

Romantic Pedagogy Revisited: From Rousseau's Cult of Childhood to Swedish Perceptions of the Child as an Independent Subject in the 20th Century

In May 1945 the Second World War ended, marking the beginning of a new era of peace in the world. Although Sweden had been spared from invasions, like every other country it was deeply affected by the impending threat of attacks and by financial repercussions. Throughout the war years, the Swedish children's book author, Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002), kept a private journal reflecting the political situation in Europe. Hidden away over decades, her personal annotations, coupled with newspaper cuttings, photographs and satirical cartoons, bringing to life the fluctuations between hope and despair, have now been published for the first time. While recording the events of a devastating epoch, Astrid Lindgren had started envisioning a story of a Rousseauvian, freethinking child unaffected by dictatorship and repression. The figure she drew was to become iconic: a little girl with freckles and stiff, red plaits, incredibly strong and able to hold her own in an adult world.

The first edition of *Pippi Longstocking* appeared in print in November of 1945. Now, in 2015, as we celebrate 70 years of peace between the nations of Europe, we also celebrate the birth of an international children's favourite. Pippi, in her clothes and stockings of non-matching colours and shoes that are a couple of sizes too big, is a curiously empowered child. She is cheeky and at the

same time caring, she is strong enough to lift a horse and her imagination for fun and games has no boundaries. Self-taught, from her previous life on-board her father's ship, she is unable to conform to the norms of a small Swedish 1940's town. After consenting to a trial period at school, to everyone's relief, she is freed from the obligation, due to her failure to comprehend the purposes of conventional education.

Behind the creation of Astrid Lindgren's mockingly playful Pippi-figure lay a critique of the lack of respect for children, particularly those who needed to be taken into institutional care. Her character's liberating behaviour has fascinated young readers all over the world, who understand that her extensive realm of action is, after all, a fantasy. As a norm-breaker, she has inevitably raised apprehensions among many child specialists. The anxiety about the effects of the book have faded over time, and Pippi's influence on children's culture has with some recurring exceptions been accepted as non-detrimental and positive.

Pippi has been defined as an "Other", who "raised in the company of sailors", does not have "access to the usual identity markers that we use to position ourselves as subjects; she has no parents, no nation, no peer-group that would serve to legitimate her being" (Coates, 2004, p.111). Attempts have been made to align Lindgren's "gender neutral" protagonist with the powerful female ideals promoted in youth literature by some Scandinavian contemporaries, before her own character came into being (Cf. Wahlström, 2011). Pippi's

independence and confidence can, however, be traced much further back in time, to the age of Romanticism and Rebellion. She is an orphan child, but she is not shown to suffer. Her mother, from whom, implicitly, she has received “corporeal sensibility” (Cf. Helvétius, 1777, pp. 124; 468-72) very early in life, is “in Heaven”, she blithely informs the people she meets. She feels a secure bond with her father although, as though in alliance with the beliefs of the Enlightenment philosopher, Denis Diderot in his *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1796), he has abandoned Europe for a primitive but fulfilling existence on a South Sea island,.

If we dwell a moment on the appearance of Lindgren’s girl character, with her freckles and red plaits we cannot help but recall another iconic heroine, created in Canada, in 1908, by L. M. Montgomery: Anne of Green Gables. A proponent of the late 19th century neo-Romantic movement, Anne is a sensitive, “high-strung child” (Montgomery, p. 40), ever in search of “kindred spirits” (Montgomery, p. 50) and “Romantic routes” (Montgomery, p. 90) offering “more scope for imagination” (Montgomery, p. 11). She has an exceptional spiritual affinity with nature, and is proud to have read most of James Thomson’s “The Seasons” (Montgomery, p.35).

Montgomery’s book was for older readers, and more specifically intended for girls, yet the two works are thematically united in their critique of narrow-minded conventionalism. Both heroines are characterised by spontaneity, but with a noteworthy disparity in the degree of agency offered to them. Lindgren’s

borrowing of the dramatic roof-climbing episode in Montgomery's book is an easily discernible case of repetition with a difference. While Anne falls, breaks her ankle and is filled with remorse for undertaking such a foolhardy project, Pippi nimbly keeps her balance and dances along the ridge-pole, eluding the representatives of the community, who are chasing her. Pippi's home "Villa Villekulla" has adroitly been described as "a chaotic deconstruction of a picturesque Green Gables" (Edström, 1992). This, however, is where the similarity ends. As indicated, the inspirational origin of Lindgren's character can be said to emanate from an era of rebelliousness and a belief in human 'perfectibility'.

In 1925, Astrid Lindgren, then a young journalist, had visited an immensely influential figure on the Swedish intellectual scene: the writer and philosopher Ellen Key (1849-1926). A ground-breaking visionary, Ellen Key was internationally famous through her numerous publications on portentous issues such as World Peace, the freedom of speech, social equality, female suffrage and the rights of the child. Lindgren met Key at her country mansion, romantically situated on a slope on the east side of Sweden's second-largest lake and with an inside harmoniously decorated in accordance with Goethe's Theory of Colours, reflecting the activities and moods of the rooms. The encounter, albeit brief, between a budding novelist and an ageing, by then almost mythical, intellectual giant, was invested with symbolic meaning. An inscription above a door inside the house, articulating a message of ephemerality, made a profound

impression on Astrid, who returned to it in her writing: “Denna dagen, ett liv” (This day, a life). The line has traditionally been associated with Ellen Key, but it is, in fact, a quote from the Swedish romantic poet and philosopher Thomas Thorild (1759-1808). A great admirer of Goethe and Rousseau, he frequently visited London to meet with the Swedenborgians and other radicals. Ellen Key approved of his epithet as the “first Swedish feminist”, on account of Thorild’s authoring of a pamphlet inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft with the title “On the Natural Superiority of the Female Sex” (1793).

Ellen Key and Astrid Lindgren, both renowned well outside the borders of Sweden, were actually born in the same South East province of Småland, although under rather different circumstances. Unlike Lindgren, Ellen Key was of a family of high social standing. Her father, of Scottish origin, was a landowner and parliamentarian for the agrarian party, and her mother was of the Swedish nobility. Ellen, who was their first-born, received an advanced education for her time, for the most part tutored privately. A girl with an immense appetite for learning, like the British radical writer Mary Hays a hundred years earlier, she was deeply involved in the issue of female education (See Hays, 1797). An early advocate of mixed schooling, she helped develop a school founded on progressive ideas in Stockholm, where she taught for many years.

Ellen Key made countless journeys to Europe, to begin with together with her father, investigating conditions in correctional institutions and associating

with members of the English philanthropic movement. Throughout the last years of the nineteenth century she toured Europe on her own, promoting her vision of peace and equality. Her international breakthrough took place with the publication of her revolutionary pedagogical tract *Barnets Århundrade* (1900). The work was translated into German in 1902 as *Das Jahrhundert des Kindes* and in 1909, from the German into English as *The Century of the Child*. All in all it was translated into 13 languages. Certain chapters bore provocative headings such as: “The Right of the Child to Choose his Parents” and the work roused many critical reactions, most vehemently from leading Swedish male academics, denouncing her “subjective mind” and uncommon female self-assurance. The situation became so arduous that she chose to leave Sweden for some years and live in exile. If her thoughts were considered absurdly utopian at home, the rest of Europe, particularly Germany, held her innovative ideas in high esteem.

It was Key’s fervent belief that every human being had an innate capacity to evolve into a complete and positive member of society, if presented with edifying opportunities. *The Century of the Child* was particularly outspoken in its condemnation of the use of corporal punishment as an established method of raising upright citizens:

What burning bitterness and desire for vengeance, what canine fawning flattery, does not corporal punishment call forth /.../ It strengthens those two emotions, the root of almost all evil in the

world, hatred and fear. And as long as blows are made synonymous with education, both of these emotions will keep their mastery over men (Key, p.146).

Critical of industrial capitalism, Ellen Key argued strongly for the abolition of child-labour. Her concern lay also with mothers who, unable to be with their children, were forced to work in factories. Defending the right of every child to be with its mother and to experience intimacy and security during infancy was a cornerstone of her philosophy, closely reminiscent of the ideas of Claude-Adrien Helvétius (1715-1751) in his treatise *De l'Ésprit* (1758), which was banned in its time for being hedonistic. Her recommendation for mothers to be with their children during the first years of their lives clashed with the aims of the women's movement, causing a major rift, in an otherwise unified mission to gain female suffrage.

What characterised Ellen Key's viewpoint was the determination to always see things from the perspective of the child. Her chapter "On Education" begins by recalling Goethe's appeal for a "clear understanding of the significance of individualistic and psychological training", an "appreciation which", she hoped would "mark the century of the child" (Key, p.106). Well read in Enlightenment pedagogy, she had been brought up in accordance with such principles by her grandfather, an ardent admirer of Rousseau. In *The Century of the Child* she repeatedly returns to Rousseau's assertion that "the great secret of education lies hidden in the maxim, "do not educate", adding to it

Madame de Staël's warning not "to influence the child to be what we ourselves desire him to be" (Key, p. 109). For Key, what mattered in education was integrity and developing creativity. To her it was even important for a child "to be naughty... and to be naughty in peace, to be left to the dangers and joys of naughtiness" (Key, p.112).

Ellen Key appropriated Rousseau's conviction that "nature is the best teacher", by stressing that "beginnings must be made in the tenderest age to establish the child's feeling for nature. Let him live, year in and year out in the same country home" (Key, p. 167). She deplored the spread of ready-made toys which deprived children of their rightful "creative opportunity", when they could " themselves make new playthings from fir cones, acorns, thorns and fragments of pottery, and all other sorts of rubbish which can be transformed into objects of great price by the power of the imagination" (Key, p. 168). What better heiress to Key's Rousseauvian philosophy than Astrid Lindgren's Pippi Longstocking half a century later? The garden of Villa Villekulla, where she lives with her horse and pet monkey, is an enchanting place for children to come and play. Her game of "thing-finding", organised for her timid and well-behaved little friends from next-door, is shown to have a healthy and liberating effect. It involves exactly this: collecting pieces of nature and scrap and investing them with a unique spiritual meaning.

In her chapter "Soul Murder in the Schools" Ellen Key warns against forcing children to learn things they do not understand or care for. She also

stresses that children develop their intellects at their own pace and do not follow identical time-curves. Citing Goethe's assertion that "The greatest fortune of earth's children is personality alone" (Key, p. 281), she consistently underscores the value of individuality. Pippi's failure to conform to the activities in the classroom is not only due to the rigidity of a 1940's school system stigmatised by threat of war. Her rebellion embodies an inherent sub-textual wish from *The Century of the Child*, that "school should be nothing but the mental dining room in which parents and teachers prepare intellectual bills-of-fare suitable for every child" (Key, p. 206).

Fearing the dulling effects of group mentality in education, Ellen Key was an advocate of "home schools" for the very young. Her verdict on pre-school education was harsh and unaware of necessary developments in society 100 years later: "The Kindergarten is nothing, only a factory. Children learn to model instead of making mud pies according to their own taste" (Key, p. 240). In order to grow up to become humanitarian and dependable citizens, she writes: "The child must protect himself from an educator who would master his thoughts and inclinations, or rudely handle them" (Key, p. 110). What Key perceived with dismay was a growing tendency towards militarism in society, the roots of which she traced to collective forms of education. Raising children who would refuse to take arms as adults was her ultimate utopian dream.

An active supporter of the Women's International Peace Movement, Ellen Key insisted that the world be viewed as a 'perfectible' place, where

constructive formation would inspire the young generation to create a better future. Her anti-militarism was shared by Astrid Lindgren, who recorded in her diary 40 years later the painful insight that “the planet had run amuck” (Lindgren, p. 33). Two female writers of different eras and from the same tiny corner of the world united in extolling the preciousness of life. From their hopes had sprung little red-haired Pippi, born as a flicker of light in the shadow of an on-going war. A fictional character whose playful creativity and rejection of all forms of unjustifiable domination owed much to the radical aspirations of the educational philosophers of the Age of Romanticism.

Helena Bergmann, July 2015

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