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Where are the little people? Childsplay and Organisation Theory

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> Then there's the story about the Cork woman who, when asked if she believed in fairies, replied, "I do not, but they're there".

Introducing: London Bridge is Falling Down, Falling Down....[1]

Despite its considerable scope and scale, organisation studies (OS) has said very little about children. We will argue that children – our little people – constitute a major lacuna, or 'white space' as the call for papers puts it, in OS. We explore and tentatively map this white space by identifying five moments around which we frame our analysis: *excluding*, *subjecting*, *subalterning*, *introjecting*, and *redeeming*. In the final section of the paper – *projecting* – we consider how this project might proceed.

Excluding: No, Cinderella, you can't go to the ball

[1] The nursery rhyme *London Bridge is Falling Down* is sometimes understood to refer to the practice of burying children, perhaps alive, in the foundations of the bridge (Gomme, 1964).

An obvious, but nonetheless important, point is that children are legally excluded from most formal (as in work) organisations. Across the developed world, work is commonly seen as alien to childhood to the point where 'child labour' is now a conjunction of categories that is seen as untenable, abusive, and exploitative; it is routinely outlawed and seen as taboo. The exclusion of children from formal organisations is enshrined in Article 32 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* which recognises "the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development".[2]

And we do not have to go to the high realms of the United Nations to observe the exclusion of children (parking, for now, the reasons for such exclusion). How many children are at the EGOS annual colloquium? How many children are in EGOS?

Subjecting: Trapped on Barney's Imagination Island

While children may be legally excluded from formal organisations, another viewpoint – based on a broader understanding of organisation – sees them as very much the *subject of* and *subject to* organisation. Most children in the developed world are forced by law to attend one form of organisation, the school, until their mid-teens. Even pre-school children spend much of their time in, and interacting with, formal organisations, whether this be the local sports club, leisure centre, the circus, *McDonalds,* or watching television programmes like *Barney* that are designed, produced and promoted by large multinational corporations. From this perspective, the organising that happens in formal organisations is but an extension and subset of a more general organising logic that includes the organisation of children and childhood. This perspective would lead us to the somewhat skeptical position that children are not so much excluded from formal organisations for their own good, but rather for the good of formal organisations (on the basis that children need to be

[2] (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, available at http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm, accessed 10 June 2009)

properly ‘cultivated’ – ‘groomed’, with all of its intimations of future exploitation – before they can adequately contribute). A Foucauldian twist to this sees childhood as primarily about the production of docile bodies for use in (or indeed harvesting by) corporations (Fox, 1996; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997). For instance Cooley (1987) argues that the emphasis placed on timekeeping in school is because of the corporate need for ‘time-disciplined’ workers who can perform their factory duties punctually and regularly. More generally, the formal and informal curricula of primary school is explicitly concerned with the cultivation of the basic forms of organisational life, such as teamwork, cooperation, goal orientation, timekeeping, task completion, etc. And it is in the micro processes of interaction in the primary school system where the values of equality, justice, power, social differentiation, and hierarchy are first addressed and fostered. From a political perspective, practices and values such as communication, decision-making, consensus building, reconciling difference, accepting authority – the very basis of democratic institutions, morality, and organisational life – are all first inculcated in the institution that is the primary school. This perspective would suggest that far from the child being the Other of organisational life – i.e. falling outside the ambit of formal organisation – the child is actually central to organisational practices.

The image of the child as the quintessential subject of organisation, management and control is most visibly manifest where the child is the subject / inmate of adult ‘total institutions’ – orphanages, industrial schools, borstals and the like. A recent and harrowing description of this phenomenon is to be found in the ‘Ryan Report’ into the incarceration, torture and slavery of thousands of Irish children in church-run, state-funded facilities between 1930 and 1990 (Ryan, 2009). This is but the most recent report into a worldwide pattern: similar organized systems of child abuse are well documented in the USA, Canada and Australia in the recent history of advanced western liberal democracies. If one were to cast a wider net, to include practices in the former Eastern Bloc, to bonded child labour in India, to sweatshops and the sex industry in SE Asia, to child soldiers in Africa, and reaching back historically to the plight of the child in adult-centred organisations, the overall picture would

be truly horrendous. But even if we restrict our discussion to the place of the child in formal organisational contexts in the western world since the mid to late 20th century, we find the child entrammeled in and subject to organisation in the numerous complex, overlapping and swarming disciplinary technologies of the school and other regimes of power, such as parenting and the family. These regimes of power are well illustrated in *Barney*'s Imagination Island which, in many ways, is akin to a totalitarian regime, like Central America as represented by Gabriel Garcia-Marquez: a magic-realist dystopia ruled by an ageless purple dinosaur where the subjects – children in the backyard chain-gang – perform endlessly rehearsed set routines, marching around, singing out the ABCs of conventional morality, munching pizza and saluting the flag. *Barney*'s Island gulag is the panoptical infernal machine of subjectification; a 'double-plus-good' Orwellian nightmare founded on a doublespeak inversion whereby on 'Imagination Island' imagination is strictly prohibited. The ideological state apparatus *par excellence*!

Subalterning: Hansel, Gretel and the wicked old witch

In this section we argue that the child has 'subaltern' status within organisational life, echoing Spivak's (1985/1988) use of that term. Spivak's key point, as articulated in her seminal article, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, is that the subaltern cannot speak if there is no space from which she can express herself that is not already determined by a discourse designed to silence her (Spivak, 1985/1988). Drawing on post-structuralist theory, Spivak argued that the subaltern *cannot* speak, in so far as, in the particular case of subaltern individuals or groups, there is no possibility of an authentic exchange between a speaker and a listener (which is a basic requirement of speaking). In a later contribution she clarifies that "within the definition of subalternity as such there is a certain not-being-able-to-make-speech acts that is implicit" (Spivak et al., 1996: 290). Building on this, she railed against the inappropriate use of the term subaltern and its appropriation by marginalised but not 'subaltern' groups.

> 'Subaltern,' she argues, is not 'just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie' . . . Many people want to claim

> subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean, just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern' . . . They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern' (de Kock, 1992).

Subalternity, then, is a particular form of exclusion that works through silencing some people through their structural exclusion from communication. In the example Spivak is speaking of above, minorities in the University are not subaltern as they are already resident within the Father's house, so to speak. They are part of the University community and enjoy access to its communicative codes and practices and are thereby authorized to speak. To be subaltern, Spivak says, is to be structurally excluded from this language community, to have no room in the house at all; to lack its authority, to be silenced. This is arguably the plight of children: to be seen but not heard. Their voices cannot be heard as they are formally proscribed from authoritative speech up to certain particular thresholds: a child is politically disenfranchised until 18 years; cannot give consent to sexual relations until 16 years; cannot give legal testimony until the age of seven, and so on. Returning to the already mentioned Ryan Report, a question that has perplexed those concerned with institutional child abuse is why the children did not speak up, why they remained silent. Spivak's insight is that the hegemonic discourse ensured their silence through marginalising and excluding them *both from and within* the discourse, which works akin to a house of language that, while it may have many rooms, has no exit door for escape. For example, if children are not provided with the word 'paedophile' or a meaningful understanding of the word, then paedophilia, in a very real sense does not exist (while Santa Claus, in a very real sense, does exist for the child). Of course children struggle to develop their own language for these events and situations, and one of the findings of the Ryan Report and similar reports is that the children in institutional abuse situations developed an extensive vocabulary and elaborate communicative codes to grasp and articulate their predicament, to communicate it to one another, to warn other

children of risks and dangers and so on, a complex of language games akin to that of adult prisoners, members of a proscribed underground movement or a criminal fraternity. Such language games, though developed within the house, as a response to the hegemony of the Father's logos, are, of course, by necessity, designed to be a secret language, a secret code incomprehensible to the Authorities, so that even though the subaltern does in fact actually speak, and often speak eloquently, s/he speaks a language that cannot be heard within the Father's house, meaning of course not just the particular religious houses of incarceration but also extending to the whole wider society, the general language community where the Father's word was authoritative.

Hansel and Gretel developed a secret code by means of which they might find their way safely out of the forest, but the signs – the crumbs – are eaten by the birds (the signs have no significance outside of the children's private language game; they appear as isolated fragments that no one can read and so come to their rescue) and so Hansel and Gretel are lost children, locked up in the Witch's house for years until the Witch grows old and decrepit when the children can roast her in her own oven. Within the Father's labyrinth, the prison house of language, there are numerous language games, some of which are, by design, inarticulate and incomprehensible to one another. It takes a third term, an intervention by another interlocutor, to enable a translation between one and another language game and to open up the possibility of what Spivak calls an 'authentic' dialog between them. The 'Public Inquiry' is such a third language game, and the figure of the Judge, wearing the mantle of a neutral transcendental objectivity on behalf of the abstract ideal of the collective third party, the modern Public, the repository and bearer of all of the world's possible language games, is in a position to hear, and to express 'the full story'. The formal Judicial Inquiry, Habermas would say, is an approximation of an ideal speech situation, but just as ideal speech situations, while they may be always implicit in the universal pragmatics of language, are, in practice, very rare occasions in a wider context of systematically distorted communications, Public Inquiries and Judicial Reviews do not spring up naturally either. What are the conditions of

possibility of the subaltern's voice in the wilderness getting an ear or even getting a word in edgeways? The walls of the Father's house must already have become permeable, the strength of the outer ramparts sapped, the foundations undermined. It is only after the Empire is in retreat and the imperial citadel breached by former colonial immigrants, when 'The Empire Writes Back' (as Ashcroft et al (1989) express it) through West Indian immigrants in London and Algerians in Paris, that the truth – at least another truth – is brought home, so to speak. Similarly in the case of religious institutional child abuse, it is only at the tail-end of a century of secularization, a short intensive period of religious decline in the otherwise long history of religious hegemony, when secular-materialism and generalized affluence and mass education have provided an alternative social foundation, that the Fathers' house of language begins to be opened up and the voices of the subaltern child incarcerated inside can be heard, though still imperfectly.

But the 'subalterning' continues even in the interstices of the Redress Board set up by the Irish Government to compensate the victims of abuse, with one victim, Christine Buckley, whose story was the subject of a television documentary about the abuse, stating that: "the whole idea of the Redress Board was another form of institutional abuse…. It's silent, it's behind closed doors and it's punishment if you reveal your award" (speaking on RTE Radio's *Morning Ireland* programme, June 10, 2009).

When applied to children and organisation, the concept of subalternity centres our attention on the way the discourse of organisation – as in writings and talk about organisation – works to silence children through becoming a 'hegemonic discourse' that excludes, divides, co-opts and re-inscribes. It asks that we consider what precisely is excluded and how this exclusion is effected. For all the talk about organisation, there is relatively little analysis of such gaps in the discourse and even less work done at examining and filling these gaps. One such exercise has recently been conducted by Dunne, Harney and Parker (2008) who analysed over 2,000 articles published in the top business and management journals in an attempt to determine "whether silence has become complicity in the realm of business and management studies" (p. 272). They conclude:

> Our study can certainly tell us what UK based management academics are not doing. They are not paying any sustained attention to war and violence, racism and sexism, population movements and displacement, mal-distribution of wealth, accidents and ill-health in the workplace or gender and sexuality (Dunne et al., 2008: 273).

What's interesting here is that even those authors who work hard at identifying what organisation studies is *not* doing, are silent about the silence about childhood.

And the wider OS literature is certainly silent about childhood. In January 2009 we found only one article in ABI/Inform that had "children" and "organisation theory" as keywords and this was on the topic of family businesses. A broader search for articles that contained "children" and "organisation theory" or "organisation studies" in the citation or abstract yielded 61 papers, but none of these focused empirically or theoretically on the organisation of children or studied interactions between children as a way of understanding organizing processes. The few articles that were in any sense 'about' children, framed children as an 'object of worry' for organisations, either in terms of child labour or child welfare.

This is altogether perplexing, not least because constructivism and organisational learning are accorded such central positions in contemporary organisation studies. Constructivism, after all, exhorts us to inquire into and study the processes by which things come to be. *Looking at the literature, one would think that organizing and organisation occurs in a world populated solely by adults.* And while constructivism has impelled many to describe and analyse organisational processes of organisation, few of these studies have focused on children, even though the practices that shape organisational life are themselves clearly a product of what individuals learn in childhood. It's a bit like a student who aspires to study how buildings are built, but only looks at finished buildings in her research. Part of our agenda, then, is to inquire into why the status quo exists, why and how children and childhood have a peripheral position in organisation studies, and how this might be redressed (being mindful of Christine Buckley's scepticism about structured attempts at redress).

Maybe this peripheral position is in our heads, but we suspect not. It seems to us that when organisational researchers put on their metaphorical white coats and set off to study organisations they, almost invariably, study *adults*, even though it is clear that the adult practices and beliefs are the outcome of intensive and extensive education and training during childhood. Most of us would have difficulty naming more than a handful of important contributions to organisation theory that have focused on children, the organisation of children, or the institutionalization of organizing practices in childhood and/or school. That most catholic of journals, *organisation,* has published no paper on children or on the organizing practices that are inculcated during childhood. Neither has *Management Learning*. Strange. Children, evidently, are to be neither seen nor heard.

Why does organisation studies not see the child within? It may be that the "the very constitution of objective knowledge requires certain kinds of exclusion" (Dunne et al., 2008: 275) and that children are a necessary victim of this exclusion (One can hardly imagine that Habermas's ideal speech situation extends to children in every circumstance. Aristotle, after all, took the view that "children and all other animals share in voluntary action but not in Moral Choice" (Aristotle, 1934: chapter 2). However, it seems to us that the invisibility of children may well be another instance of Rehn's (2008) observation that "an important part of the management scholar's self-identity is the capacity to position his or her research in a way that conveys seriousness, austere scholarship and the most po-faced interpretations possible of organisational events". Management academics know that to be treated seriously they should study adults (at work) rather than children (at play). And there is a double whammy. For if work is serious and for adults, then those who work at studying work – i.e. management academics – must be very serious indeed.

Within the broader social sciences things are little different. By and large, children are not seen as competent social actors, which has led Jenks (1996) to speak of sociology's 'gerontocentrism', reflecting the field's tendency to speak about 'the child' in much the same way that anthropologists in the early 1900s spoke of 'the savage'. In response to this critique, a 'new' sociology of

children has emerged over the last fifteen years or so, which seeks to transcend the tradition where children are 'conceptualized as a lump of clay in need of being molded to fit the requirements of a social system' (Knapp, 1999: 55). This nascent field provides an interesting set of pointers and positions to guide organisational inquiry (see Matthews (2007) for development).

Introjecting: Mirror, mirror on the wall...

Another take on the ambivalent status of the child within organisational discourse focuses on how the adult realm of formally organized work stands in what appears to be an antithetical relation to a children's realm of in-formal or free-formally organized play. Conventionally this separation is dichotomized: 'either' we are concerned with the formally organised adult world of work, 'or' we are looking at the entirely different world of the child's informally organized world of play. But this is a false dichotomy. The relationship is dialectical and reciprocal. Here we leverage concepts from psychoanalysis to illuminate the phenomenon, specifically the ideas of *projective identification* and *introjection*.[3]

Projective identification was first introduced by Melanie Klein in 1946 and refers to a psychological process through which a person splits off good and bad parts of the self (good and bad objects) and then projects one such 'bad object' into another person so that it becomes part of that person (Klein, 1946/1984). The concept of 'identification' means that the subject identifies with the object (which is often a person) and in this way keeps bad parts of the self at a safe distance without losing them. Applied to our discussion, the 'person' here is the body that is organisation studies, and the splitting is its conscious and unconscious labour of distinguishing between adult and child, work and play, serious and trivial. The child's realm then stands as *alter* to the adult realm of *ego* and through projective identification becomes the external Other that also, retrospectively, gives identity to the One – the adult corporate organisation – as 'not-the-other'.

[3] Our use of the terms 'projectification identification' and 'introjection' differs somewhat from the conventional psychoanalytic understanding which sees these as primarily phenomena associated with the psychoanalytic development of the *child* (Sandler, 1987).

Central to Klein's object relations theory is the interaction between projection and *introjection*, which occurs when a person takes into itself the behaviour and attributes of the external object. In the case of children and organisation, introjection refers to the process whereby the exteriorized Other of the child is *introjected* or taken back into the adult world of organisation. In one, rather obvious and material sense, introjection is manifest in the way the organisation feeds on the values and the energies of childhood — as the resource of future workers and consumers. For instance, the whole phantasmagoria of mass-mediatized, hyperreal global consumer society depends crucially upon the perpetuation of a collective dreamworld of a youthful, carefree, joyfully innocent childlike bubble, where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness flourish. The harsh reality of modern global capitalism and mass consumer society – the destructive and life-endangering despoiling of nature and the rapacious exploitation of natural resources; a global systematic enslavement of two thirds of the world's population; an utterly ruthless and entirely amoral system that is fuelled by perpetual cycle of violence and warfare and the threat of ever more intense war and violence that threatens the biosphere as a whole – depends very much on the ideological narrative of the fairytale: that sometimes, but certainly not all the time, bad things happen to people who live in a land far, far away; but the wise king who lives in the White House, with the help of his pixies in the CIA and other fairies, Wizards & Witches around the world, work their magic so that in the end we'll all live happily ever after. But more particularly from the point of view that interests us here, at the level of spirit and idea, the adult world of the organisation identifies itself with the world of childhood, and through this identification with the child can conceive of itself as 'childlike', as pure, as naive, as innocent. In the adult world of cutthroat competition in the market, of killer deals and hostile mergers, of vicious backstabbing and nasty politicking in corridors and photocopy rooms, of power and corruption, of 'conscious and absolute ruthlessness in rational acquisition and profit maximization' (which Weber identifies as the spirit of capitalism) modern organisations need to portray and perceive themselves – as importantly for the key actors as the operatives – as childlike, which is absolutely essential to their legitimating and motivational functioning. Thus bankers and traders 'play

the markets'; corporate lobbyists peddle influence, spindoctors and admen play for hearts and minds, entrepreneurs and scientists are animated by the child-like joy of discovery and invention; doctors and nurses, soldiers and policemen play out adult roles endlessly rehearsed in childhood and with the same motivations – curiosity and caring; defending the fort against the baddies; cops and robbers and so on. And even the most subtlety ambivalent forms of organisational agency, practiced in the shady and clandestine and liminal interstices of civilization – diplomacy, espionage, and secret service, action that fluidly moves in the amoral zones between and amongst states and corporations, banks and military command bunkers, oligarchs and plutocrats, terror cells, torture chambers and dinner parties – the whole realm of organized intrigue of spooks and spies, deep cover and double agency – is known in the trade as 'the great game.'

And if we take it that the relationship between the world of adults' work in formal organisation and the world of child's play in pre-forms of organisation are not to be understood as dichotomous but dialectically bound up with one another, we might take the further step of decomposing that part of the dichotomy wherein the realm of childhood play is presumed to be innocent and wholesome, whereas the realm of adult work is taken to be corrupted and alienated. (We should also set aside, for it is a separate question addressed earlier, the ways in which the adult world of formal organisation impacts and corrupts the innocent world of the child as children incarcerated in orphanages, industrial schools, and other total institutions.) Our concern here is different. It is to address the issue of the purported innocence of childhood play *per se*. For a start, of course, is the obvious fact of the historicity of childhood. Childhood is an invented category, as Ariès and others have demonstrated (Ariès, 1962; Corsaro, 2005). It is not a 'natural' state but an historically and anthropologically varied social construct, with any meaningful substantial difference between a person of six or eight years old and a little 'adult' being a relatively modern distinction. But what of babyhood and infancy, surely there we are on more anthropologically generalizable grounds? Yes, but even there the distinction of innocence is unsustainable. Psychoanalysis shows how, far from being innocent, the world of babyhood

and infancy is a dark, chaotic world of Titanic and epic power plays: the corpophagic baby-monster would devour the mother; the polymorphously perverse infant is a seething mass of raging, insatiable desires and furious terrors; 'His Majesty the baby' tyrannically rules the nursery and as soon as he is able he would kill the father to have the mother. The kindergarten and playground are battlefields of barbarian warfare, and young children will bully, blind, burn and bite one another, cruelly ridicule, ostracize, scapegoat and even torture one another without the restraining and punitive super-egoic power of parents, teachers and other adult interventions to limit and govern their 'play'. In all of these ways again we see played out in the adult world of work and organisation not something substantially different and separate from childhood, but rather its continuity in higher and more sublimated forms, with organized, technicized and rationalized collectivized violence, and professionally channelled, egotistically calculated predation and gratuitous cruelty. The unregulated market, like the unsupervised playground, is potentially a cauldron of violence and a theatre of cruelty that tends towards catastrophe and its perpetual recurrence.

But now we seem to have done violence to the idea of childhood, and to the phenomenon of play in particular. While childhood conflicts may still be playing out in the adult world, the lifeworld of the child is surely more vulnerable to the immense violence visited upon it from the adult world – individually in the form of neglect, economic exploitation, physical and sexual abuse, and collectively even more so by the violence of structural inequality, poverty, warfare and disease perpetuated at the level of geo-political economy by the institutions and organisations of the military-industrial-entertainment complexes. From this hell that has been, and still is the lot of the majority of the worlds' children, a catastrophe visited on children by the playing out of organized world adult powers, we would want to salvage the idea of children's play as a utopian moment wherein we might locate the possibility of redemption – redemption for children, for adults, and for the children of the future.

Redeeming (i) The play-forms of formal organisation: Let's play dress-up!

Play is that form of activity engaged in for its own sake. Play has no end other than itself. Play has no meaning exterior to itself. The child plays while playing. 'Why does the child play?' Heraclitus asks. 'He plays because he plays'. What Heraclitus means here is not that play is meaningless activity, for it is highly meaningful and meaning-making, but simply that play has no ulterior motive outside of its own terms of reference (Huizinga, 1955; Caillois and Barash, 2001). Play, like all forms of human action in Weber's typology, may be 'traditional' (i.e. habitual) 'substantive' (motivated by values, e.g. making friends and getting along with them) or 'instrumental' (conducted on a means/ends rational calculation, e.g. winning, beating a rival, cheating). And play may be analyzed in terms of Habermas's crucial addition to Weber's action typology – play may be 'communicative', i.e. oriented towards reaching understanding. Play may be, and usually is, all of these things rolled into one, and analysis of play that seeks to take the phenomenon apart in terms of these action types may well do damage to the integrity of play, or miss something crucial and essential to the phenomenon by focusing on the trees rather than on the wood, so to speak. We find that the best writers on childhood play — Erik Erikson, for example, who uses a child's expressive play in holistic psychoanalytic diagnosis and therapy — and Walter Benjamin's attention to children's stories, play and imagination / improvisation have this holistic understanding of the phenomenon and thereby preserve play's utopian moment.

Let us take first Erik Erikson's (1963) classic formulation of the importance of play. Erikson introduces his discussion through Mark Twain's depiction of Tom Sawyer's friend Ben as he sails down the street playing at being a steamboat on the Missouri, as well as him being engine and controls, the captain and crew all at once, and manoeuvres in to 'dock' alongside Tom, who is painting a fence. This vignette is structured around the usual opposition between 'work' and 'play' – Tom is working, painting the fence, Ben is playing, mimicking a steamboat. In the *denouement* of the scene, of course, the opposition turns out to be a false one, as Tom inveigles Ben into painting and the boys' 'work' becomes, in the course of their companionship, conversation and fantasy, reciprocally infused with the ethos of 'play', and

their ensuing adventure folds work and play seamlessly together. Play, Erikson concludes, is the ego's attempt to synchronize bodily and social processes within the self. For him, play is the synthetic principle whereby id and superego are reconciled with ego as the child learns to negotiate and gain mastery over the autocosmic (the child's own body), microcosmic (objects as projections) and macrocosmic (social) realms.

Ben appears to be 'idle' whereas Tom is 'working', but Erikson (and Mark Twain) shows that play is that seemingly idle activity whereby the child synthesizes, orders and organizes reality. What Erikson does here is the equivalent in psychoanalysis and developmental psychology of Simmel's fundamental sociological insight into the primary process of society, namely 'sociability.' Sociability, Simmel says, is the "play-form of association" (Simmel and Hughes, 1949: 255). Like play, "sociability in its pure form has no ulterior end, no content, no result outside itself" (ibid). Sociability, the seemingly 'idle', 'pointless' interaction for its own sake, is really society 'idling' in the very important sense of 'ticking over': it is society's ground tone; its basic, normal running order. Far from being a trivial or superfluous phenomenon, sociability turns out to be the very essence, the irreducible principle of society as such. To be strictly analytic about it, if one were to take any social institution, any practice or social process, from family and kinship to work and organisation, from custom and religion to science and law, and strip it down, taking away that which makes it other than itself, what will remain as an irreducible core, essential to it, and at the same time common to all social phenomena, is *sociability*. Through this we begin to perceive that which is essential to the nature and functioning of formal organisation in terms of a principle that is ordinarily, by definition, excluded from organisation, i.e. its dialectical antithesis – play – as interiorized synthetic organizing principle: the 'not work' interactions and practices within work and organisations – the coffee and cigarette breaks; the gossip, the grapevine and the rumour mill; flirtations and office romances; the manoeuvrings, inter-personal rivalries, petty intrigues, jockeying and backstabbing; internal complaints, exhaustive procedures and interminable meetings that appear to be a tremendous waste of time and energy, that are the bane (and also the life-bread) of HR, that are usually

taken to be symptoms of dysfunction and the 'sick organisation' in fact define 'work', giving it positive ontological form and making 'work' possible and productive.

The proof of this becomes apparent in organisational functioning that has been stripped or emptied of its play forms, that becomes, or tends towards entirely different forms, forms that are very familiar to us historically but that are pathological or malignant in some way, that are sterile and unsustainable, and that are inevitably overthrown and discarded: "If sociability entirely cuts its ties with the reality of life out of which it makes its own fabric.., it ceases to be a play and becomes a desultory playing-around with empty forms, a lifeless schematism...proud of its lifelessness" (Simmel and Wolff, 1950: 55-6). Organisations and working relations from which play has been expunged become alienated drudgery, and such forms, that are no longer animated/synthesized by an integrating *esprit des corps,* we no longer call 'organisation' but systems of tyranny and slavery. Forms of organisation wherein play is prohibited or systematically expunged become 'total institutions' – prisons, asylums, monasteries, sterile, static non-creative and unadaptive organisations that, however long they may stand, function primarily as exceptions that prove the rule that normal, healthy forms of organisational life are, by complete contrast, founded and function on the principle of 'free play'.

Redeeming (ii) Changing the world by playing with words: The Emperor has no clothes!

The serious role that play plays in constituting organisation is the central thesis of Goffman's classic study of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1956). In Goffman's dramaturgical paradigm, organisations are seen to comprise of the institutionalized performances of actors engaged in dramatic roles. The individual person learns to assume a mask, or masks, that correspond to various social and organisational parts that they play. A carpenter – who is also a soccer coach, a father of five, the chairman of a tenants' association, a Samaritans volunteer and a weekend homosexual – wears these different masks, and many others besides. The anthropological

universality of this is evidenced even etymologically, in that the word ‘person’ is derived from the Latin word *persona,* meaning ‘mask’. The organisation and its numerous roles – managerial, professional, service and functionary – is already prescribed for the performance, in terms of its settings, expressive apparatus, scripted roles, and the organisationally competent member is the person who, once appropriately socialized and rehearsed, enacts the performance by playing his or her part.

Plato well recognised play’s foundational role in organisational reproduction and role socialization – “the future carpenter should learn to measure and apply the line in play; and the future warrior should learn riding, or some other exercise, for amusement, and the teacher should endeavour to direct the children's inclinations and pleasures, by the help of amusements, to their final aim in life” (Plato and Saunders, 1970: 1.643) – but he also recognised that play can work, through its inherent capacity to both operate *and* innovate rules, to subvert social order and dissolve organisation:

> People are apt to fancy, as I was saying before, that when the plays of children are altered they are merely plays, not seeing that the most serious and detrimental consequences arise out of the change; and they readily comply with the child's wishes instead of deterring him, not considering that these children who make innovations in their games, when they grow up to be men, will be different from the last generation of children, and, being different, will desire a different sort of life, and under the influence of this desire will want other institutions and laws; and no one of them reflects that there will follow what I just now called the greatest of evils to states. (Plato and Saunders, 1970: VII.798)

Elsewhere he warns that childish make-believe has the potential to infect the imitator with false ideas and bad habits:

> if they imitate at all, they should imitate from youth upward only those characters which are suitable to their profession – the courageous, temperate, holy, free, and the like; but they should not depict or be skilful at imitating any kind of illiberality or baseness, lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate (Plato, 1974: III.395)

Of course Plato was a conservative, concerned with "implanting reverence for antiquity" (Plato and Saunders, 1970: VII.798) and his particular take on the world is not definitive. Today, the Derridian concepts of *différance* and supplementarity, which emphasise that meaning is always deferred and in play seems more attractive. Derrida's point – though it is always obfuscated – is that originary truth is a conceit and that at the core there is no more than '*freeplay'* that itself undermines the very idea of a core (since it rests on and creates a semiotic system where meaning is always moving) (Derrida, 1972). Play, then, is foundational (and the foundations are in play, meaning there are no foundations).

Derrida sought to demonstrate his notion of *différance* through a close and playful analysis of 'foundational' texts, showing that what appeared to be originary is unstable, ambivalent or untenable. All apparent organisation is both founded on play and can be subverted by play.

So let us look at an example of the conservative organisation, authoritarian, totalitarian, sterile; not a form of organisation that Plato would endorse, for sure, but an exaggerated caricature as a child might imagine it, a hyperbolic, limitless fantasy of power, an organization ruled by a would-be Philosopher King, i.e. a totalitarian dictator who is the incarnation of the Law, the State, the Word: *L'Etat, c'est moi!* This is always the Logos of the tyrant, be he President for Life or Global Hedge Funder 'master of the universe'.

Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu's regime was a baroque bureaucratic authoritarian state apparatus of military and secret police, spies, informers, and torture chambers, extracting and collating information into files & records covering every creature living, dead and yet unborn in the dictator's orbit – an organization that was legendary even by the standards of the old Eastern Bloc. The dictator's Palace-*cum*-HQ was, for decades the second-largest building on Earth, surpassed in scale only, and significantly, by the Pentagon. How did such an organization come undone and fall asunder? Let us hear the story from someone who knows a thing or two about the subversive possibilities of serious play, the London-based graffiti artist 'Banksy' (Banksy, 2006). The Dictator, Ceausescu, was addressing a staged public rally in Bucharest, wherein his hapless subjects, as usual, dutifully played the role of

cheering, fawning acolytes. Then one solitary man in the crowd, from a town subject to a recent clampdown, began to shout ‘Long live Timisoara!’ The crowd around him, completely ignorant of the news and events on their own doorstep thought it was a new political slogan and, ever obedient, starting chanting it too. But when the man called ‘Down with Ceausescu’ they realised that something wasn’t right:

> Terrified, they tried to force themselves away from him, dropping the banners they had been carrying. In the crush the wooden batons on which the banners were held began to snap underfoot and women started screaming. The ensuing panic sounded like booing. The unthinkable was happening. Ceausescu stood there on his balcony, ludicrously frozen in uncertainty, his mouth opening and shutting. Even the official camera shook with fright. Then the head of security walked swiftly across the balcony towards him and whispered, ‘They’re getting in.’ It was clearly audible on the open microphone and was broadcast over the whole country on live national radio. This was the start of the revolution.

Within a week of this bizarre play of chance events, accidents and misunderstandings, Ceausescu was dead. The very moment when the organization seems to be working perfectly, functioning on autopilot, may also be the moment of its greatest vulnerability. The mimetic spell is broken when difference is introduced: a slight variation of the code, a viral vector attached to the original virus, the scripted chant, and the virus is picked up by mimesis and carried by the voice of the mass until the imperceptibly subtle variation has become predominant, dissimulating the originally hegemonic discourse, and the entire language game of the dictators’ power begins to dissipate and crumble.

A more recent example is that of the banks and financial institutions, trading on differentially risk-weighted financial derivatives projected onto a vanishing spatial and temporal horizon – globalized markets, distant futures. Everything is a pure surface, brittle. This is the moment when a playful intervention, a variation on the theme – twisting the slogan in the Ceausescu instance; ‘calling’ the value of a real-estate portfolio, revealing a vast toxic bubble – can be most disruptive, shattering the illusion, devastating – literally unmasking

and making naked the performers and bringing the whole charade to an abrupt end.

And here we may pause and reflect on Walter Benjamin's beautiful formulation of the redemptive power of the child who can declare that the Emperor has no clothes; that it is very often only the slightest adjustment (of perspective) that can bring about the total transformation of the world.

Prospecting: Hey ho! hey ho! It's off to work we go....

In this final section we map out a number of potential research threads that might help fill some of the white space we've been exploring.

One option is to follow an actor-network approach, which would lead us to inquire into why the gap between children and organisation exists and/or how this gap and its constitutive elements have come to be.[4] This mapping of how a particular understanding of childhood came to be constructed would most likely build on earlier work that studied how the relationship between children, work and adults, emerged in parallel with other contestations about the relationship between work and females and the relationship between work and particular social classes (Zelizer, 1985/1994; Miller, 2005). For instance, Zelizer describes how the modern child emerged, from the late 1800s to the 1930s, as both economically 'useless' and emotionally 'priceless' (Zelizer, 1985/1994). Similarly, what is now a legally enforced boundary between the family and the market is a manifestation of different understandings of exchange inside and outside the family (e.g. housework is perceived to have no economic value, being based on an altruistic mode of exchange). This approach would most likely focus on the actual representations of children in different contexts and would also describe the background contestations out of which these representations emerged. Following Spivak, it might also focus on the discourses of management and organisation studies and how the silencing of children, and the construction of the child as Other, is effected through these discourses. In particular, theorizing requires the construction of new concepts that are necessarily alien to children and consequently it works to alienate then. This paper provides a good example, in that it deliberately

[4] As we're at it, why is it actor-network theory and not actor-net*play* theory?

employs terms like subalterning, introjecting, etc. that children never use. Our section titles ironically conjunct these jargon terms with allusions to children's discourse, though of course these conjunctions are only meaningful in the context of the paper, and so even this inclusion is an exclusion (a further illustration of Spivak's point of how difficult it is to get outside the house of language).

Another tack is to focus on how various aspects of management discourse are embroiled within children's culture (Ingersoll and Adams, 1992; Grey, 1998; Rehn, 2009). This phenomenon is more complicated than merely seeing an adult discourse imposed on children. Rather – and here we can again leverage ideas from actor-network theory – the ideas and practices of the discourse are *translated* back and forth between the adult and childhood worlds. Children are managed through management discourse, but children also (manage to) appropriate this and other discourses and in doing so manage their own experiences and context. One way of proceeding is to consider those cultural artefacts – television programmes, films and the like – that are commonly consumed by children and to study how these are implicated in the way children learn about and do 'management'. For instance, Rehn (2009) follows this path in his reading of the *Disney* character Scrooge McDuck, *The Simpsons'* Monty Burns, and "My First Business Day Playset". Rehn's reading opens up an understanding of what management *is* to children, and how they (perhaps) use play to satirise and critique organisational practices. Rhodes (2001) effects a similar exercise in his study of *The Simpsons* which, he argues, functions in a liberating manner not unlike Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Ingersoll and Adams take a similar, but more systematic, approach in their interesting study of children's literature, which, they argue, is an important and ignored part of the process of social construction.

A variation on this theme would be to take important themes in organisation studies, but to look at these through the eyes of a child, as it were. In Spivak's sense, children are truly subaltern, which raises profound questions about method, about who speaks, about whose experience matters, about who the researcher collects data from, and how such data is recorded, analysed and

re-presented. These are all issues that have been of central concern to a line of child-centred studies in the 'new' sociology of childhood (Matthews, 2007). Indeed there is a small but growing literature, outside of management/organisation studies, that considers children's economic activities and their participation in production, distribution and consumption (see Zelizer (2002) for a review). But even Zelizer laments the dearth of research:

> Characteristically, and unfortunately, we know even less about children's production involving their peers, or with agents of organisations, including other households. When it comes to children working with peers, we draw on little more than sentimentalized visions of future self-made capitalists learning their skills on lemonade stands or sharing newspaper routes (Zelizer, 2002: 383).

This suggests that there is a multitude of topics to be studied in a multitude of new ways. One approach would be to describe and analyse classic concepts from organisation theory but situated in the life-world and practices of children. For instance, how do groups of children make decisions? What are the processes by which groups, composed of children, are formed and maintained? How do leaders come to be within groups of children? How do children interface with new technologies (a question that Sherry Turkle (1984) addressed in her seminal study)? More generally, what is the nature of order/disorder (or organisation) in the world of children?

There is work – and play – to be done.

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