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The new wave of childhood studies: breaking the grip of bio-social dualism?

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Abstract

The article takes as its starting point a new wave of researchers who use concepts such as ‘hybridity’ and ‘multiplicity’ in a bid to move the study of childhood beyond the strictures of what Lee and Motzkau call ‘bio-social dualism’, whereby the division between the ‘natural child’ of developmental psychology and the ‘social child’ of socialisation theory replicates a tendency in modern thought and practice to divide nature from culture. The article offers an alternative approach to understanding modern Western childhood, and argues that this emerges not through a division between nature and culture, but in the form of a ‘biosocial nexus’ which is irreducible to distinct elements and which provides a way of locating developmental psychology and socialisation theory within the same field of practice. The article concludes by reflecting on the implications of this for the new wave of childhood studies, which is said to re-deploy rather than escape biosocial power.

Key Words

Bio-social dualism, Biosocial power, Bio-politics, Socialisation, Child psychology

As recently as 1997 it was still possible to describe the paradigm change that had occurred in the sociology of childhood as ‘emergent’: full of ‘promise’ while also confronting certain ‘problems’, such as a reluctance to engage with new ways of thinking about childhood (James

and Prout, 1997). But even as the new paradigm was consolidating itself it was also undergoing a transformation in the form of a 'new wave' of scholarship. Based in the UK, this new wave is comprised of a small group of theorists influenced by continental European philosophy¹, and what holds this 'position' together *as* a position (this claim is defended in the next section) is the way it deploys concepts such as 'hybridity' and 'multiplicity' in the attempt to forge a line of flight² away from the dichotomies through which modern Western childhood has been forged, foremost being the opposition between nature and culture. Importantly, the new wave asserts that its own earlier incarnation (hereafter referred to as the new paradigm) has not only failed to overcome this problem, but has reinforced it by overemphasising the social construction of childhood. If this claim is correct, then the new childhood studies continues to move in the groove of a binary logic that examines childhood through the lens of *either* culture *or* nature, thus failing to overcome what Nick Lee and Johanna Motzkau (2011) describe as the problem of 'bio-social dualism'. The defining characteristic of the new wave is its attempt to finally break the grip of bio-social dualism, and the purpose of doing so is to clear the way for new ways of thinking about childhood.

In this paper I question the accuracy and the efficacy of bio-social dualism as a way of theorising modern Western childhood. The argument is presented in four steps. Section one charts the passage from new paradigm to new wave and identifies the distinguishing features of the latter. Section two, which incorporates steps two and three, presents a genealogy of childhood from the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the early twentieth century. Here it will be argued that childhood has been constituted in the form of a 'biosocial nexus' which is at once a process of formation and a mode of power, and which allows no clear-cut separation or division between the natural/biological and the cultural/social. Furthermore, this approach engages explicitly with the historical, geographical, and theoretical scope of

childhood as framed by the passage from new paradigm and new wave, thus confining its focus to what is generally (though not without controversy) known as ‘the West’ or ‘Western’. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this intervention.

The new wave of childhood studies

In his survey of modern (Western) childhood, Alan Prout reconstructs the conditions of possibility for an ontological politics of childhood which has since taken the form of two general strategies: one whereby all aspects of childhood are reduced to a single biological or social principle, and the other ‘additive’, whereby ‘nature and culture remain...separate, incommensurable entities that are then seen as contributing a distinct proportion of the material that goes into the making of childhood’ (2005: 3). The result has been an historical trajectory that ‘zig-zags between the poles of the opposition, now placing childhood at the biological end, now the social’ (2005: 43-4). Forged along the tracks of a nature/culture dichotomy, or what Chris Jenks calls the ‘Piagetian’ and ‘Parsonian’ paradigms (Jenks, 2005: 12-28; also James, Jenks and Prout, 1998: 17-19, 22-5), childhood has become the object of distinct and uncommunicative fields of scientific study so that even today, according to Barrie Thorne (2007), a ‘wall of silence’ stands in the way of dialogue between developmental psychology and the new social sciences of childhood.

The new paradigm of childhood studies that Thorne here refers to is characterised by a social constructivist approach (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; James and Prout, 1997), but according to Prout – himself one of the pioneers of the new sociology of childhood – this has instated a ‘reverse discourse’ by shifting the emphasis entirely from the biological to the social, thus failing to move the study of childhood beyond the limitations of binary thought and dualistic modes of representation (2005: 84).

There are several points that need to be underscored before proceeding. Firstly, Prout is arguing that the new paradigm has failed to resolve the problem of a zig-zagging historical pathway; it has simply moved childhood to the social pole of the opposition. Secondly, this meandering trajectory, which stretches back to the Enlightenment, has never been adequate, because it fails to recognise that childhood *is* (ontologically) what Prout calls a ‘hybrid form’, i.e. irreducible to either biology or culture (2005: 3). Constructed in the form of a pendulum that swings between the poles of nature and culture, modern Western childhood is thus deemed to be a case of misrecognition. Furthermore, this conception of childhood is being rendered obsolete by processes of change that cut across the spheres of society, economy, culture, family, adulthood and childhood, and which amount to what Nick Lee (2001) calls the ‘age of uncertainty’.

In developing his argument, Prout amasses a sophisticated vocabulary of childhood. While there is not space here to discuss this in all of its detail, it can be presented in tabular form to give an indication of its scope (table 1). The left column charts the language of a divided childhood, while the right offers a way out of the impasse:

Table 1: Theorising Childhood

‘Modern childhood’	‘The future of childhood’
Separation	Intersection
Reduction	Emergence
Division	Complex combinations
Addition	Hybridity
Opposition	Mobility
Dichotomy	Network
Binary	Non-linearity

Dualism	Included middle
Mutual exclusion	Mutually constitutive

On the left are representations of childhood as a ‘mixing site’, analogous to a ‘test-tube’ (Lee and Motzkau, 2011: 8) in which the social and the biological are added together as a blend that shapes the growing child. On the right is a conceptual vocabulary that reconstructs childhood by using concepts such as ‘hybridity’, and in this way Prout attempts to finally break from the constraints of the past, which also means moving beyond the conceptual apparatus developed by the new paradigm. It is this posited break or rupture that marks the transition from new paradigm to new wave.

Prout is not alone in his attempt to finally break from this divided childhood, which is why I think it is plausible to refer to an emerging *position* in the field of childhood studies. This position is characterised by concepts that converge on the idea of blurring and crossing boundaries so that childhood becomes an irreducible ‘combination’ or ‘assemblage’ made up of biological, social and technological ‘networks’ (Prout, 2005: 113-16). Originating in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), Prout borrows the concept of assemblage from Lee, who examines the adult/child dichotomy as a relation which is structured by a division between childhood as an unfinished state of ‘becoming’ and adulthood as an order of ‘being’ which – prior to the age of uncertainty – was a ‘state of stable completion and self-possession’ (2001: 2; see also Jenks, 2005: 8). Lee responds to the new uncertainties and ambiguities by using social theory to deconstruct the being/becoming duality, thereby opening out an indeterminate space for the emergence of ‘multiple becomings’, or ‘becomings without end’ (2001: 84, 119). Using children’s play to substantiate what he means by open-ended becoming, Lee argues against the conventional (Parsonian and Piagetian) conception of maturation as a passage from ‘disorder to order’, suggesting instead that ‘if children appear

disorderly this is not because their activities lack order. Rather it is because their activities contain a profusion of different orders which they can move between very rapidly' (2001: 141). Such movement can be speeded up and slowed down, and orders can be made durable through 'extensions': the patterns of action, the subject positions, the props and equipment from which orders are assembled (hence 'assemblages'). In this way, and against the idea of order as a stable and static state, social order becomes an imaginative, creative and open-ended process (2001: 142-3).

This way of thinking about social orders, though formulated in a different way, is also discussed by Jenks. In the second edition of his *Childhood*, Jenks devotes a new final chapter to the subject of transgression which, he suggests, might be employed as a 'source of critical examination' (2005: 150). Again, the objective is to move beyond the constraints of social categories and cognitive frames structured by dichotomy and division. Building on the work of Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault, Jenks examines how transgressing is at once a passage that aggravates and disturbs limits and a confrontation that animates judgment, thereby unsettling normative constraints and opening out possibilities for change. In the face of concrete transgressions on the part of actual children, Jenks urges us to move against the tide of conventional responses, whereby children exhibiting 'challenging' behaviour are to be disciplined in a way that serves to 'complete and affirm our constraints'. If we are 'truly committed to childhood as an active expression of human being' Jenks asks, then 'should we not be listening to the challenges they present as critiques of the current order rather than as disruptions of a properly normative life?' (2005: 150). Children not only remind us of, but also demonstrate what Jenks describes as the 'indefatigable, inherent and infinitely variable human capacity to transgress'. It is with a view to unlocking this inventive capacity and

thereby opening out new horizons – the possibility of imagining as yet unimagined human futures – that Jenks sets about rethinking childhood.

Most recently, Lee and Johanna Motzkau (2011) have argued that these (among other) perspectives converge on a problem they call ‘bio-social dualism’. Eschewing a normative approach to this problem, Lee and Motzkau focus on developing an analytical and methodological approach informed by Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics³. This is presented as a more adequate way of ‘navigating’ childhood in a context where the posited division between the biological and the social has become increasingly uncertain and unstable, or as Lee and Motzkau point out: ‘life processes and social processes now appear regularly to mix with and to influence one another without regard to a biological/social boundary’ (2011: 8). As an alternative to bio-social dualism, Lee and Motzkau’s new way of navigating childhood hinges on the idea of ‘multiplicities’. While they focus on specific multiplicities as applicable to contemporary currents and concerns in the field of childhood studies, the concept of multiplicity itself denotes the idea of a ‘gathering’, so that within any given multiplicity is a complex and contingent combination of ‘practical, political, theoretical, and empirical concerns’ which are articulated in the form of ‘events and processes’ which might be, to cite one example, ‘biological, medical, legal, ethical and political in nature’ (2011: 10-11). The concept of multiplicity thus operates on two levels: to draw attention to a multiplicity of actual and possible childhoods; and to argue that the ‘content’ of any specified childhood is itself constituted in the form of a multiplicity.

United by a core objective – to escape the constraints of bio-social dualism – the new wave of childhood studies instates a division between the strictures of past childhoods and an imagined future where boundaries are blurred, where categories become porous, and where human futures become more creative and open-ended (Lee, 2001). It is in this way that the

new wave performs a triple intervention, simultaneously (1) problematising and (2) re-describing modern Western childhood while also (3) escaping the limitations of its own earlier incarnation. While the task of re-description anticipates future possibilities, and will be discussed in the final section below, the work involved in problematising and breaking away from the constraints of bio-social dualism is archaeological and genealogical. As a critical strategy, it is also problematic in the way it has been formulated, which is the focus of the next section.

Approaching childhood as a biosocial nexus

In the previous section I argued that the new wave is characterised by an attempt to break with the past and forge a line of flight toward a future whereby the strictures of bio-social dualism have been effaced. But a question remains as to whether this positing of a rupture is necessary, or even plausible. In this section I present a genealogical outline of modern Western childhood, from the late 18th century (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) through to the early decades of the 20th century (the child-study movement). The objective is to develop an argument that builds along two axes:

1. Culture/nature: While it may be correct to characterise the development of the natural and social sciences as a process that splits the world into separate, incommensurable, and ontologically distinct realms, modern Western childhood is constituted *not* as a division between the biological and the social, but in the form of an irreducible ‘biosocial nexus’. In the place of a posited rupture, this part of the argument identifies a process of continuity, and by the end of this section it will be possible to specify exactly what is meant by the idea of a biosocial nexus.

2. Socialisation/development: This concerns the rival paradigms of socialisation and cognitive development. James and Prout gather these paradigms together under the heading of ‘the dominant framework’ (1997: 10-14), suggesting that they might in fact form aspects of the *same* paradigm, and yet the new wave continues to struggle against what is considered to be an unresolved tendency to divide the ‘social’ child from the ‘natural’ child. The claim here is that while these rival paradigms might be distinguished and contrasted as ideal types, they exhibit a complex chronology which does not amount to a division but rather a singular field of practice, which is also a biosocial mode of power.

Nature + Culture = Childhood?

Rousseau occupies a special place in the field of childhood studies. Historians have noted that he was pivotal in linking childhood to nature, and his treatise on education, *Émile*, is said to have ‘captured the imagination of Europe’ with its ‘validation of Nature’ (Hendrick 1997: 36; also Cunningham 2005: 63-5). By the end of the eighteenth century there were over two hundred similar treatises published in England alone, all influenced in some respect by *Émile* (Cunningham 2005: 64). This might be taken as confirmation that modern childhood has indeed been forged through a nature/culture dichotomy, which then paves the way for the separate worlds of adults and children. But this is by no means a straightforward question, and I will begin to probe it by drawing on Michael-Sebastian Honig’s words when he writes that ‘the question of the child is a modern question’ which was posed by Rousseau ‘as a question of the child’s nature’. But this is complicated in the way that this positing of the child’s nature was in fact a way of discussing *human* nature, which is further complicated in that, for Rousseau, ‘nature’ is not equivalent to ‘biological nature’. Honig goes on to suggest that ‘The “discovery of the child” in the eighteenth century was the discovery of the

indeterminacy of the future determination of humans' (2009: 65). This, I will argue, is how we should understand Rousseau's conception of childhood, and it is also the significance of the many techniques to train, educate, correct, reform, and rescue children that emerged throughout the nineteenth century, and which gradually solidified as a constellation of practices that Jacques Donzelot describes as a 'tutelary complex' (Donzelot, 1979).

As is often the case with original thinkers, there is scope for interpretation in Rousseau's writings. Rather than lay claim to a definitive reading of Rousseau, my interest is solely in the way he provides a concise diagram of a biosocial childhood. As discussed here, Rousseau should be understood as a nodal point in an emerging network of ideas and practices. The scope of the analysis could be enlarged to include other sites of innovation, for example John Locke's earlier and no less influential tract on education (Locke, 2007 [1693]: 23). More important however are the practices established during the nineteenth century in the wake of Rousseau's *Émile*: the schools of Johann Pestalozzi, Emanuel von Fallenberg, Friedrich Froebel, Joseph Lancaster and Andrew Bell for example (Silber 1960; Stewart and McCann 1967), or in more technical terms, the infant school as a way of countering the threat of the 'sinking and sunken classes' (Stow 1854), and reformatory and preventative education as a way to offset the social problems attributed to parental 'neglect' (Carpenter 1968 [1851]). Such a survey would conclude not with the idea of smooth and uniform 'paradigms' of childhood, but rather a field of discourse constituted through frictions, struggles, emulation and tactical alliances. There is not space here to do more than sketch the contours of this field, but this will suffice in presenting the argument that modern childhood has been constituted not in the form of a bio-social dualism, but as a biosocial process which is also a mode of power: a way of acting upon the future⁴.

Rousseau's starting point is the question of the child's nature, yet the category of 'nature' is deceptive. For Rousseau, childhood was a slice of nature to be carefully and unobtrusively nurtured, initially by ensuring that the young child learnt directly from nature rather than from books, and subsequently by imparting knowledge and skills to the growing boy. Either way, Émile would learn from the immediacy of experience. And yet his experiences were to be staged, in their entirety, by the boy's Tutor, so that 'nature' would teach only what the Tutor decided should be taught. Émile is to embody a complex set of processes, relations, and technical operations under the direction of his Tutor, and the strategic objective is to form that part of the child's 'nature' which is the kernel of virtue – his 'conscience'. Residing deep within the 'soul', Rousseau tells us that conscience is an inner voice which is dependant on the faculty of reason while also being independent of that 'reason' which is but existing social conventions (Rousseau, 1993 [1762]: 39, 292-309). Because 'childhood is the sleep of reason' (1993: 84), so reason must be awakened and cultivated in order to answer the call of conscience and tame the 'passions'. The seeds of all three reside within, and are thereby accessible through the body of the child, and here can be detected a strong imprint of a 'horticulturalist' conception of childhood, which Hugh Cunningham (2005: 45-7) traces to the Renaissance and Reformation, and more specifically, to humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus, who wrote that 'The child that nature has given you is nothing but a shapeless lump, but the material is still pliable, capable of assuming any form, and you must so mould it that it takes the best possible character' (quoted in Cunningham, 2005: 43). The language of this horticulturalist tradition is one of 'fashioning', 'implanting', 'sowing': of preparing good soil, pulling weeds, and 'training young shoots to grow in the direction you want them to go'. But there is a crucial difference in how Rousseau adapts this tradition to new and emerging circumstances. The techniques of the horticulturalist had long been, though not solely, placed

in the service of salvation – to combat the wickedness that children brought into the world and to cleanse them of original sin. Rousseau’s ‘natural religion’ marks a break with revelation, and hence also with the authority of scripture, and from this follows his ‘creed’: that although there is a higher power that orders all that exists, ‘man’ is nonetheless free to act: to exercise judgment (reason), to master (or indeed succumb to) the passions, and to heed or ignore the counsel of conscience which, as ‘the voice of the soul’ (1993: 298), is an ultimate authority. In short, and noting that the figure of *Émile* is a metaphor for ‘man in the abstract’ (1993: 24), thus representing each and all, *Émile* both poses and answers the question concerning the indeterminacy of the future determination of humans: childhood was the biosocial terrain upon which a strategy of self-mastery was to be staged.

There is a noticeable tendency in the field of childhood studies to equate Rousseau with *Émile*, as though this can be isolated from his other works, and in particular *The Social Contract* (1968 [1762]) (see for example James, Jenks and Prout, 1998: 13-15; Lee, 2001: 111-13; Cunningham, 2005: 62-4; Hendrick, 1997: 34-7; Archard, 2004: 31-1). But only together do they map the significance of Rousseau’s interest in the nature of the child, i.e. on what the child is before he becomes a man rather than focusing on the man that the child will become, and in this way we also see how the category ‘nature’ is at once an empirical claim, a normative horizon, and a political strategy. The subject of the social contract is not given by nature, but must be formed from the raw materials of human existence, and this is to be done not by working back from the ideal subject of contract, but forward from an understanding of how human nature is socially formed: the process of life itself. Declaring himself to be ‘nature’s minister’ (1993: 336), the fictional Tutor takes it upon himself to shape and form *Émile*, but only in accordance with nature’s ‘wishes’. Nature appears as the Master of masters, and yet when Rousseau, via the Tutor, addresses the reader by asking rhetorically:

‘Cannot you make of [the child] what you please?’ (1993: 100) then the ontology of childhood emerges through the *indeterminacy* of nature. For Rousseau the relation between nature and culture is less a dualism, or indeed a sequence (as suggested by Lee, 2001: 111-13) than it is a process of simultaneity. And while it has already been noted that Rousseau’s discourse of nature is not equivalent to biological nature, the relation he constructs between the figure of *Émile* and that of the Tutor nevertheless takes the form of a biosocial process which is to be deployed in the form of biosocial power. As a treatise on education, *Émile*, just as much as *The Social Contract*, envisions a normative order, but unlike *The Social Contract*, *Émile* concerns the subject who will not only populate that order, but also, and more importantly, *enact it* in thought, word and deed. Childhood then is a process whereby the biosocial is to be brought under conscious control, which also marks the beginning of modern socialisation theory. Furthermore, while this biosocial childhood might be described by using the language in the right-hand column of table 1 above, it does not correspond to the idea of a nature/culture dichotomy.

Childhood = the biological +/- the social?

In Rousseau we find a conception of human nature which makes plausible the tradition of social contract theory⁵: that although human culture changes and human societies exhibit variation, human nature itself is constant. Whether or not pre-social ‘man’ is posed as an historical or anthropological fact, the idea of an immutable human nature nonetheless makes it credible to imagine people in a state of nature contracting into a society, thereby surrendering their natural independence. And this frames the social and political significance of childhood at that time, because the child is perceived to re-enact the passage from natural man to social man. After the mid-nineteenth century revolution in natural history, most closely associated

with Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, the mutability of human nature would become axiomatic, and this opened out new possibilities for biosocial power. Transformed into an object of scientific investigation, childhood, and the posited link between child development and human evolution, was the terrain upon which psychology built its empire.

The origins of child psychology have been traced to seminal texts, among them Darwin's 1877 'A biographical Sketch of the Infant', Wilhelm Preyer's *Die Seele des Kindes* published in 1882, and G. Stanley Hall's 'Content of Children's Minds', published the following year (Archard, 2004: 40; Hendrick, 1997: 47-9). More important however, at least in terms of understanding *how* child psychology established itself as a scientific discipline were: firstly the trend towards mass compulsory schooling, which made large numbers of children available for observation and testing (Hendrick, 1997: 47-9; Rose, 1985: 131-8), and secondly, the spectre of 'degeneration', or the fear that national populations were in a state of evolutionary decline. Enveloping problems such as crime and destitution, the otherwise vague notion of degeneration established causal connections between 'social pathologies', such as suicide, alcoholism and prostitution and the 'hereditary' problem of 'feeble-minded' and 'mentally defective' children (Pick, 1989). In this way, childhood was emplaced within a biosocial frame that linked questions of 'normality' and 'abnormality' to 'primitive' cultures and the future of the 'race'. Knowledge of the child would enable the political and administrative apparatus of state, often prompted and assisted by non-state actors, to reverse the process of degeneration and engineer a population capable of defending the state and meeting its material needs (Bauman, 2009: 35-7).

The child-study movement amounts to a relatively short chapter in the modern history of childhood (approximately thirty years, from the 1880s – 1914 according to Hendrick, 1997: 47). Yet in its ideas and aspirations can be found the source of criticisms that the new

paradigm of childhood studies has levelled at developmental psychology, as in this passage from G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence*:

Along with the sense of the immense importance of further coordinating childhood and youth with the development of the race, has grown the conviction that only here can we hope to find true norms against the tendencies to precocity in home, school, church and civilization generally, and also to establish criteria by which to both diagnose and measure arrest and retardation in the individual and the race (Hall, 1911: viii).

Hall's 'biological psychology' draws heavily on Ernst Haeckel's 'biogenetic law', which is the theory that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny (i.e. individual development repeats, in foreshortened time, the development of the species). Although evolution was deemed to be an indeterminate process – in Darwin's words it is 'blind', meaning there is no design or designer – this open-endedness did not apply to the early years of childhood. According to Hall, the process of recapitulation continues outside of the womb, so that child development is – up the point of adolescence – a repetition of humanity's evolutionary past. This could go wrong, and Hall warns against the effects of deviating from nature's prescribed course: 'secret vice' and 'enfeebled hereditary' for example (Hall, 1911: xiv), but this was not so much threat as opportunity, because it added urgency to the claim that children should be assisted in developing in accordance with what one theorist called the 'phylogenetic series' (Gulick, 1898: 803). Either way, as with Rousseau, the future was unwritten, so that properly harnessed to social objectives and subject to formative influences, childhood would enable trained experts to direct the course of human evolution. Though reconfigured as a science of childhood, biosocial power remains intact in the idea that the future is accessible through the body of the growing child.

Of crucial importance here, though Hall does not fully enunciate the word in the passage quoted above, is the notion of the 'normal' child. Nikolas Rose has suggested that this appears in three guises, all of which can be detected in the passage above, and perhaps more importantly, we see how the 'normal' operates as a shifter between the biological and the social; between factual claims and normative assertions: at once that which is perceived to be natural and thus healthy; a standard against which individuals are judged; and an objective to be achieved through policies and social programmes (Rose, 1990: 130-1). It is not necessary to use the word itself, as it is also negatively articulated in concerns about 'arrest and retardation' which manifest in the 'secret vice' and 'enfeebled hereditary' mentioned above. Scientific statements mix freely with moral judgements, blurring the boundary between what is biologically given and what is socially expected or demanded, and although codified in the scientific language of 'observation', normality is a valuation (Rose, 1990: 131).

If the focus remains on what Rose calls 'the gaze of the psychologist', then it is easy to emphasise what is novel at the expense of continuity. The issue concerns the extent to which the 'natural' child can be distinguished from the 'social' child, and thus the extent to which the rival paradigms of developmental psychology and socialisation theory are in fact rival paradigms or, as was suggested earlier, the same field of practice. With the birth of child psychology emerges a technology of life that claims to lay bare the 'soul' of the child (Rose, 1990: 131), but we have already seen how Rousseau identified the youthful soul as a means of guiding humanity into the future. This is not to say that child psychology did not also recalibrate biosocial power. In the context of the child-study movement, the authority embodied by the figure of the Tutor in *Émile* is dispersed across a field of observation and intervention that connects the clinic to the home via social work, juvenile justice and the school (Rose, 1990: 130). But even this does not capture the full extent of the biosocial

apparatus being assembled at this time. We need to cast a wider net if we are to get an adequate sense of the limitations of reading the past through the lens of a posited bio-social dualism.

Hall picked up the thread of Rousseau's theory of childhood when he wrote that 'biological psychology finds many and cogent reasons to confirm' Rousseau's view that the young child should learn directly from nature (Hall, 1911: x). But the meaning of 'nature' was now radically altered. Hall's 'cogent reasons' concerned his view that the young child should be given the opportunity to enact (or rather re-enact) 'primal hereditary impulses':

The child revels in savagery, and if its tribal, predatory, hunting, fishing, fighting, roving, playing proclivities could be indulged in the country and under conditions that now, alas! seem hopelessly ideal, they could conceivably be so organised and directed as to be far more truly humanistic and liberal than all that the best modern school can provide (Hall, 1911: x).

Hall was convinced that adolescence was the key to mastering the future. 'In no psychic soil', he wrote, 'does seed, bad as well as good, strike such deep root, grow so rankly, or bear fruit so quickly or so surely' (1911: xviii-ix). And yet he remained pessimistic as to the possibility of allowing the 'fundamental traits of savagery their fling', because the city did not provide the 'proper environment' (Hall, 1911: x). Others however did not shy from the opportunity to fabricate the proper environment so that the child's 'proclivities' *could* and *would* be 'organised and directed'.

One organisation that took on this task was the Playground Association of America (PAA). Established in 1906, the PAA was an alliance between state administration, medicine, philanthropy and social science (Knapp and Hartsoe 1979; Cavallo 1981), with key figures

within the organisation publishing extensively on the educational and social benefits of supervised play (Lee, 1915; Gulick, 1898; Curtis, 1910). This literature suggests less in the way of a coherent body of thought than a tapestry of ideas borrowed from a vast and varied archive, yet there is a red thread that holds it together: Hall's theory of mind, muscles and nerves as a continuum. Muscular contractions were believed to modulate and regulate mental processes, which in turn suggested a causal relation between flabby muscles and lax morals: training the muscles through supervised play would build character in America's youth (Gagen, 2004: 428; Cavallo, 1981). Alongside see-saws and climbing frames, playgrounds were typically fitted with sandboxes so that, in accordance with Hall's theory, the play 'instincts' of the very young child would be assisted in recapitulating the primeval swamp (Gagen, 2004: 427). Field games such as baseball and football on the other hand were to become a 'school of conduct' (Lee, 1915: 374), with membership of the team emplacing each child within the constraints of a 'body of opinion' that would 'squeeze' them into the 'desired pattern' (Lee, 1915: 260). As with Rousseau, but now well beyond the realm of ideas, childhood was deployed as a strategy to master the future.

This discourse of playgrounds and team games is one example of how child psychology is also a technology of socialisation. Shifting seamlessly from 'instincts' to 'desired patterns' of conduct, the biological and the social are so intertwined that even if one is silenced by the particular instance of representation, it nonetheless remains an insistent presence. From the sandpit to the team game, the child was to be subject to social constraints which were to become subjective desires. As with Rousseau's child who 'learns without being taught' (for the control exercised by the Tutor was at all times to remain invisible to *Émile*), the child at play was to feel free while unknowingly undergoing a programme of training, the strategic aim of which was to produce self-regulating individuals who identified with a common

purpose. Rousseau had located this common purpose in the past – in Sparta; Progressive Era reformers looked only to the future, and the team was to be that future in embryonic form. From Rousseau to the Child Study movement, the boundaries between the social and biological, the cultural and the natural, the ontological and the technological are so porous that it makes little sense to describe it in the language of dualism and division.

In this section I have traced a genealogical outline of modern Western childhood, which does not take the form of a bio-social dualism but rather a biosocial nexus. The idea of a ‘nexus’ is intended to denote an interwoven grid or lattice, the argument being that modern Western childhood is *at once* a biosocial process of formation *and* a biosocial mode of power. Furthermore, the intersection of process and power is enfolded in the interconnection of ontology and technology, whereby the *being* of childhood as a biosocial process is grasped *in conjunction* with the enframing of childhood as a technology: a means of acting upon the future. While individual threads can be pulled from this weave for the purpose of analysis, they nonetheless constitute an irreducible whole which does not follow the logic of a divided childhood.

Biosocial power beyond childhood?

In section one I charted the passage from new paradigm to new wave, and showed how the latter is united not by a single perspective, but through an attempt to break the grip of bio-social dualism. Section two adopted a genealogical approach in arguing against the efficacy of bio-social dualism as a way of theorising modern Western childhood. This final section considers the implications of this intervention.

Although the new wave attempts to distance itself from the perceived shortcomings of the new paradigm, the difference between these positions begins to dissolve once it is

recognised that *both (re-)deploy biosocial power as a means of acting upon the future (of childhood)*. Insofar as there is a difference, it concerns the ‘depth’ of critique. By emphasising the agency of children and allowing their voices to be heard, the new paradigm set out to challenge the once dominant view of children as incomplete humans destined to commence a journey through stages of development until reaching the destination of the fully socialised adult. Biosocial power here takes the form of innate capacities which are embodied by children (agency and voice), and which are said to shape, even as they are shaped by, the social context. The new wave goes further, or ‘deeper’, in deconstructing what are considered to be the very cognitive frames from which modern Western childhood was forged, thereby disturbing the conditions of possibility for power asymmetries of the kind that structure adult-child relations. But this posited bio-social dualism is a discursive construct and not an historical artefact: the object of present concerns rather a product of past realities. Consequently, the new wave obscures the degree of continuity between past and present, and fails to see that it *inhabits the biosocial nexus* in staging its critique. In short, the new wave does not radically break from the trajectory of modern Western childhood, and it too re-deploys biosocial power in the attempt to open out new horizons for human futures to emerge.

In saying this I am not making a judgment – biosocial power is not inherently good or noxious; that will always remain a contextual issue, which is precisely why it is important to confront the implications of posing the question: how is biosocial power to be deployed, and to what end? The danger of course is that actual children become a means to imagined or envisioned ends, as has been the case in the past. But what sets the new wave apart is the way it attempts to explode the boundaries of the biosocial nexus so that it is no longer identical to the category ‘childhood’. This is important, because the question that follows – and it is now an old question of how best to determine the indeterminacy of human futures – would have to

be articulated in new ways. In other words, we would have to create new ways of posing and answering the question of ‘how, and to what end?’

Notes

1. In particular the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Bruno Latour, Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.
2. This phrase is borrowed from Deluze and Guattari (1987), and is an apposite way of characterising the new wave of childhood studies given the influence of their ideas on Lee (2001, 2005), Prout (2005: 113-18), and Jenks (2005: 142-3).
3. Michel Foucault’s (2007, 2008) theory of biopower and biopolitics concerns the question of how, since the eighteenth century, ‘the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy’ (Foucault, 2007: 1).
4. Lee uses the notion of a ‘developmental state’ to examine this connection between childhood and human futures. Focusing on the formation of ‘European nation-states from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries’, Lee argues that ‘childhood became identified as a site of investment for the future, a future which states were keen to control’ (2001: 22). While this analysis has much to offer, it also attributes too much in the way of historical coherence, intention and capacity to ‘states’ and ‘rulers’.
5. Modern social contract theory, associated with the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Rousseau, concerns the nature of political authority (wielded by a state or government) and political obligations (on the part of citizens).

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