

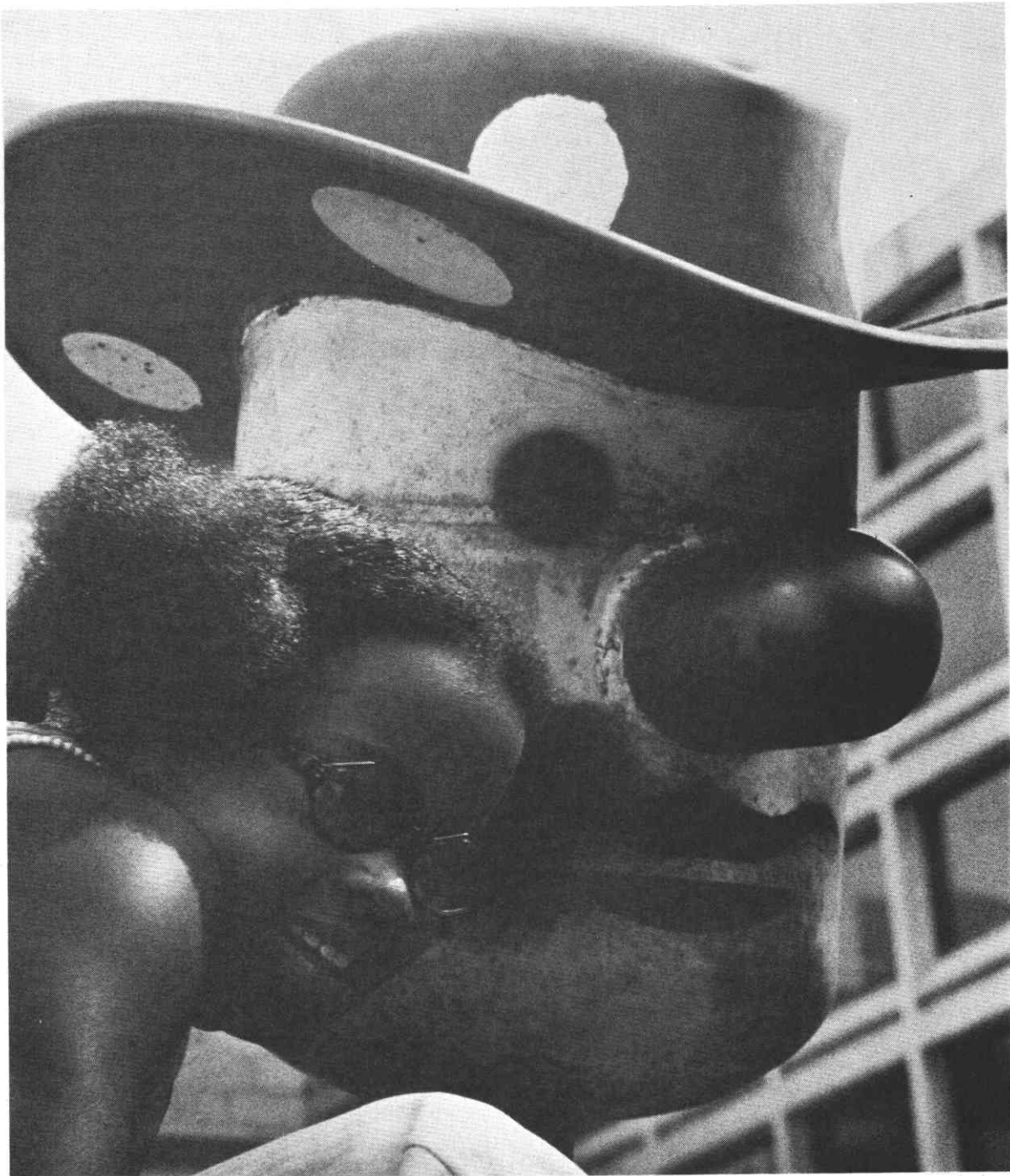


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“So I would argue that by focusing on the behavioral and institutional continuities—the real consistencies displayed by our species—we might be able to find a better way to understand childhood” - William R. Burch, Jr.

Learning from the Continuities in Humanity and Nature

by WILLIAM R. BURCH, JR., *Associate Professor of Forest Sociology, School of Forestry and Environmental Science, Yale University.*

ABSTRACT. Though the emphasis in American life is upon dramatic social change, the firmer reality is our great continuity in social behavior and institutions. For example, though many strategies of child rearing have cycled through human society, the basic problems and responsible social unit remain the same. Of necessity, children have an ordered and holistic view of nature and the urban places where they live. We, in the people-thinking trades, can learn much if we are willing to listen before we prescribe.

THE EMPHASIS ON CHANGE—new, now, the best, the latest, the earliest—has always been a characteristic of our society. But as we near the end of the American century that *Time* magazine used to tell us about, it might be wise to look at a less dramatic but no less important factor: stability. One of the things that we often fail to recognize is the great consistency within our social system—the great conservation—the many things that do not change.

I have experienced three generations of childhood and hope to experience four. I've experienced my own childhood, the childhood of my children, and the childhood of my grandchildren; I hope to experience the childhood of my great-grandchildren. When I was a child, breast feeding was not considered a very good way to raise children. During the Depression, having children was not considered a good idea. Children were things that we sat over in the corner; we hoped that they would stay quiet. My children were raised on Dr. Spock and we were big on natural childbirth. In having their children, my daughters followed something called the Lamaze program, and their attitude toward raising children seems to be somewhere between Summerhill and "hit them occasionally". The interesting thing about these changing approaches to raising children is that the basic rearing unit has remained the

same; the needs of both the child and parent have remained the same; and the kinds of things that parents and children end up doing to each other have not changed very much. These relationships have been relatively stable over time and display a degree of universality across cultures.

So I would argue that by focusing on the behavioral and institutional continuities—the real consistencies displayed by our species—we might be able to find a better way to understand childhood.

In the first session of this symposium, we discussed many views about *Homo sapiens*. I think one of the great issues that emerged out of these discussions was that we will no longer dichotomize man and nature, country and city, mind and body, individual and society. We need to adopt a holistic point of view that recognizes, for example, that urban places are as natural as rural places; that views the mind and the body as flowing together; that focuses on the close relationship between individuals and societies. Separating these things for either academic or managerial purposes is being false to ecological reality.

Most of us are in the management business—the people-tinkering trade. We are adults in our middle years, which stretch from around 20 to around 60. Those of us in this age group have a

great concern about youth and about the aged. We feel that because we work and they do not, they are not living very productive lives. Consequently, we make an occupation out of managing the lives of the young and the aged. And we have a certain stake in casting our own theoretical views upon the young and the aged.

For example, some students and I conducted a review of the literature on children's camping and found a remarkable similarity in each decade between the prevailing theories in business and commerce and the prevailing dogmas about how children should be "managed" in camp situations. In the early days, we had a kind of moral imperative to take children out and make them learn how to endure on their own so that they would develop an inner-directed attitude. Then, during the 1920s, the scientific management literature told us that children should make effective and efficient use of their time. This literature told us a lot about scheduling—what and where to do things. Then in the 30s we had the Human Relations Era, most of which was based on the Western Electric studies. This old moo-cow sociology told us how you keep them happy down at the old factory. During the 50s and the early 60s, camp programs involved a lot of group dynamics and T-group sessions that had started in industry and were transported to the camp situation. Children were supposed to have long debates on whether they should go over here or over there. The sessions I heard during this symposium involved a lot of talk about "target populations" and I found a strange resurgence

of concepts dealing with self-testing in the wilderness and inner-direction—about how we must take delinquents to the wilds so that they can learn how to make plans and organize and accomplish goals and how this process does all kinds of good things for their heads. So maybe we have come full circle.

Ethics, for those of us in the people-tinkering trades, requires that we recognize that we are all involved in maintaining a particular kind of social system and involved in furthering a particular view of how children, nature, and the urban domain should be ordered. In spite of the wide variety in dress, talk, and lifestyle of participants in this symposium, all remain firmly a part of the established social order.

Those who speak most strongly about liberating the child are often those who really mean they want the child to accept their particular frame of values and to reject the frame of others. Few persons at this gathering want a child so liberated that she or he may freely adopt the racist or sexist stereotypes of an Archie Bunker. We do not liberate ourselves or the child by playing at revolution or cynicism. We only do so through attempting to understand how children actually use the entire natural world, from the city street to the depths of a National Forest. We must start to listen, to look, and to learn systematically from children. Our programs, policies, and management practices must be as fluid and growing as this learning process. And most radical of all; under such a scheme our clients may even begin to think of us as real persons.