PLAYGROUND AS THE LABORATORY FOR DEMOCRACY. MEAD ON GAMES AND PLAY

El espacio de juego como laboratorio para la democracia. Mead sobre el juego y el jugar

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The concepts of game and play, which have traditionally been considered marginal or secondary phenomena by mainstream philosophy, gained a central position in the social behaviorism of George Herbert Mead at the beginning of the 20th century.

These concepts are important not only for the development of the child's personality; they are also the essential forms of activity by means of which a self emerges in conjunction with the several roles a child is able to play in acquiring a basic form of moral consciousness.

The pragmatist concept of game and play is therefore the essential labor of democracy within the community. This concept will be examined in order to assess its relevance and contribution to the contemporary global world, which is more complex and challenging to comprehend than the relatively homogeneous urban context for which it was originally conceived. A better integration between the main human activities (play, work and creation) and an open formal model of society with more basic social equality could be Mead's answers to the new challenges of globalization.

Key words: *Game, Play, Community, Social criticism, Democracy, Moral development.*

Mead on Games and Play

Games and play, in their rich plurality, have been a part of everyday human life ever since human beings existed. Nevertheless, philosophy neglected this widespread human practice, maybe because an inquiry into games and play appeared too frivolous for the serious business of philosophy. Yet games and play occupy a central role in the main works of Western thought: for example, the child playing in Heraclitus's cosmology, the free play of faculties in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, and the language games in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. In most cases, games and play and similar ideas have functioned rhetorically as a metaphor of the finitude of human powers in opposition to chance and fortune, or else it was used in the theory to explain very complex phenomena in terms of more simple processes, as in the case of the Game Theory[1.] We do not find any systematic treatment of games and play in its fundamental anthropological meaning as

human praxis until *Homo Ludens* (1938)[2] by the cultural historian, Johan Huizinga.

Another parallel development of games and play took place in the early thirties in the work of the pragmatist, George Herbert Mead, evident in central passages of his main work, *Mind, Self and Society* (1934). My thesis in this paper is that Mead's conception of games and play has an ethical and political signification that is reminiscent of Plato's reference to child's play in *The Laws*. Plato identified most of the implications of these concepts in his works[3] but maybe the most interesting one is to be found in the passage where he states that games are of vital importance to the *polis* since their reiterative character helps introduce favorable habits to the community. At the same time, Plato believed that a certain fascination of games can be dangerous to the community and therefore the games children play must be strictly controlled by politicians[4]. This opinion reflects the ambivalence of Plato's world concerning to play. My thesis is not that Mead followed Plato or was especially influenced by him. Rather, I would like to show that Mead's concern about the function of games and play in the community is simply analogous to Plato's reflection because they both stress the connection between education and politics, even though their political affiliations belong to completely different worlds. For both Mead and Plato, play activities are the means by which we acquire habits or patterns of behavior during childhood, which allow us to enter into the social world of adulthood. But For Mead, in contrast to Plato, the process of the development of the self is, in a primary sense, a cognitive one[5], though it is ultimately also of ethical and political relevance. To show this I am going to: (1) revisit the theoretical concept of play and game in Mead's work; (2) link it to the community work of Mead and other Chicago Pragmatists to show how the playground is the laboratory for democracy; (3) and finally, discuss the ethical and political implications

of the pragmatist approach to games and play for the global city, which is a more complex social context that is more challenging to comprehend than the original urban environment for which it was originally conceived.

Mead's conception of game and play is intrinsically connected to the sociological concept of role[6]. From a functionalist perspective, any social order can be understood as an extended distribution of roles or social functions. A given individual is able to play a certain role in a certain moment depending on his or her position in society, and this position is assumed to say something about the identity of this given individual. Role-taking is thus an essential part of becoming a self. A role is also bounded to a determinate perspective within the social situations: a role prohibits or compels a pre-fixed number of movements. We may understand this if we think of how chess pieces do: the queen can be moved in *this* way, whereas the king moves in *that* way, etc. Playing chess we are making use of some role attributions linked to a given position.

Role-taking also demonstrates a certain degree of maturity: the individual has to be able to adopt a position in the social whole and to behave from a pre-defined perspective. For Mead, the stage of ordinary play in childhood is fundamental in acquiring this sort of perception of one's self. Mead distinguishes between two phases corresponding to *game* and *play*. Play is what the child first learns to do before proceeding to the organized game. Playing is *playing at being something*: «A child plays at being a mother, at being a teacher, at being a policeman, that is, it is taking different rôles as we say» (MSS: 155). In this first period, the child can assimilate a certain number of responses but he or she is only temporarily committed to a simple organization of stimuli and structures. Mead calls this very simple structure a «conversation of gestures». Nevertheless, the whole learning process of taking roles is not fulfilled until the child can understand simultaneously the response of the

others. This is the situation of an *organized game*: «[the child] must be ready to take the attitude of everyone else involved in that game, and that these different rôles must have a definite relationship to each other» (MSS: 151).

In order to understand the situation of the organized game, it is helpful to follow Mead and think of games like baseball[7]. But what I find especially revealing is that Mead talks about the primary child play only in terms of pretend-play[8]. It raises the question concerning the connection between taking on the role of someone else and the authenticity of being oneself. Am I as a self just the mere addition of all the social roles I am able to play or something that lies beyond them? Mead tries to understand this question in terms of organization and states: «The organization of the self is simply the organization, by the individual organism, of the set of attitudes toward its social environment —and toward itself from the standpoint of that environment, or as a functioning element in the process of social experience and behavior constituting that environment— which is able to take» (MSS: 91). As a self I am in the position that enables to understand how to interact with others and to understand how others may interact with me in a wide variety of situations.

Of course a child is neither able to reflect critically on this gap, nor is he or she trained to a «delayed reaction», which is the necessary condition of intelligent conduct[9]. But by playing at being someone else the child also learns patterns of behavior that can be adopted and abandoned depending on the social constellation. The child learns gradually that his or her behavior is the presentation of the self. At the level of pure play, «[...] the self that is growing up has as much reality and as little as the rôles the child plays» (MSS: 370). At this stage of development the child often refers to him or herself in the third person. By passing to the level of the organized games, the child begins to understand how he or she is supposed to feel

in this or that position in terms of the first person[10]. By playing, we learn to be «in the other person's shoes». And there are potentially countless positions within a single community. Without a psychological theory of imitation[11] (in the traditional sense of the *Tiefpsychologie*), Mead is able to provide a formal account of the genesis of morality in the early years of the formation of personality[12].

Following Mead, the child has acquired enough habits through play activities once he or she completes the circle of the social world. Understanding the organized game, which is an illustration, a staging of the adult world[13], is a precondition for the self and social-criticism that will be expected of it when it is recognized as an adult member of society[14]. At this point I would like to critically reconstruct the social environment in which Mead's ideas arose to reflect on the kind of problems he was trying to deal with.

Playground as the Laboratory for Democracy

Mary Jo Deegan, a scholar of Mead's work and editor of the volume, *Play, School and Society*, regrets the fact that the concepts of game and play, in spite of playing a crucial role in Mead's work, are given so little attention. I believe the reason for this oversight is that games and play are considered too basic and frivolous for the high levels of analysis appropriate to social theory. Deegan points to the gendered bias that play activities were traditionally considered «woman's work» for sociologists[15]. Her reflections demonstrate that these play activities were very important in the community work led by Mead and other Chicago Pragmatists, specially Jane Addams and Mary McDowell. Her anthology also shows how the interest in games and play was increasing due to the work in the Hull-House and the exchange with the emerging urban community in Chicago in the 1890s. The Hull House was important not only

for developing the *kindergarten* philosophy of Friedrich Fröbel in the United States[6], but also for hosting anarchists, Marxists, social theorists and other intellectuals who were critical of the status quo and of the dangers of capitalism and industrialization. A synthesis of these two very important social functions can be read in Addam's text of 1914 called *A Plea for More Play and More Education for Our Factory Girls and Boys*. A year prior, McDowell had written a programmatic text with the eloquent title, *Recreation as a Fundamental Element of Democracy*, which could be seen as an historical precedent of the Nussbaum-Sen Capabilities Approach, for which play is a civil right for all human beings[17], for example, or of the Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. The relationship between playground and «real world» is not merely a mirroring one. We should not assume that children just imitate what adults do: they adopt selectively adult patterns of behavior but in doing it; they often feel free to introduce innovations in action. As Nora Hamilton, the head of the school of the art school in the Hull House, noticed, children playing «give the reality as it comes to them but the reality is living and filled with the spirit of play, that «other seeing» that finds the play world as real as the material world» (Addams, 1930: 346-347). The Hull House was specially engaged with children play and with the teaching of arts in order to provide spaces for creativity under the extremely difficult conditions for the neighbors of the Chicago settlements.

Mead, who was heavily involved in community service and was acquainted with the hard life in the Chicago settlements, was concerned that the work in the factory lacked dignity because it fails to enable the worker to express all the interests and values that are central to his or her life. He pleads for an integrated vision of human life, bringing community and university, school and family, society and government together. These worries are expressed in the beautiful passages where Mead discusses the women in medicine and argues that it is necessary not only for

women to combine their professional activity with familiar life, but also for society to have distinguished professionals that can join technical knowledge with sensibility for familiar duties[18].

Mead wrote as early as 1896: «There are three general types of human activity: work, play and art». I believe these three types of activity are closely connected in the social criticism of Mead. Play, as it was shown in the previous section, constitutes the field of experimenting with behavior. Playground is therefore called here the laboratory for democracy, because Mead's idea of civilized society is equated with the goals of democratic common life. While play and games are the means by which children acquire healthy habits and are encouraged to engage in cooperative practices, my thesis is that the playground is the context of experimenting with new ones and detecting the dysfunctions of the community. Playgrounds have to have their right place. In a broader sense, adults are also involved in complicated games of social interaction. In Mead's view of society, play and work correspond to a definite organization of society in which the interests of all are taken into account[19]. The artist, or the social critic who is bounded to marginality and creativity, is responsible for expanding our horizons. Perhaps this is even more necessary now than in Mead's Chicago. In the next section I will attempt to show that Mead's ideal is adjustable to the global city.

From the Little Agora to the Global City and Prospects for the Future

For Mead it is clear that game and play stand for adult activity and that we recognize in child play the fully developed act of the adult and see its emotional value[20] But is it playing only important for children becoming responsible citizens? Modern societies are becoming more complex and abstract so that it is more difficult to uncover the meaning of citizenship[21]. The

self is interwoven in numerous and complicated nets of roles, each of which is bounded to definite expectations, responsibilities and duties. Mead called this an ideal of a highly developed human society, for which there exist multiple interrelations among individuals[22]. The social situation in which the modern self is involved is more and more analogous to that of a game. But in the social game the playful element is absent; the rules and consequences are getting more confusing, and the actors more split.

For this Mead is able to comfort us with some inspiration and optimism. His organic, dynamic and functionalist view of society implies that the organization and unification of a social group is identical with the organization and unification of any one of the selves within the social process[23]. Mead discusses this common structure indirectly, giving only scattered clues. I will try to reconstruct its main features. First, the self lives in processes that demand cooperation, but also in processes that entail conflict with other selves. Second, self-realization depends on the recognition by the other selves and this recognition is limited by the control of society over individual members and by the set of responses a society is ready to assume. Third, there is an intrinsic exchange between self-criticism and social-criticism[24], so that in the process of the conversation between the self and community, the self has not only the right «but the duty of talking to the community of which he is a part, and bringing about those changes which take place through the interactions of individuals» (MSS: 168). In taking attitudes which involve others we are always reconstructing our immediate society[25]. To put it in other words: every little action has potentially long-lasting effects for the organization of the self and for the organization of society and it is therefore potentially significant to introduce step by step minimalistic changes in behavior patterns. The task of reconstruction may require creativity and imagination to enrich our social experience, to enlarge the social imagery. Here the third human activity —art— claims its social function.

The final picture of Mead's society reflects therefore a twofold structure. On the one hand, society demands the cultivation of habits by the individuals that favor community. The acquisition of these habits is conditioned already in the first phases of child play and all sorts of organized games by the means of which we attain patterns of behavior that naturally consolidate and orient our future conduct. On the other hand, the individual must recognize the interests of all those involved in the task of social reconstruction. The reference to all the interests is what Mead calls the «categorical imperative» (MSS: 386), which calls for the widest universe of discourse and community. In other words, the social whole is sustained by two elements: firstly, a natural and socially trained basis that is involved in integrating differences and, secondly, a formal structure that reinforces the minimum level of social equality[26].

Mead's social philosophy is said to be naive concerning the possibilities of human creativity. But this is not correct, for the picture of the Meadan society does leave room for human mistakes. As Mead asserts, «mistakes are not sins» (MSS: 389). And we could add here: there are also ways to improve our social order, and not by means of miracles. Mead's aim is to describe the structure of any social order in general, though he focuses less on a normative idea of society. Now, when the dices for Mead are thrown, we have the opportunity to make a choice. And perhaps it is better to listen to those who believe in the human capacity to enlarge social experience than to those who do not.

Final remarks

With this general presentation of Mead's social philosophy I hope to have shown the intrinsic connections between playground and children development, on the one hand,

and social criticism and arts, on the other hand. One of the major difficulties for the reception of Mead's conception of game and play is surely related to Mead's premature decease, which prevented him from developing his ideas to the end. His writings were published posthumously and it took decades until influent personalities in philosophy and sociology, such as Jürgen Habermas, Hans Joas and Axel Honneth, vindicate the originality of Mead's thought. Another difficulty for Mead's reception might have been his close friendship with the most important American philosopher of education, John Dewey. Dewey was without a doubt the most influent of all Chicago pragmatists and shared with Mead the goals of social reconstruction and social progress. But Mead was the only pragmatist who acknowledged the value of play for the prosecution of these goals. In my opinion, an extended study of Mead's concept of play and game linked to other aspects of his social behaviorism is still lacking in Mead's scholarship and to contribute at some extent in this specific topic was the attempt of this paper. Since it was impossible for Mead to develop his hypothesis into final conclusions, I would like to summarize in few traces what I take to be the most important lessons of Mead's conception of game and play:

a) Playing is not a frivolous activity or a mere preparation for the «real» world of adulthood. Playing has its own stages and times and is therefore an autonomous human activity.
b) Playing links the cognitive elements of behavior with emotional ones. Playing the other I can understand what others may see and what others may feel about what they see.
c) Playgrounds are not worlds apart of the real world. They must be thought and placed in continuity with the social order.

The continuity between playground and social order was presented here in terms of «laboratory

for democracy». That democracy is a good social order has been assumed all along these lines. The senses in which playgrounds can be seen as laboratories for democracy are at least three:

1) Playgrounds are spaces that are necessary for children to become social beings by the means of the acquisition of habits and of the interaction with other children. Interactions allow a potentially infinite number of possibilities between trial and error.
2) Playgrounds do not merely reproduce conventional, given patterns of social relations. They are open spaces to experiment with new ones.
3) Playgrounds are, in a sense, a staging of adult world. We can see what is not working in adult world by observing children play. But this is not meant to go in only one direction. If we are to protect playgrounds against the compulsions of the «real» world, we have to start to consider if broader social adjustments are also required.

The necessity of broader social adjustments is referred in this paper as a «twofold social structure». I think that Mead's insights into society are adequate to the challenges of a global and multicultural world because they impose two formal requirements to any given social order: 1) a sufficient formal equality with a guaranteed minimum of social justice; 2) the use of imaginative powers to understand differences and to take the interests of all participants into account. For these requirements it is necessary provide citizens with the better conditions for play, for work, and for creativity.

I would like to conclude with a couple of remarks that relate to Mead's distinction between human activities, i.e., between play, work and art, which also complement the aim of my paper. The first one has to do with the relationship of play to work. The sharp

compartmentalization between play and work was already disputed by Johan Huizinga in his early writings, *The Shadows of Tomorrow*[27]. The thought that our universe is a game is not new and may even be somewhat disturbing. But our worries may disappear if we take games and play to be natural paradigms or models of cooperative social practices, which are necessary for understanding social roles and the corresponding perspective within the social universe[28]. The second remark has to do with the relationship between play and art. It is noteworthy that one of the most celebrated theories of the twentieth century, the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer[29], has explained the nature of language and art in terms of play. The conversation, in which we are part of, flows within the channels of playful activity of words and the encounters with the immemorial Other through the fine arts. The circle between play, work and art is now closed[30], so that we may, at this point, endorse Mead's intuition that there is nothing more severe and serious than the games people play.

Notes

[1] I base my reflections upon Rescher (1995), Runkel (2003), González (2006) and Grätzel (2007).

[2] See Huizinga (2007a).

[3] See Aichele (2000), Freydberg (1997) and Jouët-Pastré (2006).

[4] See the most relevant passages of the *Laws* (Platón, 2002: 798b3-797a7: 338-353).

[5] Cfr. MSS: 173. Axel Honneth states also that the self-image is firstly a cognitive one, but is transformed into a practical one once the self enters into normative contexts (Cfr. Honneth, 1994: 123). What I am stating here concerns different dimensions of the self but also different stages of the child's development.

[6] On the different sociological traditions that converge in the history of the concept of role, see Arditi (1992).

[7] Cfr. MSS: 154.

[8] The distinction between game and play seems to be a simple one, but it is very important to connect it with the phases of the development of the self in Mead's theory. The examples chosen by Mead are also relevant. My thesis here is that pretend play is the best illustration of the stage of pure play, since it allows us to explain it in terms of a very rudimentary conversation of gestures, another key concept of Mead's naturalistic approach. It is also true that Mead often explains it by recalling the common case of the imaginary companion (Cfr. MSS: 370; PSS: 87), as Joas (1989) does. But I take pretend play to be a more basic form than this. I also find Honneth's assimilations problematic, between pure play and role playing on the one side, and organized game and competition, on the other (Cfr. Honneth, 1994: 124). The first assimilation raises the question concerning whether we have to have a notion of what it is to be taking a role in order to play roles at all, which is not yet developed at the stage of pure play. This is achieved in the phase of the organized game, when we acquire the perspective of the «generalized other». But acquiring this perspective does not mean that my relation to the real or potential others is a conflicting or competitive one. In other words: games of competition are only possible at the stage of organized game, but organized games involve a wider range of games, not only competitive ones. Mead refers occasionally to other play activities such as playing with dolls as an example of role-playing or hunting game, but there is neither a systematic differentiation within the «countless forms of play» (Cfr. MSS: 364) nor an answer to the question concerning which age the step from play to organized game is fulfilled (Cfr. Joas, 1989: 117).

[9] Cfr. MSS: 99.

[10] Although the distinction between «I» and «me» is also fundamental for Mead's theory of the self, he never linked it systematically to the game/play distinction. Therefore I am assuming that the fulfilled organization of the several «me» in an «I» corresponds to the grown-up self. In other passages, Mead states that play and game are, together with language, illustrations of the social conditions under which the self arises as an object (Cfr. PSS: 7). This speaks in favor of my thesis. But in another passage Mead notes that games «require a whole self, whereas play

requires only pieces of the self» (PSS: 15). The game is thus a ruled procedure close to the complex features of the adult's universe, so that it might be thinkable that there are also levels of game that correspond to different degrees of maturity.

[11] The concept of imitation (*mimesis*) is essential to Plato's understanding of child play (Cfr. Jouët-Pastré, 2006: 64). Mead would avoid here any sort of imitation based upon a mind-body dualism. See also Joas (1989: 99, 116).

[12] The step of «taking the attitude of the other» is the most important step not only for the organization of the self, but also for the organization of social experience, learning symbols and identifying objects in the physical world (cfr. Cook, 1993: 92ff). Nevertheless, the realms of language and physical world as constitutive elements of social experience cannot be discussed thoroughly in this paper.

[13] Cfr. MSS: 159-160.

[14] It would also be interesting to relate the different degrees of play activity with Honneth's different stages or forms of recognition (1994), but this analysis exceeds the aim of this paper.

[15] Cfr. PSS: lii. This ideological problem reached also the scholarship in social reform, so that it was difficult to write about so relevant figures for the American history as Jane Addams. See also Hamington (2009).

[16] Deegan recalls that Mead had an intense relationship with Fröbel's ideas through Mary McDowell, who was training *kindergarten* teachers at the Hull House between 1894 and 1901, through his wife, Helen Mead, who participated in this training, Dewey's daughter, Evelyn, who was critical of Fröbel's ideas, and also through Jane Addams, who promoted the scholarly study of play and the professionalization of playworkers. One of the most important claims of Fröbel's *kindergarten* philosophy is that every little world must have its playwork, for play activities nourish civil and moral virtues (Cfr. Fröbel, 1997: 50).

[17] See Nussbaum (2002).

[18] Cfr. PSS: 107ff.

[19] See the interesting fragments on Ethics by Mead (Cfr. MSS: 379-389).

[20] Cfr. PSS: 26-29.

[21] Cfr. PSS: 49-50.

[22] Cfr. MSS: 307.

[23] Cfr. MSS: 144.

[24] Cfr. MSS: 255.

[25] Cfr. MSS: 386.

[26] For an attempt to balance the demands of universalism with contemporary forms of pluralism, see Aboulafia (2001).

[27] See Huizinga (2007b).

[28] I take this suggestion from Stekeler-Weithofer (2011).

[29] See Gadamer (1999).

[30] Joas sees also such a synthesis between these three activities in Mead's early pedagogical writings and in the late writings on the aesthetic experience (Cfr. Joas, 1989: 208). I think it would be interesting for the perspective of the social order to consider the contributions of other game theorists, and I suggest starting with Wittgenstein, Gadamer and Huizinga. Unfortunately, this point cannot be developed adequately in this paper.

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Resumen

El espacio de juego como laboratorio para la democracia. Mead sobre el juego y el jugar

La actividad de jugar y el juego, que habían sido considerados como fenómenos meramente marginales o secundarios por el discurso filosófico dominante, ganaron una posición central en el conductismo social de George Herbert Mead a principios del siglo XX.

Desde el punto de vista de Mead, los conceptos *game* (juego organizado) y *play* (mero jugar) no son solo importantes para el desarrollo de la personalidad del niño, sino que estos designan las formas de actividad esenciales por las cuales emerge el «yo» en conjunción con los distintos roles que el niño o la niña será capaz de desempeñar en el proceso de adquisición de una conciencia moral básica.

Los conceptos pragmatistas *game and play* son por ello un laboratorio esencial de la democracia en el seno de cualquier comunidad dada. Esos conceptos serán examinados en su potencial relevancia para la construcción de un modelo de sociedad específico dentro de un mundo global, un contexto que es mucho más difícil de comprender por ser mucho menos homogéneo que el contexto urbano en el que estos conceptos surgieron. Una mejor integración entre los modos de actividad humana (juego, trabajo, creación) y una sociedad formalmente más igualitaria y abierta podrían ser las respuestas de Mead a los nuevos retos globales.

Palabras clave: *Juego, Actividad lúdica, Comunidad, Crítica social, Democracia, Desarrollo moral.*

Résumé

Le terrain de jeu comme laboratoire pour la démocratie. Mead sur les jeux et le jeu

Les activités des jeux (organisés) et du (simple) jeu, qui ont été considérés dans le passé comme phénomènes marginaux ou secondaires par la philosophie prédominante, ont acquis une position centrale dans le behaviorisme social de George Herbert Mead au début du 20e siècle.

Ces concepts sont importants non seulement pour le développement de la personnalité de l'enfant mais ils sont aussi des formes essentielles d'activité par lesquelles le soi émerge en lien avec les divers rôles qu'un enfant est capable de jouer dans l'acquisition d'une conscience morale de base.

Les concepts pragmatistes des jeux et du jeu sont donc le laboratoire essentiel de la démocratie au sein de la communauté. Ces concepts seront examinés pour en mesurer la pertinence et la contribution pour la cité globale contemporaine qui est plus complexe et difficile à saisir que le contexte urbain relativement homogène pour lequel ces concepts ont été conçus au départ. Une meilleure intégration entre les principales activités humaines (le jeu, le travail, et la créativité) et un modèle de société ouvert et formel avec une égalité sociale plus fondamentale pourrait être la réponse de Mead aux nouveaux défis de la globalisation.

Mots clés: *Jeux, Le jeu, Communauté, Critique sociale, Démocratie, Développement moral.*

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