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## Childhood and Citizenship: A Conversation across Modernity<sup>1</sup>

JOSEPH DUNNE

St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University  
Ireland

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*SUMMARY: This paper analyses the problematic nature of citizenship as a modern achievement faced with the challenge of vindicating ancient ideals in what is increasingly considered to be a 'postmodern' world. It offers a parallel analysis of childhood as a characteristically modern construct whose reality in children's life-worlds is threatened by social conditions of postmodernity, and whose discursive articulation is increasingly exposed to critique from the standpoint of philosophical post-modernism. In response, it argues for the incorporation of key elements of Athenian/republican citizenship – emphasising speech, action, and interdependence – in early childhood education, an incorporation already strongly prefigured in the exemplary experiment at Reggio Emilia in Italy.*

*RÉSUMÉ: Cet article porte sur la nature complexe de la citoyenneté, réussite moderne rencontrant le défi des anciens idéaux, dans ce qu'on appelle de plus en plus fréquemment le monde post-moderne. Il propose, en parallèle, une analyse de l'enfance vue comme une construction typiquement moderne dont la réalité, dans les mondes où vivent les enfants, est menacée par les conditions sociales post-modernes et dont l'articulation discursive est de plus en plus exposée à la critique depuis le début du post-modernisme philosophique. En réponse à cela, il plaide en faveur de l'incorporation des éléments-clé de la citoyenneté républicaine d'Athènes – en insistant sur la parole, l'action et l'interdépendance – dans l'éducation préscolaire, une incorporation déjà fortement préfigurée dans l'expérience italienne exemplaire de Reggio Emilia.*

*ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Das Papier behandelt die problematische Natur von Staatsbürgertum als einer modernen Errungenschaft, die sich zur Rechtfertigung antiker Ideale herausgefordert sieht gegenüber dem, was zunehmend als eine „postmoderne“ Welt aufgefasst wird. Es wird eine parallele Analyse angeboten von Kindheit als einem charakteristischen modernen Konstrukt, dessen Realität in den kindlichen Lebenswelten durch soziale Bedingungen der Postmoderne bedroht ist, und dessen diskursive Artikulation zunehmender Kritik vom Standpunkt philosophischer Postmoderne ausgesetzt ist. Im Gegenzuge spricht dies für den Einschluss von Schlüsselementen der bürgerlich demokratischen Gemeinschaft in der athenischen Polis – Betonung der Rede, Handlung und Wechselwirkung – in die Bildung der frühen Kindheit. Dieser Einschluss ist in dem beispielhaften Experiment in der Reggio Emilia in Italien bereits vorgezeichnet.*

*RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la naturaleza problemática de la ciudadanía como un proyecto moderno enfrentado a los desafíos de reivindicar ideales antiguos en lo que es crecientemente considerado un mundo "postmoderno". Se ofrece un análisis paralelo de la infancia como una construcción típicamente moderna, cuya realidad en el mundo en que viven los niños es amenazada por condiciones sociales de postmodernidad, y cuya articulación discursiva esta constantemente expuesta a críticas desde el punto de vista filosófico del postmodernismo. Como respuesta, se argumenta por la incorporación de elementos claves de la ciudadanía republicana de Atenas –*

*enfaticando el idioma, la acción y al interdependencia – en la educación infantil, una incorporación fuertemente prefigurada en el experimento ejemplar de la Regio Emilio en Italia.*

**Keywords:** Childhood; Citizenship; Modernity/Postmodernity; Deconstruction/Reconstruction; Interdependence; Reggio Emilia; Children's Voice and Agency

## 1. Introduction: Two Historical Thought-experiments, and the Contemporary as 'Postmodern'

We have urgent reasons now to bring childhood and citizenship into a conversation in which both may be mutually illuminated. Such a conversation has of course been underway for a very long time and I shall begin by referring briefly to two conspicuous episodes from its history. First, at the outset of recorded reflection on education in the west, Plato argued that individuals could flourish only within a harmoniously integrated, that is to say a *just*, city; in the *Republic* the political project of constructing that city presupposed the educational project of forming the young individuals who were to be its members. State-craft entailed soul-craft: there could be no hope of creating a just society through institutions and laws unless education had instilled a care for justice in individual citizens. Such education would have to be entrusted to the state as the public authority – so comprehensively, in Plato's view, that he did not balk at recommending the abolition of the family, for us the bastion of our cherished privacy. In his *Republic*, children would be reared collectively and not by their parents, whom they would not know. Without the narrow focus of the family, its ingrained prejudice in favour of its own members and its consequent tendency to create or reinforce social division and inequality, children would be all the better educated for citizenship.

The second conversation-partner is Rousseau who was deterred, more than twenty centuries later, by something that Plato had disregarded: the fact that there is no existing state enlightened or just enough credibly to sponsor or carry through the kind of education that would form people to be both good citizens *and* good human beings. This being the case, Rousseau argued, we are faced with a choice: *either* allow the state to educate, realising that if it forms good citizens, by its own corrupt standards, it will thereby have formed bad human beings; *or* educate privately, knowing that if we form human beings who are good, they will by that very fact be ill-fitted for citizenship of the existing bad state. The hallmark of a good human being, in Rousseau's view, is personal wholeness, an intact sense of oneself, without inner discord between one's desires and one's capacities, or one's feelings and thoughts. Since society, as we know it – or as he felt it – is the scene of division, of open enmity and disguised envy, one can enter it only at the cost of allowing its division to enter oneself. 'The citizen', he tells us, 'is but the numerator of a fraction, whose value depends on its denominator' (Rousseau 1982, 7). A fraction gets smaller as its denominator (the number below the line) gets bigger. And so a child is divided, is reduced, as he is drawn into a society riven by inequality; losing secure connection with his own being and learning to depend on the approval of others for his self-esteem, he becomes an imitator and a puppet. Rousseau's response is to ensure that the young *Émile* will not be thus fractioned – though to keep him whole means to devise for him a Robinson Crusoe style education, in the absence of peers, learning through interactions with the immediate environment and being formed by the unity of Nature rather than the division of Society.

Reflecting on these two great thought-experiments from the history of education, one might say that Plato abolished childhood for the sake of citizenship, while Rousseau (at least in the early books of *Émile*)<sup>2</sup> abolished citizenship for the sake of childhood. We shouldn't too readily suppose that these radical proposals are now safely consigned to the museum of ideas: each retains a permanent attraction, as the education policies of totalitarian regimes or of parents attracted to home-schooling still attest. Still, I don't think that in general we find either of these drastic solutions desirable or possible now – although the *problem* they address surely still faces us: how to understand the relationship between childhood and citizenship and how to translate this understanding into an educational project. It is the depth and dimensions of this problem, for *us*, that I want to explore. But who are we, for whom history has made the voices of Plato and Rousseau run dead? The answer might be: we are 'post-moderns'. I use this by now too-heavily-freighted term

quite lightly here. I mean only that we are *aware of modernity as modernity*, a specific epoch whose defining ideals and agenda, already clearly articulated by the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, we have begun to take stock of. This awareness and stock-taking, by now pervasive in every discipline, including early childhood education, is enough to make us post-moderns, whether or not we go on to press two further claims: that social conditions have recently undergone such seismic change that we are now beginning to live in a new epoch of post-modernity; or, a different proposition, that the core ideals of modernity should be abandoned in the philosophical embrace of post-modernism.

In the stock-taking about both the social conditions and the ideals of modernity, childhood and citizenship loom large. Both of them might be regarded as specifically modern creations and, precisely as such, now highly problematical. What perplexes indeed is not just how the two should be related but, more basically, what either in itself amounts to anymore. First, I'll try to show this in relation to citizenship and then, a little later, in relation to childhood. When I've shown how problematic each now is, there won't be much time left to consider solutions, drastic or otherwise. But I will conclude by saying why it may be right to think that the two sets of problems are indeed deeply inter-related and why therefore we need a conversation that brings both together.

## 2. Modernity and the Changing Fortunes of Citizenship

That citizenship is a modern creation perhaps seems obvious enough. We easily think that people used to live as subjects of a monarch or despot and that this subjection ended only with the French Revolution and its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. There is something right about this linking of citizenship with modernity. But in fact as moderns we have inherited two different conceptions of citizenship from the ancient world (Pocock 1995). The first is the Roman idea of citizenship as a legal status, entitling a person to certain defined rights and immunities in exchange for some degree of loyalty and allegiance. We have this idea still today; it is what a passport guarantees to its holder in terms of rights to residence, travel, security, welfare, ownership and disposal of property, and legal redress in the case of any infringement of these rights.

But we also inherit a more robust conception of citizenship from the Athenian *polis* or city-state (Honohan 2002). Here, citizenship was not reducible to a legal status guaranteeing entitlements; it was, rather, a challenging and always precarious achievement. The dignity of being a citizen was an essential aspect of the dignity of being human, which consisted in the capacity to reason, speak and act – and thus to seek out and live a good life. But reason and speech were understood as essentially public, needing the give-and-take of many voices, and the good life was one best reached in common. Aristotle, who gives us the classic articulation of this notion of citizenship, says that we are by nature political animals (*Politics*, 1, 2, 1253a, 2-3). We cannot then entirely off-load our civic functions to a cadre of professional politicians, still less of mandarins or bureaucrats, leaving ourselves free just to pursue our purely private interests. Three ideas define this notion of citizenship: first, freedom – though not freedom from interference by others so much as freedom to participate with others in the joint practice of self-government. Second, equality – though not the equality of a level playing-pitch, on which people can make themselves unequal, so much as parity of people's stake and say in determining the decisions that bind them. And third, solidarity or, as Aristotle called it, civic friendship: citizens were not to be mere strangers or rivals but, like friends, were to care about each others' good (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 8). As defined by these three ideas, citizenship carried clear ethical and educational implications. It required the cultivation of those dispositions of mind and character that comprise 'civic virtue', including abilities to deliberate wisely, to respect difference without avoiding conflict, to deal justly with others, to show courage in defending the community's security or good, and to put a premium on this good even, if necessary, at the expense of one's private interest.

When citizenship re-emerged with modern democracy after the French Revolution, it had one great advantage over its Athenian fore-runner: it sought to include as citizens *all* people and not just a small male elite. The enfranchisement of women, workers, people of colour – and, we may ask, children? – has been, if only in slow stages, part of the modern democratic struggle. But while this extension of the range of citizenship is to be celebrated, the substance of what citizenship

amounts to in the modern era has become more problematic. And this is largely because of the two powerful forces that shaped its transformation, nationalism and capitalism.

Nationalism is a specifically modern doctrine: the idea that if people share an identity in terms of historical descent, shared memory, culture and language, they should be entitled to found their own state. The nation has given a strong answer to the question of who is to form the 'we' that becomes the political community and so who are to be counted in – and *out* – as citizens of the state. It has also provided a basis for identification and belonging, thus motivating people to share the burdens as well as the benefits of citizenship and to make the sacrifices necessary for their state's survival or expansion. Unfortunately, however, as we know only too well, the sacrifice was often of citizens' own lives: the history of nation-states has been a history of war, two great wars in the last century, with millions of corpses, and recent efforts at ethnic cleansing based on the virulent nationalism of blood and soil. But apart from these problems, it is apparent now that the power of nations-states, so dominant for the past few centuries, is now declining – a fact that we register with the word 'globalisation'. The global market links the economic activities and fates of human beings across the whole inhabited world, creating a universal borderless space for the movement of capital and (more selectively) of labour, spawning multi-national corporations and generating a logic of productivity, of relentlessly uniform quantification, through which all things – goods, services, activities, and even people – are made commensurable and interchangeable. In this scenario of late capitalism, there is a compelling need to forge political institutions whose reach is no less extensive than the economic forces which they must coordinate and regulate. Moreover, the composition of national populations, mainly in response to labour-market pressures, is subject to large and rapid change. In the Irish case, for example, within a year of the signing of the treaty of accession in May 2004, eighty five thousand people from the ten new member states of the Union from central and eastern Europe had migrated to Ireland and come to form 4% of the Irish work-force.

The challenge we now face is to make the transition to some form of post-nationalist citizenship after nationalism has for so long provided the social glue of the civic bond. (The difficulty here was vividly illustrated by the referenda in France and the Netherlands in the spring of 2005 that presented such set-backs to European integration.) But this challenge is greatly increased by the fact that the nature of our society and politics in the era of globalisation makes it extraordinary difficult to reinvigorate the Athenian conception of citizenship which pre-existed, and did not depend on, nationalism. The issues that are now the matter of politics have come to seem too complex to be properly within the comprehension of ordinary citizens. Increasingly, they seem to be technical matters falling within the competence of experts, so that Alexis de Tocqueville's gloomy anticipation in the nineteenth century of 'soft despotism' seems to be ever closer to realisation (de Tocqueville 2004). Increasingly depoliticised, people look out for their purely private interests and the citizen is reduced to the consumer, the lobbyist, the litigant, or the spectator who votes or – as is increasingly the case for young people – does *not* vote. And even the discharge of this voting role in our faltering system of representative democracy is increasingly trivialised. Politicians are less inclined to try to persuade us with some vision of the kind of society it would good to live in and to seek our support for a substantial political project. Instead, they feel compelled to appeal to our private interests and to do so by marketing techniques and sound-bites rather than by argument.

These are some of the issues concerning citizenship that arise out of reflection on the nature of modernisation. They pose an enormous challenge. But before returning to that, I want to look now at our other, related topic, children and childhood.

### **3. Childhood and its Fortunes in Modernity**

#### *A Brief Genealogy: Childhood, never Universal and now Ending?*

It is now commonplace to describe childhood (in the recent words of a distinguished Irish journalist) as 'one of the few great achievements of modern civilisation – the idea of a protected, innocent

realm before adulthood begins.’ An interesting story can be told (and, since the pioneering work of Philippe Aries (1962) provoked a whole new interest in the history of childhood a few decades ago, can now be better told) about how that realm emerged. In the Middle Ages, once the extreme fragility of early infancy was over, even very young children were quickly absorbed into a way of life and a social space common to them and adults. For childhood to crystallise out from that earlier common world, so that it came to occupy a separate and special sphere in its own right, several major cultural transformations had to take place, all of them associated with the emergence of modernity itself over a period of at least five hundred years. I need make only the briefest reference to them here. First, there was what Norbert Elias (2000) has called ‘the birth of manners’ at the time of the Renaissance, or the development of new kinds of inhibitions around bodily functions, sex, personal space and hygiene, and newly invented forms of privacy and shame; the wider diffusion of literacy (itself requiring high levels of instinctual restraint and encouraging new kinds of individuation and interiority) after the invention of the printing press around the same time; and the new expectation that both manners and literacy should be inculcated in the children of the wealthy. Then there was the influence of the Protestant Reformation in giving new dignity to family life and bringing children to the fore as the targets of anxious indoctrination (a targeting taken up also in the Catholic Counter-Reformation with, for example the founding of the great teaching orders such as the Jesuits and the Ursulines). Or there was the emergence of the nuclear family after work had migrated from the domestic sphere to mines, mills, factories and offices in the wake of the Industrial Revolution; the creation within this family unit of much stronger affective ties between parents (especially mothers) and children; the replacement, as the primary personal event, of death by birth, and the emergence of a new, radically secularised sense of the future as open and worth investing in, with children coming to seem the main investment, the real after-life. Or there was the growing concern of nation-states to found national systems of education, focusing on the young as carriers of the nation’s destiny, with a strong cultural remit in relation to language and identity and with a mission to create national prosperity; and the coming into view of children as human capital to be invested in – an all the more urgent imperative in the age of the ‘information society’ and the ‘knowledge economy’. And, as the culmination of all of this, there was the great growth of schools as dedicated, customised spaces in which children are sequestered so that they can be subjected to an ever more intensive and longer – at both ends – initiation into various kinds of complex cultural capital.

What I have just outlined is a brief genealogy of childhood as a very important part of the emergence of western modernity, of what gradually became normative for the advanced classes of Europe, and what liberal-democratic politics in industrialised societies has committed itself to extending and as it were universalising: parallel to universal franchise, universal literacy, and other basic rights, there is the universal right to childhood. But two important deflationary points can be made in relation to this Enlightenment narrative of progress. First, childhood in this sense is not now universal, is not now available to all children. It is not available for instance to children on the streets or in sweat shops or war zones. It is not a reality for the 300 million children who now endure slave labour or for many of the children in the so-called Third World who, according to a recent United Nations Human Development Report, consume and pollute thirty to fifty times less than their counterparts in the First World (Loy 2002, 208). Nor of course is it available to the 35,000 children who die every day from diseases that are relatively easy to prevent or cure with suitable care and treatment (every two days, we might reflect, more children die needlessly than Americans were killed throughout the whole period of the Vietnam War; Beck 2004, 153).

Second, even in the privileged part of the world this notion of childhood may no longer be sustainable. This, at any rate, is the thesis of a spate of books over the past few decades warning that our social and cultural fabric now makes it impossible to erect protective fences around children – to confine them safely in an oasis of nurture, pedagogy and play – so that childhood as we have come to know it (i.e. modern childhood) is now ending. Titles of some of the better known of these books are: *The Disappearance of Childhood*, *Children without Childhood*, *The Erosion of Childhood*, and *The Rise and Fall of Childhood* (Postman 1982; Winn 1983; Suranski 1982; Somerville 1990). They suggest that literacy and the culture of the book are receding before a new culture of

the image (through video, internet and other hi-tech devices), a culture that is more immediate, more undifferentiated, more accessible to children and much harder for adults to patrol. Or they argue that the private zone of the family and the separate space of the school are more easily penetrated by powerful forces of media and market that turn children into consumers and prematurely eroticise them, transforming innocence into knowingness and cynicism. Or they claim that the required kind of stable family that might even attempt to protect children from all this is itself showing huge fissures.

### *Three Dominant Discourses and their Deconstruction*

There is a strongly elegiac tone in the counter-narratives I have just recited; the story is told as a lament – childhood is ending, alas! But there is another kind of response to the historical construction of childhood I outlined that reads it as a genealogy in Michel Foucault's sense, that unmasks it as a narrative of progress, revealing instead the layers of coercion and power that it carries and conceals (Foucault 1988 and 1995). Aries himself was inclined to such a disenchanting reading, and many subsequent theorists have offered more or less Foucaultian interpretations of the school, and of the preschool and crèche, as paradigm examples of the disciplinary, normalising institution (Dahlberg et al 2002; MacNaughton 2005), on a continuum with the prison or the psychiatric asylum, and of childhood itself as an inherently oppressive category, that serves the interests not of children but of adults, the state, or the market-economy, and that – like much else that is so proudly modern – needs to be deconstructed. What is to be deconstructed, of course, is not real children but discourses that have constructed and legitimated our ways of thinking about and treating children. I want to identify three such discourses that have, I believe, been particularly influential.

First there is what I shall call the *privative* discourse of childhood. Here there is an inherent purposiveness in human development across the life-span that lays down a one-way direction of growth. The early years, then, are seen as *lack*, a period when one is *unformed* and *incomplete*; one is *without* or does *not yet* possess what it takes to qualify as properly human. There are strong pre-modern roots for this view in classical Greek culture. But it has also had a strong innings in modern thought and specifically in developmental psychology. It suggests that there is a succession of hierarchically ordered capacities and attainments, with earlier ones being superseded by later ones. The earlier ones are lower and are to be understood essentially in relation to the later, higher ones that replace them. From this viewpoint, early childhood is seen as deficiency – or at best as a potentiality for what properly, all going well, comes later. Piaget's mapping of 'stages' of cognitive development, in an invariant and irreversible sequence, and Kohlberg's work on parallel stages in the moral sphere are clear examples of this privative view.

The second highly influential modern discourse on childhood that I want to draw attention to is what I shall call the *therapeutic*. In this view childhood is not just important but *the* crucially important phase of the whole life span – if only because of its fateful impact on later phases. Following Freud, it draws our attention to the strength of children's emotions, the conflicted nature of the scenes in which they are enacted, especially within the family, and the difficulty of resolving these conflicts creatively. In childhood much is at stake, precisely because so much can go wrong. So foundational are the emotional experiences of early childhood that it is unfailingly to them that one must return when enforced acknowledgement of psychological stuntedness or dysfunction lead one to seek therapeutic help as an adult: therapy is invariably a form of backward journey in which one tries to undo the knots that still tie one to a painful childhood. But therapeutic savvy has also penetrated our culture in a forward-looking way as a requirement for those with responsibilities in relation to young children, whether as teacher, care-worker or parent. Increasingly these adults are expected to have some working grasp of 'displacement' and 'projection', or the entanglements of 'transference' and 'counter-transference' or, in a softer, less technical mode, of 'active listening' and 'validation' as aids to a child's 'self-esteem'. The lens through which we now tend to see children – and the framework of assumptions within which we tend to treat and act towards them – is heavily psycho-therapeutic. We value in a new way children's feelings, the frequent rawness of which is seen as an indication less of their immaturity than of their being more truthfully

'in touch', less given to the kinds of repression and evasion that characterise adults. And of course psycho-analysis has no monopoly here; among a host of different approaches there is, for instance, Alice Miller's passionately engaged work in defence of children's emotional integrity or John Bradshaw's and others' championing of the 'inner child' (Miller 1990; Bradshaw 1992).

The third discourse of childhood that I want to discuss is what I'll call the *privileged* viewpoint. In this, childhood appears neither as a period of deficit nor as fraught with psychological danger, but rather as a time when one is uniquely gifted with positive qualities that are all too easily lost in the passage to adult life. This viewpoint sprang mainly from Romanticism and of course it has been hugely influential as an inspiration of 'progressive' and child-centred education. Much of its élan is already apparent in the founding text, Rousseau's *Émile*, though it was more fully elaborated by later figures such as Froebel and Pestalozzi and later again – fed also by religious and spiritual sources – by Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner (Froebel 1974; Pestalozzi 1967; Montessori 1984; Steiner 1981).

'Childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling; nothing could be more foolish than to try to substitute our ways'; 'allow childhood to ripen in your children.' These famous sentences from *Émile* (1760) announce this privileged paradigm. But what are these 'ways' that are not to be substituted, and what – already there in children – is to be allowed to 'ripen'? The answer, on behalf of this whole tradition, would highlight the following qualities: relative simplicity and wholeness, freedom from debilitating self-consciousness, from the fragmentations that can cause painful conflict between mind and body, thought and feeling, self and others; greater readiness to feel, and greater trust to express, the 'here and now' quality of experience; an immediate and alert presence to the sensuous world that is all the fresher and more intense for being less under the mediating influence of conceptual and linguistic schemes; wonder, a capacity to be gripped and captivated by the ordinary wonders of the available world, and an inclination to explore them repeatedly and without boredom through direct embodied engagement as well as through a torrent of questions and conjectures that open the possibilities of being, unbound to 'yeastless factuality'; a capacity for deep, undistracted absorption that is both play and work, or rather a form of experience in which the distinction between work and play is undercut – for it is without the distancing calculation that sees work as laborious and play as 'recreation' that enables one all the better to return to work (play, Froebel says, *is* the serious business of childhood).

With reference to qualities such as these, one might say that children are not just to grow up into adulthood but to grow down into childhood; for 'growing up', it is realised, can entail severe losses beneath the perhaps more obvious gains. Minimising losses as well as maximising gains becomes an important educational responsibility – a theme long in the mainstream tradition of child-centred education and taken up again recently by writers who would replace linear notions of development by other metaphors such as spiralling and layering. Here one thinks of Kieran Egan's work, and of Gareth Matthews' argument that children's capacities for bold philosophical speculation and artistic creation *decline* after the early years (Egan 1997; Matthews 1994). More than educationalists or philosophers, however, it is poets who have associated these qualities with childhood – one thinks especially of Blake and Wordsworth. But let me quote here lines of the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, from the last stanza of 'Among School Children', a poem prompted by his visit to what was then a pioneering, Montessori-inspired primary-school in Waterford in 1925:

Labour is blossoming and dancing  
Where body is not bruised to pleasure soul  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil ...  
Oh body swayed to music, oh brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

I have now outlined three major discourses that have hugely informed our theory and practice towards children in the modern period. And how do we regard them now, at this 'post-modern' moment? As I mentioned earlier, they seem ripe for various kinds of deconstruction, arising largely from a keener perception that, although they are *about* children and are constructions *of* childhood,

they have been constructed by adults. There is now heightened suspicion that, as such (as adult constructs), they carry, even if unwittingly, adult priorities and projections. The driving priority of modern adult society, through the medium of scientific-technical reason, has been to gain mastery and control – to be able to set predictable outcomes and increase the efficiency with which they are delivered. This is the characteristically modern attitude towards nature. When we adopt it towards human beings, too, it leads to what Foucault calls ‘normalisation’. And in recent years the first two paradigms – the privative and the therapeutic – have come under suspicion as being complicit with this normalising project. A lot of critique has focused on the way in which stages of attainment have been identified as supposedly natural and normal, inscribed as it were in the very being of children at 4 or 7 or 9, independently of cultural, social or economic contexts, and so are available to set developmentally appropriate – scientifically accredited – educational targets and learning outcomes, to which whole populations of children are to be subjected and in relation to which they are to be graded and selected (Kessel and Siegal 1983; Burman 1994; Walkerdine 1998; Dahlberg et al 2002). And similar concerns have been raised about the therapeutic discourse: it has been argued that, with the increasing dislocation of children from ordinarily sustaining relationships and communities in their life-worlds, the therapeutic outlook too easily assumes that there are techniques for managing emotion – another way, behind the language of self-esteem and self-efficacy, of normalising children as the kind of assertive, competitive but not too unruly individuals that our present society requires (Graumann and Gargen 1996; Henriques, et al. 1998).<sup>3</sup>

And the privileged paradigm, too, has been criticised for carrying disguised adult needs (Richardson 1994; McGavran 1999; Plotz 2001). The argument has been made, for example by the cultural historian, John Gillis, that this view of childhood was invented by highly literate adult males who were simultaneously losing their religious faith, being deprived by industrialisation and imperial conquest of the last places on the inhabited earth on to which they could project phantasies of untarnished natural simplicity, *and* being expelled from the newly feminised spaces to which children were increasingly being confined (Gillis 2000). In response to all this, childhood became the fixated object of displaced sentiment and intense nostalgia; what Gillis calls the ‘mythic country called childhood’ was invented. This idealised childhood did not have much to do with real children – apart from the damage it could cause them. For the idealisation could all too easily be a prison for the child who seemed to fit it, and provide a basis for demonising the child who did not – the devil as the angel’s unassimilated ‘other’.

#### **4. Towards Reconstruction: Childhood and Citizenship in Conversation**

##### *Speech and Action at the Heart of Education*

I have tried to convey some sense of what seems to me to be the complex and contested landscape of contemporary citizenship and childhood: everything about these two topics – including answers to the basic questions, ‘what is a citizen?’ and ‘what is a child?’ – is inherently contestable and is likely to remain so; no matter how much good empirical work we accumulate, it will continue to be refracted through divergent and conflicting interpretative and evaluative lenses. I said at the outset that I would not attempt to propose any large-scale solution (I wonder if anyone now can). But in the final section of this paper I shall sketch very baldly my own ‘take’ on a scene that is not only interesting and vexing but also desperately important.

I would argue that there is much still to be retrieved from all three of the discourses I’ve mentioned – and I confess to a particular sympathy with the privileged one. I value the emancipatory thrust I see in the Romantic inheritance: even if it can be badly sentimentalised, as much of the writing and art around children throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century make clear. There is of course some value in recent critiques – especially in their insistence on greater vigilance about any boundaries we draw between childhood and adulthood and the secret ways in which they can infect (or infect) each other. For instance, if we too easily see children as paragons of play, spontaneity and wonder, and adults, then, as the experts in rational thought and effective action, this neat, age-based parcelling out of qualities impoverishes



both children and adults: we won't then expect children to think critically or act responsibly while adults, well adapted to the 'real' world, will have put wonder and play behind them. Having conceded this, however, I would argue that *in early childhood education the need now is to move beyond deconstruction towards reconstruction*. And one very promising way of envisaging this needed reconstruction is precisely by thinking of children and citizenship together - as neither Plato nor Rousseau succeeded in doing, nor any of the paradigms of childhood I've since outlined. And in doing this, there is, I suggest, much to be gained from the Aristotelian conception of citizenship sketched earlier, despite the unacceptable exclusiveness of its practice in the original Greek *polis* and despite (or perhaps partly because of) its seeming inapplicability in the macro-politics of our contemporary states.

In this conception, speech, expression, deliberation and action are the essential tokens of our humanity; and all of them are practised in essential relationships of interdependency with others. Speech and expression transpire in language, of course, but also through other media. And speech counts as genuine speech only as it reveals the speaker's meaning or, as is nearly always the case for us, as it reveals (or rather creates) what *we are trying* to mean: speech only partly as declaration and so also as probe, experiment, play - our meaning always slightly beyond us as we are stretched out in language towards it (Dunne 1997, ch. 5). This is living, serious, meaning-making speech, which can also be light and effortless, words falling in congruously together and complex syntax doing its work unnoticed. It's the kind of speech that young children latch into early on - when they are not answering ritual questions, repeating mind-numbing formulae, or being tied to a recitative script that deflects the trajectory of their actual interest. It is speech as directed to others and as responding to them: locution as inter-locution. The realness and range of interlocutory stances available to children is crucially important: that they can ask questions, volunteer opinions, entertain conjectures, interject a comment, seek clarification, amplify or challenge what others have said, give the conversation a fresh twist, or bring it back on course - and be in position to have all these kinds of speech acts directed towards them. Plato has the beautiful image of dialogue as the rubbing together of two fire-sticks neither of which, on its own, can produce the illuminative flame (*Republic* 435a). And Vygotsky (1986) teaches us the same lesson; we are who we have become in relationship; it is on the plane of the inter (the between) that the intra (the within) is formed.

Relationships connect us with others. But also it is very largely in and through them that the world opens up to us and that we are opened to it. A small child will explore the immediate sensuous world on her own, a world of very small things minutely observed, of vivid colours, interesting textures, spectacular shapes. But the small child also *makes sense* of her world, sometimes in very big ways. When my wife recently said in the garden, 'I hate ants', her four-year-old granddaughter retorted, 'but, Biche, you shouldn't hate anything.' I know a four-year-old, too, who proposed to her parents that the traveller family who called every Saturday for food should be given the upstairs part of their house to live in; and a two-and-a-half-year-old, brought with her mother to the butchers to collect the Christmas turkey, who, overcome with tears by the sight of hanging dead birds, implored that they find some other way of celebrating the feast. What is impressive about examples like these, which can be multiplied many times over, is, first, that, freed from complete bondage to the factual *is*, they are already responsive to the demand of the ethical '*ought*'; second, the inclusiveness of their identifications, what you might call their intuitions of 'all' (all people, all living beings); and, third, the immediacy and forthrightness with which they are tossed to the other person, the adult who thereby finds herself pitched into a deeply ethical - and potentially political - conversation.<sup>4</sup>

The utterance, 'you shouldn't hate anything', did not just spring up from somewhere deep within the child herself; she had already been party to conversations in which 'hate' and 'love' had occurred - sometimes in the context of feelings and dealings towards her younger brother that would have given her some quite personal purchase on what 'hate' means. But here she was now, at three and a half, having somehow taken hold of this concept, deploying it in a new context and returning it, with interest, to an adult. We should not doubt the force of the challenge to us adults, and our more or less confused and compromised moralities, that will come regularly if we engage in real conversations with quite small children - conversations in which, if our thinking can pick up some of the mobility and openness of theirs, we too may have much to learn.

'Catching the ball that the children throw us' is a favourite metaphor in Reggio Emilio (it is also the image in a stanza of one of Rilke's poems that the great German philosopher of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer (2005), took as epigraph for his *magnum opus*, *Truth and Method*). 'They [the Reggio Emilio community] like to use the metaphor of the children and teacher participating in a game of ping-pong', Carolyn Edwards tells us. And she goes on: 'All of the...supportive adult interventions are based on keying in to the rhythm of the game and modelling an attitude of attention and care' (Edwards *et al* 1998, 181-2). It is an extraordinarily imaginative achievement to have built a rich, variegated pedagogy – with so many themes, across so many areas, and in so many media – as Reggio has done, with this metaphor of a game as a basic inspiration. You can't play the game from the outside, and everyone inside the game is a player, a partner, or co-protagonist – sometimes stronger or weaker but always capable, when the other player is responsive, of progressing in the myriad of ways that the game itself keeps open. This model of learning and of pedagogy is completely different from the consumption model: the pupil as consumer and the teacher as transmitter or vendor. And it seems very close to what lies at the core of citizenship: solidarity and reciprocity in a shared project. It also, I should say, rectifies a weakness in (and thus helps to 'reconstruct') the three modern models of childhood I outlined earlier, all of which conceive 'the child' too much outside the context of relationships, with other children as well as with adults. Furthermore, it helps us to a better understanding of children's 'voice', a surely welcome emphasis in recent research and advocacy in a society in which for so long children were to be seen and not heard. But there is a danger of fetishising children's voices – and, therefore, of mere tokenism. Setting up a parliament of the young – as our National Children's Strategy has done recently in Ireland – can perhaps too easily be delivered by administrative *fiat* and then held out as a token of serious intent (Ireland: Department of Health and Children 1999). The more important and difficult task – at once educative and civic – is to ensure that in homes, play-groups, schools, and other settings, exchanges take place in which children's voices are in genuine dialogue with other, often adult voices, and in which they can challenge and be challenged according to the demands of what is at stake in each particular conversation.

In unpacking the Athenian notion of citizenship, and bringing it close to early childhood education, I have been stressing speech because of its defining human significance and because children from early on are such natural oralists. I have emphasised speech as a medium through which we deliberate, clarify, conjecture, discuss, argue and persuade – while not wishing to neglect its role in telling stories, making jokes, creating rhymes, or in all the other free-wheeling ways in which it can work and play for children. But I should not neglect to mention, as a complement to speech, *action*. Speech itself of course often *is* action, as for instance when a child finds the courage to say something that he truly thinks or feels even though it conflicts with the prevailing view in his group. Not all behaviour is action in the sense intended here, a sense clarified by the philosopher, Hannah Arendt (1998; Dunne 1997, ch. 3)). An action is a genuine venture or initiative: it starts something new. It makes something happen that was not there before and in doing so it realises the agent, and reveals her to herself and to others, in a new way. This kind of action is then a spring of development; it is most significantly through my actions that I am changed, becoming who I am. Actions are inserted into webs of relationships, evoking responses from others and unleashing chains of consequences that can never be fully predicted in advance. Every action is an *event* in the original sense of a coming-into-being. And it is closely related to story. For through our actions, we enact our histories; stories are not pre-scripted – they narrate what has *emerged* through actions, different actions of different agents gradually defining their individual characters and interlocking with each other to form the plot that no one agent on her own could have anticipated or devised.

It is not easy to ensure that action will be at the centre of education. And that is why, understandably, we rely on plans. But plans (of the usual linear kind) bring about 'outcomes' – which are almost the opposite of 'events' (Dunne 1997). One of the remarkable feats at Reggio Emilia is – against the force of gravity, as many might have supposed – to have created a form of education in which young children can and do act. In the projects that are a central part of the work, for instance, children are enabled to try things out, to explore possibilities, to experience the responses of other children, confirming, or conflicting with, or running at a tangent to their own. What takes shape emerges as a function of their interests, suggestions, interventions, their consid-

erations and reconsiderations, their ways of taking up and developing what has been contributed by others, their ability to stay with stuckness when it happens and to work their way through or around it, their readiness to face conflicts along the way and to find ways of resolving them; and, in and through all of this, their engagement in an enormous amount of multifaceted and never entirely predictable learning. But one should not speak only of the children in Reggio Emilio – who, I suspect, are not much different from children elsewhere. The really remarkable aspect of this educational undertaking is the work of the *adults*, the teachers who make all this possible for children through a combination of imaginative and painstaking preparation of resources, ideas and hypotheses; sensitive listening; the most delicate judgement of when to intervene and when to hold back; pitching an intervention so that it is just within a child's reach and less a solution to a problem than a spur to further thoughtful action; enough trust to forego the security of pre-specified outcomes – trust in the children, in themselves, and in the fecundity of the game itself; careful documenting of the children's activity and speech so that, when played back to them, it can help them to re-cognise what they have accomplished and be motivated to elaborate it further; sustained reflection on what they are doing and not doing (aided partly by this same documentation), and readiness to extend this reflection in critical discussion with colleagues and parents. All of this is done in the closest rapport with the children and all for the sake of ensuring that they will, in the greatest possible degree, be active protagonists in their own learning (Edwards et al. 1998; Abbott 2001; Rinaldi 2005). It is hard to think of a better form of education as a human being *and* as a citizen.

#### *Interdependence and the Grace of Childhood*

Speech and action, as I have emphasised them here, might be translated as 'voice' and 'agency', two concepts now widely invoked for children. But it is important not to understand voice and agency in ways that co-opt them into a neo-liberal rhetoric of 'autonomy', where autonomy is the supremely prized quality of the individual who knows how to make all the right choices and manage all his resources – including himself – towards maximum individual gain. I dissent from this notion of autonomy not because it is an adult quality that should not be foisted on children but rather because it is not, in my view, a properly adult – or rather a properly human – quality at all. Focusing on early childhood has the great merit that it does not allow us easily to evade the reality of human dependency – small children clearly are in many respects vulnerable and therefore dependent. To squarely acknowledge this fact, however, need imply no concession to any strongly privative or deficit notion of childhood. Rather, I see it as pointing up the extent to which we are *all* dependent – though much of modern life is a kind of conspiracy to deny it, an effort to sustain the *illusion* of self-sufficiency (MacIntyre 1999). Nobody of course is self-sufficient and people can suppose that they are only to the extent that they can relegate to some shadow-world and conceal from themselves the multiple strands of their actual dependency; and generally they can do this only because they are favoured by some imbalance of power. You can imagine this, walking past impressive office blocks at night when workers – invariably women, many of them immigrants – are cleaning; they don't appear, they don't exist, their lives are of no concern, to the executive who turns up in the morning to his clean office to conduct his important affairs. And where are the executive's children, whom he no doubts loves? What is the measure of his dependency on those who care for them – or will care for *him* if medical disaster strikes, as at any moment it might (and ultimately of course *will*) to consign him to some place other than the office?

What I am drawing attention to is the irreducible reality of human *interdependence*. Acknowledging this does not deny the value of becoming *independent*; happily, the smallest children have a strong drive towards independence that is our great ally as educators. It is a matter, rather, of ensuring that this independence does not exclude awareness of indebtedness and that through it one becomes *dependable* for others. Citizenship is about bringing these interdependencies more into the open, and acknowledging various kinds of indebtedness – and injustice – that are denied, or relegated to what I have called the shadow-world.

Perhaps the world of work with young children is still too much in this shadow-world. The powerful economic order of our society depends on it for the mobilisation of the present work-

force as well as for the creation of the next one. But it exists on the whole in a subordinate space, ghettoised one might say, ill-resourced and under-recognised. Our present culture may indeed be more fixated on childhood than any previous culture and many, many parents put themselves out to no end for their own children. But this is not to say that we live in a child-friendly society, for we do not. The dominant priorities lie elsewhere, and children figure in public policy largely by default – as a problem that has to be contained so that the bigger, *real* problems can be addressed. In this context, it is another of the considerable achievements of the Reggio Emilia experiment that it has broken out of the ghetto – that the partnership that exists within it between teachers and children extends out to a partnership with parents, the wider community, and with public authorities, local and municipal, so that it is indeed a truly civic enterprise. This wider civic dimension of the life of any early childhood centre is surely something that we need to learn how to build in other places – as part of rediscovering or inventing local solidarities and strengthening the fabric of our civil society. Civil society was not only the great casualty of the former Soviet regimes; in the West, it is still threatened by neo-liberal policies (Taylor 1995; Walzer 1995; Dunne 2002).

To the question, ‘who are we now?’ I answered earlier that we are ‘post-moderns’. But another paradoxical answer is: *now* we are *future* citizens of the world. The paradox lies in the fact that although we can now recognise ever more clearly our global interdependencies – not just economically, but with respect to borderless cyberspace, threats to the environment, transnational crime and terrorism, or states with devastating nuclear capability – we have as yet no durable political structures to reflect or coordinate them. In this situation, it seems to me to be an advantage of the Athenian or civic-republican conception of citizenship, as I have outlined it, that it does not pre-emptively define who is to qualify as a citizen; there are no identity tests that could automatically exclude those who, for whatever reason, are deemed insufficiently Irish, or British, or whatever. For this reason, it can serve us well in a country such as my own, which (as I intimated earlier) is rapidly becoming, through unprecedented immigration, a multi-ethnic society. Given that this is happening almost entirely for economic reasons – because of labour-market pressures – it is all the more important that we have some inclusive notion of citizenship to offer to, or to forge with, these immigrants, including children. It is precisely by sharing together in significant speech, deliberation and action that we not only accept a common fate, trying to understand better the different historical strands from which it is woven, but also strive to shape this common fate for the future, thereby constituting ourselves as citizens (Williams, 2003).

I can think of no more important task than that of bringing the core values of this kind of citizenship into our practice of education at every level; doing so now is all the more important precisely because of the decline of nationalist grand narratives, because of the tendencies towards depoliticisation in our societies, and because our current world order (or disorder) may be a great deal more fragile than we suppose – we too easily forget the awful European horrors of what has only recently become the last century. I said, ‘education at every level’. But with regard to early childhood education, specifically, I hope I have conveyed some sense of the *help*, as well as the responsibility, that comes to us from the nature of children and childhood. ‘Nature’ is a word we scarcely dare to use anymore – so intimidating now is the charge of ‘essentialism’, one of the more damning terms in the post-modernist lexicon of excommunication. But it is interesting that Jean-Francois Lyotard, author of *The PostModern Condition* and other important post-modernist texts, has not felt disbarred from writing of childhood as ‘the season of the mind’s possibilities’. ‘Philosophising’, he tells us – and he would include all creative work in any medium – ‘responds to a demand for a return to the childhood of thought...[but] what would happen if thought no longer had a childhood? If those who pass for children .... ceased to be the milieu of man’s uncertainty, the very possibility of ideas?’ (Lyotard 1992, 120). Here Lyotard is pointing to something we all perhaps intuitively recognise: the deep connection between childhood and our still open and best possibilities – *and* the fact that, nonetheless, for real children these possibilities can all too easily and quickly be closed down. When education manages to keep them open, it accomplishes a huge good, not only for children but for our whole society. But I want to give the last word not to Lyotard but to another philosopher who has meant much more to me and for much longer, the great Jewish thinker, Martin Buber. ‘In every hour, the human race begins’, Buber wrote, referring to the

thousands of children born every hour. And he went on: 'what greater care could we cherish or discuss than that this grace may not henceforth be squandered as before, that the might of newness may be preserved for *renewal*' - the renewal of the society and world into which these children come? (Buber 1955, 83). Since Buber raised that question (at a conference not unlike this one nearly eighty years ago), it has lost none of its force or its promise.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was the opening key-note address to the annual conference of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association in Dublin on 1 September 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> It needs to be said that Rousseau believed that children educated according to the dictates of nature, while dysfunctional in the existing corrupt society, would be just the kind of people needed by, and capable of exercising citizenship in, the kind of good society that he depicted in the *Social Contract*. All of them, he supposed, without discord within or between them, would be capable of uniting their own wills with what he called the General Will: each 'I', without alienation, would identify wholly with 'We'. And this 'We' would be a united community, a denominator of one, so that in becoming, as a citizen, its enumerator, I would not be divided or reduced: my unity with my fellow citizens would extend and reflect back to me my own inner unity. In this wider frame, Rousseau's project does not appear so different from that of Plato - whom indeed he greatly admired - and from a post-modernist (or indeed just liberal) perspective both projects are likely to seem unpalatable. There is recoil from their perfectionist ambitions - their wanting to create good, indeed the best possible, human beings; an inability to share their confidence in knowing the one best way or believing that it's written in nature waiting to be read; and fear of the authoritarian potential of one collective will with which all, if only they are enlightened, will obligingly agree. There is no inclination to idealise unity or - the other side of that coin - to fear plurality and difference. And Karl Popper is seen to have a point when (even as he badly fails to appreciate the irony and literary indirection of the Platonic texts) he convicts Plato as a great-grandfather of the awful experiments of Nazism and state collectivism in the last century (Popper 1971), while Rousseau's figment of the General Will is easily regarded as an influential legitimisation of extreme nationalism with all its continuing excesses of oppression and exclusion.
- <sup>3</sup> This recent, postmodernist critique of the therapeutic culture should be distinguished from an earlier critique that doubted the resources of this culture to provide moral orientation or communal cohesion; classics of this earlier critique are Rieff 1966 and Lasch 1979 and 1984.
- <sup>4</sup> Might the debates of our political communities be significantly refocused if they were made porous to children's concerns? From many discussions with children in primary schools of matters of serious interest to them (Dunne 1999; see also Donnelly 1999), I offer an example. Humans' treatment of other animals has only recently come on the political agenda and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the two-and-a-half millennia-old tradition of western academic philosophy only in the past few decades has it come to merit any serious attention (Singer 1975; Clarke 1984; Midgely 1995); but had children's voices been heard in either the political or the philosophical fora, it might have featured earlier and more prominently. For, as I have learned from experience in many classrooms, it is dear to the hearts and minds of children; and perhaps it has been so for a long time. Here is a boy's contribution to discussion on the ethics of experimenting on animals in research geared to improve cosmetics: 'Maybe now in the middle of an operation this animal you're operating on just sits up and says 'Hey you! Go away! Go test it on some human! I don't want to die. I'm too young to die.' (This utterance is from a study of almost fifty discussions on a wide range of ethical and political topics with a class group over four years in a Dublin primary school [Russell 2005]).

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Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Joseph Dunne  
Education Department  
St. Patrick's College  
Dublin City University  
Drumcondra  
Dublin 9

Email: joe.dunne@spd.dcu.ie