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Portrait

Jean Piaget (1896–1980)

Merete Amann Gainotti

In 1996 the centenary of the birth of Jean Piaget was celebrated in Switzerland and throughout the world. A scholar of universal and multifaceted importance in the field of human sciences, Piaget has greatly enriched our knowledge of human beings in their relations to the material and social world. Human sciences, in particular psychology and epistemology, have broadened their scope and acquired greater validity and objectivity thanks to the research and works of Jean Piaget.

Biologist, philosopher, logician, psychologist and sociologist, Piaget contributed greatly to breaking down the barriers that traditionally separated these disciplines, in an unceasing labour of research whose basic features had already become clear during his high-school years. As a youth, Piaget had a lively and precocious intelligence and interests in the fields of philosophy and epistemology, although he had been educated in natural sciences and biology. In a short essay published under the title *Recherche*, he had formulated, as early as 1918, the fundamental questions and the essence of the problems to which he was to devote his life as a scientist and scholar.

> My aim, which was to discover a kind of embryology of knowledge, was suited to my biological training; from the start of my theoretical reflections I was convinced that the problem of the relations between organism and environment was also to be posed in the field of knowledge, appearing in that case as the problem of the relations between an acting and thinking subject and the objects of experience. (Piaget, 1966: 132)

For Piaget , the study of children in their mental development was to become the principal means of achieving the experimental discovery of an 'embryology of knowledge'. Through the study of children, he attempted to answer more general epistemological questions concerning the acquisition and growth of knowledge.

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As a theoretician of knowledge, Piaget defined himself as a constructivist and an interactionist. Without excluding the part played by physiological maturation, education and imitation in mental development, he stressed the fundamental role of personal experience and activity in relation to surrounding reality. In his view, the development of knowledge takes place through the interactions arising between the subject who knows and the objects of knowledge, which belong both to the material and physical and to the social world.

From an epistemological point of view, therefore, Piaget disagrees with innatist and maturationist positions, according to which, cognition is an a priori condition of experience, that emerges during the subject's development without the subject playing an active part in the elaboration of knowledge.

Piaget is also distant from empiricist and behaviourist positions (stimulus–response theories, reflexology of the Pavlovian school) because, according to him, they attribute too much importance to the causal role of the environment in determining cognitive acquisitions, and do not give sufficient weight to the subject as an active agent in cognitive construction.

Piaget and his collaborators at the International Centre of Genetic Epistemology at the University of Geneva, founded in 1955, systematically explored the genesis of many areas of knowledge and forms of human experience using a transversal method of research consisting of studying different groups of children at successive ages.

The titles of the following works may give an idea of the scope and diversity of the research undertaken: *La représentation du monde chez l'enfant* (1926), *Le jugement moral chez l'enfant* (1932), *La naissance de l'intelligence chez l'enfant* (1936), *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant* (1946), *La psychologie de l'intelligence* (1947), and, co-authored with Inhelder, *La représentation de l'espace chez l'enfant* (1948), *La genèse des structures logiques élémentaires* (1959), *De la logique de l'enfant à la logique de l'adolescent* (1955), *L'image mentale chez l'enfant* (1966) etc.

In another, more recent cycle of research, the problem of the formative and transformative mechanisms of cognitive development was addressed: *Réussir et comprendre* (1974), 'Recherches sur la contradiction' (1974). Piaget also wrote several books of theoretical reflection such as *Biologie et Connaissance* (1967b), *Le structuralisme* (1968), *L'épistemologie génétique* (1970), *Le scienze dell'uomo* (1973).

Piaget left an immense body of work in the field of developmental psychology: over 50 books, hundreds of articles, the annual publication of the research carried out at the Centre International d'Epistemologie Génétique, the editing of journals, book series and treatises. Many different schools and research trends in contemporary psychology have been inspired by Piaget's theories: cognitivism, intercultural and social

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psychology, child psychopathology, juridical psychology. Piaget's written work and that of his collaborators, as well as all the publications on Piaget, can be found in the Archives Jean Piaget Library at the University of Geneva.

In Piaget's vast scientific production, a relevant, even if less well known place, was taken up by sociology. In different articles and essays, Piaget addressed sociological problems and wrote about social relations and interactions, social norms, the role of generations, general symbolic functions, collective representations, psychological and sociological structures. It is therefore not inappropriate to speak of his 'sociological theory', which constitutes an important aspect of his broader epistemological reflections.

In summary, for this is not the place to discuss Piaget's sociological theory extensively, he proposes that social facts are reducible to social relations and to social exchanges. The fundamental social facts consist of rules, values and conventional signs. These correspond respectively to the cognitive, the affective and the symbolic aspects of behaviour. He also strongly stresses that the psychological and the sociological aspects of a person are impossible to separate, and psychology and sociology thus study two complementary aspects of all behaviour of individuals in society. Psychology focuses on individuals adapting to their physical environment, whereas sociology studies these same individuals in their social adaptations to each other.

Piaget's theses have been mentioned in well-known treatises of sociology such as the *Traité de Sociologie* (Gurvitch, 1960: Vol. 2, 229–54), and many sociologists and social scientists have shown an interest in the sociological aspect of his work (Goldmann, 1959; Girod, 1973; Della Valle Simoni, 1973; Busino, 1976; Moscovici, 1976; Doise and Mugny, 1980). In *Etudes Sociologiques* (1967a), a volume grouping a number of texts written by Piaget between 1940 and 1950, a period during which he was lecturing on sociology at the Universities of Lausanne and Geneva, he focused his attention on certain aspects of Durkheim's work. These comments on Durkheim should be read while keeping in mind the central feature of Piaget's epistemological concerns, which was to highlight and explain different forms of knowledge, as well as to make their process of formation clear. In this context, Piaget (1950) concentrates on the relations between biology, psychology and sociology, and on the types and possibilities of an explanation of knowledge offered by these disciplines.

With regard to the sociological explanation of knowledge, he often refers to, and comments on the ideas of various scholars of social sciences besides Durkheim, such as Lévy-Bruhl, Comte, Marx and Tarde.

According to Piaget, the essential task of sociology – as a science that also deals with knowledge – is to explain how social life can be at the same time at the origin of structures of rational knowledge such as logic and

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mathematics, and also the source of 'poor' ideologies such as nazi fascism, for example. The methodological solution which he proposes for the problem of the dual nature – rational and ideological – of knowledge, is to assume a genetic point of view and to analyse knowledge in the developing individual. In this connection Piaget writes (1967a: 10):

> Without asking the sociologist to replace the epistemologist, he would however have at his disposal all the means of control if only he wanted to adopt a genetic point of view and not only a historical or synchronic one. . . . It is enough to analyse the facts to realize that the social initiation to mathematics does not occur in exactly the same way as the initiation, for example, of the Hitler Youth to the dogma of the supremacy of the Aryan race.

With the expression 'social initiation' Piaget refers to the processes of deduction, testing of hypotheses, comparisons, requirements to furnish proofs and so on, which are involved in the learning of mathematics, as opposed to the coercive methods (constraints, dissuasions, punishments) that may be employed to impose dogmas and ideologies.

It will be clear from this that, when Piaget speaks of knowledge , he favours its rational, logical and mathematical aspects rather than other forms of knowledge such as collective or social representations, or the unconscious thinking discovered by psychoanalysis. He often stresses the great interest presented by 'collective representations' first evidenced by Durkheim (1898). But he disputes Durkheim's thesis according to which rational and scientific notions derive from religious thought, nor does he think it possible to discern, in collective representations, the condition and essence of rational thought.

Because of his intellectual training, and probably also because of personal inclination, Piaget turned his attention, as a scientist, to the 'epistemic subject'. His aim was to formulate a theory of knowledge that would be as general as possible and to give prominence to universal laws of cognitive development. Thus he did not address the question of differential aspects of human development – biological, affective or sociocultural – although he always attributed a very high theoretical status to the environmental context and to social interaction, as many of his writings attest (*Le jugement moral chez l'enfant*, 1932; *Etudes sociologiques*, 1967a). Piaget's theoretical position, which assumes that a general theory of the genesis and development of cognitive processes is possible, contrasts sharply, therefore, with racist theses on differences of intelligence, though it is not immune to another type of ethnocentricity, that of affirming the superiority of scientific and technological culture, as has been argued by Buck-Morss (1975).

In the field of psychosocial studies, Piaget's construct had some important developments in two branches of research which I will mention briefly.

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The first is intercultural research on cognitive development. From the early 1960s, Piaget's theory aroused great interest in a number of countries as a theoretical paradigm for the comparative intercultural study of cognitive development. Research on western and non-western populations was undertaken, using the method of research and the experiments invented by Piaget. Among the many exponents of this trend of study and theoretical reflection are Dasen (1972) and Jahoda (1982).

The second field of research concerns the development of children's social knowledge as opposed to logico-mathematical knowledge (Amann Gainotti and Tambelli, 1986), which has recently led to an interesting theoretical debate on the relations between social notions and social representations (Moscovici, 1976, 1989; Doise, 1988). According to Moscovici, studies on social representations in the field of social psychology were undertaken when research progress in social psychology demanded conceptual enrichment, in open contrast to the influence of American behaviourism. A resumption of the study of social representations, of which Durkheim had been the founding father, signified new ways of entering the intellectual reality of the modern world; it also meant proposing an approach to individuals, and to the social group, considering them as acting and thinking subjects in a material and symbolic environment, to which they sought to give meaning and form.

Besides, the rapid cultural changes which have taken place since the beginning of the century have brought with them a massive increase in information and knowledge. In this context, the problem of identifying the processes by which the individual can build a conception of the social and natural world, enabling him or her to communicate and act, became an important theoretical and practical concern for social psychology.

These questions, which form the background to Moscovici's research on social representations, led him to become interested in certain aspects of Piaget's work. In particular, Piaget's articles of 1928, 1941 and 1950, in Moscovici's view, help one to grasp better the problems of social thought, while Piaget's work on *La représentation du monde chez l'enfant* (1926) in which the child 'penseur de son monde' is meticulously questioned and patiently analysed, played an invaluable part in making it possible to study social representations in a more concrete way.

As these brief remarks show, significant points of contact are being established between Piaget's genetic epistemology and social psychology which in their turn, are opening new horizons for research. Nonetheless, several Anglo-American authors such as Rotman (1977) and Riegel (1979), just to mention a few, have been arguing that Piaget's theory of cognitive development ignores or underestimates the importance of social factors. This misconception is partly due to the fact that much of Piaget's sociological writings are still contained in untranslated French works.

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Piaget's most mature and developed views on sociology and social psychology are contained in a series of articles in French published between 1928 and 1979, which have never been translated into English. This points to the need for a more objective and comprehensive discussion of Piaget's sociological views, that has to take these untranslated works into consideration.

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