

En dynamisk og grensesprengende pioner i barndomsforskningen

Intervju med Chris Jenks
v/Barbara Rogers og Vebjørn Tingstad

Introduksjon

Chris Jenks er professor i sosiologi og leder ved Centre for Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London, England. Han er medredaktør av det internasjonale tidsskriftet *Childhood* og for tiden også gjesteprofessor ved Norsk senter for barneforskning. Han har publisert en mengde artikler og bøker om så ulike tema som kriminologi, urban sosiologi, kultursosiologi, sosiologisk teori og barndom. De mest kjente av hans bøker er *The Sociology of Childhood* (1982), *Culture* (1993), *Childhood* (1996), *Theorizing Childhood* [med Allison James og Alan Prout] (1998) og *Transgression* (2003). I tillegg kommer to firebinds publikasjoner, *Culture: Critical Concepts* (2002) og *Urban Culture* (2004).

I forbindelse med et opphold ved Norsk senter for barneforskning i november 2003 besluttet redaksjonen for *Barn* å intervju Chris Jenks. En motivasjon for dette var blant annet at Jenks er en svært sentral aktør i utformingen av det som fra 1990-tallet fikk betegnelsen *den nye barndomssosiologien* eller *det nye barndomsparadigmet*. Hovedfokus for intervjuet var 1) hvordan han ble interessert i barndom som et forskningsfelt, 2) hvilke veier hans faglige karriere har tatt og 3) hvilke utfordringer han mener barndomsforskningen står overfor i dag.

Uten å foregripe intervjuets innhold, som vi velger å presentere på informantens morsmål, har den følgende presentasjonen karakter av en bevegelse mellom disse tre innfallsvinklene. Et sentralt spørsmål i Jenks' tidlige karriere var etterlysningen av barnet i forskningen. Det han oppfattet som en alvorlig svakhet i datidens forskningsperspektiver ga ham

en motivasjon for å utforske barndom mer teoretisk. En oversikt over Jenks' forfatterskap viser både høy produksjon, stor tematisk bredde og teoretisk kompleksitet. Med henvisning til at boka *Theorizing Childhood* er en mye lest bok i Skandinavia, spør vi Jenks hvilke kommentarer han selv har til denne boka. Han oppfordrer, som vi skal se, barndomsforskere til å se kritisk på dette arbeidet og utvikle videre det han humoristisk kaller "den nye", nye barndomssosiologien.

Så over til intervjuet og til Chris Jenks' egen beskrivelse av hvordan det hele startet. Vi gir i hovedsak ordet til informanten selv, bare med unntak av noen innskutte kommentarer og spørsmål.

When and how it all got started

– I originally went into sociology, with an interest in the sociology of education. Important in the way that I write, is that my undergraduate training was largely in philosophy and sociology. So there was a point when I was going to become a post-graduate and I didn't know whether I was going to be a philosopher or a sociologist. I applied then for qualifications in both directions. I went to work with Basil Bernstein (sociology), and I thought to myself, "This is it, I'm a sociologist." I then concentrated on the sociology of education...

Teacher bashing

– In 1976 I jointly edited [with John Beck, editorial note] a collection of essays called *Worlds Apart: readings for a sociology of education*. The readings applied themselves to a *new* sociology of education, which was really about the social construction of curricula, of the politics and moralities and social constructions of forms of knowledge. The most empirical we got was to look at the way that children's identities got negotiated through versions of curricula in classrooms. We did micro studies of interaction in classrooms. I got into the sociology of education because I saw education as a vehicle for social change. Because, you know, it had happened to me. I was a working class kid who had made it. I was the first person to attend university in my whole family. So I thought, it *can* happen, despite the structures. The sad consequence, however, was that the

interaction studies in classrooms did nothing about the structures of oppression. It did nothing about the dominant orders. What it did was actually blame teachers for children failing. I called that teacher bashing. So we needed to go in a new direction.

Looking for children

– Having taught the sociology of education for a number of years, it occurred to me something serious was missing. Here I was a phenomenologist, and right in the center of my sociology there was no actor. That's to say, there was no subjectivity that was being educated, doing education. It was just absent. So I thought, "Let's look for children, then." So I started going through the literature looking for learners. The only sociology I could find was some structural functionalist material. This was incompatible with my beliefs as it was a system theory of childhood and socialization. So then to find anything about childhood I had to go elsewhere. I went back in to philosophy, and of course because of Bernstein, I went to Durkheim. This gave me a kind of mosaic way of looking at childhood, which I then composed in the collection – *The Sociology of Childhood [Essential Readings]*. The introductory essay in that book formed the bases of a kind of social constructionist view that has since gone on and on. So I wrote that introduction, put that collection together, it was filed under educational psychology in the London University book store I use to frequent, and it more or less sank. I mean it sold more copies than I knew about, but you know, I always said jovially that at the end of the year instead of a royalty statement they [the publishing house] sent me the names and addresses of people who had bought it so I could send them thank-you letters.

I continued doing new things, developing new interests, reading philosophy again and going back to Hegel, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, much more so than I was reading sociology, because at that time I didn't think a great deal of what was coming out in contemporary sociology.

Circling in on childhood

– There was, however, a conference in Athens, with mainly medical practitioners and psychologists, which lead me back to the sociology of childhood. I was one of the few sociologists together with Jens [Qvortrup], which is where I met him for the first time. I thought to myself “This is quite interesting. Somebody has found the book.” Jens introduced me to the fact that Scandinavia seemed to be very interested in childhood. So I thought, “There is a possibility here.” I later attended a seminar at the Institute of Education [University in London] that was run by Berry Mayall, where this woman I’d never met, called Allison James, was sitting there giving a paper on the social construction of childhood. So I introduced myself to Allison afterwards, and she said “Good heavens, I thought you were dead.” Anyway, that started a new big friendship. That was probably getting on from 1990 or something like that. The same year as *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* [*Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, edited by Allison James and Alan Prout] came out. It then became very noticeable that people from a whole range of disciplines were beginning to zoom in on childhood.

A wild lifestyle and skipping about between research interests

– You [Rogers] have picked up on this transgression thing, however I’m not going to tell you too much about my private life, but I’ve always been a terrible risk-taker. I’ve done rock climbing, snow and ice climbing, for years until I was 40 or something, and then it gave me up, because I thought I would just die. So I use to do that kind of thing, and I had a very wild life style as well, what ever that builds into your understanding of the work [transgression], but it meant that I was quite volatile. I skipped about between ideas and things. It occurred to me; one bit of me said that actually, “If you stick with childhood now, then this will be the next generation of thinking.” So my transgressive instinct reacted and I thought, “Alright, it’s time to do something different.” I then started doing work in the sociology of culture. First of all, because I hadn’t put anything together for quite a while, I assembled that set of readings *Culture Reproduction* [edited by Jenks in 1993], which again was a spill out from a course I had

taught to post-graduates. In the wake of that the publishers said, “Oh well, good heavens, it’s time for a book on culture.” I thought, “Hells bells, how do you write a book on culture? I’ll do it.” So I sat and wrote that book *Culture*, everyday, without a break until it was finished. I hope this is going in the right direction for you...

I had also been doing some work on visual material, working with artists and so on. So I thought I would assemble a collection on visual culture, and that helped me build in the thoughts I was having about scopic regimes, of modernity, of Martin Jay’s and Foucault’s stuff. I pulled *Visual Culture* [edited by Jenks] together then in 1995. That meant that, within my own academic jungle in the UK, suddenly people were talking to me as a sociologist who worked in the area of culture. I got quite a serious reputation of a sociologist of culture rather than a cultural studies person. And although I have worked with people like Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, Dave Morely and Valerie Walkerdine – all people from the Birmingham Centre of Cultural Studies (all students of Stuart Hall) – they never had the same tradition as me. They always felt the voice came from somewhere very different, but I always find it completely rooted in sociology.

Back to childhood, yet again

– Again people called on me to do childhood stuff, and always in Scandinavia. I drifted back into childhood, met some very interesting people, and thought to myself, “There’s more to be said here.” So I then wrote that book, *Childhood*. Soon after I had handed the manuscript in I went to a conference in London. I was giving a paper with Allison James and Alan Prout. They said, “Shall we write a definitive book on childhood?” I said, “Well, it’s actually slightly embarrassing but I’ve just written it.” But I thought, “What the hell”, because Allison has fantastic energy, I knew we would get another book done.

Childhood Journal

– Around 1996, Ivar Frønes had called me up – I had met him before on the childhood circuit – and said that the *Childhood Journal* was moving from the Danish publishers Munkgaard to the London publishers Sage,

who were also publishing some of my books, and it would be a very good idea if we, that is *Childhood*, could have a home editor. So I said, “Sounds good. It is a good journal.” So I took on that and got the journal going in Great Britain.

Critique of *Theorizing Childhood*

– I don’t mean that I’m un-proud of it. I wouldn’t say there was anything wrong with it, but I would say I’m worried about anything that produces an orthodoxy, and I think there is a slight danger of the book doing that. It therefore does entertain me when people make very gentle critiques of things they think that I might hold dear. And in fact, the sooner somebody can knock over that fourfold typology and say, “Well it worked for a week or two, but now we’ve got to go somewhere else”, the happier I’ll be. Otherwise, we’ll just have a freeze frame on the sociology of childhood and then I won’t really have contributed much to moving things forward, which is what I’m more interested in doing. That book does seem to have a way of setting future study, and people have adopted it in that way. Maybe that’s because it is good and useful. But it’s as good and useful as it has been, but there’s room for something else. But I’m not going to be the one that writes it.

Dette leder oss over til å spørre om hvilke utfordringer Chris Jenks mener barndomsforskningen står overfor i dag. Vi oppsummerer hans refleksjoner nedenfor.

Challenges for contemporary research on children and childhood

– I don’t have any crystal ball, but I don’t think that I’m in the vanguard of what’s happening tomorrow.

Space and Place: – The things that are happening that I like are new theorizing of space and place. I like geographies. I think cultural geographies are absolutely riveting, and the way that suddenly space stopped being a kind of neutral medium where action took place and suddenly became

identity sets. It just seemed wonderful to me. People like even [Edward] Soja, whose concepts of space are utterly intangible; you know the *Third Space* [*Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* 1996] and so on. Absolutely fascinating. Space is an identity regime. I think that is an incredibly important area for working with childhood. You know the placing of children and the places of childhood. That can be from the most wildly theoretic to the most banally concrete, of just actually taking a camera and walking through the streets with the camera held at knee level and seeing what kids see, which is mostly dogs' mess and garbage on the pavement. From this perspective adults then seem to be telling children that everything else is up there some how.

Citizenship: – Something I know is important but I don't attach to – and this is not because I'm irresponsible, it's just because I think there are a lot of jurisprudence scholars who would do it far better than I – is the issue of child's rights. I know it's a big deal over here, and really produces a major steer for things you have to do, but it's not something I could get terribly exercised about. In the same way that I have been known to say that I don't like children very much. That's not because I don't care, but quite simply I don't care about children any more or any less than I care about white people, black people, women, working class people or whatever. Children are an interesting group. They are a very interesting theoretical vehicle, and at the moment they're an interdisciplinary vehicle. I do know that there are people who work in this area who really love children. They feel terribly attached to them, and feel a great kind of political motivation on their behalf. They're okay, they're alright.

– That's not your motivation, asks Tingstad.

– No, that's not mine, replies Jenks and continues...

– Children are analytically fascinating, so that's where my kind of other concerns would be. They're not just analytically interesting but they're a kind of a moral dumping ground for a whole series of adult agendas. Education and socialization – if I'm allowed to use the term – are concepts about people, about how they best ought to be, which are always political decisions. So again my transgression wants to know why. It seems to me, producing a good pedagogic program for the under 11s or something, and pushing forward with good moral justification, is not an enormous distance from saying, "Do it because I say so and I'm your father." So I need to disrupt that. I need to deconstruct good regimes for children, and people who think well about children. I need to deconstruct that as well. My sense is that, why a lot of people care a lot about children today is because other

relationships are much more fragile, whereas children are secure, they can't do anything about having a relationship with you. They can't divorce you. One way or another, they're yours. When you watch people when their marriages break up, they fight like hell over the children because it's a primal relationship that nobody can do anything about. So again, all that love is being tangled up with a whole series of other sets of projections and motivations. That kind of thing fascinates me.

A "new", *new social studies of childhood*: – I think it would be good, soon, if somebody produced a "new", new social studies of childhood. Not so that I could get back in the arena and punch it out with them, but just as I said earlier, so that we could all trundle on a bit further. But you know about the politics of knowledge as much as I do, and what usually moves things forward is power. ("And money", adds Tingstad). Sometimes it's capricious, but paradigms are usually set by power and authority. Who was it that said, "Science is not powerful because it's true, but it's true because it's powerful"? I guess there will be a series of interests, motivations and funding council initiatives that will roll the sociologies of childhood in certain directions.

Generation: – Generation entertained me, I don't mean that trivially, but it also slightly bothered me, because it seemed to me, I guess in the end I would probably argue, that it is a demographic category rather than a social structural category. That's because when I was a child I thought generations existed because there was me and then there were adults. And as you get older you realize that there are people that are forty and a half. And you're not quite sure whether you're the generation of your friend or your friend's mother, or something like that. Maybe there is something else. Perhaps it is one of those concepts that's run its time. And this might tie into the kind of conversations you're having in Scandinavia, because I think there's a serious problem for contemporary adulthood post-World War II and as a result of the sixties, that contemporary adulthood denies its maturation in many ways. Maybe this is just a personal view, but there's a sense in which it is very hard to concede that one is actually an old person. A lot of my kind of ability to move about between topics, and not stay still, to have a lot of facets to my identity and productivity is deeply post-structuralist; where there's no sense of solid identity. There's a series of viscous planes that can adhere to whichever context they're in. Yet at the same time I deeply deny the post-structural theory of identity. And at the same time I'm trying to erode the kind of humanist notion of identity. I guess it's another terrible complex for me. It seems that age is a major

problematic in contemporary society. And who knows, it might be one of the reasons that I started writing about childhood in the first place. Complexities with my own children, my sense of loss about my own children, and the irresolution of my adulthood and my childhood. None of that felt through a great sense of pain or mistake but just a grand sense of confusion, and a complexity or swamp that I had to wade out of, analytically, as far as possible.

The autonomous child: – To invent the autonomous child...it was to prize the child, to free the child from theoretical constraints. That business about how we invent “the autonomous” category that is childhood, when in fact there are lots of childhoods, but then that takes you down that silly pluralism. It’s just like early feminists talked about women as a unified group. But of course, black working class women in Mississippi had nothing to do with white English middle class women in Hampstead, you know. They were a million miles apart, not just geographically. But it was a political act to create that category of the autonomous child, and I’m fully aware of that, and I’m fully aware of the paradoxes that have stemmed from that. One arising after Allison James and I did that work on the two children that had killed a younger child in the UK. When the two boys who had done the killing, actually came up for parole [the Jamie Bulger case], there were a whole series of different agencies that got involved, and I was called in to offer evidence in one of these. Now, if I had thought that the autonomous child was the one that is now being used as a reality, I’d have said, “Well yes, they must be responsible for their actions, mustn’t they. You must do with them what ever you think fit.” Because it [the killing] was premeditated, they can’t use any mitigation. But of course I said that we’d be turning our back on civilization to do that. You may as well take them out and shoot them. I said “Why don’t you just do that now? Why don’t you just kill them, because if you put them into an adult institution, they’re finished? They’re written off as citizens. They have still got a chance, whereas their victim hasn’t. So let’s handle that part of history and move them somewhere else.” I’m not deeply ambivalent about why I, “we”, did invent the autonomous child, but I can see some of the unintended consequences of the way it’s been adopted. Oddly enough, I always use to have ferocious arguments with Jens [Qvortrup] about what we [James, Jenks and Prout] call “the social structural child.” I’m coming more and more around to the view that that *is* where children are located. They’re always a constant part of any social structure, and therefore they are as various as whichever social structure they inhabit, which then means

you can then talk about their agency and their autonomy within the confines and the constraints of that social structure. I suppose I felt that the reason I had to do separation from Jens' ideas, at the time, was because he wasn't actually making the child big enough and luminous enough. And of course, it is particularly difficult in cultures with states like Scandinavia, where the relation between the child and the state *is* direct. The state always mediates through the families in the UK. There's still that buffer, and agencies are very slow at taking children away from the care of or abuse of families. So in a funny kind of way, the awakening of "the autonomous child" is a bit of a monster, which hasn't done children very much good at all, perhaps. Though it might have done children in what we call "the south" some good. It may have done.

***Transgression* and Jenks' own transgressive acts**

– I've always opted for writing things that make me feel good, excite me, so that I don't have to feel as though I am going over old ground. So if we come round to the *Transgression* book, I was back in the childhood circuit, giving papers, but not feeling that there was a great deal of originality in my work. I thought it was time to write something that had been hanging around in my head for a long time. Really it's theoretically autobiographical that *Transgression* book. I had a vision of this book being a real kind of violent interjection into academic debate, and I wanted it to be shocking. So for the cover of the book I had got this series of rather salacious brothel-like photographic shots. When I finished writing the book, I dropped all of this material into the publisher's office. The publisher then rang me up, and I asked, "What do you think of it?" The publisher's reply was, "The cover is exploitative and the manuscript is too long." After all of the pleasure of writing it and the excitement of its shock value, I was angry. However, I said, "Okay, I can concede the cover" (and she was right, it wouldn't have helped sales and it may have been burnt in the streets!). I said to the publisher, "The manuscript's too long by how much?" By about 5000 words was the reply. "Okay, then I'll cut 2500, and that'll be it", was my response. So then I asked, "Which was your favourite part of the book?" The publisher's reply – now you'll like this – was the bit called childhood and transgression. So I just cut it out. I just took that out of the manuscript, and that was the paper I gave in 2002 when I came to Jens'

seminar here in Trondheim¹, which will now be published in another form, somewhere else. But that was another kind of minor transgressive act that kept the book intact for me but also relieved my anger.

So that's the rocky road to the present. If I had to do a hierarchy of my achievements, I would guess that I'm probably best known for a combination of childhood study, but not in a very empirical way. I have done only one major research project, which I did with Allison James. But if it hadn't been for her with her ethnographic and methodological abilities and so on, I would have been completely lost. So she guided me through that. So I guess I'm well known in childhood studies, but as a theoretician. I'm well known in the study of culture, but as a theoretician. But I think the best thing I have ever written is *Transgression*. And I think that is because that it is exactly how I have always tried to organize things."

Vi avslutter dette intervjuet der sosiologen Chris Jenks understreker betydningen av samarbeidet med sosialantropologen Allison James. Herved skulle oppfordringen være gitt, både i forhold til å utforske og utvikle perspektivene innenfor barne- og barndomsforskning på tvers av disipliner, se kritisk også på de perspektivene barndomssosiologien bygger på og dermed overskride det som kan være etablert som fastlåste "sannheter".

¹ Norsk senter for barneforskning arrangerte i 2002-2003 en internasjonal seminarrekke, *Childhood – Agency, Culture, Society* med 6 forskjellige seminar. Jenks var en av de inviterte foredragsholderne på seminaret Culture, Ideology and Modernity i Trondheim 23.-24. september 2002. Han holdt foredraget "Childhood and Transgression".