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On power, habitus, and (in)civility: Foucault meets Elias meets Bauman in the playground

Kevin Ryan

Abstract
Drawing on the work of Foucault, Elias, and Bauman, this article examines how the playground has articulated specific configurations of power/knowledge. Originally designed to cultivate virtue and counteract vice, the playgrounds of the past were to complete the discipline of the schoolroom, assisting the trained master to ‘direct’ the child’s thoughts, feelings and actions. From its tentative beginnings in the work Rousseau, the strategy of supervised play was intended to conceal its purpose from the child, with power exercised through discreet forms of surveillance and constraint which would, it was hoped, gradually be embodied and re-enacted as self-restraint. Contemporary playgrounds – and here the article focuses on Ireland – no longer claim to be directing the conduct of children. Public playgrounds are framed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, while commercial playgrounds provide a service to consumers of play, yet both unobtrusively act upon the child’s capacity for action, and there is a tension between these different modes of provision. Setting recent Eliasian scholarship on ‘de-civilising’ processes against Bauman’s theory of ‘liquid modernity’, and utilising Foucault’s notion of government as the ‘conduct of conduct’, the paper examines this tension and shows how it provides insight into the relationship between power, habitus, and (in)civility today.

Introduction
Norbert Elias’ Civilising Process (2000) is perhaps best known for its analysis of the long-term processes which combined to reduce the incidence of aggression and violence in everyday life. In visual terms, the theory could be depicted as a snowball rolling down a long shallow incline. Nobody really knows how the civilising process was set in motion, and yet it exhibits a definite direction: it gains momentum, mass and density as it moves through time so that it becomes an almost unstoppable
evolutionary force. I say ‘almost’ because (as a process) the snowball is in a state of motion, and thus may collide with obstacles that alter its course or shatter its structural integrity. Recent Eliasian scholarship suggests that this may have happened; that the civilising process has gone into ‘reverse’, in which case it is possible to speak of a ‘de-civilising’ process or set of processes (Mennell 1995, 1990, Fletcher 1995, Wacquant 2004). The main insight here is that new patterns of behaviour are being habituated; the self-restraint and mutual forbearance which is characteristic of civilising processes is giving way to more impulsive, aggressive, and violent behaviours. Stephen Mennell presents the contrast between civilising and de-civilising processes in tabular form as a set of opposites; for example ‘increased mutual identification’ is set against ‘decreased mutual identification’, and ‘decreased violence’ is set against ‘increased violence’ (1990, p. 206). This would suggest that the notion of a reversal is to be understood as a process of un-doing rather than unravelling: the return of something familiar and undesirable rather than the emergence of something unknown and possibly unfamiliar (see Pratt 2004).

I’m not convinced that this is the best way of explaining or interpreting the relation between past and present, between what was and what is. My objective in this paper is to examine the dispositions and behaviours associated with civilising and de-civilising processes by drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman as well as Elias. I want to make use of the tensions that arise when these three thinkers are brought together in the same analytical space. I will also be using a study of playgrounds to frame the analysis. Before explaining why the playground is suited to this task, a few words are required on the strategy of triangulation.

If modernity is conceptualised as a puzzle, then the discipline of sociology can be said to have pieced the puzzle together in a variety of ways. The end result – the picture we are presented with – is sometimes sophisticated, perhaps comprehensive, or it may be stripped down to bare essentials; either way, pieces which are present in one account may look very different in another, or indeed be absent altogether. In the case of Elias, certain pieces are consigned to the margins of his main concerns. Bauman and Foucault go some way to correcting this; their particular talent (each in his own way) being the ability to practice an unrelenting circumspection. As Foucault noted (1984a, p. 42-3), it is not a question of choosing sides: insisting that
medical treatment is a humane alternative to punishment, or championing self-restraint over external-constraint. Treatment might be preferable to punishment, but can we know for sure that a specific instance of aversion therapy or psycho-surgery was more humane than two dozen strokes of the lash? For Foucault what matters is to understand how various modalities of power are exercised through and over life (Foucault 1977, 1998, 2007). Power is at all times a living relation, and this makes power dangerous, because any attempt to discipline, regulate, or regularise life – which is really what Elias’ theory is all about – connects the formation of subjectivity (or habitus) to subjection. In refusing to take sides before the work of analysis has even commenced, Foucault’s stance is comparable to Elias’ method of detachment, yet Foucault was very much an analyst of the specificity of historical epochs. What he called ‘effective’ history is history without constants. In contrast to the Eliaian approach, which posits the unsocialised child as a trans-historical zero-point from which the civilising process commences (Elias 2000, p. 120, 153, Mennell 2007, p. 6-7, 1990, p. 209), Foucault refuses the ‘reassuring stability’ of foundations, whether located in nature or the human body (Foucault 1984b, p. 87-8).

Perhaps more than any other social theorist, Bauman has studied the ways in which modern ordering processes are implicated in the creation of human waste and related practices of waste management and waste disposal (Bauman 1989, 1991, 1998). We need not refer to the Holocaust as our point of reference here, Elias and Bauman having both examined the Holocaust. I am thinking of more mundane examples, those more often found in the work of Foucault than Bauman to be sure, yet commensurate with Bauman’s interest in the creation and management of human waste. Education and psychiatry are good examples; fields of activity and technologies of life that discipline and normalise, constituting relations of difference between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’ or ‘defective’. The activities at the margin of the civilising process did not escape Elias’ notice, but they were rarely to the forefront of his analyses, and when they did appear they were given the innocuous-sounding name of ‘pacification’ (Elias 1986, p. 41, Elias and Dunning 1986, p. 63, Elias and Scotson 1994, p. 121-2, 130-1).

I propose that the question of whether and to what extent we are witnessing a transformation in habitus is best answered by suspending judgement on whether
violence is on the increase, and instead conducting what Foucault called an historical ontology of ourselves: an inquiry into how we have come to be what we are (1984a, 1982, p. 216). The question, which is as much Elias’ and Bauman’s question as it is Foucault’s, can be extended by asking: ‘what are we in the process of becoming’.

**Why the playground?**

In book I of The Civilising Process Elias explains that he is examining table manners because they can be treated as a ‘segment’ of ‘the totality of socially instilled forms of conduct’ (2000, p. 59). The playground can also be examined in this way, but in contrast to the Eliasian idea of a linear process and an enduring figuration, the playground articulates particular configurations of power/knowledge.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the playground was assembled and positioned at the centre of the social, but by no means was it an isolated technology. Connecting up with the school, with philanthropy, and later with social work and psychology, the playground was at the interface between order and waste, coercion and violence; it was among the techniques used to examine, discipline, and normalise. I have examined these aspects of ordering (civilising) processes elsewhere (Ryan 2007), and will return to the question of waste in the final section of the paper. The main focus however will be on how the playground was assembled and positioned, bearing in mind that the centre and the margin form a mutually constitutive relation.

The analysis will be presented in five steps. The next section looks at the recent revival of public playgrounds, a trend which is anchored in rights discourse and framed by the notion of empowerment. Between the rights of the child and the playground is something of a tension however, and making this explicit begins the task of mapping the tricky relationship between the power of the playground and the freedom of the child. This is examined in detail in the subsequent three sections, each of which explores a specific aspect of the history of the playground. The first of these sections looks at playgrounds in early 19th century Britain; at how the playground was developed in conjunction with spectacular innovations in the field of education. By focusing on the relationship between the playground and the classroom, we will see how a strategy of self-mastery was constructed through the idea of cultivating the child’s nature. The strategy itself, which I discuss by drawing on the work of
Rousseau, was anchored in a particular configuration of power/knowledge, and it was reconfigured during the second half of the 19th century. This process of reconfiguration saw the playground lifted out of the school setting and moved into public space. In Progressive Era America, which is the focus of the third and final historical section, the playground was framed as an ‘ethical laboratory’ and a school for democracy, which transformed the technique of cultivation into an engineering project. By juxtaposing these histories, we will see examples of how the child at play has articulated specific social logics – the interlacing of social knowledge, relations of power, and social practices – and how power is produced and exercised through the freedom of the child (on social and political logics see Glynos and Howarth 2007). In terms of overall structure, the analysis will be presented in the form of an ellipse; it begins by looking at the revival of public playgrounds, and it returns (in the final section) to the present via the past, at which point the analysis shifts to developments in the private sector, where play services are provided on a commercial basis. Drawing on Bauman’s theory of ‘liquid modernity’, this final section looks at the behaviours associated with de-civilising processes.

The right to play
Since the new millennium public playgrounds have been appearing all over the Republic of Ireland (hereafter ‘Ireland’, and I will explain why I am beginning with Ireland shortly). Some have been retrofitted; others have been built from scratch. Figure 1 depicts the playground in Lismore, a small town in the south-eastern county of Waterford. All of the children depicted in this image are being supervised by adults. Even the woman to the right of the image, in the background, seated and physically detached from her child/children, maintains visual contact. Playgrounds are not always like this of course, but there is a lot of history in this image.
As will be seen in more detail below, the playgrounds of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were rooted in the idea that children should be supervised while at play. Play was to be ‘directed’ to specific ends, and the equipment organised into the playground – such as swings and sandpits – was to play a key role in civilising children by training them in habits of self-control and cooperation. Indeed traces of this ideal can be seen in the swings, slides and see-saws found in many playgrounds today. The equipment itself has changed in recent years. See-saws now work on the principle of a spring rather than a fulcrum, which means that they can be operated by an individual and no longer require a partner, and the slides which once stood independently of climbing frames are now integrated into a single piece of equipment. I will return to the significance of these small changes later on, but for now it is sufficient to note that the playground was originally a disciplinary apparatus; a way of teaching the child to behave in a particular way.

Today the renewed interest in playgrounds is anchored in rights discourse. In Ireland the main reference points from a policy perspective are the *National Children’s Strategy*, the *National Play Policy*, and the more recent *National Recreation Policy*, all of which defer to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which was ratified by Ireland in 1992 (Ireland 2000, 2004, 2007). Article 31 of the CRC sets out a bundle of rights relating specifically to play, recreation, leisure, and culture:
1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate freely in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity (UN 1989).

The right to play is unique; it is a new type of right, specific to young people under 18 years of age, and recognised for the first time in the CRC (David 2006, p. 3).

When the Government of Poland first proposed a CRC in 1978, it based its draft on the 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Play and education were written into a single Article (Article VII) of the Polish initiative and directed to the same ends: to ‘enable’ the child to develop her or his ‘abilities’, ‘individual judgement’, ‘sense of moral and social responsibility’, and ‘to become a useful member of society’². A decade later, when the CRC was finally adopted, this apparent equivalence between play and education had become unstable. Notwithstanding the fact that the CRC is based on the indivisibility and interrelationship of rights (David 2006, p. 15), play and education have to some extent been prised apart, and the gap articulates a growing emphasis on individual freedom.

Articles 28 and 29 of the CRC – those dealing specifically with education – contain words like ‘compulsory’ (primary education) and ‘discipline’ (to be ‘administered in a manner consistent with the child’s human dignity and in conformity with the present convention’). Article 29 also stipulates that education should be ‘directed’ to particular ends: specifically, preparing the child for ‘responsible life in a free society’. That education should be compulsory, at least at the elementary level, that it should entail some kind of discipline, and that it should prepare the child for responsible life in a free society: all of this seems obvious if education is equated with schooling.

The relationship between education and play is something else. In the decade it took to produce the CRC, a consensus of sorts emerged on the need to broaden the
meaning of education beyond schooling, training, and instruction (see Detrick 1992). A 1982 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights captures this quite succinctly:

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\text{[T]he education of children is the whole process whereby, in any society, adults endeavour to transmit their beliefs, culture and other values to the young, whereas teaching or instruction refers in particular to the transmission of knowledge and to intellectual development (Campbell and Cosans judgement of 25th February 1982, cited Detrick 1999, p. 475).}
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Viewed through the lens of legal discourse, schooling is a right which is compulsory and in need of authoritative guidance: a right not to be refused by the child and to be directed so that it accords with specific ends. Outside of the school, play, though still a dimension of education, is a right to be met on the basis of equal opportunity. The rights-based approach to play underpins the National Play Policy (NPP) in Ireland. With its overall objective ‘to plan for an increase in public play facilities and thereby improve the quality of life of children living in Ireland’ (2004, p. 8), the NPP defines Play as follows:

\[
\text{Play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child…Play is what children do when no-one else is telling them what to do (Ireland 2004, p. 11).}
\]

Though sometimes referred to as the ‘forgotten right’, partly because the rights recognised under Article 31 are considered a luxury in comparison to other rights ‘whose violations bear more cruel, visible and spectacular consequences’ (David 2006, p. 17), Ireland has taken Article 31 very seriously, and it is for that reason that I think the Irish case is worth examining (I return to it in the final section of the paper). In its second periodic report, submitted to the UN Committee on the CRC in 2005, the Government of Ireland claimed that its new NPP made Ireland ‘the first country in the world with a detailed national play policy’ (Ireland 2005, p. 7). The definition of play in the NPP is actually borrowed from the British policy context (NPFA 2000, p. 6) though, as we will see later, it could well have been written by Rousseau some two hundred and fifty years ago. This is not to suggest that nothing has changed. For Rousseau it was important that the child thought that he (or she, though he had far
less to say about girls) was the master of his own actions; in fact the child was to be subject to a directing power which would unobtrusively act upon his actions. In Rousseau (1993) this power is wielded by a figure he calls the Tutor, symbolising a specific mode of education which operates outside of the schoolroom and away from books. It turns out that the enlarged conception of education is not so new after all. Today we speak of the right to play, and of the freedom of the child whilst at play, as if the conduct of the child at play is no longer circumscribed by a directing power. But there is a tension built into the NPP, a tension which is more or less apparent depending on whether we locate its detailed objectives within or outside of the school. On the one hand the child at play is a freely choosing and self-directing agent. On the other hand, in line with contemporary theories of play (NPFA 2000, Coalter and Taylor 2001, Wood and Attfield 2005), the NPP directs the child’s freedom towards specific ends: play should aid the development of the ‘whole child’ (emotional well-being, cognitive skills, problem-solving skills, and social skills), it should assist in producing healthy children (both physically and mentally), it should contribute to a more inclusive society, and it should help to tackle both ‘anti-social’ behaviour and juvenile offending. And a final objective, which might provide a clue as to what exactly it means to ‘prepare the child for responsible life in a free society’ in today’s world, play should ‘aid the economy by developing autonomous adults’ (Ireland 2004, p. 12-3). Aside from the slant of this last point, all of these objectives are steeped in the history of the playground, and yet the rights-based approach is a major innovation, not least because – outside of the school – the specific objectives of the NPP are to be met solely through provision. A question of sorts arises within this field of discourse on the right to play, and it concerns the relationship between discipline and freedom. The playground has articulated this relationship in a variety of ways, and its history provides an interesting vantage point on the present.

The power of play

The objective here is not to reconstruct the history of the playground in all of its detail, but to present a critical account of how the playground was assembled, how it instantiated a specific mode of power, and how this relates to the habitus associated with civilising processes. I begin with a quote from James Kay (later Kay-
Shuttleworth), who played a significant role in establishing a public system of elementary schools in Britain\(^2\) (Stewart and McCann 1967, p. 179-97):

…during the period when the children are taking recreation they are not abandoned to the mischievous influences of the street or lane in which their parents reside, but they take their recreation under the superintendence of the teachers, who endeavour, by careful attention to what occurs, without applying any restraint, to exclude the influence of vicious propensities; and, by degrees, to establish in the playground mutual good offices among the children’ (Kay 1838, p. 19)

The quote is from Kay’s testimony before a Select Committee on educating the poorer classes in England and Wales, and in it can be seen the key elements of the early nineteenth century playground: supervision, moral training, and something Elias might recognise: training as a process whereby external control is habituated, leading to self-control on the part of the child.

This was an intense period of innovation in the field of education. Among the better known schools were those of Johann Pestalozzi, Emanuel von Fallenberg and Friedrich Froebel on the continent; in Britain were the monitorial schools of Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster, Robert Owen’s experiment in New Lanark, and the infant schools of Samuel Wilderspin and David Stow. Notwithstanding variation in pedagogical techniques, a common objective emerges within this field of innovation: the idea of cultivating a ‘second nature’ (Pestalozzi 1801, p. 180-1, Stow 1854, p. 48); of habits, manners, and sentiments being ‘impressed’ onto the child so that they became ‘natural’ (Owen 1817, p. 82-3); of morality as an ‘art’ which is acquired through practice so that it ‘becomes a part of our very selves’ (Wilderspin 1852, p. 97); of childhood as something to be ‘moulded’ by the ‘moral machine’ of education (Stow 1854, p. 87); of ‘a conscious being acting upon another being which is growing into consciousness’ (Froebel 1826, p. 64). All share the idea that power can be exercised in such a way that constraint is experienced as freedom.

The continental reformers mentioned above, all inspired directly or indirectly by Rousseau, developed a child-centred approach to education which privileged the
place of play in the child’s development. But it was the British reformers, in particular Wilderspin and Stow, who developed a distinctly spatial model of training comprised of distinct yet interrelated zones. Readers familiar with Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) will recognise his theory of panopticism – the regulation of self-regulation – in what follows, though as will be seen, the practice of the playground went beyond the discipline engendered by a centralised authority.

Both Wilderspin and Stow developed what they called a ‘training system’, which for Stow included teacher training, for he was interested in training the trainers, and in both cases the playground was an integral feature of the system (fig 2). Wilderspin insisted on flowers and fruit trees in his playgrounds; as a constant temptation these would compel the child to ‘set due bounds to his desire’ (1852, p. 88). Wilderspin was essentially re-staging the fall, and if, like Adam and Eve, the child gave into temptation, the infraction would form the basis of a more explicit lesson in morality. The rotary swing, which can also be seen in figure 2, was equally important. Unlike the conventional swing (a seat suspended from two ropes), which Stow equated with ‘stupefaction’, the rotary swing required each child to be the ‘regulator of his own movement’. To set the swing in motion, all of the children holding the ropes would work together until airborne, at which point it was at the behest of individuals to keep the swing moving. In this way the swing would teach the child to be independent and to cooperate (a similar logic can be seen in what would later become a standard piece of playground equipment: the see-saw).

Figure 2 The uncovered school room. *From: Stow, 1854, p. 214.*
Complimenting these technical innovations was the technique of trained observation. Children at play were ‘free and unconstrained’, and the supervised playground would provide the ‘arena’ in which the ‘true character and dispositions of the children were exhibited’ (Stow 1854, p. 209; cf. Wilderspin 1852, p. 46). In contrast to unsupervised play, which left the child free to ‘develop evil habits and a corresponding disposition’ (Stow 1854, p. 6), the supervised playground was to instil ‘a sense of obedience and order in the child’, so that the child would come to ‘do everything in a regular manner’ and ‘have a command over itself’ (Wilderspin 1852, p. 20). While this type of surveillance is at the heart of Foucault’s theory of panopticism (represented by the all-seeing invisible eye of the central inspection tower in Bentham’s panopticon), in the playground self-command was to be instilled as much through mutual constraint as a fear of authority. Interaction among ‘restrained playfellows’ was considered to be far more effective than the internalised gaze of the master (Wilderspin 1852, p. 24). It is through this combination of internalised external authority and mutual restraint that Foucault can be said to meet Elias in the playground (and Bauman will join them later).

In the playground the master would study each child’s character and note incidents of waywardness. But it was only when the children returned to the schoolroom that the behaviours rehearsed in the playground would form the basis of moral training. This was the purpose of the gallery (fig 3).

Figure 3 The covered school room. From: Stow, 1854, p. 215.
When the children were seated in the gallery, the master could observe them as individuals and collectively, but unlike the panopticon, visibility works in both directions: the master is visible to each and every child. This two-way visibility would enable the master to ‘conduct’ what Stow called the ‘sympathy of numbers’.

The technique, borrowed from Wilderspin, was derived from an understanding of the power of large numbers (of people) (Stow 1854, p. 156; Rose 1999, p. 197-232). What Stow called the ‘new state of society’, meaning industrial towns and cities, brought a mass of bodies into close proximity, and this created a space of ‘concentrated feelings’ (Stow 1854, p. 60). In the slums children were exposed to the wrong feelings, which not only corrupted their individual natures, but also threatened to drag the more respectable classes into a downward spiral of immorality (1854, p. 106). But wielded by the trained teacher, the sympathy of numbers could ennoble the child, and do so ‘from a fear of offending, rather than from a fear of the rod’ (Stow 1854, p. 157, 261). Like the conductor of an orchestra (Foucault 1982, p. 220-21), the master was to pool the feelings of the children assembled in the gallery, and then direct this pool of sympathies so that immoral tendencies were counteracted. If a child came to school with dirty hands for example, the master should not simply tell the child that this was wrong, and then instruct the child in the rule of washing one’s hands before coming to school. That would be teaching. Instead the child’s hands should be held up for all to see, whereupon the master would pose questions to the class and direct the process of answering. Modifying conduct in this way was training (Stow 1854, p. 79).

By the sympathy of numbers was meant a technique of bringing mind to bear upon mind (Stow 1854, p. 17). In contrast to the individual child, a group of children provided the trained trainer with a whole variety of temperaments and ‘mental powers’ to work with: some were better at apprehending facts, others at abstract reasoning, but in the gallery, properly conducted, each of these faculties could ‘be made to operate upon all’ (Stow 1854, p. 17, 156). There would inevitably be cases of wrongdoing, and these would be corrected, but not through the use of the rod. Instead the master would induce a sense of shame in the wrongdoer by assembling a student jury which would pass judgment on the immoral act, and as punishment the child would experience the feeling of being temporarily excluded from the circle of sympathy (Stow 1854, p. 262-3).
As a technique, the sympathy of numbers was an attempt to act – indirectly – upon the emotions as much as the intellect. The master was to orchestrate the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the children so that, *by their own efforts*, they strived to reach a destination which had already been mapped out for them, which is where the coercive grip of the playground becomes visible: it was intended to move the unregulated child into a regulated space which would, in time, be embodied as self-regulation. Ideally, once the child had passed through the training system, his or her conduct would be guided by bonds of trust and mutual restraint. But the power of the playground – the power of freedom\(^4\) – was shored up by something else: coercive power.

The strategy of self-mastery
In linking technical innovations (the rotary swing) to practical techniques (the sympathy of numbers), the early 19\(^{th}\) century playground can be conceptualised as a technology of conduct (Foucault 1977, p. 294) which was harnessed to a strategic aim: self-mastery. Rousseau produced a concise diagram of this strategy in 1762, not in his *Social Contract*, but in his treatise on Education: *Emile*, a text John Dewey (1916, p. 112-8) considered still relevant in the context of Progressive Era reforms (which is where I will re-locate the playground once the strategy has been outlined).

The focus of *Emile* is the period of the life-cycle prior to adulthood which, according to Rousseau, is comprised of four stages. Rousseau’s finely calibrated theory of childhood was not in itself radical; what was radical – measured by reactions to it – was his argument concerning the place of Man in the trinity of God, Man, and Nature. I am going to suggest that we do not shy away from the word ‘Man’, even though it clearly has a gendered meaning. Because ‘Man’ also has a larger meaning which circumscribes asymmetrical power relations, whether configured in terms of gender or otherwise. ‘Man’ is at once a claim to universality and the means of staging what Foucault called pastoral power: power which takes as its object the welfare of one and all (Foucault 2007, Dean 1999, p. 74-83). This is crucial to understanding Rousseau’s infamous doctrine of forcing people to be free, for the strategy of self-
mastery confronts a dilemma at the heart of modern power relations: the difficulty of striking a balance between the freedom of each and the freedom of all.

I take Rousseau’s question to be this: what exactly does it mean to say ‘I am free’? The question is about limits, about the nature of constraints, and Rousseau crafts his argument by first deferring to a higher power as the cause of all that exists. While Man can intuit, even feel the presence of this higher power, God can never be known in the way that Nature can be known, and Nature can teach Man the correct relation between one’s own individual nature, human nature, and the order of ‘Nature’ in the larger sense. From this follows Rousseau’s creed: at source all people are the same (human nature is unchanging and universal), but Man’s nature may be corrupted by particular social arrangements. This is the problem of passing from the natural state to the social state. Law is no guarantee of a virtuous order, and neither is reason, for both may be tainted by social conventions. So Rousseau looks to conscience, stating that ‘conscience persists in following the order of nature in spite of the laws of man’ (1993, p. 274). The key to freedom thus lies in the cultivation of conscience. If conscience is to be cultivated, then what is required is a power that takes the place of God and acts on behalf of Nature. In *Emile* this is the function of the Tutor, a directing power who adopts the techniques of a gardener in order to cultivate the nature of the child he has selected as his pupil: Emile. Emile represents ‘man in general’, and by showing how this one fictional person can become the master of himself, Rousseau aims to demonstrate how Man can be freed from the chains he speaks of at the beginning of his *Social Contract* (1968, p. 49). *Emile* would demonstrate how Man could be trained in the ‘right use of his freedom’ (1993, p. 306). Emile was to learn from Nature, away from books and among things, beginning with the simple before tackling the complex, and mastering the tangible before moving to the abstract. It is for this reason that play was so important. While at play Emile would be immersed in situations and receptive to sensations, thus affording an ideal opportunity to orchestrate his formative experiences.

In the same way as the schoolmaster was to observe the child from a distance in the infant systems of Wilderspin and Stow, Rousseau’s Tutor instructs his readers to ‘watch your scholar well before you say a word to him…do not constrain him in anything, the better to see him as he really is’ (1993, p. 68-9). From day one of his
life, the Tutor studies Emile and prepares to bring him under discreet control. In one example, a conjuror at a local fair is employed to confound the boy by leading a wax duck around a bowl of water without touching it. Emile returns home to ponder the secret behind the trick, and when he concludes that it has been staged by using a magnet, he returns to the fair to upstage the conjuror and bask in the applause of the crowd. But this vainglorious intention has already been anticipated; it is all part of the lesson, and when the plan backfires he experiences shame and disgrace. The lesson is a blend of science (knowledge of physics) and morality (the cost of vanity), and it illustrates how Emile’s actions have always already been acted upon by the Tutor. Emile always believes he is free, but he is free to act only within parameters constructed by his Tutor. But this directing power is subtle in its operations and its exercise, which brings us to the question of habitus, more specifically, how habitus relates to power.

Via the figure of the Tutor, Rousseau speaks of the ‘training of a sort of sixth sense’, which he also calls ‘common sense’, explaining that this ‘is not common to all men’ but ‘results from the well-regulated use of the other five [senses]’ (1993, p. 145). By ‘directing’ Emile’s senses, the instruction unobtrusively imparted by the Tutor was to be ‘embodied in deed’ and ‘engraved’ on Emile’s memory so that it would ‘never fade away’ (1993, p. 340-1). This is broadly similar to Elias’ conception of habitus, which he says is ‘imprinted on individuals from early childhood’ and ‘kept alert…by a powerful and increasingly strictly organised social control’ (2000, p. 441). Embodied as habitus, the constraining and directing power of the Tutor (Elias would say the ‘super-ego’) was to be transformed into Man’s conscience – this is Rousseau’s objective, and his method. By converting external constraint into self-restraint, education would (more or less) solve the problem of self-mastery. But there still remained the question of what to do with those unable or unwilling to master their passions and appetites.

Rousseau addresses this problem by splitting the power of the Tutor; something which happens only as Emile approaches the end of his education. No longer in the realm of childhood, Emile marks his transition to adulthood (representing Man’s maturity) by asserting his autonomy. Now married and about to father a child, Emile concludes his long education by challenging the authority of the Tutor ‘…God forbid
that I should let you educate the son as you educated the father. God forbid that so sweet and holy a task should be fulfilled by any but myself…’. But almost in the same breath he entreats the Tutor to ‘Advise and control us; we shall be easily led; as long as I live I shall need you’ (1993, p. 533). The Tutor is thus retained as an external power to which Man will always be subject, and – because Emile himself has requested it – this coercive power is posited as a legitimate condition of Man’s freedom. In this way Rousseau crafts an ontology of power with three coordinates: subjectivity (self-restraint), intersubjectivity (mutual forbearance), and subjection (external constraint).

In *Emile* we find the strategy of self-mastery as both an ideal and a design. Emile travels a road which has been mapped out for him by power; he complies with the demands of power, and he does so with enthusiasm because he believes that he is the author of his own actions. The world of social practice is different of course, and there is often a significant gap between the design or the ideal and the real. While it did not emerge from a blueprint, the strategy of self-mastery was nonetheless instituted through a process of discursive formation which was never finished, never fully accomplished, and there were always those who were unable or unwilling to comply with the demands of power. When the various ways of thinking and staging the strategy of self-mastery are abstracted into a field of discourse, then a discernable objective comes into view which maps onto Rousseau’s writings: producing a general will; a social contract. Not a contract orchestrated through a process of open communication, but a shared background consensus quietly imprinted on the child. The whole point of infant training was that the child would carry the background disposition – the habitus – acquired in the playground and gallery into adult life. This was to be the basis of ordered social action (Haugaard 2008).

**Civilising the child**

The first playgrounds were organised around the belief in a static and universal human nature upon which a second nature could be grafted. By the middle of the nineteenth century, theories of hereditary crime, pauperism, and vice, initially a combination of observation, conjecture and analogy, were bolstered by the science of evolution. Once consolidated as a new configuration of power/knowledge, this
presented a question of some magnitude. Despite all the talk of reason, virtue, conscience and self-command, something had been overlooked, and it was busy working its evil among the population. The really troubling – and potentially humiliating – thing was that this had been unknowingly aided by the civilising of society. The shared humanity which had underpinned the optimism of early 19th century reformers was shaken into a new object: a common biology. But this was not all of a piece, for there were signs of an evolutionary gap within the category of Man. The universality of Man was shattered by the positing of biological distinctions specified in terms of coexisting ‘races’ and differential ‘descents’. And this found its domestic equivalent in discourses of ‘degeneration’: individuals and groups within the domestic population who were on the same evolutionary plane as primitive races.

Human nature was now mutable, subject to evolutionary forces which had always been at work, through Man had been blind to these forces. And because Man had been blind so the process of evolution had been blind, not in Darwin’s sense of natural selection being a process of ‘blind chance’ (Darwin 1981, p. 396), but in the more technical sense of being undirected by Man. While this could have been a moment of profound humiliation, in fact it offered up a new horizon of possibilities: the opportunity to reinstate the project of self-mastery. The great evolutionary struggle for existence was now visible. If it could be known, then, in the words of the biometrician and eugenicist Francis Galton, it could be directed (Galton 1901, p. 665).

Concerned over the numbers among the ‘rising generation’ who were not attending any type of school, and determined to counter ‘influences subversive of social order’, preventative agencies like the Playground and General Recreation Society of London had begun to move the playground beyond the school setting by the middle of the nineteenth century (Punch 1858; Englishwomen’s review 1859). By the end of the century growing concern about the degenerating state of the population saw the theme of social defence become more urgent (Stedman Jones 1971, Pick 1989). British defeat in the first Boer War galvanised the imperialist Lord Reginald Brabazon, who founded the Metropolitan Parks, Boulevards and Playgrounds Association in 1882. Though in some respects a continuation of the established Victorian movement to defend the commons, this was a discourse of racial hygiene: the city needed ‘lungs’ –
open spaces, parks and playgrounds – so that its young inhabitants would develop broad chests and strong moral fibre: the city was to raise up men capable of defending the empire (Brabazon 1887, Malchow 1985, Reeder 2006, Brehony 2003).

Similar activity was in evidence on the other side of the Atlantic, but in America the status of the playground would be radically transformed, no longer merely a supplement to the school or the park but instead the centrepiece of a movement which brought together civic enterprise, philanthropy, state legislatures, and the White House. At the helm of the movement, established in 1906, was the Playground Association of America (PAA) (Knapp and Hartsoe 1979). Playgrounds had been around for some two decades in the bigger American cities, but according to Luther Gulick, one of the founders of the PAA, earlier efforts had floundered because they lacked a systematic theory connecting play to moral and physical development (Cavallo 1981, p. 35). The PAA would provide this missing link.

Psychology, not as a branch of philosophy or theology, but as a positive science, was established as an authoritative discipline in America toward the end of the nineteenth century. For the theorists involved in the PAA, it is Karl Groos, William James and, above all, G. Stanley Hall who stand out as the most influential representatives of the new psychology. As a neo-Lamarckian, Hall proposed that individual development, from foetus to adult (ontogenesis), recapitulated the stages of human evolution (phylogenesis) (Cavallo 1981, p. 56). Childhood was thus understood (and examined) as a foreshortened repetition of human history. Hall’s theory found its dramatic moment in the way it framed the passage from past to present, childhood to adulthood as problematic. Modern society was deemed to have become too sedentary, leading to muscular atrophy and moral decay: flabby muscles were the cause of flabby morals (Gulick 1898, p. 794, Curtis 1907, p. 282). The adolescent’s inclination to masturbate, the capitalist’s indifference to the public good, the labourer’s willingness to strike, the politician’s proclivity for corruption, and the rise of degenerate habits among the population – saloons, brothels, and pool halls – provided the evidence. The population was in a state of degeneration, necessitating an urgent course of action, and the scope for intervention was opened out by Hall’s theory of the relationship between mind and body. According to Hall, consciousness, muscles, and sensory nerves existed on the same continuum, so that training the body
would also condition the mind (Gagen 2004, p. 427-8). With adolescence, the child was thought to have reached the most recent stage of human evolution, and because this passed beyond a mere rehearsal of the past it afforded the possibility of shaping the direction of future evolution (Gagen 2004, p. 427). This is the precise point where the supervised and publicly funded playground would be inserted into the field of discourse.

While the playground activists conceded that the child’s intellect could be adequately trained in the school, the problem of synchronising physical and moral regeneration could only be solved by the playground. The signs of degeneration were alarming, but it was possible to stage a renewal, to secure the future by training children in the arts of self-control and mutual restraint (Curtis 1910). The playground was to lead this process of renewal; it was to be an ‘ethical laboratory’ wherein the child would learn that self-control was the condition of freedom (Gulick 1907, 1909, 1920). The sandbox (copied from experiments in Berlin) was added to the see-saws, swings and climbing frames of the existing playground model, tailoring activities to suit the precise developmental stages of the child. But now the emphasis was on the adolescent, and the team game was posited as the culmination of the child’s education-through-play. In the course of recapitulating human evolution, the child was said to develop a group instinct, but this could be expressed just as easily through the immoral activities of a ‘gang’ as the civic qualities of a rule-bound ‘team’. Membership of a team would prepare the child for life in a society based on growing specialisation and interdependence (Lee 1902, p. 210). Modern society demanded that all children experience their ‘conscious individuality’ becoming ‘submerged in a sense of membership’ (Lee 1907, p. 489, cf. Gulick 1907, p. 481, Curtis 1917, p. 226-7). This was not something that could be staged at a purely cognitive level through instruction; instead it had to be felt, experienced not in the head but in the ‘heart’ as an ‘intense controlling ideal’ (Lee 1907, p. 489). If the strategy of supervised play succeeded, then the problem of self-mastery would have been solved: the player would not simply be part of the team; instead the team (or city or nation) would become an integral and inseparable part of the player.

The Progressive Era playground recalibrated the sympathy or numbers by dispensing with the gallery and moving the master further into the background. Supervision took
one step back; it was the equipment, rules, and setting which were to create the boundary conditions that conducted the conduct of the child. Furthermore, and here is the trace of Rousseau, the child was never to be aware of being anything other than free:

‘The man whose limbs are shackled cannot control them. The man whose mind is shackled, cannot control his mind. The person who is compelled by force or fear, so that he is not free, has no self-control. The control of one’s self is absolutely based upon having the freedom to control one’s self’ (Gulick 1907, p. 483).

This is the subject of Elias’ civilising process, the subject who embodies the shift in balance from external constraint to self-restraint. For Foucault it is a situation where ‘freedom has been subjected to power’ and ‘submitted to government’ (Foucault 2000, p. 324).

As it migrated out of the school to become a feature of public space, the playground connected up with other innovations such as public baths, parks, and libraries, together articulating the ideal of the moral city, which was to purify the population and promote moral uplift (Boyer 1978). To what extent this communitarian project did or could succeed is not a question I will attempt to answer here. Of interest is what this tells us about the strategy of self-mastery. By instituting a discourse of administrative expertise, technical proficiency and specialisation, Progressive Era reformers reconfigured the relationship between childhood and education. The garden of virtue was transformed into an engineering project: park administrators, playground supervisors and city planners would engineer civility. Furthermore, the strategy of self-mastery was now anchored in the authority of science. The recapitulationists claimed to be in possession of true knowledge derived not from metaphysics, but from empirical facts: from ‘a more careful study and better understanding of children’ (Curtis 1907, p. 280). It was simply a fact that ‘play is the ontogenetic rehearsal of the phylogenetic series’ (Gulick 1898, p. 803), and this factual claim supported a normative agenda: ‘What we want is the dedication of free, self-directed individuals to a common purpose, not the literal welding of subordinated fragments into a common whole’ (Lee 1907, p. 487). For those with a stake in this
project there was never any thought given to the possibility that organising infants into ring games, and older children into competitive team games, was in part the source of the child’s ‘nature’. Whether we look to Rousseau, Wilderspin or Gulick, what is said to lie within the child (the seeds of virtue; the play instinct) is first posited and then discovered as fact, and in this way particular conceptions of childhood are grounded in, even as they help to ground, specific paradigms of self-understanding. Are things any different today?

**Between the child and the adult in ‘liquid modernity’: power, habitus and (in)civility**

Childhood is still very much to the foreground of debate on social order and social change, and the behaviour of children remains one of the principal lenses through which public debate is funnelled when gauging collective predicaments and prospects. But the ‘child’ is not always a child. Jonathan Fletcher for example suggests that one of the signs of a de-civilising process is ‘a decrease in the distance between the standards of adults and children’ (1995, p. 289). This echoes Elias’ argument that in the medieval world ‘The distance between adults and children, measured by that of today, was slight’ (2000, p. 120). So has the distance between the standards of adults and children – a distance measured by the duration of the civilising process – begun to contract, and should we be worried about this if indeed it is the case?

Before we get to the question of whether adults are behaving more like children today, I want to focus briefly on what Bauman has to say about inter-personal relations on a more general level, in the context of what he calls ‘liquid modernity’. According to Bauman, the retreat of the social state (the state of security and welfare) has shifted the burden of life’s uncertainties onto the shoulders of the individual. The message: rely on your own wits, skills and industry; the effect: this is not straightforward. For the dissolution of ‘we-feeling’ goes hand in hand with situations whereby ‘frightened individuals huddle together and become a crowd’, meaning people who turn to religious fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism for security (Bauman 2004, p. 58, 2002, p. 42-8). Elias (2008, p. 38) might say that our ability to control the dangers is diminishing; Bauman would add that it is diminishing on
unequal terms. The self as a project – the life politics of liquid modernity – can produce ambivalent effects, depending on whether one chooses to choose, or is forced into a situation of having to choose without also possessing the means to make the ‘right’ choice. In contrast to the Eliasian emphasis on mutual-identification – the basis of cooperation and solidarity – Bauman suggests that social relations are increasingly configured as a fluid and shifting field of strategic alliances (Bauman 2000, 2002, 2004). As Bauman puts it: ‘Since the task shared by all has to be performed by each under sharply different conditions, it divides human situations and prompts cut-throat competition rather then unifying the human condition inclined to generate cooperation and solidarity’ (2000, p. 90). For Bauman the shopping mall is the archetypical ‘public but not civil’ space of liquid modern interaction. The consumer has no use for the arts of civility, exemplified by the person who speaks loudly into a mobile phone while remaining oblivious to others who are close enough to touch. Public space becomes a constellation of private worlds, and there is an ugly side to this, manifest in the suspicion directed at those who seem out of place. The individualised consumer and the xenophobe are not necessarily different people.

Bauman’s observations are penetrating and insightful, and yet his is a timeless definition of civility. Bauman tells us that civility is ‘the ability to interact with strangers without holding their strangeness against them and without pressing them to surrender it or renounce some or all the traits that have made them strangers in the first place’ (Bauman 2000, p. 104-5). It is not entirely clear whether Bauman is describing something which is absent or prescribing a code of conduct which should be present; perhaps he is doing both. But if he is adopting a normative position then he risks short-circuiting his own argument. A recurring theme in Bauman’s recent work is obsolescence. Not only is it that people, things, and identities become disposable in liquid modernity (like a single-use paper plate), but our ability to grasp our situation – the conceptual tools we have at our disposal – may also face redundancy. Mourning the loss of something such as ‘civility’ is insufficient, because it risks creating a monument which points to the heavens and signifies something which has been lost and should be reclaimed, thus ignoring the many ugly sides of the world it represents: the whole history of human waste creation and waste disposal. Rather than equating contemporary trends with ‘de-civilising’ processes or the death of ‘civility’, it might be a better strategy to take our cue from Foucault, specifically
his work on governmentality, and to think about how the field of possible action is currently being re-configured (Foucault 1982, p. 221). In other words, instead of working with a concept that prejudges behaviour against its own normative boundaries, we might begin by examining conduct itself: at how specific social logics are being instituted, embodied and enacted.

The problem lends itself to exploration rather than statements of certainty, and the playground is one place we can look for clues. Earlier I suggested that a major innovation has taken place in the history of the playground: the playground has been partially decoupled from training. It was also noted that the revival of the playground articulates a complex discourse made up of several strands: the rights of the child, social inclusion, health-promotion, and crime-prevention. But of course the public playground is not the only place where children play outside of school. Children play on beaches, in parks, in their gardens at home, in their bedrooms, on the street, in school, on waste ground – there is no definitive list. But if we focus on how children play, and on how play is channelled into designated spaces, then it is possible to contrast public playgrounds with commercial play centres.

For the purpose of consistency I will return to the Irish case where play centres have proliferated at a rate comparable to public playgrounds, but I will also make passing reference to the UK and Australia, because it is important to emphasise that this is certainly not a national trend⁴. Also, in order to keep things manageable, I will focus on a single type of play centre – described by one group of researchers as the ‘stand alone indoor adventure soft playground’ (McKendrick, Fielder and Bradford 2000b) – thus setting aside play centres and play zones found in pubs, restaurants, and shops.

The play centre in fig 4, which is located in the West of Ireland, is a typical example of what I am referring to, i.e. typical in terms of design, layout, entry fee, access, and location.

This type of commercial play centre is generally situated on the edge of its nearest town or city, usually in a small industrial or business park which is often inadequately serviced by public transport (see Cole-Hamilton, Harrop and Street 2002, p. 30). Unlike public playgrounds, the play centre is a service provided on a pay-for-play basis (McKendrick, Bradford and Fielder 2000a). In terms of supervision, staff patrol
the perimeter of the main play area, using a whistle to check unruly or risky behaviour, but there are many blind spots, especially if the children are on the upper tiers. There is also a viewing gallery for the adults who accompany children to these places (and children must be accompanied). This can be seen from the perspective of adults in figure 5, and from the perspective of the child in figure 6. Adults can keep an eye on their children as they relax over a coffee, chat with friends, read a magazine, work on their laptop, and so on. However, this is a two-dimensional view of a large three-dimensional play area, and adults sitting in the viewing gallery will only make occasional eye-contact with their child/children. In some play centres adults are prohibited from entering the main play apparatus, but they generally do not venture in even if permitted, preferring instead to remain outside the play zone, looking inwards and upwards as they track the movements of their child/children.

Figure 4 The play zone in a commercial play centre

Figure 5 Viewing gallery

Figure 6 Viewing gallery seen from inside the play zone
When asked about the jungle metaphor in his interview for this journal, Bauman argued that behavioural conditions (whether modelled on the jungle or the garden) are less important in liquid modernity than a specific mode of behaviour: the hunter (Bauman 2008, p. 113). I think Bauman may be underestimating the continued importance of behavioural conditions. Play centres are the synthetic equivalent of untamed nature, and in Ireland, the UK and Australia, they go by such names as Jungle Giants, Jungle King, Rumble in the Jungle, Bonkers, Cheeky Monkeys, Go Bananas, Run Amuck, Tiny Tearawayz, Crazy Tykes, Chaos for Kids, and Little Rascals Funworld. Not all play centres adopt such names, but many do, and there is a good degree of fit between the name and the type of interaction which is facilitated within these enclosures.

The kind of play found in play centres fits with what is described in the play literature as ‘rough and tumble’ play’, ‘deep’ play, and ‘locomotor’ play. Rough and tumble, or ‘close encounter’ play is defined as having ‘less to do with fighting and more to do with touching, tickling, gauging relative strength, discovering physical flexibility and the exhilaration of display. For example playful fighting, wrestling and chasing where the children involved are obviously unhurt and giving every indication that they are enjoying themselves’. Deep play is ‘play which allows the child to encounter risky or even potentially life threatening experiences, to develop survival skills and conquer fear. For example leaping onto an aerial runway, riding a bike on a parapet, [or] balancing on a high beam’. Finally, locomotor play entails ‘movement in any and every direction for its own sake. For example chase, tag, hide and seek, [and] tree climbing’ (NPFA 2000, p. 33). All of these require specific behavioural conditions, and when threaded together – as they are in commercial play centres – then they add up to activity focused on movement, agility, risk-taking, bodily contact, on developing personal survival skills and mastering fear. These modes of play are about fun and enjoyment, and the play literature includes them among fifteen distinct types of play, together contributing to a comprehensive process of psychological, intellectual, emotional and social development (Coalter and Taylor 2001, p. 3, NPFA 2000, p. 33-4). Yet in commercial play centres the other twelve types of play are all but absent, and I have witnessed many cases where play becomes aggressive, usually on the upper tier of the play zone where interaction escapes the gaze of adults. What happens is that a child becomes scared and backs off when overpowered by a stronger
or more aggressive child, and in this way the situation may be diffused before it becomes violent. There may be a valuable lesson in this type of interaction ritual, but it is not entirely self-evident what it might be, unless it somehow equips the child for adult life (on the way to becoming Bauman’s hunter perhaps, or surviving situations where one has become the hunter’s prey).

The language of contemporary play theory has dispensed with the idea of directing and conducting the conduct of the child. Instead, if and when a play coordinator is present, then her/his job is to ‘enable’, ‘animate’, and ‘facilitate’. This is the language of empowerment. What is really striking about the commercial play centre is the mode of empowerment: the setting itself (the behavioural conditions to use Bauman’s phrase) enables children to *relax the reigns of self-restraint*. It is all but impossible to describe the mood of a play centre in full flight – the noise, the atmosphere – these places are about pure excitement, and the double-slide provides a graphic illustration of this (fig7). The traditional slide, which can still be seen in some public playgrounds, channels children into a line from the bottom of the ladder to the end of the slide. Irrespective of whether an adult is present to watch over the child, the equipment itself has a training effect. If more than one child wants to use the slide, then queuing, turn-taking, and patience are required, even though of course the children may find ways around the requirement. In the case of the double slide there are multiple possible routes to the top and from the bottom, and the race need never conclude. Padding around the steel scaffolding which supports the multi-level play zone prevents impact injuries, while nets prevent the children from falling out of the play area. Beyond the constraints of padding and netting, just about anything goes.

It is often noted by parents and teachers that children, especially young children, usually play alone together. Commercial play centres encourage playing alone together, and insofar as children play together together, it tends to be competitive and self-assertive play. The play centre unobtrusively tutors the child in the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes demanded in a liquid modern world: that access is granted to those who can pay (it cannot be claimed as a right or entitlement); that the pleasures of the promised land are available only to those who can make their own way there (do not rely on public transport to ferry you); that once inside, the appropriate
behaviour is a blend of flexibility and innovation: to stay in the game is to stay on the move, choosing direction and (transitory) destination without pausing to reflect on why one has chosen that path. In this way a specific habitus is configured and given normative force, but not through the codification of explicit demands and prohibitions. Instead, the rules of the game are suspended within the standing conditions. In the play centre, the world is transformed into the bounded anarchy of a bouncy castle, and the padded surfaces are of little help when bodies collide.

![Figure 7 The double slide](image)

Running parallel to the innovations which have been organised into the public playground, commercial play centres add up to a second innovation – a re-articulation of the playground which invests it with a different logic. Of course, many children never frequent either of these places, but if we take the playground and the play centre as together forming a ‘segment’ of ‘the totality of socially instilled forms of conduct’ (Elias), then it is possible to suggest that the child is positioned, and possibly split, between the public playground, which more or less continues to articulate the logic of Elias’ civilising process, and the commercial play centre, which articulates the logic of Bauman’s liquid modernity. However, with an eye to Foucault, it might be wise to pause before choosing sides, because it is not necessarily the case that the playground promotes civility while the play centre engenders incivility. In recognising the right of the child to personally direct his or her own
actions, the public playground is by no means incommensurate with the logic of the play centre.

To conclude I would like to redirect the question posed at the beginning of this section of the paper: are adults exhibiting the same types of behaviour we find in the commercial play centre and, if so, should we be worried about it? Historically, the danger of the playground can be illustrated with the help of George Orwell’s *Nineteen eighty-four*: the spectre of Big Brother. Connecting up with the school, with civic enterprise, with social work and psychology, the playground was among the techniques used not only to train children in the sense of enabling them, but also to mould them in accordance with context-specific ideals, and those who could not or would not be moulded were candidates for other, more insidious types of intervention. If we use Orwell as a lens through which to examine this darker side of the playground, then we are reminded that freedom is fragile, that social and political power can be dangerous: we need to be careful about what we do in the name of freedom, or in defence of solidarity. These insights are as relevant today as they were when Orwell wrote *Nineteen eighty-four*, but of course times have changed, and today we confront a different type of problem, an outline of which can be discerned from the realm of ‘reality’ TV – specifically programmes like Big Brother, Survivor, and the Apprentice – which Bauman interprets as public rehearsals of human disposability (2002, p. 63). The liquid modern version of Big Brother is very different to Orwell’s dystopia. It is among a proliferating universe of adult games (and I stress the word ‘game’) that institute new types of waste creation and waste-disposal, which brings us back to Bauman’s thoughts on social life becoming a fluid and shifting field of strategic alliances. Being a member of the Big Brother household or the Survivor team is no indication of a durable bond. Loyalty and solidarity are liabilities rather than assets, while initial status or standing is no guarantee of success. In fact status – in the form of celebrity – is one half of what is at stake in winning or losing, the other half being personal wealth. In the end the winner takes all and everyone else is a means to that end. Power in liquid modernity is a zero-sum relation, and only the fittest – meaning the most ruthless and unscrupulous – survive the relentless game of exclusion (Bauman 2002, p. 63-65).
Stewart Clegg (2005, p. 534-5) makes the point that ‘everyone has the democratic potential to be a winner’ in these games. So far so good, but this is far from being mere entertainment or media spectacle; the games we participate in from the comfort of our armchairs (using our cell phones to evict contestants or keep them in the game for one more day) are also the games we must survive in our working lives. Clegg calls this the ‘Survivor syndrome’: the many (and proliferating) mechanisms of surveillance we are subject to are organised in such a way that we must keep our self under surveillance in order to survive the ongoing processes of assessment, audit, and downsizing. Life becomes a permanent struggle to measure up to the current (i.e. soon to change) indicators and metrics of performance so that, as Clegg puts it: ‘in work, as in life…you’re only as good as your last presentation – of self, that is’.

Given that habitus is constituted by and constitutive of culture, Bauman’s writings are important in the way they ask us to think – critically – about the implications of a culture which is split between relentless deconstruction and the resurgence of fundamentalist beliefs. Between one and the other is the life strategy staged in the Big Brother household and rehearsed in the commercial play centre: a game of each against all. Hobbes would recognise this world and recommend a Leviathan as the solution, thus returning us to Orwell’s nightmare. This is one reason why we should be wary of the idea of a ‘reversal’, which really only makes sense in accordance with the normative undertones of Elias’ theory: in the way it anticipates the possibility (if not also the inevitability) of a world without violence. The problem of violence – past and present – is not only the violence randomly perpetrated by individuals and groups against other individuals and groups, but also the forms of violence organised into the institutional fabric of the civilising state.

Whether we look to the public realm of entitlements and rights or to the private realm of commodified goods and services, the child at play has been released from the coercive grip of the administered playground. We might conclude that the child has been empowered, or we might raise an eyebrow and ponder the fact that the discourses of human rights and consumer choice converge in the newly configured freedom of the child. It could be argued that empowerment is preferable to the controlling techniques of the past. But it is also the case that thinking about where and how children do play or should play leads to decisions: we are still acting upon
the actions of the child. But to what end exactly? Equipping the players to stay in the
game seems to be the best we can come up with for the moment – Clegg’s *Survival*
syndrome. The strategy of self-mastery was a dream, perhaps a promise, never
fulfilled, and for the children subject to the grip of the old disciplinary playgrounds it
was possible to see through the strategy, to decode its logic and construct counter-
strategies unbeknownst to the master⁹. When the playground is devoid of purpose
other than meeting the rights or servicing the desires of its users, then there is little to
resist other than freedom itself.

**Endnotes**

1 I would like to thank Mark Haugaard, Siniša Malešević, Barry Ryan, and the two
anonymous readers for the *Journal of Power*, for taking the time to read earlier drafts
of this paper, and for their comments and suggestions on how to improve it.

2 Principle 7 of the 1959 Declaration reads as follows: ‘the child is entitled to receive
education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He
shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on
a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgement, and his
sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.
The best interests of the child shall be the guiding principles of those responsible for
his education and guidance; that responsibility lies in the first place with his parents.
The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed
to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour
to promote the enjoyment of this right’ (Detrick 1992, p. 33, 643-4)

3 Though my focus is different from Ian Hunter’s analysis in his *Rethinking the
School*, this section is indebted to chapter three of that work (Hunter 1994).

4 I have borrowed this phrase from the title of Nikolas Rose’s book (1999).

5 The NPP in Ireland devotes a single paragraph to ‘the commercial involvement in
play’, noting that ‘there are a growing number of commercial play facilities around
the country, although the actual number is unknown’ (Ireland 2004, p. 34).

6 Jungle Giants (Galway, Ireland), Jungle King (Donegal, Ireland), Rumble in the
Jungle (Cheshire, UK), Bonkers (Melbourne, Australia), Cheeky Monkeys (Kent,
UK; Bristol, UK), Go Bananas (Colchester, UK; Perth, Australia), Run Amuck
(Waterford, Ireland), Tiny Tearawayz (Bristol, UK), Crazy Tykes (Wetherby, UK),
Chaos for Kids (Newport, UK), Little Rascals Funworld (Cork, Ireland).
The remaining twelve types of play are: symbolic play, socio-dramatic play, social play, creative play, communication play, dramatic play, exploratory play, fantasy play, imaginative play, mastery play, object play, role play (NPFA 2000, p. 33-4).

I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for the Journal of Power for this last point.

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