In ‘The Greatest Love of All’, Whitney Houston belted out the lyrics “I believe the children are our future! Teach them well and let them lead the way”. This pop classic could easily have been the theme song for social scientists working in the middle of the twentieth century, with a better ring to it but the same message as their proclamation that ‘The children of today are the custodians of the United Nations of tomorrow.’

In June 1947, more than 100 scientists in two dozen nations had collaborated to produce a proposal for the establishment of a United Nations Institute for the Human Sciences. The first of all of the research projects that these scientists suggested was a project on human relations in childhood. They argued that ‘not only are children the future citizens and neighbours of the world, they are also that section of humanity which offers most hope for constructive and ameliorative action.’

The optimism about what the scientific study of children could achieve was, in part, an optimism based in fear; there was huge scope for change because change was so imperative in order to prevent the catastrophic and potentially apocalyptic devastation of another World War. Because of such fears, the will (and funding) was available to investigate how to change society for the better and promote good mental hygiene and, that favourite aim of beauty pageant contestants, world peace.

The work of Ronald Lippitt and Kurt Lewin offered nothing less than a potential technical manual for creating democracy produced during what seemed to be dark days of the rise of totalitarian states. They created a scientific playground and experimented on the influence of different styles of leadership on groups of children. Under the guise of kid’s clubs, they studied the effect of authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire leadership, and argued that individual children weren’t inherently autocratic little Hitlers, but would switch their behaviour depending on the group they were put in. This implied that the scientific study of groups was the only way to make sense of totalitarian states and human behaviour more generally.

Lippitt and Lewin’s work suggested that further research was required to ensure that children received the right (scientifically grounded!) education. One of the people to take up that mantle was Herbert Lewin (no relation) who had conducted comparative studies of ‘Hitler Youth and the Boy Scouts of America’. He made recommendations for the re-education of German youths, to secure the peace ‘by getting the German people to accept peace as a desirable and permanent goal rather than a necessary intermission between wars’. But he also suggested that ‘we should not hesitate to learn even from our defeated enemies’ and argued for the re-

education of the youth of America too, where there was a ‘danger of emphasizing frontier ideals in a highly interdependent society.’

Freud had famously said in the inter-war period that even if it was possible he would not psycho-analyse Europe to help solve her problems because “I never take a patient to whom I can offer no hope”, but other psycho-analysts and social psychologists were more optimistic about applying their science to the study of children in order to solve society’s ills.

In the UK Anna Freud was working on how to instil democratic values in orphans liberated from Nazi concentration camps. Her rival, Melanie Klein, and other object-relations psychoanalysts were using the “play technique” to uncover and solve disturbances. Klein was also working with evacuee patients and discovering “the Hitler inside” or the internal aggressive tendencies that children struggled with (see The War Inside by Michael Shapira), and her colleagues in the Children’s Department of the Tavistock Clinic were also studying and treating the psychological damage caused by displacement, for example due to evacuation. This scholarship argued for the importance of good human relations in shoring up children’s psychological defences and preventing their submission to an authoritarian leader.

The work of the British human relations scientists, like Lewin, Lippitt and Lewin, offered scientific guidance on how to create and manage a democratic state. Manage was the operative word; these social scientists and their colleagues were working on ideas of leadership and management in society more broadly, and their studies of kids’ behaviour was a practicality because, as stated in the United Nations proposal, ‘to overlook children is to be grossly inefficient from the standpoint of social engineering.’ Children were more malleable and more easily formed through scientific manipulation into good democratic citizens. The scientific playground offered lessons for the leaders, and its focus on children offered hope that those lessons might, for future generations, change the world.