

SOCIETY



The Pinkerton's late 19th-century logo. Private police forces are actually far more numerous today.

police on the sidewalks rather than in patrol cars, allowing precinct commanders more leeway in dealing with local complaints about police policies, and cracking down on disorder and vandalism might not lower crime rates, but would surely make citizens feel safer.

Debating How Children Learn

"What Does Piaget's Theory Describe?"
by Kieran Egan, in *Teachers College Record* (Winter 1982), Columbia Univ., 525
West 120th St., New York, N.Y. 10027.

American educators have been strongly influenced by the child development theories of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980). Yet Egan, professor of education at Canada's Simon Fraser University, contends that Piaget's evidence is seriously flawed.

Piaget held that children pass through four fixed stages of "logico-mathematical" development. Using a battery of assorted tests, it is possible to determine at what age children reach particular stages, and therefore what they are capable of learning.

In one classic Piagetian test, children are shown a bunch of, say, four red and two white flowers and asked if it contains "more red flowers or more flowers." "Preoperational" children under age six normally say there are more red flowers. Egan believes the question itself is misleadingly phrased. Piaget's defenders reply that language comprehension also develops in stages. But even adults become confused by the question, Egan notes. And if the choice is clarified so the children know that they are being asked to distinguish between the *whole* group of flowers and part of it, nearly half answer correctly.

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Moreover, 50 percent or more of children who fail one test of their "operational" ability pass others. Piaget and his disciples maintain that such children are between stages. Yet Egan wonders how accurate the theory can be if it dismisses so much contrary evidence.

American researchers, meanwhile, have successfully taught children things that Piagetian theory says they cannot learn. Piaget, for example, believed that four-year-olds cannot grasp the principle of conservation: If water is poured from a narrow tube into a wide container, they will insist that there was more water in the tube because the water line was higher. To Piaget, this suggested that they were incapable of certain kinds of reasoning. But in the American tests, the children not only learned the principle on their own, but applied it to other cases as well.

Many teachers in the West have adapted their classroom methods to fit Piaget's notion that children can learn certain things only at certain ages. Given the evidence against the Swiss psychologist's "vast baroque theoretical edifice," Egan warns, such restrictions "serve mainly to impoverish the practice of education."

PRESS & TELEVISION

An Invisible Man

"The Andropov File" by Edward Jay Epstein, in *The New Republic* (Feb. 7, 1983), 1220 19th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Does Soviet Communist Party leader Yuri Andropov play tennis? Listen to Glenn Miller records? Write comic verse?

Yes, U.S. newspapers told the American public in describing the former KGB chief last November when he succeeded Leonid Brezhnev. Yet virtually none of these piquant details can be verified, says Epstein, author of *Between Fact and Fiction*.

When he was head of the Soviet secret police, American newsmen depicted Andropov as a "shock-haired, burly man" (the *New York Times*) intent on stamping out political dissidence in Russia. But when he was elevated to his new post, the *Times* discovered that he had the "air of a scholar"; the *Washington Post*, which had once pegged his height at five feet, eight inches, now found him "tall and urbane."

Andropov's personal tastes were reported last autumn in rich detail. Fond of the tango and of jokes "with an anti-regime twist" (the *Post*), he likes "Glenn Miller records, good Scotch whisky, Oriental rugs, and American books" (the *Wall Street Journal*). The *Times* noted that Andropov's library included Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Andropov's furniture was a gift from Hungarian leader Janos Kadar; *Time* said it came compliments of Yugoslavia's late Josip Tito.

Yet Epstein says the sources of such information do not withstand