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Editorial

Governmentality of Children's Play

Michael A. PETERS | ORCID : 0000-0002-1482-2975

Distinguished Professor, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University,

Beijing, China PR

mpeters@bnu.edu.cn

ZHU Xudong

Professor and Dean, Faculty of Education, Beijing Normal University, Beijing,

China PR

zhuxd@bnu.edu.cn

Abstract

This editorial provides a brief analysis of the emergence of modern concept of the child, originating with Rousseau and Kant. It is a notion that is predicated on the concept of freedom to which 'play' is a natural cognate, and it is associated with the ideology of universal rights. This view is contrasted with Jacques Donzelot's 'The Policing of the Family' that describes the governmentality of children through the language of the welfare state; and the current era of governmentality through the market where neo-liberal notions of 'choice' and 'quality' dominate.

Keywords

Play – Romantic Child – Contingency – Human Rights – Policing the family – governmentality

One principle of *education* which those men especially who form educational schemes should keep before their eyes is this—children ought to be educated, not for the present, but for a possibly improved condition of man in the future; that is, in a manner which is adapted to the *idea of humanity* and the whole destiny of man (Kang, 2016, p. 15)

Philosophy consists of offering reassurance to children. That is, if one prefers, of taking them out of childhood, of forgetting about the child, or, inversely, but by the same token, of speaking first and foremost for that little boy within us, of teaching him to speak—to dialogue—by displacing his fear or his desire (Derrida, 1981, p. 122).

We are delighted to see a special issue on Play in Childhood edited by Dr Heyi Zhang as a special issue of *The Beijing International Review of Education* (BIRE). Dr Zhang is one of the Associate Editors of BIRE who has worked with Chinese and international colleagues to produce an important and challenging collection. We offer some preliminary comments on the history and philosophy of childhood.

1 Play and the Contingency of Childhood in the West

The Kantian Enlightenment grand narrative identifies and stipulates a growth metaphor for the development of children that ‘exits immaturity’ to become adults, fathers and citizens to use Kant’s 1784 expression in his minor essay on the Enlightenment “Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?” written for the periodical *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. The famous and oft-quoted line by Kant emphasizes the passage from childhood to adulthood as a metaphor for the enlightenment of humanity: ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity’ (*Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*). Kant uses a species description of the development and cultivation of public reason. Immaturity is a result of not having the courage to use one’s reason without the guidance of another. This state implies a childlike state of dependency. Kant uses the word ‘Unmündigkeit’ to mean not having attained legal adulthood. The same root word ‘Unmündig’ also suggests ‘not being of age’ or being dependent and unfree. This metaphor is central to Kant’s moral philosophy and our Kantian Western heritage that picks out the concept of *autonomy* as that which

distinguishes the cultivated individual who can think for herself and 'dares to be wise.'¹

The Kantian metaphor for Enlightenment rests on the popular depiction of childhood as 'unreason' and of education as the cultivation of reason in the child as a process of teaching the child to think for herself. Kant formulated his thesis at the point historically when human rights were being invented and the moral worth of the individual was being debated. As I explain in the essay 'Inventing Human Rights' (Peters, 2012):

In the eighteenth century, people underwent a profound moral and psychological transformation, coming to see themselves and others like them as human beings who were autonomous agents in the possession of rights. This remarkable change in subjectivity was expressed in the dream of universal equality and codified in law by declarations including the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1793).²

While the juridical construction of the citizen took place in the eighteenth century several categories of person – women, the poor, blacks – were considered subservient and unequal. Rights for children were historically only recognised and developed much later, first, by the League of Nations in 1924, partially by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 that recognised the need for 'social protection.' The definitive and full statement of children's rights had to wait until relatively recently in 1959 for the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child that stated ten principles for the protection of children's rights though some critics maintain that the notion of children rights is still not well defined.

Rousseau's *Emile* argued that the child had the right to *enjoy* childhood – in a word, to play. As Caroline Rhys David puts it in her Introduction to Kant's (1808) *On Education*:

The child too, *quâ* child, had rights to be let live his child-life and enjoy his youth. *Laissez mûrir l'enfance dans les enfants!* Pleaded the book which was the charter of the rights of the child—I allude, of course, to the *Émile*—they have their own ways of seeing, thinking, feeling. Be not

1 See James Schmidt's discussion at <https://persistentenlightenment.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/translatingkanti/>.

2 <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/9443-inventing-human-rights>.

for ever seeking the man in the child, heedless of what the child is in and for himself. He is not simply 'undeveloped man, but diverse.' Let the child, echoed Kant, be trained as a child and not as a *Bürger*. He had, of course, to be trained up in the duties he owed to a social macrocosm, but this entity was not so much a definitely conceived state—that ideal was of the past and not yet re-born—as a vaguely comprehensive humanity of independent individuals. The child was to graduate as a *Weltbürger*. ... The individualism of the time saw only the Child and the Man, the nature of him overlaid by a crust of privilege, convention, and corrupt tradition. This was to be broken away; and the common nature that lay stifled beneath elicited and developed by a wholesome culture that should be all-powerful to redeem and reform. So would the moral sense innate in him sprout and burgeon, till the dignity of Man in the blossom of the Youth should stand confessed and vindicated.³

Heavily influenced by Rousseau's Child, Kant allows the growth of the moral nature to develop unassisted in 'the play of regulated freedom.' As David goes on to remark education for Kant is "either *cultivation* or *moralisation* of the individual" with the 'ultimate ideal' being 'nothing less than the perfection of human nature.' She also notes that for both Rousseau and Kant the ultimate end of education is not 'citizenship, nor fraternity, but *fatherhood*' for training ceases when he is old enough to father children of his own. Thus, following Rousseau and Kant most of the major figures 'regarded the fostering of reason or rationality as a fundamental educational aim' (Siegel et al., 2018). What is not noted is that the gendered nature of rationality and education was ingrained at the very beginning of educational modernity as an exclusively male attribute.

Rousseau's *Emile* following his 1755 work *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* is in part a novel and philosophical discourse concerned with moral perfectibility and the progress of civilization that begins with an imaginary original 'state of nature' where the educational task is to socialize the child while fostering his natural and uncorrupted morality. Through the conventions of the fictional genre *bildungsroman* Rousseau follows *Emile* from childhood to adulthood. *Emile* has a dramatic impact on the construction of the Romantic Child affecting the English Romantic poets particularly, Wordsworth and Blake and helping to initiate the genre of children's literature.

³ <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/356>.

Recognizing that the child had a soul was potentially a human rights breakthrough. The hard reality of children of the working poor depicted by Dickens and others is very much a factual counterpoint to the idealized construction of the Romantic child centred around the importance of play:

Embodying innocence, immediacy, and uncultivated vision, the Wordsworthian child is an idealized construction offering a model for the male poet seeking to redeem the dying-away of light and joy....

The figure of the child—a staple of Romanticism—represented qualities under threat in an increasingly commercial and urban society, such as autonomy, intimacy with nature, and an unmitigated capacity for wonder and joy.

'Romanticism and the child: Inventing innocence', (Metz, nd)

<http://web.utk.edu/~gerard/romanticpolitics/childhood>

As another commentator expresses it:

To our eyes, the Victorians seem very inconsistent in terms of their attitudes toward children. Child-worshippers who waxed rhapsodic about the perfect purity of children simultaneously eroticized them. Even as sentimentality about childhood reached new heights, the notion that all children are savages likewise gained widespread support; many Victorians accepted the "Law of Recapitulation," which stipulated that as a child develops, he or she repeats the stages of development of the human race. This belief in "the savagery of all children and the childishness of all savages" served a justification for subjecting children to harsh discipline, and natives of other countries to the rule of the expanding British Empire ...

'The Victorian Child, c. 1837–1901', (Gubar, nd)

<http://www.representingchildhood.pitt.edu/victorian.htm>

This is a far cry from Philippe Ariès's *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (1960) where he argues that childhood is a new concept emerging in the seventeenth century at the same time great progress was made in decreasing infant mortality and changes were that introduced to the European educational system, with a corresponding withdrawal of the family from the wider society – a privatisation of the family. The result of Ariès' astounding research is to show that the historical and cultural contingency of notions of

childhood; that childhood—and with it, family life—is not a universal constant or natural category, but rather an ever-shifting concept.⁴

The Napoleonic Creed of 1811 was an 'Imperial Decree Concerning Foundlings, Abandoned Children, and Poor Orphans.' It legitimated the notion of the 'baby hatch' where mothers could abandon their babies anonymously – a practice that was practised since the Middle Ages in terms of the Foundling Wheel. (The first were introduced in Italy as early as 1198 and it has been reintroduced in the modern era after WWI). The New York Society for The Prevention of Cruelty to Children (<https://www.nyspcc.org/>) was established in 1875 and was the first child protection agency in the world. In its founding charter the NYSPCC stated:

In the religious and philosophical stage the child takes on an importance of its own; it is humanely treated because it is now recognized as a human being, or it is protected because it is said to have, young and apparently unimportant as it seems to be, a soul of its own. From there on to the time when the child, as the father of the man, is a charge upon the State, — or on all men, — until it is able to take care of and protect itself, the murder of a child is theoretically as great a crime as the murder of an adult. In fact, the conditions of the past hold long after each recognized step of progress, the most primitive habits obtruding in the very midst of the most advanced knowledge and the most complete enlightenment (NYSPCC, p. 340, <https://www.nyspcc.org/>).

While the prevailing philosophical conceptions of the child embodied in Dr Montessori's child centred approach developed during the early twentieth century beginning with the opening of the Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) in 1907 that came increasingly to dominate philosophical accounts, the reality was still far from ideal.

2 The Policing of the Family

Jacques Donzelot, a student and colleague of Michel Foucault, wrote two important books that focus on the construction of children, *The Policing of the Family* (1979, 1980 Tr.) and *L'invention du Social* (1984). In *The Policing of the Family*, Donzelot (1979) documents French government intervention in the

4 <http://www.representingchildhood.pitt.edu/aries.htm>. George Henry Payne (1916) *The Childhood in Human Progress*.

regulation of family. Since the eighteenth century the family had been considered a private domain. The process of intervention constitutes a process whereby the family became a public institution regulated by public law: the family and the behaviour of children become the focus of a network of social practices and official discourses through the intervention of philanthropists, social workers, educationists and psychiatrists. These disciplines and multiple agencies, often working in isolation from one another, transformed the family and came to regulate every aspect of the lives of children. As Gilles Deleuze (1980) writes in his 'Foreword: The Rise of the Social': 'Jacques Donzelot's book is a forceful one, because it proposes a genesis of this strange sector, of recent formation and growing importance, 'the social': a new landscape has risen up around us (Donzelot, p. ix). Deleuze, in particular, chooses to comment on the development of the juvenile court as a new force that remoulds the family—its juridification was a 'liberalization' of the family and children in relation to the attribution of rights that marked the 'social progress' of the twentieth century.

In the Preface to the English Edition, Donzelot acknowledges that the book was addressed to three interlocutors (and discourses): Marxists, feminists and psychoanalysts, that among them, governed the theoretical literature in France. He argues: 'The choice of the family as an object of study was therefore a strategic one, since the family is the concrete locus where these discourses implicitly converge' (Donzelot, 1979, pp. xix). He goes on to argue:

For Marxists, the family is an apparatus indispensable to the bourgeois order. This is owing to its function as an anchorage point for private property and its function of reproduction of the ruling ideology, for which purpose alone its authority is recognized and mandated.

The introduction of divorce, rights for women, and the child-protection laws was a profound disruption of the bourgeois patriarchal family as a bastion of the established order supported by the emergence of a largely male wage-earners' welfare state. But as Donzelot theorizes the internal transformation of the family that took place with a series of policies designed to protect children and to preserve them from old customs, an educative model Donzelot calls 'protective liberation' (Donzelot, 1979, pp. xxi). The emergence and modification of family law was contractualized or put into tutelage with state agencies. The family was not an apparatus of the state but rather its modernization took root within a new form of sociality signalled by the rising importance of feminism and the changing role of women. The transformation of the family required the active participation of women who worked for health and

education agencies to domesticate the family and win new norms within the home that worked a more equal distribution of gender power relations inside the family.

'The Preservation of Children' (Chapter 2) documents the burgeoning literature in the middle of the eighteenth century that developed in medicine, administration and education that questioned the old practices of foundling hospitals and nurses commenting on the high rates of child mortality. It was during this period that the state came to see that its responsibility to govern social relations in the name of production and the political economy of the nation, especially in the work of the Physiocrats of population. Donzelot notes that 'A study needs to be made concerning the parallel histories of convents for the preservation and correction of young girls, supervised brothels for prostitutes, and foundling hospitals (Donzelot, 1979, p. 23).

Donzelot provides us with an understanding of the shift from 'government of families to a government through the family' and, in particular, 'methods for developing the quality of the population and the strength of the nation'. As Donzelot comments:

What of childhood? In the first instance, the solicitude of which it was the object took the form of a protected liberation, a freeing of children from vulgar fears and constraints. The bourgeois family drew a sanitary cordon around the child which delimited his sphere of development: inside this perimeter the growth of his body and mind would be encouraged by enlisting all the contributions of psychopedagogy in its service, and controlled by means of a discreet observation. In the second instance, it would be more exact to define the pedagogical model as that of supervised freedom. The problem in regard to the working-class child was not so much the weight of obsolescent constraints as excessive freedom-being left to the street-and the techniques employed consisted in limiting this freedom, in shepherding the child back to spaces where he could be more closely watched: the school or the family dwelling (Donzelot, 1979, p. 47).

If Donzelot provides us with the governmentality of children, the emerging government rationality for the 'protection' of children, to document state regulation of children in the family during an era largely given to 'protection,' 'welfare' and 'rights', then it may come as no surprise that children's education and child play has become subject to the neoliberal governmentality of the market where early expressions of play as 'freedom' and its necessity for growing up has been replaced by the discipline of the market and its emphasis on 'choice' and 'quality.'

3 Philosophy, Neoliberalism and Child's Play

Laura Kennedy (2017), writing for *The Irish Times*, a piece titled 'Philosophical questioning can be made child's play' echoes the idea that 'children's curiosity is an ideal starting point for learning philosophy' and expresses what has almost become a modern-day truism 'I like to think that we are all born philosophers and the world bashes the curiosity out of us.'⁵ She goes on to argue: 'We should encourage the inquisitiveness of every child, because by asking questions they are learning philosophy.' And she then mentions a range of books that are suitable for children of various ages: Janell Cannon's *Stellaluna*, the *Children's Book of Philosophy*, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*.

As 'play schools' have mushroomed, the philosophy of play, especially children's play, has become big business. It is a sector that came later, after the three waves of universal education—primary, secondary, tertiary—and its full-fledged emergence occurred first with free kindergardens and playcentres, and later, Kōhanga Reo, and then, the grow of private institutions during the neoliberal privatisation of education (Urban & Rubiano, 2014). Every new play centre or preschool touts its 'philosophy of play' but, disturbingly, the real underlying story is one of privatisation. As Fazal Rizvi (2016, p. 5) explains:

Neoliberalism is thus best understood not simply as an economic policy, but rather a rationality, a mode of thinking that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and constructs human beings and relations largely in economic terms. It does not merely 'privatize' individual production and consumption of goods that were once publically supported and valued. Rather, it reformulates everything, everywhere in terms of capital investment and appreciation.

In New Zealand, for example, ECE policy environment changed dramatically in the 1990s from a rights-based equity paradigm to an economic or market model based on quality and risk in tune with skills required for a knowledge economy (May, 2001; Bushouse, 2008). ChildForum (2015) reports 'Profit-Driven Early Childhood Education Is Flourishing': 'Privately-owned centres now make up 69% of all licensed childcare centres up from 57% ten years ago.' The report mentions Evolve Education as an example, which was listed in the NZ Stock

5 <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/philosophical-questioning-can-be-made-child-s-play-1.2927752>.

Exchange, with a predicted revenue for its first year to be \$136 million and profit \$16.6m for the same year.⁶ As the website states:

Evolve Education Group owns more than 120 centre-based ECE facilities around New Zealand, operating under brands that include Lollipops, Active Explorers, Learning Adventures, Little Earth Montessori, Little Lights, Little Wonders and Pascals.

This is the twenty first governmentality of early childhood in New Zealand, once the epitome of the welfare state, and after nearly 40 years of neoliberalism, a paradise for privatisation that offer stock market shares in 'quality' early childhood education, while touting for business. From freedom to 'quality' in 40 years that overturns the principles of state education and marketizes the early years of childhood.

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6 <https://www.childforum.com/news-early-childhood-education-latest/1303-should-early-childhood-education-be-profit-driven.html>. The Evolve Education website <https://www.evolveeducation.co.nz/> mentions a profit of \$11–12 million for 2018 and lists six related businesses including au paire and 'sell your centre'.

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