

Two Worlds of Childhood

Urie Bronfenbrenner, Russell Sage, 1971. £3.25. 190 pp.

The conclusions of this book are clear : compared to children in the USA, those reared in the USSR have a greater concern for others and a more developed community spirit. American children are more likely to be inconsiderate, dishonest, impolite and selfish though Soviet children too have their faults—particularly in that they lack initiative.

Bronfenbrenner is most concerned with what can be learned from the USSR and beneficially applied to America. His main recommendation is that the school and parents generally should play a more positive role in socialising wayward American children. Faced with considerable violence in American society (the author and his family were pleasantly surprised to find that they could walk unmolested in the streets of the USSR), the inculcation of norms of obedience and collective self-discipline in school backed up by active parent involvement would seem to be highly desirable. The difficulty of changing the school system and the family, however, which is only marginally discussed by Bronfenbrenner, is the structure of the society in which these institutions are set. The values of American society are derived from norms of possessive individualism, of the frontier society, of competitive capitalism. The United States is also much less homogeneous in the structure of the values held by various groups of the population and it is therefore inevitable that the values inculcated in schools will not reflect a monolithic official value system as in the Soviet Union. Hence the school system reflects the wider society and changes in the former are severely limited by the latter.

Bronfenbrenner provides a valuable service by showing that many of the values of Soviet schools are desirable from a humanitarian point of view. British teachers might find much of Soviet educational philosophy not unlike that of the British public school with its emphasis on work, group competitiveness (c.f. the house system) and collective peer oriented discipline (prefect system). A more historical approach might have been able to draw parallels between the Soviet philosophy of education and the more austere practices of British education of the Victorian era. What is quite clear is that the ideas of permissiveness and of child-centredness find no place in Soviet educational philosophy—at least as described in the book under review. The Soviet school has been required to knit together into a national unit, a population diverse in social and national background and therefore it has emphasised homogeneity. It therefore seems to me doubtful whether Soviet educational philosophy can be grafted, as it were, on to a society so dissimilar as the

USA. Furthermore, it may be questionable how far the Soviet educational system as a whole can continue without some fundamental changes. As Bronfenbrenner points out, recent trends in Soviet thought are to recognise the necessity of moving away from conformity towards individuality and independence.

Bronfenbrenner focusses in this book on the very young and here he is able to show significant homogeneity in upbringing. The question may be posed of how long into life this lasts. Is there not greater individual competitiveness between children when selection for higher education takes place? While group consciousness may be strong enough to control "anti-social" elements among very young children it does not seem to be so successful in preventing "deviance" in adolescence or in adult life. In fact, the oversocialisation in school may cause a reaction in later years and a rejection of the values inculcated.

One other reservation I have is that the Soviet family is given a secondary role as a socialising institution and the primacy of the collective over the individual is stressed. Now compared to the American family, the Soviet is probably weaker, though it is interesting to note that Soviet parents spend more time with their children than do American ones. But many studies have shown the relatively independent role that family background plays in forming children's aspirations for, and achievements in, secondary and higher education, and it has also been shown to be an important influence in the persistence of religious beliefs.

But this is a stimulating and interesting book and is written with very little ideological bias. It is attractively produced, rather highly priced and regrettably it contains no subject index.

DAVID LANE.

Russian for Everybody, edited by V. Kostomarov, distributed by Collets. Set of books £2.50; Set of 10 L.P. Records £10.50.

A new Russian course for all beginners except the very young, edited by V. Kostomarov, and the result of several years' preparation at the Moscow Methodological Centre, deserves our attention and serves a real need. The main textbook is an attractively produced course of 40 lessons, with profuse and well thought out illustrations in black and white. Looking, hearing and speaking develop side by side from the start, and the grammar is gradually built up from patterns and simple texts and dialogues, with a minimum of explanations (all in Russian) and of awkward irregularities. All one needs is a classroom and a record player, though much of the material could be reinforced in a language laboratory. The teacher is given