

**Conference proceedings, Round Table Discussion at Sixth Biennial Conference  
of SHCY (Society for the History of Children and Youth)**

**"The state of Children: Politics and Policies of Childhood in Global Perspectives", June  
23-25, 2011 at Columbia University, NY.**

**Pär Widén "Is History from below by necessity a critical approach?"**

The writing of history of children and youth was established within a modern ideological framework of writing history from below. As an academic discipline it grew out of a will to explore alternative perspectives questioning former hegemonic "whig interpretations" in which the kings and nobles of society placed themselves in the center of history as movers and shapers. History writing was in that sense a part of the power technologies of an Elite to inscribe and structure ways of thinking in society. In that sense it reflected power relations of society.

Making children (or women, or workers or minorities) the objects of historical study in a sense overturned the privileged positions of elites in the study and of the writing of the past. Michel Foucault interpreted this reversal of focus in history writing to be an effect of changes in power relations of modern societies. The power relations was related to new academic knowledge formulated by scientists and experts in welfare states, even our own studies of youth and children, arose as part of the governing discourses of modernity.

Foucault's work calls us to examine this reversal in our sensibility of historical and social significance which has made the history of childhood and youth possible. Rather than asking who was 'in power' by occupying our historical attentions, however, a foucauldian analysis

seeks to explore how a history of everybody and their everyday lives is itself an exercise of power.

Within such a Foucauldian frame of thought that focuses on the effects of the study objects of the historical discipline, we need to ask ourselves: what are the effects of our academic 'gaze' at the historical objects on children and youth?

So this presentation can be seen as a way to come to terms with our presuppositions and preconceived ideas and ideals in writing history of childhood.

What kind of historical focus or 'gaze' are we promoting in our studies of childhood and youth?

How are we taking a critical stance towards these presuppositions in which our academic interests and venues are being articulated?

What power relations are encapsulated in our notions of modern childhood and youth? What aspects and ideals of modern power relations are we promoting with our history writing, and what aspects are we overshadowing?

Who's power/knowledge is invested in our history?

Questions/reflections

Are we as historians part-responsible for promoting an ahistorical agency and an hyper individuality in and around thoughts on children and youth as an historical actor?

Possible effects of a history of everybody and their everyday lives?

Presuppositions of our historical academic interest?