

THE CHILD AND THE GHOST

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Abstract:

In this excerpt Giorgio Agamben analyzes the relationship between childhood, play, and signification. Importantly, he argues that children play a unique role in social renewal precisely because of their precarious location between death and the political life of the adult. Agamben's sustained interest in childhood is part of his overall project which concerns the ethical witnessing of the remnant that exists between binary terms such as life and death, nature and culture, human and animal. It is this interval, which both connects and separates oppositions, that Agamben locates the potentiality necessary to rethink politics, linguistics, and society itself.

Key Words: Levi-Strauss; diachrony; synchrony; ghosts

Agamben no intervalo da infância

Resumo:

Nesse excerto, Giorgio Agamben analisa a relação entre infância, jogo e significação. Essencialmente, ele argumenta que as crianças desempenham um papel único na renovação social justamente por causa da sua localização precária entre a morte e a vida política do adulto. O atestado interesse de Agamben na infância é parte de seu projeto geral, o qual diz respeito ao testemunho ético do vestígio que existe entre termos binários como vida e morte, natureza e cultura, humano e animal. Nessa intervenção, na qual tanto conecta quanto separa oposições, Agamben localiza a potencialidade necessária para repensar a política, a lingüística e a própria sociedade.

Palavras chave: Levi-Strauss; diacronia; sincronia; espíritos

Agamben en el intervalo de la infancia

Resumen:

En este extracto, Giorgio Agamben analiza la relación entre infancia, juego y significación. Esencialmente, argumenta que los niños juegan un papel único en la renovación social precisamente en razón de su ubicación precarias entre la muerte y la vida política del adulto. El sostenido interés de Agamben por la infancia es parte de su proyecto más amplio que concierne el testimonio ético del resto que existe entre términos binarios como vida y muerte, naturaleza y cultura, humano y animal. En este intervalo, que conecta y separa oposiciones, Agamben sitúa la potencia necesaria para repensar la política, la lingüística y la propia sociedad.

Palabras clave: Levi-Strauss; diacronía; sincronía; espíritus

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It is perhaps an accurate statement to suggest that Giorgio Agamben's work is interested in the gap, which mysteriously conjoins and separates binary terms. For instance, Agamben explores the realm of *homo ferus* (between animal and human), *homo sacer* (between *zoe* and *bios*), and the concentration camp (outside yet inside the law). Provocatively, the following essay will add to this list the ghost and the child, both of which exist in a zone of indistinction between death and the political life of the adult citizen. It is in the exploration of this paradoxical (dis)location that underlies all oppositions that Agamben finds room for a new linguistic theory, a new philosophy, a new political practice, and perhaps for us a new theory of the adult-child relationship. Overall for Agamben the sphere of experience, of history, and of humanity all exist precisely because of the gap created by and within binary division. As such this division must be rigorously examined through a variety of concepts and theoretical perspectives.

These archaeologies of the in-between have decisive political ramifications. As Agamben argues, the violence of a sovereign decision derives from an act of separation that erases relation (a relation, for instance, between the animal and the human that leads to domination and exploitation of the nature world). Thus ethics for Agamben is a form of acknowledging or witnessing the interval of the in-between. As such there must be respect paid to the "remnants" of the binary. In the following essay, you will see how this demands a new respect for the social role of the child in the overall process of historical transformation and social experience.

With this brief methodological outline in mind, here is a condensed version of Agamben's essay on play, ritual, and childhood from the book *Infancy and History*.

In Playland (pp. 75-96)

Everyone knows the bit in Collodi's novel where Pinocchio, having traveled through the night on the back of the talking donkey, arrives happily at dawn in 'Playland.' In his description of this infantile utopian republic, Colloid has left us the image of a universe where there is nothing but play.... The immediate result of this invasion of life by play is a change and acceleration of time....

It is worth dwelling on Lampwick's explanation. E know in fact that in ancient times, and still in the present among so-called primitive peoples...pandemonium, uproar, and bedlam had instead the function of instituting and securing the stability of the calendar....

If this is true, and Lampwick's reflections are still to be taken seriously, we can hypothesize a relation of both correspondence and opposition between play and ritual, in the sense that both are engaged in a relationship with the calendar and with time, but this relationship is in each case an inverse one: ritual fixes and structures the calendar; play, on the other hand, though we do not yet know how and why, changes and destroys it.

But the world of play is connected to time in an even more specific sense. We have seen that everything pertaining to play once pertained to the realm of the sacred. But this does not exhaust the realm of play. Indeed, human beings keep on inventing games, and it is also possible to play with what once pertained to the practical-economic sphere. A look at the world of toys shows that children, humanity's little scrap-dealers, will play with whatever junk comes their way, and that play thereby preserves profane objects and behavior that have ceased to exist....The essential character of the toy—the only one, on reflection, that can distinguish it from other objects—is something quite singular, which can be grasped only in the temporal dimension of a 'once upon a time' and a 'no more'.... The toy is what belonged—once, no longer—to the realm of the sacred or of the practical-economic. But if this is true, the essence of the toy...is, then, an eminently historical thing: indeed it is, so to speak, the Historical in its pure state....

If this is true—if what children play with is history, and if play is a relationship with objects and human behavior that draws from them a pure historical-temporal aspect—it does not then seem irrelevant that in a fragment of Heraclitus—that is to say, at the origins of European thought—*aion*, time in its original sense, should figure as a ‘child playing with dice’, and that ‘domain of the baby’ should define the scope of this play....

Ritual and play appear...as two tendencies operating in every society, although the one never has the effect of eliminating the other, and although one might prevail over the other to a varying degree, they always maintain a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony.... For if human societies appear in this light as a single system traversed by two opposing tendencies, then one operating to transform diachrony into synchrony and the other implied towards the contrary, the end result of the play of these tendencies—what is produced by the system, but human society—is in every case a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony: *history; in other words, human time*.

If this casts history as a system transforming ritual into play and play into ritual, the difference between the two kinds of society is not so much qualitative as quantitative: only the predominance of one signifying order over the other defines the placing of a society as one kind or the other. At one extreme of such a classification we would situate the case...of a society in which all play had become ritual, all diachrony transformed into synchrony...human beings would live in an eternal present.... At the opposite extreme we would situate the similarly ideal case of a society where all ritual had been eroded by play, and all structures disintegrated into events: it is ‘Playland’.... In both cases, there would be a lack of that differential margin between diachrony and synchrony in which we have identified human time.

...the signifying opposition between synchrony and diachrony...is shattered not only by death. It is threatened by another critical moment, no less to be feared: birth. Thus here too we see unstable signifiers come into play: just as death does

not immediately produce ancestors, but ghosts, so birth does not immediately produce men and women, but babies, which in all societies have a special differential status. If the ghost is the living-dead or the half-dead person, the baby is the dead-living or half alive person. It too, as tangible proof of the discontinuity between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and between diachrony and synchrony, and as an unstable signifier which can, at any moment, be transformed into its own opposite, thereby represents both a threat to be neutralized and a means of enabling the passage from one sphere to the other without abolishing its signifying difference. And just as ghosts have a corresponding function to that of children, so funeral rites correspond to initiation rites, in their purpose of transforming these unstable signifiers into stable signifiers.

From a starting point in Christmas folklore, with its central figure of Father Christmas, in just a few unforgettable pages Levi-Strauss reconstructed the meaning of initiation rites; behind the adult-child opposition, he discerned a more basic opposition between living and dead. In fact, as we have seen, children correspond less to the dead than to ghosts. Within the perspective of signifying function, adults and dead belong to the same order, that of stable signifiers and the continuity between diachrony and synchrony....But children and ghosts, as unstable signifiers, represent the discontinuity and difference between the two worlds. The dead person is not the ancestor: this is the meaning of the ghost. The ancestor is not the living man: this is the meaning of the child. For if the dead immediately became ancestor and ancestors immediately became living men, then the whole present would in an instant be transformed into past, and the whole past into present, and this would diminish that differential margin between synchrony and diachrony on which is based the potential for signifying relations, and with it the potential for human society and history....

Within this perspective, ghosts and children, belonging neither to the signifiers of diachrony nor to those of synchrony, appear as the signifiers of the

same signifying opposition between the two worlds which constitutes the potential for a social system. *They are, therefore, the signifiers of the signifying function*, without which there would be neither human time nor history. Playland and the land of ghosts set out a utopian topology of historyland, which has no site except in the signifying difference between diachrony and synchrony, between *aion* and *chronos*, between living and dead, between nature and culture.

So the social system can be pictured as a complex mechanism in which (unstable) signifiers of signification are counter posed to stable signifiers, but where in reality an exchange takes place between them to guarantee the functioning of the system. Thus adults submit to becoming ghosts so that the ghosts can become dead, and the dead become children so that the children can become men and women....Thus no society...can altogether do without unstable signifiers....

For it is certainly not an index of health when a culture is so obsessed with the signifiers of its own past that it prefers to exorcize them and keep them alive indefinitely as 'phantoms' rather than bury them, and when it is so afraid of the unstable signifiers of the present that it cannot see them as anything other than the bearers of disorder and subversion. This exasperation and this hardening of the signifying function of ghosts and children in our culture is an unequivocal sign that the binary system has become blocked and can no longer guarantee the exchange of signifiers on which its functioning is founded.

Recebido em: 14/04/2007
Aprovado em: 12/05/2007