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Governing the future: citizenship as technology, empowerment as technique

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Abstract

This article examines how citizenship can be deployed as a technology of conduct, and how it combines with the technique of empowerment in instituting the behavioural norms that constitute a neo-liberal social order. It conducts a detailed analysis of policy innovations in the Republic of Ireland, where children have recently been recognised as 'active citizens'. This field of innovation is framed by the idea that children should be listened to and included in the decisions affecting their lives. The fact that this concerns children is important, because governing children is a way of acting upon the future. Moreover, governing the future is not a matter of reducing inequalities, but of ensuring the inclusion of all into the neo-liberal 'game between inequalities' (Foucault, 2008). In cases of failure, the fault lies with the individual player, not with the game.

Keywords:

Citizenship, Empowerment, Government, Playgrounds, Rights of the Child

In his new book, titled *Living on borrowed time*, Zygmunt Bauman reflects on why he coined the phrase ‘social state’ to theorise the origins of welfare capitalism (2009: 35-7). With the age of cradle-to-grave welfare fast becoming more of a memory than a lived experience, it is tempting to commemorate it as a monument to past struggles waged in the name of equality, emancipation, and solidarity. But as Bauman astutely reminds us, the history of welfare capitalism is more complex than that, and while it did indeed add substance to the mythical social contract by socialising many of the risks attached to human existence, it was in fact born from a biopolitical imperative: to ensure a fit and healthy reserve army, both in the figurative sense associated with Marxism (a reserve army of labour), and in the literal sense of a population to be mobilised in defence of the state or nation. Beginnings do not necessarily determine the shape of things to come however, and as T. H. Marshall argued, it was the combination of democracy, welfare and capitalism that created the conditions of possibility for a distinctly *social* conception of citizenship (1992, 1972). Marshall was no leveller, and he accepted that inequalities would persist, but he insisted that the universal rights bestowed on citizens would ensure that solidarity endured despite the existence of inequality. While Marshall’s theory has been extensively critiqued (see Bottomore, 1992; Walby, 1994), it nonetheless retains an important insight in terms of gaining analytical traction on the present: the content and composition of citizenship is shaped within particular contexts. Marshall’s theory was one of gradual inclusion and continuous expansion: over time, citizenship was extended to more people while also encompassing a more complex bundle of civil, political, and social rights. But what expands can contract, or indeed move in new directions altogether.

Bauman's main concern is not in fact the social state but rather the present state of things, which he characterises as 'liquid modernity'. Among the trends characterising this new modernity is the retreat of the welfare state and the concomitant rise of the neo-liberal state. The sources of this transformation are well documented and include structural dislocations as well as interventions on the part of actors from across the political spectrum – some championing the free market, others attacking the 'nanny' state, others again exposing the instruments of welfare as hidden (hence insidious) forms of domination. In the world that Marshall described, citizenship was a way of tempering, even taming market forces, initially in the name of social defence, and subsequently as way of addressing class antagonism. The world that we now inhabit is one in which market forces have been unshackled, with the result that the risks of human existence are increasingly shouldered by individuals (Bauman, 2002, 2000, also Castells, 2003; Wacquant, 2009). But while each now shares the task of managing life's uncertainties, all are not similarly situated in social space, so that differences – in education and occupation, in status and wealth, in access to resources – carry implications far in excess of the inequalities that Marshall allowed for in his conception of citizenship. According to Bauman, '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' (2000, p. 90). This is a recurring theme in Bauman's recent writings: the subjects of a liquid modern world (or neo-liberal social order) are somehow compelled to compete with each other, and on unequal terms, which connects up with the big normative concerns we face today – concerns we cannot possibly address by acting as individuals.

Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose have examined these same trends, though through the lens of governmentality theory. They also note that the ‘social citizen’ has given way to a conception of citizenship framed by a discourse of individual freedom, autonomy and choice. But this does not mean that citizens are not still governed. On the contrary, Miller and Rose insist that ‘individuals can be governed through their freedom to choose’, and thus the individualised subject of a neo-liberal social order embodies a paradoxical form of agency: regulated autonomy (Miller and Rose, 2008: 48, 53-83; also McNay, 2009). The aim of this paper is examine how this subject is assembled in a particular context¹. More specifically, I want to examine how citizenship can be deployed as a technology of conduct, and how it combines with the technique of empowerment in instituting the behavioural norms that constitute a neo-liberal social order. Focusing on the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as ‘Ireland’), I will be conducting a detailed analysis of how children have recently been awarded the status on citizenship. The fact that this concerns children is important, because governing children is a way of acting upon the future. It is worth remembering something that 19th century social reformers were acutely aware of: childhood is the terrain upon which the battle for the future is won and lost. I am by no means advocating a return to past practices, but what I am arguing for is close and critical attention to how children are being governed, not simply through schooling and associated forms of training and instruction, but through their freedom to choose as young citizens.

In 2000 the Government of Ireland launched a ten year National Children’s Strategy. This was produced in consultation with children in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates that ‘the views of

children must be taken into account in matters affecting them' (NCO 2000a: 6). Framed by values such as 'child-centred' and 'children first', and recognizing children as 'active participants', 'active contributors', and 'active citizens', the central idea driving the National Children's Strategy is that children should be, and are now being, empowered. The errors and injuries of the past, whereby children were subject to coercive and disciplinary power, are to be overcome by instituting practices that listen to children, understand children, and include children in the decisions affecting their lives. In actuality, as opposed to hypothetically or potentially, children in Ireland are now included as citizens in the policy-making arena. In short, children have been empowered, or as Miller and Rose might say, they are now (to be) governed through their freedom to choose.

The paper is organised in five sections. It begins by mapping the contours of empowerment as an ideal and as a technique. Section two examines how the new citizen-subject has been assembled, while section three looks at how power relations are configured around this subject. Section four focuses on how the actions of young citizens are (to be) acted upon. While these dimensions are distinguished for the purpose of analysis, they are in fact parts of a single process of formation whereby citizenship and empowerment combine as technology and technique in governing the future. The final section concludes the discussion by reflecting on what this particular case might teach us about the more general question of power and the subject in the context of neo-liberal social orders.

Empowerment as ideal and as technique

In terms of its general usage, the concept of empowerment describes a movement away from reified systems of domination and debilitating states of dependency. In the field of community development for example empowerment is ‘A multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives’ (Page and Czuba, 1999); for those combating poverty it is ‘The process of transferring decision-making power from influential sectors to poor communities and individuals who have traditionally been excluded from it’ (CPA, 2008); and in the international development arena it is about ‘Increasing the capacity of individuals, communities or institutions to become more self-reliant’ (Cardno Acil, 2008). In all three examples the concept of empowerment signifies the possibility for self-directed action, and it is understood as a transformative process that enhances the autonomy of individuals and/or groups. Used in this way, the concept of empowerment is an idea or ideal that stands in opposition to domination.

There is another way of thinking about empowerment: not as an ideal, but as a practice which is also a technique. Karen Baistow (1994) and Barbara Cruikshank (1994) were among the first to conduct a critical analysis of such practices. Baistow examined a trend towards empowerment as a technique in the fields of health, welfare and social work, and her argument focused on the dual ‘regulatory’ and ‘liberatory’ implications of this for empowerment ‘candidates’. Similarly, by examining combat poverty programmes in the US, Barbara Cruikshank argued that, in the context of an organised ‘will to empower’, the relationship between autonomy and domination might not be one of opposites but of allies. In both studies, empowerment targets problem behaviours and problem populations, and it operates through the strategic objective of acting both through and upon the actions of people who are ‘free’, but

who are exercising the ‘wrong’ kind of freedom. In other words, empowerment as a practice spans what Foucault called ‘government’ – ways of ‘structuring the field of possible action of others’ (1983: 221), and ‘mode of subjectivation’ – techniques through which people are ‘invited or incited’ to recognise responsibilities and obligations (1997: 264).

Gathering these initial reflections together, I will borrow from Vikki Bell’s (1993) work on governing childhood to argue that, in Ireland, childhood is being ‘deployed’ through a programme of empowerment, suggesting something tactical, something *strategic* is taking place. What seems to be happening is that the meanings invested in the ideal conception of empowerment – the way that this is used to signify ‘power to’ rather than ‘power over’ – have been appropriated, so that ‘power over’ operates in the guise of ‘power to’. However, it is important to resist any temptation to attribute this to design or intention on the part of a power elite. What Cruikshank means by the ‘will to empower’ is not the will of a single actor or coalition of actors, but rather something which is assembled from a multiplicity of actors and actions – an outcome rather than a willed intention. The next section examines the National Children’s Strategy as such an outcome. I begin by sketching the broad contours of the National Children’s Strategy (hereafter referred to as ‘the Strategy’), and then focus in more detail on its constituent elements, and in particular on how citizenship operates as a technology that combines with the technique of empowerment to act upon the actions of children.

Between reality and fantasy: assembling the Strategy

In the Republic of Ireland, the empowerment of children is a very recent trend, and it moves in the groove of a governmental practice known as ‘social partnership’.

Established through a series of National Agreements, the first of these – instituted in 1987 under the name of a Programme for National Recovery – was limited to negotiations between the so-called traditional partners, but the framework was extended during the 1990’s to include civil society actors with a stake in issues such as poverty, discrimination, and social exclusion, and has since been described as a ‘problem-solving process’ (DoT, 2003: 15). The inclusion of children was less a solution to a specific conflict than it was the extension of an established practice, and although under significant strain at present (due to the impact of the global financial crisis), social partnership has proven to be a very effective way of absorbing sources of friction, and possible resistance, to the neo-liberal direction of public and social policy (Ryan, 2007). This has been accomplished through a blend of recognition and empowerment – by giving the marginalised and excluded a ‘voice’ in the policy process. Children are but the most recent group to be empowered in this way, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has provided stakeholders with leverage in broadening the parameters of the partnership approach.

In 1992 the Irish State ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), after which it was obliged to report on the steps taken to implement the Convention. Ireland’s *Initial Report* was submitted in 1996 (DFA, 1996). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also submitted views to the UN Committee, and the Children’s Rights Alliance – a coalition of NGOs dedicated to the implementation of the CRC – recommended the development of a ‘national policy’ to ‘ensure a coordinated and comprehensive approach towards implementation of the Convention’ (CRA, 1997: 9).

The UN Committee was in agreement, and in its concluding observations recommended that the Irish state ‘adopt a comprehensive National Strategy for children, incorporating the principles and provisions of the Convention in a systematic manner in the designing of all its policies and programmes’ (UNCCRC, 1998a: 5).

The following year, the Irish Government announced its decision to develop the Strategy, stating that the purpose of this was to ‘lead the development of supports and services for children up to eighteen years of age², to improve their quality of life over the next ten years and reflect the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (NCO, 2000c: 7). An inter-departmental group of senior officials from eight Government Departments, together with a legal adviser from the Attorney General's Office, was to oversee the development of the Strategy. Two advisory panels were also established to provide expert advice: an NGO service providers’ panel, and a research and information panel. The final dimension of the production process was a period of consultation, which was not confined solely to parents and agencies working with children, but also entailed communicating directly with children (more on this below). In November 2000, the *National Children’s Strategy*, subtitled *Our Children – Their Lives*, was launched.

The Strategy comprises a number of distinct though related elements: a ‘unifying vision’, an ‘engine of change’, three ‘national goals’, and what is called the ‘whole child perspective’. The unifying vision is ‘an Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential’ (NCO, 2000a: 10). As a

horizon of possibilities and an aspiration that unites actors populating the field, the vision is anchored to reality in the idea of an ‘engine’. This is the motor of change, intended to drive the Strategy forward by establishing vertical and horizontal linkages, not only within the apparatus of state, but also between the state and the voluntary sector, NGOs, and the research community.

The engine is given concrete direction in the form of three ‘national goals’, summed up in the statement that the Strategy ‘seeks to listen, to think about and act more effectively for children’ (NCO, 2000a: 92). In terms of listening, children are to ‘have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity’³ (NCO, 2000a: 30). The goal of thinking about, or knowing children, is to be realised by commissioning research, developing better information management systems, monitoring the impact of programmes, and adopting an evidence-based approach to service provision (NCO, 2000a: 38). The third goal – acting effectively – is about ‘quality supports and services’, both ‘the universal and the tightly targeted’, otherwise referred to as ‘the supportive and the custodial’. Here the Strategy recommends a ‘renewed emphasis on prevention and early intervention’ (NCO, 2000a: 7, 44-5). I will come back to this in more detail shortly.

The fourth and final element emplaces a new social subject at the centre of the Strategy: the ‘whole child’. Signifying a new paradigm of knowledge and understanding (see James et al., 1998), the ‘whole child approach’ recognises ‘the capacity of children to shape their own lives as they grow, while also being shaped and supported by the world around them’ (NCO, 2000a: 24). Marking a shift from a

‘welfare model’ to an ‘all children approach’, this is said to ‘anchor the strategy to a coherent and inclusive view of childhood’ (NCO, 2000a: 24; NCAC, 2006: 35). I would add something to this: the ‘whole child’ is a way of ordering the field. The ‘whole child’ makes an incision in the archive: a cut that breaks with the past while opening out the possibility of distance between old and new conceptions of childhood. Yet something remains unsaid here, for the new paradigm of knowledge is not simply illuminating something long obscured. Instead this should be understood as a production process. The whole child is a bio-political construct. Simultaneously each child and all children, it codifies a multi-stranded objective to know, support, enable, and constrain in accordance with general social trends and particular situations (see Foucault, 2000). Positioned at the centre of the Strategy, the whole child is indeed ‘whole’, or indivisible. In relation to the three national goals however, the whole child is divided between services and supports which are universal – matching the needs of all children – and those focused on children with ‘additional needs’.

It is here, in the relation between national goals and the division of the whole child, that the Strategy’s adversaries are framed. The Strategy is ‘not a report on the lives of children in Ireland but *a means to intervene in their lives* in a way that will enhance their status and improve their quality of life’ (NCO, 2000a: 12, emphasis added).

Strategic intervention is the name of the game, and perhaps the most general of the adversaries to be tackled – linked to all of the other ‘additional needs’ – is the negative or harmful effects that result from the ‘pressure to compete and succeed’, not only academically and in the context of sport, but also in the arena of consumption (NCO, 2000a: 6). Not all children can withstand these social, psychological and emotional pressures; perhaps some choose not to play by the rules of the game, others

may be the victims of circumstances beyond their control; either way, as the focus of the Strategy shifts from ‘universal’ to ‘tightly targeted’ supports and services, so it confronts more specific adversaries: child poverty; youth homelessness (defined as inadequate accommodation, and linked to drug use and prostitution); suicide; harmful behaviours such as smoking, alcohol and drug use (associated with ‘criminal activity and generally disruptive anti-social behaviour’); anti-social behaviour and criminal activity; racism and discrimination; teenage pregnancy; and early school leaving (associated with any or all of the above, and also detrimental to future employability) (NCO, 2000a: 6-7, 23).

There is actually little in this constellation of adversaries that stands out as being particularly new. Indeed many can be traced to the 19th century (Foucault, 1977; Garland, 1985; Rothman, 1971). A whole variety of techniques to train and reform children were developed at that time, and what they shared was the goal of transforming external constraints into habits of self-restraint (Elias, 2000). Compulsory schooling is an exemplar. Education is now framed in terms of rights, inclusion and equality, but among those who championed mass education in the 19th century, the school was a way of ordering society and securing the future. While it was inevitable that some children would escape the influence of the school (and other, more coercive forms of control were developed to deal with these recalcitrant cases), the expectation was that the majority would comply or succumb to the demands of power. Foucault (1977) used the image of the panopticon to theorise this mode of power. Panoptic power operates on the principle of a unidirectional judgmental gaze, the normalising effects of which are embodied by individuals and embedded in the rhythm of social life. But when the panoptic ‘monologue’ is transformed into

dialogue, then we have moved to a somewhat different way of exercising power. The Strategy *listens* to children as well as acting upon their capacities and circumstances, and it is here that the figure of the ‘whole child’ connects up with Foucault’s remark that neo-liberalism is a ‘game between inequalities’ (2008: 120). Addressing the ‘additional needs’ of children has nothing to do with attacking or reducing inequalities; on the contrary, the Strategy governs by ensuring that *all* children are incorporated into the neo-liberal game of inequalities – one and all must withstand ‘the pressure to compete and succeed’, and there are to be no exceptions. It was noted earlier, from Bauman, that the subjects of a neo-liberal social order are somehow compelled to compete with each other, and on unequal terms. It is this ‘equality of inequality’ (Donzelot, 2008: 123) that structures the field of action, for no child is to be excluded from the opportunity to compete, and inclusion is orchestrated through dialogue.

Concealing the exercise of power

The fact that children participated in the process of public consultation that culminated in the Strategy underpins one of its central claims: that it is ‘a major new development in the formulation of government policy’ (NCO, 2000a: 8). With the support of the Children’s Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council, children participated in the public consultation in three ways: through a ‘targeted’ consultation in five primary and five post-primary schools; through an open invitation published in newspapers and announced on children’s television, asking children to write or email the Minister of State with responsibility for children; and through ‘in-depth’ consultation conducted by ten organisations working with children and young people (NCO, 2000c: 7; 2000d: 2; 2000a: 99).

What I want to focus on here is not what the 2,488 children who participated in the consultation process had to say (though I will come to that in the next section), but on how the Strategy is communicated to children: how this ‘major new development in the formulation of government policy’ goes beyond listening to children, for the Strategy also communicates *directly* to children⁴. The import of this innovation is that it institutes a practice whereby children are no longer simply the targets of policy. Instead, children are partners and participants in a dialogue. The first instance of this can be seen from the *Report on the Public Consultation*. Bringing the period of consultation to a conclusion, this was published in two formats: one for adults and another for children (NCO, 2000c, d). The launch of the Strategy itself however saw further innovation in the form of a decision to appoint a children’s writer to produce a special children’s version of the policy document⁵. It was an Inter-Departmental Group that agreed this approach, and on the basis of this decision, for which there is no documented reason or rationale, the process of dialogue was transformed into story-time.

In commissioning a writer, a brief was prepared and sent out to eleven candidates. The winning proposal identified a number of possible pitfalls, particularly with respect to the stipulation that the text should be aimed at children 4 – 12 years of age (8 – 12 year olds were to be able to read the text, while younger children were to be able to understand it). It was suggested that this was ‘fraught with difficulties’, and that a more suitable approach would be to write ‘a series of documents for different age groups’. It was also suggested that if the envisioned booklet adopted a ‘light-hearted tone’, then children would be able to distinguish it from school textbooks, and

thus ‘feel empowered by the Strategy’. Neither suggestion was approved by the Minister, but a compromise position was reached. The language used in the document would be pitched at eight year-olds, while shorter and simpler sentences would be added to each page for younger children. Similarly, the idea of a light-hearted or humorous approach was toned down. Minor disagreements perhaps, but in this relation between author and authority we see the outline of a tension that resonates throughout the field.

In one of the most significant passages of the children’s version of the Strategy, key policy concepts, including the word ‘strategy’, are introduced. While the adult version of the Strategy is anchored in a ‘vision’, children are told that the Government has a ‘big dream’ for children, that dreams require good ideas if they are to come true, which is why the Government has come up with a ‘plan’, and that a ‘strategy’ is ‘another word for plan’ (NCO, 2000b: 10). There is a clear sense of awkwardness in this passage – perhaps as a result of having to simplify complex ideas, or perhaps because the act of translation is also a form of persuasion. The idea of a ‘big dream’ has obvious appeal in communicating with children, but it has limitations too in the way it blurs the boundary between the world of fantasy and the world as it *should be* (i.e. the ‘vision’ codified by the Strategy). Similarly, the meaning of plan and strategy may, to some extent, be interchangeable, but they are certainly not equivalent. *To* plan is practice foresight and to prepare to act purposefully, while *a* plan is a detailed scheme or method for obtaining an objective. In the most general sense, planning is the application of means-ends rationality. Strategy on the other hand is the art of war. A strategy may involve planning, but what sets it apart is that it presupposes tactics,

struggle, and *adversity*. Strategy is about succeeding; it is about overcoming an opponent through guile, intelligence, strength, and, if necessary, deceit.

The purpose of a National Children's Strategy is to orchestrate collective action in the face of adversity, and the split mode of address is significant, because it divides the subject at the centre of this field of discourse – twice over. Adults and children are joint authors of the Strategy, but they are divided by the distance between normative policy discourse and a form of communication that appeals to the imagination rather than the subject's ability to reason, discriminate, and judge. Policy discourse can of course be analysed as a type of narrative, but story-telling only works by suspending disbelief – by blurring the boundary between reality and fantasy. Coupled to this is the division of the whole child between universal needs and 'additional' needs, which is where 'prevention and early intervention' come into play. Straining against the Strategy's unifying vision are divisions insisted upon by the Strategy itself, which is where specific modalities of power meet and intersect.

It was noted above that child poverty is one of adversaries confronted by the Strategy. When it comes to communicating this to children, they are told that 'the Government wants...To set up really good childcare for young children and to make things easier for parents who are trying to work and bring up children at the same time' (NCO, 2000b: 21). In conveying this simple message – that the solution to child poverty lies not in social supports, but in the earning capacity of the child's parent or parents – children are tutored in the basic arts of neo-liberal rule. Similarly, while the adult version is explicit in confronting 'anti-social behaviour and criminal activity', children are told that 'the government wants...Children who get in trouble and break

the law not to have to go to jail but to be looked after in child-friendly places and helped to sort out their problems'. Here again young citizens are coached in how to understand the nature of 'problems', which are to be addressed by taking ownership of them – by practicing responsible autonomy. The Strategy's 'big dream' is to enable and empower all children, but what this effectively means is that each must learn how to respond to, or at least withstand, the 'pressure to compete and succeed'.

Having consulted with (i.e. listened to) children, and as the policy process shifted to the task of communicating to children, the logic of strategy (combating specific adversaries) vanished. But why? Either this question cannot be asked, or there is some sort of tacit consensus at work, which amounts to the same thing: an unspoken agreement on the inappropriateness or irrelevance of such questions. Both point in the direction of power/knowledge. Research into what children know about the world around them – not the world we might associate with 'childhood', but the world of politics, violence, crime, sexual assault – indicates that children as young as seven are capable of understanding why preventative strategies might be necessary (Cullingford, 1992; Devine, 2002; O'Connor, 2008: 73-5, 83-8, 99). And yet, when it addresses children, the Strategy speaks only through the language of empowerment. The words 'plan', 'dream', 'strategy' and 'vision' are presented to children as a set of interchangeable signs. In fact nothing is interchangeable here, and the distance between dream and vision, plan and strategy articulates specific modes of power. Prevention and intervention correspond to a mode of power that continues to be exercised over children in the name of 'protection', but empowerment is the more important modality, because this ensures that no child is excluded from the game of inequalities⁶.

When dreams become reality: governing the empowered citizen

It was noted earlier from Miller and Rose that neo-liberalism ‘governs at a distance’ through programmes and techniques aimed at creating regulated autonomy. An example of this is the Rough Sleepers Initiative in the UK. Through the creation of a market in research and service provision, homelessness is now governed through the actions of voluntary sector agencies competing for clients and resources, and this has altered the nature of the service provided. While in the past many of these agencies provided shelter and hot food to homeless persons, the aim now is to modify the conduct of ‘rough sleepers’, with access to services based on a willingness on the part of ‘clients’ to undertake training in life-skills (see Ravenhill, 2008). Again, the objective is to prevent exclusion by providing people at the margins with the means to take charge of their individual situation. In this way the power of the neo-liberal state is exercised through the actions of voluntary sector agencies as they act upon the actions of service users, which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish the public from the private, or to separate the citizen from the consumer. Similar innovations have been identified in the regulation of skateboarding. Characterising the skatepark as a ‘neo-liberal playground’, Ocean Howell has examined how the provision of skateparks in the US organises users into a contractual relation with city management, with the result that skateboarders undertake responsibility for running the amenity and begin to police their own conduct (Howell, 2008).

Public playgrounds, which are the focus of this section, are also a way of instituting regulated autonomy, which is not to imply that the concept of ‘game’ (game of inequalities) should be taken too literally. By way of foregrounding the analysis (and

I will build on these points in the course of the discussion), I argue that playgrounds merit close attention for the following reasons: firstly, what amounts to a new playground infrastructure in Ireland provides tangible evidence of legitimacy on the part of the Irish State. As an indicator of compliance with Article 31 of the CRC, which sets out the rights of the child ‘to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts’, the Irish State has claimed international leadership in implementing the Convention (NCO, 2005: 7). Secondly, the new playground infrastructure is framed as responding to the needs of children as identified by non-governmental stakeholders and children themselves. As with the examples above, the playground blurs the public/private distinction, and it translates the discursive process examined in the previous section into a public ‘statement’ that action is being taken, that progress is being made, and that the Strategy is being implemented. Thirdly, and this relates back to my earlier characterisation of childhood as a battle for the future, modern playgrounds were originally conceived of explicitly as technologies of conduct. Innovations in the field of education during the first half of the 19th century were replicated by urban reformers, activists and planners in the early decades of the 20th century, with playgrounds deployed as a way of acting discreetly upon the thoughts, feelings and actions of children. More specifically, in the context of the social state, the playground was a means of engineering a healthy, vigorous and productive population, thus countering the immorality, dependency, and the mental and physical feebleness associated with the problem of ‘degeneration’ (Cavallo, 1981; Gagen, 2004; Ryan, 2008; Stedman Jones, 1971). Playgrounds no longer serve these particular ends, but they are still a way of governing children; or as Foucault might phrase it, they are both a way of structuring the field of possible action and a

mechanism through which young citizens are invited/incited to recognise their responsibilities.

Playgrounds are not new to Ireland. They have existed since the 1930s, but were in a general state of neglect by the 1980s – more likely to be frequented by drug-users than by children (Kernan, 2005). Towards the end of the 1990s however, a renewed interest in playgrounds culminated in a National Play Policy (NCO, 2004) and the very sudden (re)appearance of playgrounds all over Ireland. Some have been built on new sites, but even the old playgrounds that have been refurbished signify new beginnings. The National Play Policy (NPP) can be located in the same production process that culminated in the National Children’s Strategy, as a brief sketch of this process will demonstrate. In its 1997 report to the UN Committee, the Children’s Rights Alliance (mentioned above) expressed views on a range of substantive issues, among them the child’s right to play, which was to be ‘facilitated by the development of a national play policy’ (CRA, 1997: 47). The UN Committee responded by noting that ‘There had been insufficient information reported on recreational facilities, playgrounds, access to holiday programmes, etc. The child’s right to play should be facilitated by the formulation of a national strategy in that area’ (UNCCRC, 1998b: 14). The following year a study commissioned jointly by the Centre for Social and Educational research at the Dublin Institute of Technology, and the Children’s Research Centre at Trinity College Dublin, found ‘a lack of clear direction, no recognition, no strategy, and no structure for children’s play services...at government or departmental level’ (Webb and Associates, 1999). Play and recreation had moved to centre field, providing stakeholders with something tangible: something that could

be used both to exert pressure for reform and measure the extent to which the CRC was being implemented.

It was this issue of lack – the source of widespread criticism – that provided a way of demonstrating responsiveness to the ‘voice’ of children, because this had arisen as an issue of central concern among children during the process of consultation. The *Report to Children on the Public Consultation* notes that ‘one of the things nearly all of you wrote about was that you need more places to play and hang out’ (NCO, 2000d: 4). The adult version is less coy. Not only was this ‘the most pressing issue in the course of the consultations’, children and young people were also ‘really clear that there is an intrinsic link between the lack of facilities and a whole range of social and personal problems [that] go on to manifest themselves as serious problems for communities and for society as a whole’ (NCO, 2000c: 20-2). And in a more explicit restatement of the same point: ‘The young people involved in this consultation repeatedly make a clear case for investment in leisure facilities as a preventive strategy for a whole range of social problems’ (NCO, 2000c: 22). Here the provision of facilities for children and young people is explicitly framed as a tactical instrument of the Strategy – a means of combating its adversaries. And there is no apparent reason why this strategic purpose should be hidden. After all, the insight is derived from listening to children and youths; yet hidden it is, concealed within a discourse that speaks only of enabling. I am going to suggest that this mode of address is itself tactical.

The published documents provide some evidence to support the claim that children and young people *themselves* identified playgrounds and leisure facilities as a way of

preventing social problems, but it is sparse and inconclusive. If there is a pattern in the evidence, it concerns the sanctions that children and young people meet with when they use public space in ways that deviate from its prescribed uses. For example, several contributors reported abuse and harassment on the part of security personnel, neighbours and Gardai (police) when they use their skateboards. Similarly, several younger children reported that they had constructed their own swings and tree-houses, but that these have been removed by local authorities (in one case a tree was felled to prevent the children from re-building their playground) (NCO 2000c: 22-5). These examples do not invalidate the idea that provision functions as a mode of prevention, but they do suggest the need for a critical interpretation of such claims. The provision of play and recreational facilities is a way of positioning children and young people in social space, so that they are free to act as children and youths, but only in the places that have been designated as appropriate. And in the absence of such places, sanctions apply. Playgrounds both *are* visible and *make* visible: the ‘inside’ of the playground is observable to the ‘outside’ world of passers-by, and the normative gaze that comes to bear on children playing within the boundaries of the playground is refracted onto the wider society. The playground is a sort of prism that helps to institute a particular vision of social order.

According to the NPP, 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’ (NCO 2004: 11). Actually this is not quite the whole story. As noted above, educational experiments spanning two centuries, from early 19th century innovations to the activities of the Playground Association of America during the early decades of the 20th century, incorporated playgrounds into

their respective training system. Whether cultivating the child's nature, moulding the child's character, or training the child in the arts of civility, the idea of free play has long been a way of unobtrusively exercising power over children. The playgrounds of the past were intended to do their job subtly so that children remained unaware of being trained, moulded and coached, and there was a larger purpose to this.

Habituating the child in specific feelings, thoughts, and forms of behaviour was a means to a more ambitious (and elusive) end: engineering the future. Very few public playgrounds today are staffed by professional supervisors (as they would have been in the past), and the purpose of play is now framed by rights discourse, but this does not mean that the larger objective has been abandoned.

Of the various disciplines with a stake in this field, psychology stands out as the one which has probably done most to shape our understanding of the child at play. The 'ages and stages' approach to human development has provided an enduring platform for those who have argued that children have a play 'impulse' or 'instinct', and that this innate urge can be directed towards particular learning outcomes. Today, the question of why children should play is debated in terms of 'benefits', and the benefits come under two broad headings: individual benefits and social benefits (Cole-Hamilton et al., 2002; Coalter and Taylor, 2001, NPFA, 2000). The NPP encompasses both, but in view of the Strategy's adversaries, these need not be seen as mutually exclusive. The point to be made is this: the thrust of the NPP is that the benefits of play *can* and *should* be harnessed and directed to specific ends, and this disturbs its definition of play, which is actually derived from the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) in the UK. It may well be the case that the child at play is not being told what to do, but that does not mean that children are not being *directed*

whilst at play. The NPFA certainly defines play as ‘freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child’, but it adds this: ‘boundaries are required, but these need to be skilfully drawn’ (NPFA, 2000: 6-7). Organised as a bounded space that acts upon the actions of children, the playground is a technology of conduct. The NPFA acknowledges as much when it states that ‘good play experiences...support the development of autonomous adults, with a strong sense of personal identity, who are effective in society as parents, workers, informed consumers, active citizens, and in a range of other roles’ (NPFA, 2000: 14). The NPP itself identifies ‘a national play infrastructure’ as a means of prevention and diversion in the arena of juvenile justice (NCO, 2004: 45). Put all of this together, and it can be argued that, like the playgrounds of the past, the NPP harbours a strategic objective.

The inclusive playspace and the normative child: Ready, Steady, Play!

As a programme of action, the NPP looks to the future and envisions what can be characterised as ‘the inclusive playspace’. The inclusive playspace deploys the whole child approach, encompassing all situations and settings so that no child is excluded. It gives children a voice in designing play facilities and implementing play policies; it maximises the range of public play opportunities; it guarantees that all children have access to play facilities; it improves the quality and safety of playgrounds and play areas; it ensures that play services are provided by people with the relevant qualifications; and it develops a partnership approach to the provision of play opportunities (NCO, 2004: 9; NCO, 2000a: 6-9, 61; NCAC, 2002).

The boundaries of the inclusive playspace extend to a whole variety of ‘opportunities’ and ‘settings’: local communities, playgrounds, childcare facilities, primary schools,

hospitals, and parks. However, moving from the vision (or the dream) to the practice, the NPP states that ‘the provision of fixed equipment playgrounds is the most tangible evidence of a national commitment to supporting play’ (NCO, 2004: 16). As a practice, the NPP moves in the groove of international trends in public sector reform, the key features of which are mechanisms of financial transparency, the creation of markets and quasi-markets, and an emphasis on accountability to consumers of public services (Power, 1997: 43-5; Page, 2005). In Ireland the operational term is ‘strategic management’, with indicators of performance the means of demonstrating efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. Fixed equipment playgrounds are among the countable things which can be presented as evidence of accountability: the number of playgrounds opened since the Strategy commenced; the ratio between playgrounds and population in a given administrative area; the percentage of local authorities with recreation and amenities officers; the proportion of local authorities with a recreation strategy...and the audit trail extends to the inspection and maintenance of playground equipment: the frequency and intensity of inspection, the cost of maintenance and improvement – a universe of numbers demonstrating that action is being taken and the Strategy is being successfully implemented.

In focusing on the provision of fixed-equipment playgrounds, it should not be forgotten that in Ireland and in the UK, so-called ‘anti-social behaviour’ is associated with children and youths ‘hanging around’ on street corners or playing ball in the street (Burney, 2005; Squires and Stephen, 2005). Children and young people who do not conform to social expectations concerning where they are and what they are doing are increasingly likely to be confronted by coercive power. Playgrounds are more than an indicator of performance – an auditable entity demonstrating efficient and

effective policy implementation – they are also authoritative statements in a field of discourse; a way of saying ‘children should play here and nowhere else’ (McKendrick, 1999: 5; Cunningham and Jones, 1999).

The inclusive playspace is a diagram of the future in miniature, and it derives its authority and legitimacy from the Strategy. Framed as an open, transparent process of deliberation and decision-making, the Strategy was produced both with and for children. It is a landmark event, a major innovation both in terms of how policy is made and in terms of transforming adult-child relations. Recognising children as active citizens and as bearers of fundamental rights, the Strategy is about enabling children to be all that they can be. But by structuring the field of possible action, it encourages the exercise of a particular type of freedom. This is the strategic objective of empowerment: it regulates the autonomy of young citizens.

The title, or the public profile, of the NPP is *Ready, Steady, Play!*, which gives narrative form to the exercise of power. The child is positioned like a trained athlete (*Ready...*), prepared and competent (*Steady...*), poised to perform to the best of his or her ability (*Play!*). The young citizen-subject knows in advance what to do and awaits the opportunity to commence doing it, while the context – the posited mode of action – is a contest. Whether interpreted as an individual or a team member, the child is addressed as a player, and here we return to the pressure to compete and succeed, or the Strategy’s adversaries. Far from waging combat against the structural sources of social problems, the Strategy and the NPP focus on equipping children to adapt and perform to the best of their ability. In cases of failure, the fault lies with the player, not with the game.

Governing the future

The art critic and novelist John Berger announced a new era of critical thought when he argued that ‘The art of the past no longer exists as it once did. Its authority is lost. In its place there is a language of images. What matters now is who uses that language and for what purpose’ (1972: 33). Berger was tuning into something by no means confined to the world of ‘art’: a widespread willingness to question, challenge, and politicise. And this has not been without consequence, for it is the arts of governing – the forms of knowledge and the practical techniques deployed in administering human populations – that no longer exist as they once did. Political authority has become fragile and unstable, and what matters now, in what might be characterised as the age of strategy, are the ‘uses’ and ‘purposes’ that Berger refers to. By ‘age of strategy’ I mean a context where grand narratives have been all but reduced to rubble, and where knowledge no longer represents truth in the sense of reflecting or mirroring a reality which is independent of human culture. Knowledge is true to the extent that people recognise it as such. No accident then that governing has become a matter of story-telling.

From a close examination of the National Children’s Strategy and the National Play Policy, we have seen how citizenship and empowerment combine in organising constraints into embodied spaces of thought, speech and action. Framed by a loosely defined set of adversaries (i.e. behaviours that result in dependency, crime, self-harm, and so on), the Strategy was instituted through an inclusive process of public consultation and social partnership. A constellation of ‘stakeholders’ – players or actors with a stake in the field of childhood – were recruited into scripting the

Strategy, and these players now have a stake in its future. This is how the Strategy secures legitimacy while becoming a symbol of the legitimacy it has secured. And the kind of legitimacy it represents is broad social recognition; precisely the kind which is most effective in a democracy. The Strategy enrolls actors, routes the production and dissemination of knowledge, constrains the scope of innovation, and stabilises the field, adding up to what Stewart Clegg calls an ‘obligatory point of passage’ (Clegg, 1989). When it comes to deciding what counts as valid knowledge or how best to intervene in the lives of particular types of children, the Strategy is both the source and the destination of authoritative statements and actions. Deferring to the Strategy is obligatory. In fact the Strategy is one of two obligatory passage points in this field of discourse, the other one being the CRC. As an external source of authority and legitimacy, the CRC has the status of the universal. The National Children’s Strategy translates the universal principles of human rights discourse into a particular context and specific programmes of action, deriving its authority in part from the CRC, and in part from an ongoing process of consultation with stakeholders.

To govern is to order the field of action by instituting specific degrees of freedom, which is also a way of constraining what can be ‘legitimately’ thought, said, and done. In this sense legitimacy is inseparable from power and knowledge. Governing children is a way of acting upon the future – this is an insight basic to the concept of ‘socialisation’. But to focus on socialisation is to miss how acting upon and through the agency of children also configures relations among those doing the empowering. In other words, empowerment passes through the figure of the ‘whole child’ and folds back onto the field as a whole. Citizenship and empowerment combine not only in subjecting children to power, but in subjecting each and all to what the National

Playing Fields Association calls ‘the skilfully drawn boundaries of contingent constraints’. This is government in the age of strategy, a situation where we must all survive what the Strategy refers to as ‘the pressure to compete and succeed’.

Notes

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2 This conception of a child is in accordance with the CRC. According to Article 1, a child is ‘every human being below the age of eighteen years’ (UN, 1989).

3 The wording of this national goal is broadly similar to Article 12.1 of the CRC.

4 This section is based on personal communication with the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

5 200,000 copies of the children’s version were printed, twice as many as the principal text.

6 The tension between power ‘over’ and power ‘to’ can also be seen in the CRC, which attempts a balance between rights to participation and rights to protection. One side of this relation recognises children as knowledgeable and competent, and awards them the status of citizen. The other side insists that children are lacking in competency, and therefore in need of an external agent to protect their interests and make decisions on their behalf (see Archard, 2004: 60-9).

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