infant curriculum therefore represented a significant departure from the idealist Fröbelian doctrine of the self-contained family unit and an important corrective to its mystified construction of the mother-baby bond. For the Fröbelian kindgartner, the model of infant happiness was the unconditional love of the family relation, the pedagogical fruits of which could continue to be reaped by female teachers confidently equipped to exercise their instinctive caring skills in the receptive context of the kindergarten. For the progressive Deweyan early educator, by contrast, the locus of effective socialization was not simply the family, but also the peer group. The kindergarten peer group acted as the child’s entry into society. It removed the “innate selfishness” unavoidably generated out of the narcissism of the family unit and taught the infant to “give up his own will to others.”\(^36\)

As the enthusiastic Deweyan Irwin Shepard remarked, once the infant “loses his little self in the greater self of the community and realizes the ethical kindergarten motto ‘Each for all and all for each,’” he will recognize that the fulfillment of individual aspiration is always mediated and moderated by the legitimate collective purposes of the wider community.\(^37\)

The clear implication was that these virtues of proper self-esteem and communal service could not be learned under the sole authority of the family or of institutions that sought slavishly and inappropriately to reproduce its emotional ambience in social contexts where such sentiment could too readily become immobilizing.


What was true, of course, for middle-class families applied with even greater force to the families of the mostly migrant lower orders in American society. Indeed, it was in these situations that the reform of the Fröbelian system, according to the Deweyan assessment, was most keenly required. Here more than anywhere else progressives believed that the state rather than the family should assume primary responsibility for the education and acculturation of the very young. Fröbelian idealists had argued that the privatized model of family relations, centered on the tenderness of maternal nurture, bred in the infant an emotionally authentic and lasting discernment of the good and the right. Deweyans, however, pointed to the maladaptive character of much (if not all) domestic life and the inadequacy of any theory that argued simplistically for a transfer of kin-group moral sentiment to the operations of a much more complex and transitory wider society. Soon reinforced by the seemingly devastating unmasking of family dynamics offered by psychoanalysis, they presented their own model of the kindergarten as an obvious corrective to the dangerous introversion of the family romance. Thus when the eminent Deweyan preschool advocate Patty Hill declared the kindergarten to be a “laboratory for democracy,” she highlighted the role of the peer group in facilitating the natural transition of the infant from the introspective embrace of the family enclave to the demands and opportunities of a mobile, competitive, cosmopolitan society.39 The governance of the very young, she concluded, belonged not only with the mother or the family, but equally with the agencies of the democratic state in which were vested the responsibilities of a transparent and accountable citizenship.

Rediscovering Infancy

In the United States, in the intensely difficult period following the First World War, the older, Fröbelian conception of the kindergarten steadily yielded to what came to be more routinely referred to as the “progressive” preschool movement. The importance of this shift in thought and practice cannot be overstated in the history of our perceptions of infancy. While its implications for American education were profound, its influence radiated across the English-speaking world, affecting preschool education policy internationally and shaping the philosophy of early childhood in many democratic polities. Its interactions and accommodations with older styles of nursery education were sometimes very subtle, but it succeeded incrementally in steadily reconceptualizing the purposes of early education and in altering key perspectives on the nature of infancy and of adult duties toward it. Occasionally, its impact was felt dramatically in, for example, the role accorded preschool education in Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program of the 1960s or in the famous and highly-prized High Scope initiative from that era — still seen as one of the best accredited justifications for early intervention.

strategies in the history of liberal democratic state education. Each of these innovations presupposed an emphatic, if scrupulously benign, intervention of the state in family life and in the detailed patterns of infant child rearing, impelled by the desire to combat social injustice and inequality at their roots.

In the United Kingdom, the interaction of progressive infant education with older traditions of nursery teaching was for many years much more complex than in the United States. A broadly Fröbelian recognition of the integrity of the nursery environment — its simulation of the emotional life of the home, its child-centered focus on play, its management by a cadre of female child care professionals trained in a kind of “guild mentality” of practical wisdom — endured for some considerable time, with radical educational change directed mainly at the compulsory sectors. In the 1990s, however, a massive reorientation of nursery schools took place across Britain, the ongoing narrative of which remains inadequately documented and understood. Driven by the social managerial principles of early intervention, social inclusion (including the rapid return of new mothers to the workforce in order to reduce welfare costs and maintain a pool of comparatively cheap female labor), and education for citizenship strongly reminiscent of the kindergarten debates in the United States, these changes resulted in a huge overhaul of the “pre-5 curriculum” (a term unknown to the previous UK systems) between 1993 and 2000. They also involved extensive reform of the training of child care professionals, whose education henceforward included formal acquaintance with the social sciences and the calculated formation of a deep skepticism toward the traditions of “professionalized femininity” out of which generations of previous nursery practice had been crafted. The overall aim of these revisions was the final annexation of nursery education, its practitioners, and its underlying vision of infancy to the disciplinary and pedagogical practices of the primary school. The consequent transformation of nursery provision across the United Kingdom — a process that remains unfinished — posited an enhanced role for government intervention in the rearing of the very young and drew infancy under the technocratic “interagency” scrutiny of the administrative-bureaucratic state and its performative systems of monitoring, assessment, target-setting, and attainment.

The effect of this peculiarly British inflection of the late-modern governance of infancy has been implicitly to reprogram forms of tacit knowledge intrinsic for generations to the wisdom of the nursery and early years sector, and to reveal


infant education as a characteristic feature of modernity in the unsettling terms critiqued by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt. This is the dangerous realm where education becomes, for Arendt, “an instrument of politics” and the youngest child is configured as “nothing but an undersized grown-up” whose endless self-validating project of “development” is seen as integral to the realization and management of progress in society at large. By contrast, Arendt’s watchful rehabilitation of the idea of natality — of becoming in the world — helps defend the kindergarten vision of infancy as an organic transition from the private sphere of the family to the public realm of the social, sheltering the child from the world and the world from the child. Abandonment of this principle, in the name of an instrumentalized ideal of progress, undermines the fundamental authority of the early educator — her “responsibility for the world,” in Arendt’s terms — which governs the balance of relations between the careful hallowing of the past and the energetic welcome of the future.42 Arendt’s description of the complex web of relations, investments, and obligations through which the child is situated in society, yet at the same time sealed from society, reproaches much that passes for contemporary early years education — despite its rhetoric of rights, inclusion, and citizenship — as an insidious and unaccountable technology of governance active in the subtle, covert reconstruction of the public, the private, and the boundaries between them.43 The extent to which these troubling and far-reaching developments can yet preserve within them a genuine and enduring embrace of infancy as a communitarian locus of caring relations between adults and the youngest children in society remains at this juncture difficult to determine. The scale and character of the changes taking place must surely provoke serious questions, however, about the future of the institutions governing early childhood in democratic culture, while prompting a wider political conversation about the relative jurisdictions of government and family in the care and well-being of infants.

42. Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 186–188.