



REVIEW: Alexandra Rutherford, *Beyond the Box: B.F. Skinner's Technology of Behaviour from Laboratory to Life, 1950s-1970s.*

**Author(s):** Jennifer Fraser

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#### EDITORIAL OFFICES

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology  
Room 316 Victoria College, 91 Charles Street West  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1K7  
[hapsat.society@utoronto.ca](mailto:hapsat.society@utoronto.ca)

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## REVIEWS

Alexandra Rutherford. *Beyond the Box: B.F. Skinner's Technology of Behaviour from Laboratory to Life, 1950s-1970s*. 224 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.\*

Jennifer Fraser<sup>†</sup>

During the late twentieth century, the historiography of behaviourism underwent a radical shift, in which histories written by pioneering historians of psychology were supplanted by revisionist narratives that reinterpreted the behaviourist movement. A growing group of twenty-first century scholars has become increasingly critical of histories of behaviourism written in the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that historians of psychology like Howard Gardner, Ned Block, and Brian Mackenzie had portrayed the behaviourist psychological perspective as “bleak, narrow, simple, inadequate, negative, and dead.” (Shimp 1989, 163). These early behaviourist histories were not only criticized for their appropriation of Thomas Kuhn’s “revolutionary” rhetoric, but were also chastised for failing to take note of the many parallels that could be drawn between B.F. Skinner’s behaviourist theories and present-day cognitive psychology (Gardner 1985; Block, 2001; Mackenzie 1977; Leahey 1992; Zuriff 1979; Epting 2008). In an attempt to purge the historiographic record of intellectual histories of behaviourism, this new cadre of revisionist historians began to correlate the rise and fall of behaviourism with shifts in societal attitudes—with individuals like Laurence D. Smith arguing that the intellectual shift from behaviour to cognition could be attributed to popular hostility towards “technological imperatives” in the wake of Hiroshima (Smith 1992). In an attempt to stay true to their revisionist roots, contemporary historians of psychology have continued to view the behaviourist movement in light of America’s social ethos during the mid-twentieth century. Not only have these individuals underlined the importance of social context, but have also taken revisionist interpretations one step further by attributing the relative successes and failures of behaviourist theory to the corresponding cultural opportunities and confrontations operating within late twentieth-century American society. While a variety of historians have attempted to write behaviourist histories in this scholarly tradition, few

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<sup>†</sup> Jennifer Fraser is a first year PhD candidate at the University of Toronto’s Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology. She is particularly interested in the history of medicine, and focuses on a range of historical issues relating to the development and dissemination of twentieth-century medical technologies within North America.

have done it as well as Alexandra Rutherford, a professor at York University, and author of the recently-released *Beyond the Box: B.F. Skinner's Technology of Behaviour from Laboratory to Life*.

In this excellent work, Rutherford offers a post-revisionist interpretation of the behaviourist movement that elucidates the ways in which social context affected popular acceptance of, and resistance to, the central tenets of B.F. Skinner's psychological theories. By outlining the ways in which American culture both facilitated and hindered behaviourism's success, Rutherford's analysis provides readers with a new way of conceptualizing behavioural psychology: it both offers an alternative to a strictly intellectual history of behaviourism and problematizes unilateral social interpretations that oversimplify the relationship between technology and social values. *Beyond the Box* conceptualizes behaviourism as a practical application rather than as an experimental science; it focuses on the pragmatic applications of Skinnerian theory to examine the ways in which social context impacted the American behaviourist movement. By examining the ways in which technological approaches to behaviour were employed within a multitude of public forums—like schools, psychiatric institutions, prisons, self-help literature, and utopian communities—Rutherford emphasizes the importance of changing American attitudes towards technology, consumer culture, and ethics to the advancement of behaviourism.

Not only does Rutherford accentuate the importance of cultural context, but she also provides a more nuanced approach to the construction of social histories in her emphasis on the bidirectional nature of social factors. She challenges Laurence Smith's argument that the decline in behaviourist rhetoric is explained exclusively by the "fall of the technological ideal," his unilateral notion which postulates that the American public grew increasingly skeptical of behavioural technologies during the post-war era. Popular perceptions, while providing Skinnerian psychologists with a variety of opportunities to promote their theories, had the dual effect of curtailing behaviourism's overall success (pg. 10). These contradictory effects can be best observed in Rutherford's discussion of the air-crib, Skinner's proposal for an enclosed, temperature-controlled crib. The air-crib seemed to accord with America's "better living campaign" of the 1950s, characterized by favourable attitudes towards household technologies that provided individuals with increased control and mastery of the domestic environment. Ultimately, however, the image of box-reared babies was incompatible with the increasingly popular nurturant approach to childcare (pg. 25). In contradictory ways, popular attitudes of post-war Americans were just as responsible for behaviourism's advances as they were for its decline.

In conclusion, Rutherford's *Beyond the Box* rectifies many historiographical problems that pervade the existing literature on behaviourism. By refraining

from intellectual history and instead delineating the complex interrelationship between psychological theories and popular perceptions, Rutherford's post-revisionist work offers a novel approach to understanding the history of behavioural psychology.

JENNIFER FRASER

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology

University of Toronto

91 Charles Street West

Toronto, ON M5S 1K7

Canada

jenniferlindsey.fraser@mail.utoronto.ca

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