

The Playwork Pamphlets

A short series of think-pieces on the politics and ethics of playwork

by Gordon Sturrock

1. Politics, playwork and neo-liberalism

*In this first of an original series of pamphlets, the UK playwork scholar **Gordon Sturrock** argues that avoiding the political implications of playwork practice will lead to its continuing, inevitable demise. Nor should we water our politics down to accommodate more dominant discourses. Instead, he argues, the field must vigorously embrace its true ethos, and so offer a vital alternative to the neo-liberal colonisation of education – and the wider public realm – to the rapacious capitalist project.*

In his paper, [What is Playwork Under Neoliberalism?](#) (2018), Ben Dalbey attempts to survey the political dimensions of the playwork approach. Given his particular US perspective, it may be a little harsh to describe this exploration as timid – the complexion of politics in the US is significantly different to that of these isles – but the reading and interpretation offered appears to be both out of kilter and out-of-date.

It is out of kilter because the proposition is that, at its heart, playwork might be able to seek accommodation, to make some form of alliance, albeit at a distance, with the Neo-liberal political project. By associative citation we are advised that the 'fun, freedom and flexibility' mantra is a useful application in a workplace adapting to more fluid and creative working practices. The general thrust seems to be of a playwork approach, seen as an apolitical developmental programme, which, as a consequence, may have some benign, sterilised influence and effect on the intense application of economic regimes of capitalism.

Following such an approach is to mollify a method that is both highly destructive to the human and non-human environment and to social cohesion; to collude with a specifically designed political narrative that colonises at every opportunity. To countenance is to be co-opted. To counter that impulsion with a 'revolution of hope' is an exercise in futility.

For example, Facebook's cosmetic overlay of a 'fun' workplace, doesn't conceal a rapacious commodification of communication. There is a growing requirement for communication to move from syntax to simple fetishized 'media-derived' exchange. In effect, we have been co-opted into unparalleled control over social discourses and interchanges that are already being weaponised.

Dalbey's thesis is also outdated. There are tectonic shifts in the nature of politics underway in both the UK and the US – not all to do with Brexit and Trump. Our field –professionally apolitical and, almost certainly, personally leftist – must now concern itself with adopting a distinct ideology and political philosophy. In the new emerging politics, with its deepening of democratic engagement, it is vital to our continuance as a distinct and valued form of practice that our unique stance should position itself as a contributor to this new politics. We are seeing the institutional emergence of formations of mobile groups, driven by issue in loose confederation, arising from grass roots, bottom-up, ideological consociation. This is where we should plant the taproots of our philosophical development.

The bleak truth is that, certainly in the context of the UK, we are in the final destructive stages of the decay of Neo-liberalism's fiscal authority and economic hegemony of the free market. What we see is the 'disenchantment of politics by economics'. Neither is this a solitary perspective. There is a

distinct trend in economic theory, via, for example, Kate Rawlings, David Pilling, Jeremy Rifkin, Elinor Ostrom, to describe an economics that is more centrally situated in a post-patriarchal, post-industrial society, with fluid movement between action groups and agencies, who are not entirely bound up in a politics founded on analyses of the left/right axis. We are seeing the birth of a new politics.

It could be argued that our field's very apolitical stance has meant that our moment of politicisation as a practice and movement is poised to emerge at a very opportune time. To function in this new political arena requires that the field develop its own ideology as a praxis directive and to set out a political philosophy. And the first element of that new attitude is to suggest that any association by any means with the Neo-liberal project is a redundancy. That project is disintegrating around us, not into political chaos, but into the invoking of new cultural institutions. In this new description, playwork has both a comity with new emerging discourses, but also a responsibility to introduce our praxis philosophy to alternate ways and means; that our perspective is highly exportable within the dimensions of the new emerging politics. But, it must be said that our founding narrative is exhausted. We are required to acknowledge that Elvis has left the building.

Is it possible to arrive at a narrative, or at least a commencing ideological statement, that is cognisant of the pluralities of insight derived from our practice encounters? Is a grand narrative not but a shared objective? We contend that it is. Such a narrative is implied by our praxis and its natural consociation with emerging discourses, particularly those of the commons, in a post-patriarchal, post-industrial landscape. Is it not a major playwork default to develop our eco-intelligence within highly specific, environmental, ludic niches?

There is every clear indication that, within the playspace, and many of the human and non-human interchanges, the inter-communications between the child and habitat, and children in consort and conflicts, we see a distinct politics being enacted. Playgrounds are hustings and parliaments where, to follow Chantal Mouffe, 'agonisms and antagonisms', we might suggest, are played out. Through playing, the commencing grammars, syntaxes and vocabularies of a *conatus* emerge: a knowing, an intelligence, about the manner in which political discourses operate. And, in making those distinctions in the various choices, directions, the persuasive narratives, rule-formation and governance, the 'action stations', as Ostrom describes them, of playful interchange, we see the proto-formation of a distinctive ludic politics.

Is it possible to derive a coherent ideological statement from an analysis of, and in, a ludic dialectic with the child in the playspace, that avoids entering into a necessarily, 'by proxy' relationship?

We have had for some seventy years now had access to a ludic 'autonomy lab'. From the non-taught position and a degree of measured let, we negotiated an environment where the opportunities for governance were contested, child-to-child and children-to-adult. In that ludic dialectic there is the activation of certain neural reward pathways: effectively developmental eointelligences, hard-wired into brain structure. The essential contestations of social agency are learned and acquired solely by means of that underpinning eointelligence. While children experience directly and, we practitioners, both directly and indirectly, we have a duty to weigh and interpret our responses as contributions to that eco-intelligence, which is an evolving construction of deepening understandings of ecology, environment and habitat and the potentialities of growth and development, activated and sustained by playing.

The repertoires of motile adaptive response, which are the fundamental underpinnings of the creativity to survive for our children in the future, are embedded in a clearly discernible ludic curriculum, centred on a form of ontological evolutionary process perhaps best described by

Antonio Damasio, as 'homeostatic disequilibrium' ; a driver of evolutionary adaptive reaction. Playing is the most effective means of creating symbiosis, encounters with the potentials of adaptive repertoires, sensible to fluctuation and change in the holding habitat.

This is more than speculation. From this deeply considered evidence-based articulation, and by the additional lens of a playwork perspective, we have the possibility of describing a significantly well-weighted argument for both the recognition of our practice, as adepts in the learning potentials of human to human and human to non-human encounters, but also as readers of environments as crucibles of playful encounter.

The nature of that learning? That there is practicality to thinking of the playspace in the context of a ludic ecology deserves an argument. Damasio describes evolution as commencing in micro-cellular 'going forth'. That going forth has a distinct, highly operative ludic dimensionality. By hazard rather than intent, as a field, we have playgrounds and playspaces, where we are in attendance with a learning situation driven by encounter, novelty, the lures, buttons and triggers of what are the 'pulses' of evolutionary engagement. The consequence is the creation, accidental or otherwise, of hotspots for the accelerated development of adaptive repertoires, of being and becoming, self and identity, the necessary rudiments of communicative ecointelligences, where the human-to-human interchanges are as regarded and considered as those with the non-human environment: our biota interface in forms of ecocommunion within an econiche, responsive to change, alteration and shift.

Is this outline sufficient to suggest an inherent ludic curriculum? Can we articulate that through this exploration of evolutionary endowments, children are offered some immunity to the dysaffiliations of gang culture, of abusive social media, of the calculated indoctrinations of consumption? Can we offer a counterbalance to the widespread blindness to the ecologies of developmental growth – in an accord with habitat sensibilities – as a humanity of learning, and hold a perspective to apprehend and function in dimensions of political exchange?

Is it possible to essay this further in terms of a challenge to an education system that is entirely unfit for purpose? Regimes of instruction, centred on a nebulous and non-critical citizenship and the deployment of policies dictated by filtered-down market force analyses, are rendered redundant in the face of automation of delivery and a movement to a non-work lifestyle supported by a universal wage.

We have two significant factors to consider. The first, is that the dimensions of the political frameworks that supported educational policy are being eroded; we cannot be far from a tipping point into a meltdown of provision. The loss of 35,000 teachers, who leave the profession within the first five years of employment, is not just unsustainable, but is also indicative of a growing dis-ease with both the methods and purposes of teaching. Secondly, figures indicate that the £92b earned through the exports of our 'creative industries' are almost entirely supported by a default curriculum of learning, extramural to the taught environment.

As a hidden motivation, it would be reasonable to suggest that the focus and concentration on aspects of a class definition are tailored to those who are amenable to instructions of entry and entitlement: that adhering to societal acceptance and membership, however subtly expressed, and the rejection of this doctrine by what are termed the 'unacceptable behaviours' of children – already aware that their futures are tied up in techniques of survival and in conflict with the knowledge of conformity – is an exercise in futility. Given a future where work is robotised and climate change and environmental catastrophe become commonplace, we might ask the question: is the scholastically disengaged child creating their own individualised, survival learning? In a precariat future the knowledge requirements of continuance and capacity to flourish become radically re-altered in terms of awareness, intelligence, skills and accomplishment characteristics.

In a renewed partisanship of playwork thinking, we are required to instigate our capacities to challenge existing educational practices, both by ideological statement and in a fundamental opposition of theoretical proposition. Our opening remarks should be bold enough to suggest that the induction of children into full-time education, the imposition of directives of instructional schema, the entire ABC, please-and-thank-you mantras of early education, the measured applications of assumed practicality, the nod to ecology, the formalising of consociation into classification (I use the term advisedly) as being developmentally apposite, are not just wrong-headed, but damaging.

We have replaced a learning – where the interstices of knowledge acquisition are contextualised by the actualities of interchange in the myriad potentials of the playspace; a highly effective, child-derived, habitat hermeneutics: a setting where that enquiry into meaning is met by the environment's capacity to respond, with the self-ordinated generated acknowledgements of identity and innate biotic exchange – with sanitised spaces of sloganised wallpapering of 'art' and where the environmental encounter is limited to playtime. We have permitted education to permeate and colonise a space that has deeply ingrained learning potentials with an overlay that is inimical to child-ordinated knowledge acquisition, and is ecologically illiterate.

Our partisan explication is simply this: the entry of children into full-time education at an early age, where that education has a delivery that is directed and taught, is in denial of existing and more profoundly embedded, learned, environmental attachment. We effectively disassociate the child from self-governance, via consociation and playful interchange, with a contrived and crude socialisation. We deny a form of ecological citizenship with a limited and poorly evidenced tutorship of associative connection. We fail to understand the crucial distinction between what is experienced and what is instructionally processed.

The notion of brain plasticity, that is the age where a maximum of supple engagement with knowledge acquisition and habitat interchange, is thought by, for example, Freud and Piaget, as being around the age of seven. Were we, from a playwork perspective, to argue that the fundamental building blocks of education and, more essentially, learning, were integral to adaptability and creative resilience, as a grounding for the needs of qualification by instruction, then the adventure playground becomes a concomitant element of teaching. An adventure playground, seen as a highly specific learning habitat, in fluid conjunction with the school environment, where innate, child-ordinated learning is interwoven, into creative developmental teaching, and where there is a reciprocity of practices worth and value, is not just an alternative, but an ecological necessity.

The question arises can we, as a field, do it alone? Or, perhaps more succinctly, do we have to do it alone? Our depoliticised field has been chary of alliance. But the acknowledgement of an emergent political syllabus inherently active in children's play, which is informative of our own political awakening, offers a congruence we can follow. There are other congruities evident in our identification with the new politics.

There are, for example, affinities we can readily discern in the commons tradition and the burgeoning return of a commons movement. The management of the rights of commoners to access grounds for grazing, foraging, fishing, coppicing, nutting and berrying, arises from local and idiosyncratic practices, enhanced by trial and error application. Ostrom sees this form of management as having economic validity. The central justification for their existence is enshrined in the rights and perpetuities of the Magna Carta. There is a commencing argument, that in forming such an alliance – in establishing children's right to access a ludic commons, where the child's right

to play is as cogent as both the historic need to graze cattle, and the contemporary right to ramble – we contribute and benefit from an associative commonality.

The commons movement offers a historicity into which we can situate our field's practice ethos, almost seamlessly. And, in addition to a top-down UN-led rights agenda, we also position our rights and, more crucially perpetuities, as arising from localised democratic endeavours. Perceived as a perpetuity, the child's right to playing, in an acknowledged, ludic commons, becomes consecrated by tradition.

But we offer the commons movement a significant exchange. By widening that movement's range of sensibilities to acknowledge the child in the ecology of the commons, the idea increases the potential of the commons movement and our field's own authority to be categorised as a 'new' institution, in a new politics. Together we empower a shared ideological purpose. Is it too large a leap, to suggest that playwork practice, in the construction I offer, might be construed as the educational wing of the commons movement?

Heidegger suggests 'our origins lie before us'. Is this outline sufficiently founded on playwork practice and principle, in this new iteration, or is it too great a step for our field to countenance? I reiterate: without an agreed playwork ideology our field will become not so much involved in a process of historicity, as history itself.

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