

THE PLEASURE OF THINKING

Tania Zittoun demonstrates that there is pleasure in thinking and that the pleasure of thinking plays a key role in our lives – in the development of children, in learning, in adult life, and in ageing. Drawing on arts and philosophy, exploring research in developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and psychoanalysis, it highlights five modalities of thinking: curiosity, the functional pleasure of pursuing a task, the pleasure of discovery, the dialogical pleasure of thinking with others, and a meta-pleasure. This book proposes a unique integrative model of thinking, conceived as a situated activity, following trajectories that combine modalities of pleasure. Evolving with time, the pleasure of thinking can take place as we reason, make sense, or daydream, at school, at work, when we garden, or do science. Academics and graduate students in sociocultural, critical, developmental, and cognitive psychology will benefit from *The Pleasure of Thinking*.

TANIA ZITTOUN is Professor at University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. She is a sociocultural psychologist interested in human development and particularly, the role of fiction and imagination in the lifecourse. She has published several books, including *Transitions* (2006), *Human Development in the Lifecourse: Melodies of Living* (2013), and *Imagination in Human and Cultural Development* (2016).

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OF THINKING

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To Charlotte and Joseph

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Foreword

Mitsva guedola liyehot besimha tamid [It is a great mitsva (obligation) to remain always in joy].

Rabbi Nahman of Braslav, *Liqouté Moharan I* (1808)¹

La première chose qu'on devrait apprendre, (...) c'est que le savoir est profondément lié au plaisir. Enfin qu'il y a, qu'il y a certainement une façon d'érotiser le savoir, de rendre le savoir hautement agréable...

Michel Foucault, in discussion with Jacques Chancel (1975)²

Thinking is out of order because the quest for meaning produces no end result that will survive the activity, that will make sense after the activity has come to its end. (...). The only possible metaphor one may conceive of for the life of the mind is the sensation of being alive. Without the breath of life the human body is a corpse; without thinking the human mind is dead.

Hannah Arendt (1978, p. 123)

This book explores the pleasure of thinking, an experience many people have, but that is rarely named, discussed, or supported. Devoting a book on the pleasure of thinking in 2023 may seem a strange choice, given the emergencies our world is currently facing. In the pages to come, I will try to show that the question of the pleasure of thinking is central for psychology; here, I want to emphasise the fact that focusing on it is also a deliberate choice in times of adversity. Thinking of clear ideas, especially about the nature of thinking and the satisfaction and joys it may provide us with, is an attempt to make a rampart against the growing and general anxiety characterising this period of crises. Pursuing the pleasure of thinking is not a withdrawal from the world: it is an attempt to render it more meaningful, to ground a constructive basis for dialogue, and to preserve something that I believe is central to our very humanity. The project of engaging in a theoretical exploration of thinking is one I considered for a



Figure 0.1 Thinker of Cernavoda, 5000 BC, Hamangia Romania

long time; yet it is the specificity of this period of crises that made it possible. Being locked down during the COVID-19 pandemic gave me the time and space to return to theoretical texts and to engage in a silent dialogue with authors across time and space (Figure 0.1). Interestingly, many of the authors of the past and the present whom I frequented during these years – especially Hannah Arendt, Lev Vygotsky, and Sigmund Freud – developed their reflexion in conditions of societal and personal crises. All of them saw in the activity of thinking a fundamental and dialogical movement, which may bring joy, and connects us to others and more generally to humanity; I found great nourishment, solace, and inspiration in their works.

Focusing on the pleasure of thinking is also a way to pay tribute to all these with whom I have shared it. This includes my parents, of course, who cultivated my curiosity and my relentless questions for many, many years. It also comprises some of my teachers and professors, who knew how to preserve and nourish my curiosity, even when it could have been threatened by the educational system: Martin Cuénod, Françoise Vallin, and later, at University, Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, the late Gerard

Duveen, and Jaan Valsiner, who all played a key role in my trajectory of thinking. This book also owes a lot to Bernard Krauss, who helped me to acknowledge my own pleasure in thinking. I also wish to deeply thank my friends, with whom I have long-standing discussion, who were present while I was writing this book, and who all helped me to maintain thinking when I doubted it most – Alex Gillespie, Michèle Grossen, Jérôme Hentsch, Adeline Rosenstein, and Paul Stenner. A special thanks goes to the Dialogical group that engaged with me in the exploration of Hannah Arendt’s writings, and especially to Ivana Marková, as well as Sophie Zadeh and Clare Coultas, and Flora Cornish. Martina Cabra was also part of this group; in addition, she helped me to formulate the project of this book and was one of its first readers; her friendship and critical eye played a key role in the early phase of this work. Finally, I thank Milan Mazourek, who shaped the frame in which this book could be written.

In addition, many people provided references for this book or helped me to find texts and examples. Marianne Stubenvoll was a real fairy and managed to obtain all the books I was looking for even in times of pandemic. Antti Rajala and Miguel Gonçalves kindly responded to my questions about their data. Jerome Hentsch introduced me to the work of Jean-François Billeter; Fabienne Gfeller, Markéta Machková, Adeline Rosenstein, Ramiro Tau, and Simon Vuille suggested useful references; Pierre Alain Mariaux and Christophe Imperiali brought books to my attention – I thank them all here. Finally, the manuscript was discussed with a group of students who accepted to think along with me and generously provided examples, some of whom are reported in these pages under pseudonyms: Simon Vuille, Vrinda Ewering, James Alzetta, Flavio Rossi, Thioro Loum, Anita Luginbühl, Vanessa Neukomm, Romane Crettenand, Luca Gillioz, Elis Nikaj, and Morgane Voillat; I thank them all for this. Finally, I am also grateful to Rowan Groat, Laura Simmons and Janka Romero from Cambridge University Press, for their trust in this project, their support and their excellent work, together with their team.