There is a clear relation between the way children are raised and the way the world is heading. Famous philosophers and educationists such as Kant, Dewey, Montessori and Freire, exposed clearly the direct link between the social and political abuses of their time and the way in which children were brought up. From their analysis they each conceived the ambition of making the world a better place through educational reform. For various reasons it is not fashionable these days to make any kind of direct connection between child upbringing and ‘the state of the world’. The project of child-rearing gradually became focussed on individual development. In this book, Dutch child-psychologist Micha de Winter argues that there should be much more to child-raising, education and youth policy – for example, to learn to understand and practice democratic citizenship, humanity and freedom. What does it mean to live in a democratic society, how do you resist the seductions of ‘them-versus-us’ thinking which both offers the feelings of security and of belonging to a group and at the same time invites the risk of dehumanizing and excluding the other? Socialization from this perspective is a common responsibility that requires an educative civil society.
SOCIALIZATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY
Socialization and Civil Society
How Parents, Teachers and Others Could
Foster a Democratic Way of Life

By

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Translated by Murray Pearson

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FOREWORD

There is a clear relation between the way children are raised and the way the world is heading. It is a two-way relation: when children from an early age are given the idea that it is perfectly normal to let fly at the least provocation, it is hardly likely that as adults they will have much time for social ideals of cooperation and tolerance. A child growing up in a society or neighbourhood dominated by the law of the strongest is more likely to learn from parents that talking is of little help. Famous philosophers and educationists, Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Paolo Freire, exposed clearly the direct link between the social and political abuses of their time and the way in which children were brought up. From their analysis they each conceived the ambition of making the world a better place through the reform of education. In this, admittedly, they did not always succeed – though of course there have been successes. For instance, education in the western world has clearly contributed to the emancipation of girls and women, and scientific insights regarding child development have played an important role in bringing about international agreements on the rights of children.

However, some would say that idealized educational aims are highly dangerous: dictators love them and all too readily exploit the upbringing and education of children as a blatant instrument of indoctrination. But whether we therefore have to forget any ulterior educative aim?

In any case, for various reasons it is not fashionable these days to make any kind of direct connection between child upbringing and ‘the state of the world’. We no longer believe in the feasibility of ‘making’ the world and if someone takes it into his head to use upbringing as a means of achieving social ends the idea is immediately dismissed as naivety at best or, more ominously, as state usurpation of child-rearing. Moreover, everything now revolves around individual chances and individual development. In our present-day neoliberal culture child-raising has become a predominantly personal project, one whose success the parents feel themselves responsible for and which, at the same time, they are supposed to find enjoyable. They often experience it, on the other hand, as a lead weight. You mustn’t appeal to anyone else in the vicinity, for that would shatter the illusion of your own success – furthermore, others always know better! And in turn, don’t involve yourself in the upbringing of other people’s children, or worse still, in the behaviour of other children or youths on the street. Before you know where you are you’ll get a stone through the window. On the other hand, there has been an explosive growth in the appeal to educational experts these past decades – experts who increasingly portray themselves as specialists in behavioural regulation. They advise parents above all to be consistent, to reward good behaviour and ignore bad behaviour. As a result, child-raising seems to become a kind of behavioural
therapy. Many parents – and teachers, politicians and TV programme-makers too – appear to think that child-raising is successful if no serious problems have occurred. And from this idea, in recent years, we have seen a great deal invested in a youth policy that will provide early warnings of all possible risks in children’s development, so that they can be guided back on track. Everyone will agree that growing up without major problems constitutes a victory – a victory for parents, for children, and for society as a whole. But can upbringing really be considered a success merely because the child has not fallen into criminality or prostitution?

There should be much more to child-raising, education and youth policy – for example, to learn to understand and internalize democratic citizenship, humanity and freedom. What does it mean to live in a democratic society where you have a right and your own identity, but where you also have to extend that same right to others? How do you resist the seductions of ‘them-versus-us’ thinking which both offers the feelings of security and of belonging to a group and at the same time invites the risk of dehumanizing and excluding the other? Or how do you actually realize freedom in your life? What does freedom actually mean: to be able to go your own way undisturbed by others, to try and give meaning to your existence together with others, for instance when it comes to sustainability or social justice, etcetera?

Where these kinds of global issue are concerned, child-raising and its scientific study do have a role to play. This idea conflicts with the often implicit assumptions of most psychologists and educationists, viz. that such questions are not amenable to objective scientific research. But that seems to me entirely the wrong way of looking at it: if the established methods do not lend themselves to the study of urgent issues, then you should not stifle the issues but rather look for new methods.

This book consists of six related essays, which can also be read separately. The first two deal mainly with youth policy and its history. Chapter 1, on the basis of Isaiah Berlin’s concepts of positive and negative freedom, shows how one-sided our thinking about childhood and child-raising has become, as prevention of aberrances or misconduct seem to have become ever more dominant. But when we mainly concentrate on the restraint of the freedom of children and parents, we forget that child-raising must also have a positive direction. If that is missing, the problems will only be exacerbated.

Social Darwinism and social hygienism have had a large influence on thinking about youth policy. On the basis of these two historical movements, chapter 2 shows how individual and contextual perspectives conflict in the social and political a debate over youth and child-raising. At one moment the issue is how to deal with ‘bad’ or ‘depraved’ children and their parents, the next it is a question of how to combat social evils that are supposed to be the cause of the problem.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the important, but nowadays largely ignored role of the wider social circumstances in child-raising and socialization. In chapter 3 I illustrate this role by concentrating on the issue of child abuse. While research and practice are mainly aimed at causal factors in the family, which are therefore sought within the home, there is strong evidence that various processes which operate outside the home have a major influence on this problem. One implication
of this is that prevention ought to be directed, far more than at present, at the potential force of social networks in the immediate environment. In chapter 4 I introduce the concept of an ‘educative civil society’. Because parenting and child-raising have been so forced into a straitjacket of individualist thinking, and because experts have come to play such an important role, we have gradually found ourselves in a double-bind: as parents we are told that child-raising is our own creative responsibility, yet at the same time each individual act must be carefully chosen to conform to expert advice. In the end, this leads either to ever more individual requests for help or to the further imposition of sweeping measures from above. The thesis of this chapter is that we can only free ourselves from this double-bind of child-raising through cooperation. The widening of responsibility for child-raising and the strengthening of ties between young and old in the immediate locality are highly relevant means of reversing this double-bind process. In chapters 5 and 6 I set out the connections between child-raising and wider social developments. In chapter 5 the focus is on the role played by parenting and education in relation to the general good of society, in this context the importance of a democratic state and the democratic way of living together in a society. On the one hand we have to consider the facts: everyone who has a part to play in the socialization of young people not only exerts an influence on their individual possibilities and fortunes, but also on the quality of the society. On the other hand, precisely for this reason there are far-reaching normative choices to be made: what type of citizenship do we actually want to promote by means of upbringing, education and youth policy and what social ideals are we ultimately striving for? Chapter 6 finally tackles the charged question of whether, and if so how child-upbringing and education can contribute to the fight against phenomena that have to be considered reprehensible by any conceivable standard – specifically, violence against communities or populations, which sometimes leads to genocide. Moral exclusion and dehumanization always play a highly significant role in the process leading to such violence. If only from the viewpoint of prevention, it is therefore essential for children to learn how such mechanisms work and how they can sometimes be actively exploited to set one community against another.

Of course, this book does not pretend to offer a solution to all the world’s problems. But in my own view, when it comes to the social, societal and general aims of child-raising, everyone involved in parenting, education and youth policy would do well to raise the level of their ambition. After all, the way children are brought up makes an enormous difference, not only for their own lives – both in the immediate present and for the rest of their lives – but also for the way people live together in various social associations, for the degree to which they are prepared to participate actively in the political community, and ultimately also for their concern for and involvement in the lives and problems of people elsewhere in the world.

Micha de Winter
Groenekan, February 2012
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CHAPTER 1

POLITICS AS SUPERNANNY

Bringing up children, youth policy and Isaiah Berlin’s two kinds of freedom

Scene: an aeroplane; I am sitting in a gangway seat, next to me a mother with a dear little four year-old daughter. The daughter discovers that there are several children from her infant class further up the gangway, so her mother asks me in a very friendly way if her daughter could climb over me to go and play with them. Naturally I agree, and equally naturally, three minutes later, the daughter climbs back over me to tell mama about it and to fetch one of her toys. And again, and again … After this has repeated itself about fifteen times, and the preparation of my lecture is beginning to suffer, I say to the little girl: the next time you want to climb over me, you’ll have to pay me a cent. To which the mother replies: I’m really glad you’ve said something, sir, because I’m being driven crazy myself …

1.1 CHILD-UPBRINGING AS BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

Bringing up children is a battle ground; or at least, it has to be that from time to time. Behind every front door, in every school class, in every football club or youth organization, norms, values and behaviour are fought over in daily skirmishes. This is logical, since children are first and foremost inclined to do whatever they like, whereas for parents that is not always the most desirable way to go. As the Spanish philosopher of child-upbringing, F. Savater, rightly observes, you cannot instil anything into a child without crossing them from time to time. And conversely, those responsible for bringing up children sometimes make demands on children that are excessive, as for example when they allow the pattern of their own expectations to override the child’s real possibilities (Savater, 1997). The phenomenologist Langeveld (1979) referred to these kinds of ‘ingrained tension’ as the antinomies of child-rearing. One of these antinomies is the tension between freedom and restraint. Children need to experiment with things in freedom, while adults want to limit that room for experiment to ensure that their children don’t land themselves in frightening or unsafe situations. Another tension is that between the ideal and actual reality: those who raise children have constantly to seek a balance between the possibilities and needs of the child and the demands of the future. An exaggerated focus on the future exerts an enormous pressure on the learning child, whereas too little attention to it challenges the child insufficiently to want to explore the world. And finally there is the tension between conveyance of the culture into which a child is growing and the renewal of that culture. Children
must be induced into the existing culture, the norms and customs of society, but on
the other hand they must have the chance to develop themselves to become critical
citizens capable of shaping their lives and futures. The inherent tension between
freedom and coercion is an almost universal theme in the socialization of children.
To be free is to free oneself from ignorance and from determination by our genetic
and social environment, writes Savater, and for this reason raising children for
freedom demands a degree of discipline.

There is thus a great deal at stake in child-upbringing, far more than the
problems of behaviour that one usually sees in supernanny-like TV-programmes.
In that kind of programme it is always a question of parents who, for one reason or
another, cannot keep order, a child that won’t be potty-trained or brothers and
sisters who create havoc, tumbling all over the place. These programmes, almost
without exception, offer a popularized form of behavioural therapy, i.e. a consistent
system of rewards and discouragements based on the known principles of operant
and classical conditioning. Successful child-rearing is thus more or less equated
with the regulation of behaviour (Furedi, 2009). We also come across this in
popular classes given by health and welfare organizations, for example, under the
terms of child-rearing support. The support mainly consists of learning ‘effective
parenting’, i.e. from instruction in how to replace undesirable by desirable
behaviour. It is seldom – if ever – about fundamental and normative questions such
as the dilemmas mentioned above that are simply inherent in bringing up children.
It would seem that not only professionals and programme-makers, but also social
scientists have defined away these fundamental dilemmas of parenting. This is
undoubtedly related to the fact that experts are averse to entering into normative or
ideological territory, for this would raise the question of their precious neutrality –
a neutrality which is, in fact, by definition incompatible with issues of raising
children. In the world of youth policy, this focus on the regulation of behaviour has
much to do with the cult of efficacy which has predominated there over recent
years. ‘Effective parenting’ is easily measured, and creates the illusion that child-
rearing problems can be quickly manipulated by evidence-based methods. And to
some extent this account holds true for the regulation of simple behavioural
problems. But regulating behaviour has little to do with bringing up children, for
the latter turns upon far more complex matters – the formation of personality, the
discovery of identity and the meaning of existence, one’s place in a culture and
society. Faced with such recalcitrant questions, parents and educators in the end
have more recourse to wisdom and authority than to simple principles of
conditioning, and rely more on patience and experience than the obvious direction
to be consistent. But admittedly, the model of child-raising as simply the regulation
of behaviour has become very popular. It achieves quick and tangible results, so
quick and tangible, in fact, that one can make spectacular television programmes
about it. But nobody ever sees what may or may not have transpired a few years
down the line.

Child psychologists such as Garbarino, Damon and Lerner have recently
demonstrated that we sell children, young people and parents seriously short with
this short-term behavioural approach that currently seems to have taken over
children’s upbringing. Among other things, their work deals with the question of why so many young people feel alienated from society and scarcely any sense of connection with others, why so many have no inkling of how to give meaning to their lives, and of course, what can be done about it. Many of the problems that we currently refer to as individual behavioural dysfunctions (attention deficit, substance abuse, depression, criminality, truancy, etc., in fact have a significant cultural and collective component. In other words, they also have to do with the way in which the lives of children growing up in modern society are organized, the way families and social networks function within it, how youth and educational policy is shaped; and more generally, the nature of the educational culture in politics and society. Tackling such problems is also an enormously complex task. But in society it is the simple and quick solutions – where available – that are given preference. We would rather fight the epidemic of ADHD-like disturbances with Ritaline than ask ourselves to what extent our tolerance limits for children whose brains function differently have perhaps shrunk; we would rather deal with youth criminality by correcting moral thinking errors of individuals than by studying the social conditions under which such patterns of thinking actually arise (Gibbs et al., 1997). These are examples of interventions that rely on a simplified, fragmented analysis of the particular problem concerned. Only one limited part of the whole spectrum of possible causes is dealt with, mostly at the level of individual behaviour. ‘Larger’ or ‘wider’ causes remain virtually untouched. When their efficacy is measured, this too is increasingly a matter of measuring changes in individual behaviour. But whether, for the sake of argument, the level of child-abuse can be substantially reduced by offering all parents parenting classes, as is being claimed by some proponents, is very much open to question (see chapter 3).

1.2 SIMPLIFICATION AND POLARIZATION

Not only in the realm of TV programmes, parenting classes and scientific studies of parenting do we see a preference for simplified and fragmented solutions. The positions adopted in politics and the media on bringing up children and tackling youth problems are also increasingly characterized by the same approach. Many politicians in fact behave like failed supernannies: failed, because the real supernannies know that rewarding good behaviour is much better than punishing bad behaviour. Politicians, on the contrary, seem to want, as it were, to impose stricter limits, maintain consistency, introduce ‘boot’ camps, punish inadequate parents by withholding their child allowance, for example, or fining them for their children’s delinquency. Politicians often in history were meddling in the way children are brought up. Nor could it be otherwise, since raising children is not merely a matter of private concern, but also a question for society as a whole. However one looks at it, the way children are brought up affects not only the individual but also the way they function socially. And conversely, the way society and politics function has a great impact on parenting, education and youth policy. In the past, educationalists have also often meddled in political questions. To give just a few well-known examples: John Dewey (and the democratizing of society),
Maria Montessori (educating children for freedom), and Paolo Freire (and liberation pedagogy).

In our own time, when it comes to questions of socialization, politicians are particularly preoccupied with two interwoven notions, viz. incompetent parents and disobedient children. Over the whole political spectrum, the alleged incompetence of parents (or sometimes also of others who have responsibility for raising children, such as teachers or child healthcare workers) is almost automatically assumed to be the cause of various problems occurring in society, ranging from poor language skills and the early dropout from schooling to the culture of hanging around, binge drinking and unsafe sex. When it comes to the problems of young children the case is often argued for using pressure or compulsion on parents. One regularly hears official arguments, in the interests of children, for giving less weight to the privacy of the family and, if necessary against the will of the parents, to investigate and intervene in the home. It certainly seems that juvenile care organizations and juvenile judges have become more inclined in recent years towards supervision and removal orders as a result of child abuse that end in the death of the child, as have happened in Britain and the Netherlands in recent years, and the waves of public outrage that ensued. When it comes to adolescents, parental incompetence is perhaps still seen as the main cause, but we especially see measures that have to curb their behaviour in the social domain in an unmistakable fashion. The main idea is that the regime at home and at school has become too ‘soft’, that supervision on the street is too friendly, so that youths are a law unto themselves in the public domain. Even political groups who see themselves as the standard-bearers for the autonomy of the family or the individual are demanding measures that would allow the freedom of child-rearing to be restricted. Until a few years ago, in fact, this was only possible by means of a criminal or civil action. But freedom-restrictive interventions, such as street coaches who pick up under-age children out on the streets in the evening, forcing parents to sign a child-rearing contract with the school, or enforcing an antisocial behaviour order, can now be executed without the mediation of a judge, for instance at the instigation of the local authorities.

Over the last decade, the public and political debate over child-upbringing has internationally become starkly polarized (Furedi, 2001; De Winter, 2003). The tone is more strident, the standpoints have tended to become more radical and entrenched. Not that polarization is in itself a bad thing, for example, since having a sharp debate over pressing social questions often contributes more to their solution than glossing over the problems. And indeed, in the case of the questions over upbringing this effect can be observed. For example, when it comes to the problem of social ‘nuisance’ caused by youths, many municipalities have gradually discovered that their policy was, on the one hand, too tolerant, but on the other hand also too one-sided. Attempts have long been made to resolve the problem by establishing ready-made hanging-out places, sometimes with participant involvement over the question of whether or not these should be covered. When this was found to be ineffective in reducing the level of nuisance, there was a switch to more repressive measures, but these turned out to be equally ineffective
in solving the problem; they merely displaced it. Slowly, by degrees, local councils
discovered the interactive nature of the phenomenon: by definition, there is no
nuisance caused by youths without local residents who are disturbed by their
behaviour and complain about it (Martineau, 2006). It is precisely in the interaction
– or better said, in the lack of it – that the problem lies (RMO, 2008). Perhaps the
sharp social debates that have been conducted on this issue will give the necessary
impulse for a new type of solution that we can by now see on the horizon, such as,
for example, neighbourhood mediation, investigative groups of adult and young
residents, and the Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative (Vreedzame Wijk) in the
Netherlands. This is an initiative based on the principle of the Peaceful School, in
which children learn to resolve conflicts in their own environment via peer-
mediation.

Polarization, although it can sometimes be fruitful, also brings with it serious
risks. The greatest danger is that polarization sets groups against each other. Although the argument is that the problems, if identified, should be named,
igmatization of entire communities is a predictable side effect. For example,
polarization of the public debate on youth can easily stigmatize large groups of
youngerst – immigrant youth, for example.

Another important effect of polarization is that the quality of arguments is often
subordinate to the desired goal, specifically the domination and, as far as possible,
the detriment of the opposing party (de Dreu, 2009). To the extent that the tone
becomes more strident and the attacks more personal the debate is impoverished.
Positions are so firmly drawn that there is no further room for negotiation (RMO,
2009). Because many such debates are carried out through the media, standpoints
and arguments are often reduced to the level of one-liners. This is precisely what
has happened over recent years in the field of child-upbringing in many western
societies. The restriction of freedom, both the freedom of incompetent parents and
disobedient youth, seems to have become the main pedagogical theme of our time.
Freedom is apparently no longer a positive value that one should promote by
means of education and upbringing, but rather a right that holds more for some
than for others. The debate on upbringing has thus been reduced to a single
dimension. The normative clash is not only over the question of when and by what
criteria can one resort to coercive measures. The question is whether we are still
capable of resolving the complex dilemmas surrounding child-upbringing within
such a uni-dimensional school of thought. In any case, the polarization between a
hard and soft line in socialization and youth policy is demonstrably fruitless: it is
clear that neither model brings any closer the desired, acceptable goals of child-
upbringing within a democracy.

1.3 ISAIAH BERLIN AND THE TWO CONCEPTS OF FREEDOM

Isaiah Berlin, one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth
century, developed a theory of freedom that has, in my view, enormous relevance
to the problem of the socialization of children in our time. In his famous Oxford
inaugural lecture on ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ he raised the question of obedience
and coercion: “Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else? Why should I not live as I like? Must I obey? If I do not obey, may I be coerced? By whom, and to what degree, and in the name of what, and for the sake of what?” (Berlin, 1958). His starting point is the value of plurality. From a conviction that there is no such thing as a single all-inclusive truth, he finds it of the utmost importance that there should be sufficient room in society for different legitimate values to be weighed against each other. That may sound rather tamely obvious, but in reality the opposite turns out to be the case. The concept of freedom has been misused throughout the course of history in every possible way, says Berlin. Every dictator, every totalitarian regime tries to establish its power by an appeal to the liberation of its citizens from one or other evil: the communists promised to liberate the workers from exploitation by capital; the Nazis claimed that they would cleanse the German race of perverse Jewish and other non-Aryan influence, and so on. The end result of virtually every dictatorship, however, is the total subjection – or worse – of their own ‘liberated’ citizens. Freedom thus serves as the bait, with blind oppression the end result. The concept of freedom can thus be manipulated incredibly, and for this reason, says Berlin, it needs further specification. He therefore distinguishes between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom concerns the question of what room there is for individuals or groups to do what they want, unhindered by others. For example, the more strongly the individual is protected against state influence, the greater his negative freedom. Positive freedom, on the other hand, has to do with people’s need to give a particular content and direction to their own lives, either independently or together with others in a community or society. Negative freedom, in short, is freedom from restriction by others, whereas positive freedom concerns the giving of content to life and society, free of coercion. Supporters of negative freedom want to restrict authority, whereas supporters of positive freedom want precisely to achieve that authority. The problem is that these two kinds of freedom can seriously conflict with each other. If, for example, an excessive emphasis is laid on a social ideal that citizens should strive for, varying from total autonomy to a strongly communal life, then the individual’s negative freedom suffers. That is what happens under the influence of totalitarian ideologies; but even in a democracy the government will sometimes involve itself in what takes place behind people’s front doors, for example appealing to a shared value such as the safety of children. Conversely, one can also imagine societies in which the freedom of each individual was so absolutely conceived that he or she was constantly in collision with the right to self-determination, and thus with the positive freedom, of others. According to the political philosopher Blokland this kind of conflict constantly presents us with a “dilemma of emancipation”: when one places too much emphasis on negative freedom, one robs people of the possibility of developing, in interaction with their environment, their own autonomy. When, on the contrary, one places too much emphasis on the development of their autonomy, in school, education, socialization, then negative freedom suffers. And that negative freedom is precisely what one
needs if one wants to make use of his capacity for self-determination. (Blokland, 1997, p. 169)

Does this conceptual clarification of the term ‘freedom’ offer a constructive way out of the dilemma between a hard and a soft approach to the problems of child-upbringing and youth? As said earlier, the concept of freedom in relation to socialization is troublesome. A child is not free in all senses, precisely because the way to freedom for oneself and from others is complicated and thus requires a degree of guidance from others. It is this field of tension which opens the door to all kinds of ideologies, which either advocate maximizing authority over children (in an authoritarian upbringing), or on the contrary argue for the complete self-determination of children (in an anti-authoritarian upbringing).

What strikes one immediately if one looks at this from Berlin’s perspective, is that present-day political and social debates over child-upbringing turn exclusively within the conceptual space of negative freedom. To what extent should the privacy of the family be infringed when those around fear that the child’s interests are threatened by the parents? Should a local authority be able to determine how late children are allowed to be out on the streets at night, should a restriction order be placed on youths when residents complain of the level of disturbance they cause? The prevailing idea over almost the entire political spectrum seems to be that the space of negative freedom has become too generous, and that this space must be curtailed. In itself, it may be thought curious that this political conception is so widely shared. The maximization of negative freedom (as little interference as possible by the state in the affairs of the individual) was, after all, one of the basic principles of classical liberalism, but in the field of pedagogy it is not only liberals who have deserted this principle, but in their wake also some socialists and Christian-democrats.

But how does this affect positive freedom, pre-eminently a principle bearing on the direction of development of the individual, and therefore inherently implicated in child-upbringing and youth policy? As already said, positive freedom is concerned with the content, with ideals and ways of living for which individuals and groups strive. The political version of this, according to Blokland, is democracy: “the possibility for individual, together with those with whom they form a community, to give direction to their own society” (Blokland, ibid., p. 170; Taylor, 1989). Whereas today, when it comes to child-upbringing and youth, the curtailment of negative freedom has assumed the central position in the discussion, positive freedom has been virtually ignored. This is remarkable, since one would expect that in a society where questions of identity, religion, plurality and democracy were so emphatically placed at the top of the agenda, these might also figure more prominently in the field of socialization. The fact that so little attention has been paid to positive freedom in the public and political debate does not mean, of course, that nothing has been done in this area. In many western countries civic education is part of the curriculum. The programme ‘democratic citizenship in the primary school’ that we have developed in conjunction with primary schools, is a concrete example of this (Verhoeven, in press). Children (see also chapter 5, this
CHAPTER 1

book) learn there, both in theory and practice, the basic principles of democracy. Thus, for example, they practise how you resolve conflicts with each other by means of peer mediation, how you reach decisions together in group meetings, how you manage diversity, and further gain concrete social experience via ‘service learning’. Such a programme can be seen as a contribution to the development of positive freedom. And so, for that matter, could regular school subjects such as social studies, history and religious education serve the same purpose.

1.4 LIBERATING THE DEBATE ON SOCIALIZATION

The question was whether the conceptual distinction between negative and positive freedom could help give a constructive turn to the debate over ‘hard versus soft’ approaches to problems of socialization. It is now very clear that the polarity between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ is not so much concerned with freedom itself, but almost entirely with the curtailing of negative freedom, i.e. restrictions. It therefore becomes intelligible why the debate leads to ever more trenchant positions, while at the same time is conspicuous for its predictability and lack of any new insight. After all, the balance between setting boundaries and giving space plays an important role in almost any modern theory of child-upbringing and development. Briefly, an upbringing that is dominated by restrictions, in which children are given few support or room for development, may well produce obedience but usually very little autonomy or critical social engagement. And conversely, if too much room is provided in upbringing and few boundaries set, children learn to see themselves as the centre of the world and to take little account of others (De Winter, 2007). We could say that a youth policy which exclusively focuses on limits and restrictions is, at the very least, from the perspective of socialization, one-sided. Against this it may be countered that the aspect of positive freedom would have to be given shape by means of education and various other training processes in society. What then is the problem?

There certainly is a problem. In Berlin’s conceptualization, negative and positive freedoms behave as communicating vessels. If there is a tendency in society to set more limits on the negative freedom of certain groups than for others, the result is understandably to provoke resistance. Moreover, as history shows, the door then stands wide open for ideologies which are only too ready to convince citizens that they will bring deliverance. This is abundantly clear from our own research on the processes of radicalization among young people. Young people feel themselves to be discriminated against along ethnic or cultural lines and – mostly through the internet – come in contact with gurus who know how to channel their dissatisfaction into one or other radical ideology. Almost always, there is a total lack of any pedagogical counterweight. Parents, teachers, and even social workers feel themselves virtually incapable to affect the process, and instead mostly choose to look the other way (Van San et al., 2010).

But alternatively, a constructive relation is also possible. In a social and political climate where many possibilities exist for individuals and groups of citizens to shape their identity themselves and to a large extent to practise their own form of
‘common life’, the need to restrict the room for negative freedom will be so much less pressing. For whoever has the feeling that he is himself the source of empowerment over his own life – rather than some dictatorial proclaimer of truth – has less need to fear that that others will want to interfere uninvited in his affairs. In conclusion, following the analogy of Isaiah Berlin’s theory of the two mutually dependant forms of freedom, we can now settle several matters arising from the debate over the child-upbringing and youth disaffection. In that debate, rightly or wrongly, the emphasis over the past few years has come to lie on the restriction of negative freedom. Governments want to intrude into the home – and for many that does not go far enough – despite the fact that this desire conflicts with the basic principles of the liberal democratic state (Furedi, 2009). That there appears to be a willingness to tolerate this strain has to be attributed to two motives: concern and fear – concern, for example for the safety and the rights of children that are at stake, fear that those who threaten to go off the rails could eventually put the social security of large groups of citizens in danger – and possibly also endanger the state itself.

With this focus on negative freedom, however, the question of how to give form to positive freedom has receded into the background. But it is precisely when the issue is that of child-upbringing and youth disaffection that this question is crucial: how do we support young people to enable them to develop as well as possible into the autonomous citizens of a plural, democratic society? According to Sieckelinck in current culture we increasingly lose any sense of what to do with the ideals of young people, even in education (Sieckelinck, 2010). Young people simply entertain different ideals from those adults expect. Moreover, these same adults apparently find it increasingly difficult to discuss the issue with them openly. This neglect of the ideals of children and adolescents themselves in their upbringing and education can lead not only to a deadening of awareness, but also to radicalization (ibid.). The deeper the neglect of positive freedom, the more young people will tend to want to maximize their negative freedom. But it then becomes highly likely that this will be a rather empty freedom: you are young and you want something – but what that ‘something’ looks like scarcely matters (Blokland, 1997). Such an expanded but empty negative freedom could then provoke the growth of social forces demanding that it be curtailed. Thus the circle is complete.

The argument, I hope, is clear. We must speak more with children and with young people, about their identity, the way in which they experience society and want to change it – in short, about positive freedom. This is no task that can be simply delegated to formal education. Citizenship and identity formation are not issues that arise in the context of education alone, but more especially in their everyday social experience (Biesta & Lawy, 2006). A social debate that is primarily about the restriction of negative freedom is in fact part of that experience. We see it happen all around us: there are many children and young people who, from a very early age, have been given the message that they are not much valued, that they don’t belong. Worse, they learn – especially from the media and politicians – that they are mainly seen as a danger to be combated. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy, for such experience eventually leads to behaviour that evokes a
social reaction demanding tough limits. Raising children for positive freedom is therefore enormously important. It is a condition for being able to guarantee space of the negative freedom for all citizens in a democratically constituted state.

To return to that small girl in the aeroplane, whose mother allowed her so much negative freedom: That she finally ran into difficulties from me was something she would get over, and in any case it made a nice story. But in the end the multiplicity of such stories will inevitably lead to complaints about the behaviour of the children (and parents) of today, and then to new rules for passengers with children. The alternative is there for the taking.
CHAPTER 2

THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST CHILD

Traditionally, there have been two ways in which attempts have been made to improve humanity: (I) directly, through external forms of influence on people themselves – by moralising, by admonishing and exhorting, in the hope that they will as a result become better and happier; (II) indirectly, by improving the conditions in which people live. In the last twenty years, a third approach has increasingly has been consciously To these must be added a third way that has increasingly been used, though only consciously realized as such over the last twenty years: (III) improving humanity through the direct action of humanity on itself, the way of eugenics. M.P. Vrij (1917)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It will not have escaped many that youth policy has developed over the past decades into a political and social issue of major importance. It is also a social field in which ideological bias has played at least as great a role as scientific evidence. No matter that the results of scientific research convincingly demonstrate that the influence of parents on their children’s behaviour is often overestimated, and that the problems of children’s upbringing can only be successfully tackled by also taking into consideration their social, economic and cultural context; that kind of knowledge is all too readily rejected in public debate these days as inconvenient and ‘soft’. No, ‘hard’ is in. The various political approaches to this problem differ only marginally. In the Netherlands, for instance, although Geert Wilders steals the show with his willingness to kneecap Moroccan hooligans, almost everywhere the tone is much the same: deal with the problem by going in early and hard: whether young troublemakers, potential offenders, early school-leavers or recalcitrant youths – not forgetting, of course, their parents. Because many of the policy measures are aimed at children and parents from ethnic minority groups, youth policy – whether intentionally or unintentionally – inevitably promotes stigmatization. The problems that arise within these groups become implicitly – and often explicitly – acculturated. That is, they become associated with a particular cultural background – ‘a typical immigrant problem’. In discussions the social context of the problems concerned is frequently ignored, as though the background had been airbrushed from the picture. Koops regards such stigmatization as a social variant of eugenics (Koops, 2007; see also Noordman, 2010).
This field of tension between science and ideology in the area of youth policy is by no means a new phenomenon. Many of the concepts and practices from the recent history of this policy area, although they were argued or fought for out of scientific conviction, were in fact also loaded with normative assumptions. Nor is that so surprising, since youth policy deals with themes which by definition are not value-free: the whole point is to advance or curtail certain things.

In this chapter I sketch developments in current youth policy against the background of two historical movements: Social Darwinism and social hygienism. The term ‘Social Darwinism’ refers to the application of theoretical evolutionary principles to human social life. This ideological outlook assumed concrete expression in the propositions of eugenicists, who advocated that the poor and the mentally subnormal should be prevented from breeding, thus maintaining the standard of inherited characteristics among the population. It should be said at once that Darwin himself was hardly responsible for this social application of his theory of natural selection. It was Spencer (1851) who coined the expression ‘the survival of the fittest’, frequently mistranslated as ‘the right of the strongest’ or ‘might is right’. He qualified this mechanism (literally: the survival of those who have best adapted) as a necessary condition for social progress. Darwin on the contrary considered altruism to be a principle characteristic of the human species that had played an important role in human evolution (Darwin, 1859).

Around the mid-nineteenth century there arose a movement of progressive medical practitioners who campaigned for the improvement of public hygiene, public health and the living conditions of the poor. This group of ‘public hygienists’ particularly focused on the link between public health and poverty, and more especially between poverty and epidemics. The idea was that ‘impoverished classes produced epidemics, but also that, vice versa, the recurring epidemics maintained poverty’ (Houwaart, 1991). Although Social Darwinists and social hygienists shared some ideas (for example, the great expectations they both held of prevention for public health), they differed starkly in the type of interventions they recommended: whereas the Social Darwinists mainly wanted to intervene in private lives, the hygienists were concerned with the public domain. It appears to be a fundamental opposition which has actually always played a part in youth policy and still does today. The conflict over this difference of outlook has invariably been conducted with scientific arguments, but in the background it is the ideological and political considerations that play the dominant role.

2.2 CHILD MORTALITY: NATURAL PHENOMENON OR PROBLEM?

In many European countries throughout the second half of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century, infant mortality was enormous. Around 1850 the average rate of infant mortality in the Netherlands was about 25%. Among the poor, less than half the children born survived their first year, while of those who did survive almost 10% died in their second year and another 5% in their third year (Koppius, 1958). To complete an even blacker picture, Daels (1936) referred to a Belgian study from 1910 from which it appears that the children of unmarried
factory and mineworkers held the absolute record: almost without exception they died in their first year (Daels, 1936).

At the time of Spencer and Darwin, there were many who did not particularly consider this such a disaster. On the contrary, their idea was that a high rate of infant mortality had to do with 'hereditary weakness' that had to be eliminated by natural selection – an idea that still echoed well into the twentieth century. The ethnologist Steinmetz, a well-known advocate of eugenics in the Netherlands, thought that 'care and education for children who ‘are already complete trash at birth’ was damaging and superfluous. He considered, for example, the practice whereby babies were kept alive in an incubator to be 'a wretched and painful parody of our misplaced over-sensitivity'. Infant mortality, according to him, was merely 'the weeding of humanity by nature' (Steinmetz, 1910; see also Noordman, 1989, p. 65). The idea that government should not interfere to combat alcoholism – because this fight only helped to maintain inferior qualities – also fitted into this way of thinking. M.P. Vrij wrote in De Toekomst der Maatschappij [The Future of Society] that the new science of sociology demonstrated that there were only two rational ways toward a better future: either one strove to do something about poor living conditions or one tried to improve humanity itself (Vrij, 1917). The latter approach formed the core of social eugenics and led to proposals for racial improvement. The former view was mainly held by social hygienists, idealists of a liberal and progressive persuasion who advocated equal rights to health, but who at the same time developed new scientifically based ideas of the causes of infant mortality. For example, the hygienists proposed that if it was true that a high infant mortality was the consequence of hereditary weakness, in areas where mortality was high, the surviving people ought to be stronger and healthier and there should be less sickness death and infirmity than elsewhere. But the statistics showed that in reality the reverse was the case (Koppius, 1958, p. 9). The social hygienists discovered that early infant mortality had little to do with hereditary weakness. Poor nutrition and hygiene, bad housing and poverty were the causal factors they were able to identify (Houwaart, 1991). For example, in 1875 Coronel pointed to the difference in infant mortality between urban and rural populations, to the high death rate among illegitimate children and the effect of the warm season on death rates. And in 1906 Sternberg came to the conclusion that mortality among bottle-fed children was seven times higher than among breast-fed children, and that more than 70% of infant mortality was caused by intestinal diseases during the summer months. Similarly, a major research project into the causes of infant mortality carried out around 1910 in The Hague demonstrated that living conditions, health and size of family were of decisive influence (Koppius, 1958, p. 11).

The early hygienists were well ahead of their time. They strove for improvement in the living conditions of the poor and argued for the laying of drains, raising health standards, improvement of working conditions and nutrition. Interestingly enough, they based their arguments on theories that, measured against present levels of understanding, are completely untenable: the so-called miasma theories, according to which poisonous emanations in water, atmosphere and soil were the causes of disease and death. Time and again in their accounts one comes across
such terms as ‘rotting’, ‘stink’, ‘plague vapours’, etc. (for example, Corbin, 1986). Under the influence of Pasteur’s discoveries, these miasma theories gradually disappeared to be replaced by the principle of contagion.

With the government showing little interest in these social problems – which, after all, mainly affected the poorer classes – the first societies for social and preventative health care were set up at the end of the nineteenth century. These saw social-hygienic work as a ‘war’, a battle that had to be waged using all possible means. In propaganda films of the early twentieth century and in countless commemorative books one comes across such terms as ‘crusaders’, ‘holy war’, ‘harbingers of health’, ‘hygienic aftercare/resettlement’, etc. This battle was waged on several fronts. Advice bureaus were set up, to which milk-kitchens were often attached; district nurses paid visits to check up on every family in which a new child was born; ‘hygienic literacy courses’ were organized, travelling exhibitions, etc. Beside this, a wide range of activities were developed: hospitals were founded, transport for the sick was organized, bath-houses were opened and in several places these social health societies themselves built roads to provide more easy access to the countryside in case of calamities such as outbreaks of disease.

Another important aspect was the fight against the prevailing abuses the first district nurses encountered round the childbirth:

I was informed that the nurses leave the women filthy for 9 days and also don’t properly clean the external genitalia: because, they say, ‘what comes by itself must also be got rid of by itself. (Hagemaker, 1904, quoted in Stöpetie, 1983)

The societies tried to combat these practices by instituting in 1899 training for their own nurses. But above all, general principles of nutrition and hygiene, such as the pasteurizing of milk, the availability of clean water and the laying of drains appear to have made a huge contribution to the reduction of infant mortality (McKeown, 1979).

Social hygienism, maternity care and child hygiene in the form of advice bureaus, maternity care and family care were all very much concerned with raising the quality of life, especially the existence of the poor. Concomitantly, few saw the moralizing and normative slant as a problem. The hygienists succeeded in linking their new insights to the moral force of contemporary philanthropy. Health was a virtue, hygiene a social obligation. Infant welfare work must be educative and elevating, missionary work based on modern scientific insights (Van Daalen, 1981). In the Netherlands, many generations of parents have been raised on the three R’s of child care: **Rust, Reinheid en Regelmacht** [rest, cleanliness and regularity]. For many hygienists the fight to improve the quality of existence was politically charged. It was the progressives among them who campaigned for public drainage and clean drinking water, while it was those in power and the wealthy bourgeoisie who blocked these measures for so long. For others, the hygienist outlook was primarily a moral one – a campaign to civilize the lower classes, whereby new ideas about health were tied to civil ideals such as decency and a regular family life.
The means the societies employed to propagate modern hygienic understanding would not be so readily accepted today. In Utrecht, for example, before the First World War there were ‘the seven sisters’, a group of nurses who together exercised a kind of surveillance over virtually all families with small children. These sisters did not make appointments or give notice, they simply entered the home at random moments – often via an open back door – and carried out their controls.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a growing group of doctors came to see this openly normative bias as an obstacle to the emancipation of medicine as a science and a profession. As Ten Have (1988) states: ‘These doctors wanted to move from the domain of subjective evaluation and normative judgements to an objective value-free description of hard fact (…) with their criterion the natural normality of the human body’. With the help of this criterion, a sharp distinction was drawn between medical and moral domains. The explosive growth of medical and biological science from the beginning of the twentieth century led to the development of an increasingly mechanistic conception of health and disease. Man was seen as a machine that either did or did not function well. Whereas the hygienists were still arguing for measures that that were essentially social and, strictly speaking, fell outside the field of healthcare, the mechanistic approach led to an increasingly narrow vision: the measures needed to combat and prevent diseases were narrowed down to medical-technological interventions focused on the individual. With the rise of this scientific outlook in childcare, the openly moral and political engagement gradually declined. Overtaken by the pursuit of objectivity and moral neutrality, the social-contextual orientation disappeared and care became mainly an individual affair.

2.3 PRESENT-DAY CHILD POLICY

Morbidity and mortality among children in the Netherlands and other western countries has for many decades now been among the lowest in the world. This has to do with the high standard of living, a high level of education and good preventative and curative healthcare. Yet there are a number of the same ideological and scientific conflicts referred to in this brief account of the approach to child mortality which today play an important role in relation to a different problem: how to raise children into society. I shall illustrate this by means of two examples where the different perspectives are very clear: the first, the phenomenon of child-raising contracts whereby governments or professional bodies try to compel parents to exercise in an approved manner the responsibilities for their children’s upbringing; and secondly the repressive policy for combating youth nuisance, or the problem of loitering street gangs of youths. Where are the analyses that provide the basis for such policy measures? Are there moralistic, social-Darwinist or social-hygienist traits to be discerned in them? And finally, what are the normative assumptions behind such interventions?
2.3.1 Child-raising contracts

Early in 2009 there surfaced a rumour in the Dutch media and in political circles concerning a proposal by a Rotterdam councillor for a so-called school-parent contract. Under such a contract between the school and parents, the latter would be obliged to fulfill their responsibility for their children’s upbringing. For example, parents would have to promise not to let their children go to school without a healthy breakfast, to allow them to watch educative television programmes and to ensure that their children went to bed in good time so that they were capable of concentrating in class the next day. Apparently the councillor had come to the conclusion over the past years that far too many Rotterdam parents had failed their parental obligations. Shortly after this proposal became known, the English sociologist Frank Furedi wrote in a newspaper article that he thought contracts with parents were a nonsense, in particular because they would formalize the relation between school and parents excessively and in the process parents would be infantilized (Salm, 2009). But perhaps such a categorical rejection passes too easily over the experience of many governors of large cities and educationists that there are considerable numbers of parents who do not adequately supervise, care for or stimulate their children. Publicized family tragedies are often quoted as evidence. In itself, there cannot be any great objection to making agreements over children’s upbringing, nor even against formalizing them. It could be seen as a consequence of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to which governments are obliged to ensure adequately the safety and interests of the child. But from the perspective of democratic citizenship (cf. De Winter, 2006a) two very important conditions attach to such an agreement:

– that it should be reached through serious consultation between partners who take each other seriously;
– that the agreements reached are reciprocal.

And it is precisely these conditions that were missing from the proposals for the school-parent contract. It appeared as though they were primarily intended to make ‘bad’ parents to face up to the reality of the situation. But after a storm of criticism, the councillor pointed out via his website that with such a contract, parents in turn would be able to hold the school to account – for example, their obligation to provide a good education. It was precisely this element of reciprocity that was invisible in the publicity.

Many proposals of recent years to improve the situation of children in the Netherlands are well-intentioned. Thus, for example the mayor of Utrecht deploys street supervisors in a deprived area to take home young children who are out on the streets too late in the evening, the aim being to force the parents to face up to their parental responsibilities. And at the beginning of 2009 the Dutch parliament approved a curfew for under-twelves who caused a nuisance. From now on, parents who fail to keep these children indoors are liable to be punished. The intention is clear: to put a stop to the confusion of children through parents’ negligence and
free neighbourhood citizens from the nuisance that this causes. Even the voluntary urine tests that the Rotterdam city government wanted to implement to combat the use of stimulants by secondary school students was a praiseworthy endeavour. For when it comes to drink and drugs teaching meets with little success. More important, however, is the question of why, in pursuit of widely supported laudable aims, we so often use interventions whose effect is precisely to hinder them. Nobody wants drugs in school, but it is known from international research that controls at the gate only make the problem worse, because they are a symptom of organized mistrust (see e.g. Noguera, 2008). That mistrust arises in environments where people hardly know each other and in which mutual involvement is reduced to virtually nil – and where relationship and discussion have become impossible all that is left are tests, gates and cameras, which in turn only serve to deepen mutual distrust. Something comparable also applies to child-raising contracts. If parents are presented with one-sided agreements over behaviour, at least two things happen. Firstly, they are implicitly being told that they are no good as parents, for why otherwise would such a contract be needed? And secondly, one is letting them know that no-one is interested in hearing their own story. What leads parents, for example, to send their children to school without breakfast, or let them play in the streets in the evenings? Such a one-sided and uninterested approach is extremely humiliating for parents, and it is precisely this humiliation that once again obstructs an equal dialogue over child upbringing. In this way various possible remedies are also excluded, for if parents are a priori put in the dock, there is hardly any further possibility of discussion over the circumstances that might contribute to an improvement in the situation – of what solutions parents themselves see, and what assistance might be necessary to achieve them. Can and should all these solutions be found within the family, or would it also help to strengthen the social networks around families?

In Het pauperparadijs (The poor man’s paradise), Susanna Jansen describes the ‘trap of good intentions’ in which her family had been caught since the nineteenth century (Jansen, 2008). Briefly: people in extreme poverty were, for their own good, taken to institutions for re-education where they were supposed to be re-socialized as respectable, self-reliant citizens. On the whole nothing came of it. For generations her ancestors had remained with very many others imprisoned in a system of painful dependence, stigmatization and humiliation. The message of this story is that interventions such as imposed help and re-education, however obvious a solution these may appear, can trample on human dignity. The chance of this is all the greater if citizens are categorically declared incompetent, when contracts are forced on them without parents’ own side of the story being listened to. Authorities tend to be over-optimistic with the short term effects of this kind of intervention when, in fact, caution should be urged. The actual impact – as is so well documented in Het pauperparadijs – can be perpetuated for generations, for example through an enormous aversion to society, lethargy or antisocial behaviour because, after all, there is nothing to lose: in short, through the destruction of human and social capital through a well-founded distrust of the democratic state.
2.3.2 The approach to the problem of loitering youths

Many local authorities in various European countries have to deal with residents who complain about loitering youths and the anti-social behaviour of groups of these boys in their neighbourhood. For the Dutch citizen this would appear to be the second most serious source of nuisance after the fouling of public spaces by dog faeces. Often such groups are categorized into: annoying, causing serious nuisance and criminal (Ferwerda, 2009).

It is interesting that the basic level for youths is ‘annoying’ and thereafter becomes more serious. There is apparently no ‘understanding’ – in either sense of the word – for young people who just hang out on the street or square to chat with each other, to flirt with each other, to kick a ball about or show off with their scooters. One could compare this situation with the social disquiet over youth that was so prevalent after the Second World War. In the Netherlands, the Utrecht educationalist Langeveld was then commissioned by the government of the time to investigate the mentality of the mass of young people, a study that led to the report "Maatschappelijke verwildering der jeugd" – the social brutalization of youth (Langeveld, 1952).

The gangs of loitering youth – were typified as a totally separate, almost soulless species of primate. One quotation will suffice:

The feral youth lives in a world that may be called formless in the extreme, in a hollow void: (where) one bellows, roars, talks endless drivel, shrieks, rages, whines and whinges. In their families there is no real love, though there is the blind animal love of a parent for its offspring.

The author of this report moreover reports the threat of a decay of sexual morality in the town of Veenendaal. In the war young people had come to learn far too much about contraceptive means and were as a result far less afraid of free intercourse between the sexes: they apparently knew how to avoid the consequences. On a square in the centre of town’, writes the distressed author, ‘contraceptives can be regularly found in the morning where children who play there happily suck on them …’. His colleague blamed the threat of moral collapse, among other factors, on the arrival of ‘foreigners’ – young men and girls coming to work in the factories of Veenendaal from neighbouring towns and villages – and you could see that they were of a different, more southern type. They were less well dressed, their behaviour was rougher and more careless, with primitive, retarded characteristics. Before their arrival, the way of life in Veenendaal had proceeded as a matter of course, whereas afterwards manners began to change. Intervention was required: more help with upbringing organized leisure time, youth leaders, youth clubs. Now, some fifty years later similar concerns are being raised. But our current ideas seem to be less about upbringing, aimless youth seems rather to have become the enemy: there is much more talk of urban marines, street supervisors, taskforces, a policy of zero tolerance, attack plans, hot spots and finally, of course, of the mosquito, the ultrasonic precision weapon that hunts out the loitering enemy without anyone getting their hands dirty.
A recent Dutch report on problems of youth nuisance made it clear that street gangs of youths can cause severe levels of nuisance (RMO, 2008). They litter the neighbourhood with rubbish, they make a row, they insult and threaten residents. Authorities are under pressure to take strong action against these youths. At the same time, however, these authorities willingly acknowledge that the future belongs to the young and that these youths have to be drawn into society. According to the report, hangjongeren (hang-around youth) proves to be a catch-all term. Youths can hang out on the street and must be allowed to continue to do so. Some of these youths treat others insultingly and such behaviour and that kind of behaviour must mainly be firmly contained within clear limits. And of course the criminals among them must simply be arrested. It was recommended that clear limits be set to unacceptable behaviour in the public space; but this should not happen solely by anonymous, technological means. Setting limits is part of upbringing and that means being prepared to confront youths where necessary. That could happen in various ways. There are destructive methods whereby people are pitted against each other, whereby mutual animosity is encouraged and any connection to society is undermined. But there are also much more constructive methods of confrontation – having a firm talk with youths, for instance, or community mediation, or victim-perpetrator conferences. After all, nuisance is always an interactive phenomenon, requiring both the causers of the nuisance but also those who experience it. Many local councillors and professionals talk about youth nuisance, but also of the extremely limited tolerance and short fuses of some of the older residents in the community. Where such strained relations exist, what is required of these authorities is that they de-escalate the tensions. For example, with the help of youth community workers who set clear limits but also work to build social connections, who ensure that youths continue to feel part of society. A one-sided, repressive regime only contributes to an atmosphere of fear and intolerance among those living in the neighbourhood, who are then even less inclined to come down to the level of young people and have a normal conversation with them. The report argues against exclusively whitewashing or repressive actions but rather for setting boundary limits as a way of offering a future perspective. This is referred to as the ‘combined approach’: acting when and where necessary but at the same time implementing a more constructive repertoire, because repression without perspective simply does not work, nor does the converse of offering perspective without setting clear rules of behaviour. By this approach, policy-makers and politicians must not focus exclusively on youths but also on their environment – physical, social, cultural – and on improving relations between youth and the rest of the neighbouring community.

2.4 TO CONCLUDE: YOUTH POLICY AND IMPROVING THE FUTURE

In the light of the alternatives for ‘improving the future’ as set out by M.P. Vrij in 1917, how should we characterize the current youth policy reflected in these two examples? To begin with, we can safely say that reconstruction of the social and material environment as advocated by the social hygienists is not one of the
priorities of modern youth policy. Today’s youth and family policy is in the first place aimed at improving the early signalling, referral and treatment of so-called risk children and risk families. It is an approach based on the assumption that such problems have individual causes that need to be dealt with at the same individual level. In chapter 3 I shall show that this individual-based thinking does not so much represent reality as – at the least – reconstruct it: for important contemporary problems like child-abuse, school drop-out and youth criminality, in addition to risk-factors there are also determining variables which exert a powerful influence at the level of society (poverty, migration, social exclusion, etc.) and at the level of living environment. Neighbourhood factors such as social-economic deprivation, the number of migrants in the area, a highly transient population, a lack of mutual solidarity and trust and a lack of social control are found to be powerful predictors with regard to all the problems mentioned above (Junger-Tas, 2008), yet such social risk factors have no place among the priorities of current youth policy. Instead, this policy seeks the origin of these problems in the family home. Thus, as is evident in the cases of child-raising contracts and of youth nuisance, almost all resources have been put into attempts – with or without compulsion – to improve the individual. And in part this occurs through means – to hark back to M.P. Vrij’s terminology – that belong to the category of ‘admonishing, moralizing or exhorting’. But the most important aspect of present-day youth policy is the management of individual behaviour. In this discourse conducted by behavioural technologists problems are situated within the individual and the family, while the wider social context is held to be more or less unalterable. The normative frame is utilitarian: the appropriate actions are those that produce the desired result or ‘the end justifies the means’. If this principle is applied to the case of child-raising contracts, the question of whether such contracts are ethically and democratically sound is less relevant than the supposed efficacy in leading to the kind of behaviour approved by authority. More particularly, it almost always boils down to a question of short-term effectiveness. This has to do with a governmental and scientific culture in which there have to be ‘quick results’: a politician wants to see a quick result or he won’t be re-elected; a modern scientist has to have a quick result in order to reach the target norm; a manager of a child/youth welfare institution must see quick results to guarantee further funding. Beside this, research on the long-term effects of interventions is in the first place expensive, but more importantly it is methodologically virtually impossible to carry out because of the number of ‘disturbing’ influences which increases exponentially with time.

Can one detect a certain analogy with Social Darwinism in modern youth policy, as suggested by the title of this chapter? In many respects this analogy does not apply, certainly not in as far as Social Darwinist proposals were aimed precisely against protecting vulnerable individuals. Much of today’s child and youth policy is, after all, intended to strengthen the care of vulnerable children and families. But this policy is emphatically focused on the care of vulnerable children and families and not on dealing with social situations which amplify vulnerability. There lies the great contrast between the work of the socially-inspired doctors, educationists and governors who took up the cause of deprived children and
families from the latter half of the nineteenth century. A social hygienist such as Samuel Coronel, for example, strove untiringly against the social deprivations that were a constant threat to the health and the lives of poor children; the educationist Jan Ligthart devoted himself to raising the intellectual level of the worker’s child, and governors like Wibaut campaigned against the degrading way the poor were forced to live. The mission – the normative framework – of the elevating child policy was totally clear: to combat the suppression and poverty (of the working class), to fight for humane living conditions for everyone. In the neoliberal philosophy that currently dominates not only the modern economy but also the modern child and youth policy, welfare and development are individual attributes: everyone is responsible for the creation and exploitation of their own and their children’s chances. Success is thus a personal choice and whoever makes the wrong choices is held personally responsible for it. In such a philosophy the survival of the fittest child assumes a very real form. In any decent society, of course, the issue should be the survival of all children.