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Simply child's play? Reconfiguring child-adult relations in a leisure place for children

I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me.
Daniel Defoe, *Robison Crusoe*

Rethinking child-adult relations from a child's perspective

This contribution aims to explore a different way of configuring child-adult relations. Based on a change in the assumption of what is commonly assumed about “being a child” and, consequently, about “being an adult”,¹ this proposal suggests moving from an educative framework in interpreting child-adult relations towards an *intercultural* one. In so doing a socio-constructionist and interpretive approach will be adopted together with the theoretical tools of Cultural and Subaltern studies.² My opinion is that the categories of *subalternity* and *language*, as reinterpreted by Spivak,³ can offer a valid contribution in re-analyzing the field of childhood.

During my ethnographic research, carried out for three months through participant observation in an Italian leisure place for children (play-centre), aged four to seven, I was able to observe how child-adult relations took place and especially how the play assistants in charge of the kids behaved, so often presuming to know what the children needed, before asking them or listening to them. Conversely, observing the children, I could see and actively participate with them in *another* world where children were capable of acting creatively, understanding each other and creating what Corsaro defines as «children's peer cultures».⁴ Nevertheless caregivers frequently *translated* these activities into adult language as “just children's games” or as expressions of “their preparatory attempts to become adults”.

The issue of children's play is therefore strictly linked with the power of regulation but also with the *power of nomination*.⁵ Who owns the power to name an activity as play or not play? Is it the child or the adult? This point raises relevant questions that are not neutral as regards the implications they might have on the everyday life of children.

What about play into play-centre?

The recent massive expansion of play-centres, designed and promoted as safe sites for children's play, comes within a more general trend which affirms that public spaces belongs to

¹ Allison JAMES, Chris JENKS, Allan PROUT, *Theorizing childhood*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1998; Nick LEE, *Childhood and society. Growing up in an age of uncertainty*, Buckingham, Open University press, 2001.

² Ranajit Guha (ed by), *Subaltern Studies I*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982; Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed by), *Mapping Subaltern studies and the Postcolonial*, London, Verso, 2000.

³ Gayatri C. SPIVAK, « Can the Subaltern Speak? », in Cary NELSON, Lawrence GROSSBERG (eds by), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

⁴ William C. CORSARO, *The sociology of childhood*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997.

⁵ Michel FOUCAULT, « Two Lectures », in Colin GORDON (ed by), *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980; Michel FOUCAULT, « Prison Talk », in Colin GORDON (ed by), *Power/Knowledge*; Michel FOUCAULT, « On Power », in Laurence D. KRITZMAN (ed by), *Michel Foucault. Politics, Philosophy, Culture, Interviews and other writings 1977-1984*, London-New York, Routledge, 1988.

adults and children should be removed from the urban street if their presence is out of the control and protection of adults.⁶ In the northern advanced industrialised countries children's everyday life is characterised by a general tendency toward a separation from the adult's space and by a high spatial and temporal differentiation functional to the meeting of children's needs. As stated by Zeiher «places geared toward children's needs, often toward the needs of children of a particular age, are scattered like islands on the map of the city at greater or lesser distances from one another».⁷

Zeiher, in describing the spatial and temporal configuration of children's everyday life, talks of «insularisation» addressing the «process where children growing up in an urban context tend to be ferried between dislocated 'islands' of activity».⁸

The play-centre can be seen as one of these islands described by the author.

In particular, through this substantial development of after-school clubs, leisure clubs, play-centres and the like, we face a deep change in play configuration because we have moved from play as a child's form of appropriation of the urban space to play-centres as a way of expropriating children of their spatial freedom, even if discursively sustained as “places designed for children”. Indeed, these places are often constructed following the adults' way of seeing things rather than the children's way: the adults are the ones who construct the «interaction order»⁹ as a generational order in which children, «as juniors, are incorporated into the society under the guidance of various senior carers or educators».¹⁰ However, not always are the places designated *for* children children's places; informal, meaningful to them and places that they would choose for their activities.¹¹

This distinction opens up the path to a critical vision of spaces and to the acknowledgment of a generational perspective within space not only in the planning but also in the daily management of a play-centre.¹² According to Sibley «when talking about children's spaces, however, we necessarily implicate adults who themselves construct childhood in different ways. We cannot isolate children from their social relationships with adults».¹³

Organized play contexts, like the play-centre, are primarily places and fields of leisure but also sites constituted through a series of recurring contradictions between the adults' demand for protection and the children's attempts to gain independent space of freedom.

However, this acknowledgment does not reveal anything of the shapes taken by child-adult relations, which can vary, even discontinuously, from a low level of control to a high level of hierarchical direction.

The play-centre where I carried out my research was depicted as a place for children where, as soon as they entered, they could find that freedom of body movement and self expression which they could not find in the external environment. This was how the director presented the play-centre to me:

This is a place where children can practice using their body because you so often see that children outside are told “don't do that”, “be careful”, “don't behave like that”, “do not touch that” etc. while here it is different. They can run, they can jump, they can do everything with their body. This is a child-sized place.

⁶ Gill VALENTINE, *Public space and the culture of childhood*, Hants, Ashgate, 2004.

⁷ Helga ZEIHNER, « Shaping daily life in urban environments », in Pia CHRISTENSEN, Margaret O' BRIEN (eds), *Children in the City. Home, neighborhood and community*, London-New York, RoutledgeFalmer, 2003, p. 66.

⁸ Pia CHRISTENSEN and Margaret O'BRIEN, «Children in the city. Introducing new perspectives », in Pia CHRISTENSEN, Margaret O' BRIEN (eds), *Children in the City*, p. 7.

⁹ Erving GOFFMAN, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior*, New York, Anchor books, 1967.

¹⁰ Karen F. OLWIG, Eva GULLØV (eds), *Children's places. Cross-cultural perspective*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 2.

¹¹ Kim RASMUSSEN, « Places for children-Children's places », *Childhood*, vol. 11, (2), 2004, pp. 156-173.

¹² Caterina SATTA, «Qui dentro non è come là fuori». Surrogati di domesticità in uno spazio gioco per l'infanzia, in Valerio Belotti, Salvatore La Mendola (a cura di), *Il futuro nel presente. Per una sociologia delle bambine e dei bambini*, Milano, Guerini Scientifica, 2010, pp. 197-226.

¹³ David Sibley, « Families and domestic routines. Constructing the boundaries of childhood », in Steve Pile, Nigel Thrift (eds), *Mapping the subject. Geographies of cultural transformation*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 137.

Out there children always have to adapt to the adult world, here it is the contrary. For example, do you see these chairs? They are very small so that if an adult wants to sit down he/she is the one to adapt to the chairs», (Play-centre Director).

The aim of the research was then to understand how the people, and mainly the children, actually *used* this space regardless of how it was described by the play assistants.¹⁴

Looking at the internal setting of the play-centre I could observe how the play assistants were engaged for most of their time with the promethean attempt of trying to direct something that is, for its very composition, unmanageable: the activity of play. Indeed, the fact that this place was designed for playing complicated their efforts to circulate a static, but above all, faithful vision of the reality. In play activities, in fact, the point in question is not the appearance of reality but the distance from reality because «there is a limit to take and to protect, a not very easy balance to set and to keep, if we want to stay in the play, between the normal reality and the distancing reality».¹⁵ Even in child-adult relations it seems that the distance between adults and children is never kept because it is often occupied by the constant interference of the adult in the children's life.¹⁶

During my first weeks of participant observation I noticed how the playroom harmony between children and play-assistants changed completely as soon as the children were told to tidy up. Nothing special for people used to spending time with children and probably a familiar situation for many adults, but what is not familiar is the reason, the meaning and the sense of this reaction from the point of view of the children. In the centre I could see that the play-assistants were very frustrated by the children's resistance to tidying up; this topic occupied almost all the time of the staff meeting and they were all very concerned by the educative value that they would have missed if they had not intervened effectively with the children. So this simple operation was overloaded with meanings, reasons and senses that were very adult-centred. What about the children? Was it the same for them? Or was something else passing through this resistance and avoidance of tidying up?

In this scenario I proposed to the play-assistants an experiment, which they called "The experiment of untidiness". It consisted in leaving the kids free from tidying up the place: the play-assistants would have stopped telling them to tidy up during the activities, they would have not tidied up the playroom themselves (except for cleaning the space of food and drink), they would have just left the playroom space as the children had left it, leaving the toys where they had been left by the children the day before. As for me, I would have just carried on with my usual participation in the children's activities. We tried this experiment for 8 days during two weeks (this play-centre is open 4 days a week) just to see what would happen and how the children would handle this situation.¹⁷

Entering child-adult cultures

For the first time I saw the children running around the room and using actively their bodies. They played more between each other, something usually very rare because an adult was often with them; besides, they started being less interested in the adults and more interested in the toys which they now used following their own rules and desires.

Ann, Michelle, Jennifer and Erika sat in front of the table playing "Forza 4". This is a game where players have to create a line of 4 pawns of the same colour and prevent the opponents making a line with

¹⁴ Michel De Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. Tome 1: Arts de faire*, Paris, Union generale d'editions, 1980.

¹⁵ Alessandro DAL LAGO, Pier Aldo ROVATTI, *Per gioco. Piccolo manuale dell'esperienza ludica*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 1993, p. 17.

¹⁶ Stuart C. AITKEN, *Geography of young people. The morally contested spaces of identity*, London, Routledge, 2001.

¹⁷ The play assistants preferred that neither the children nor the parents knew about the experiment until the end, also because the aim of the experiment was exactly to see what happened.

the other colour. Instead of playing following the rules they enjoyed just throwing the pawns in the air and screaming at every throw. I was sitting in a small chair close to them and at a certain point Ann asked me "Will you play with us?" I agreed and while I was with them Jennifer invited me to throw the pawns in the air too "Throw them in the air!!!". Only once Michelle's mother said "Michelle, you don't have to throw the pawns, it is not like that", and, after that, she didn't intervene anymore.

So the little girls started to say strange sentences, saying wrong words on purpose and because I wasn't able to understand what they were telling me I started to change the words too and the other little girls followed me saying strange words too. After a while Laura, one of the play assistants, arrived and hearing me repeating strange incomprehensible words said "What does it mean?... Ah, it means bad weather!". And by chance she was right. After that she asked the little girls very gently if they wanted to participate in the handcraft workshop on paper dolls, or if they preferred doing it another day. Jennifer said "I'll do it at home!". And Laura replied "No, you do it now or you do it another day. Then Jennifer said "Another day then". So Laura asked the other 3 girls "We'll do it another day, is it ok?". And immediately Ann "No, let's do it today". So Laura went to the other table and started to prepare the material and then one after the other the kids stood up and went to the workshop. (Excerpt from field notes)

The toys were left out of place by one child or by a group of children but this didn't prevent the next child from playing with them, contrary to what is usually assumed by adults.

Ann and Michelle played at "preparing the table for lunch". It was interesting to see how they first cleared the table, put back the plates inside the cupboard, then the tablecloth, the glasses that another two children had used before them. Then they chose a different tablecloth and prepared the table with the food, the plates and the glasses. Michelle also simulated using the vacuum cleaner toy.

Another time it happened that two boys, less familiar with the place, arrived in the room and went immediately to the green table which was already prepared with food, dishes and bottles and started to play with what they found on the table. (Excerpt from field notes)

We could say that having the toys out of place makes them more visible and accessible for the children who then start to play with less fear. The children never complained about the untidiness of the playroom, they carried on without putting their toys in order but this had an impact on their relation with the playroom, which now was more direct and faster. In the end this situation probably resulted in making them feel even more powerful as this example shows:

After having pushed a chair over and jumped from one side to the other of the chair, Ann, looked at the play assistant, silent in front of her, and said: "Do I have to tidy up?". The play-assistant, completely surprised by the question, stayed there for a few seconds without saying a word and at the end said: "What do you think?". Ann waited there one second and then ran away without answering or tidying up. (Excerpt from field notes)

The children were more excited and freer to go around and change their usual way of living the playroom.

By simply changing the setting of the everyday life inside this place (that is by not insisting on tidying up) and leaving the kids free to deal with this change, the children experienced new and different ways of being together, in relation with the space, with their body, with rules, unlike the adults who were just concentrated on the difficulties of managing a place without being able to put the toys back in order.

According to Fink to play is an «existential fundamental phenomenon».¹⁸ Likewise are work, power, life and death but in a different way because play can instil in life a different style: «unlike

¹⁸ Eugene FINK (1957), *Oasi del gioco*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2008.

the other existential facts of our life, play is not directed toward a final aim, on the contrary it contrasts with the aspirations of the future that press and afflict our very life». ¹⁹ Play is linked with real life but it places itself in a parallel dimension, it has «the features of a quiet “present” and an autonomous sense – it appears as «a haven of happiness that comes to us in the desert of our persistent tension towards happiness and of our tantalizing research. We are enchanted by the play». ²⁰ Play has an aim, but this aim is internal in itself, it doesn't refer to other things and «when we play “with the aim” of reinforcing our body, of training for war, or of reaching a state of good health, the play is immediately misrepresented and transformed into an exercise of something else». ²¹ According to Fink, playing should not be intended in contraposition to a serious life, to authenticity, because this would disclaim its truth, as if it were one of the many things of our life beside all of the other social phenomena. On the contrary, play «stands in front of them so to gathering in itself by representation». ²² So, we could say that, structured play is no longer play because it roots out play from this dimension of eternal present and drives it into the instrumental flow of everyday life.

The experience of playing is spatially and temporally fixed in special places designed for leisure time and it is misrepresented in adult life and even more in the child's world when, as appears in the discourses of “professional carers”, it is linked to ideologies which interpret play as a means for anticipating adult roles and capacities.

The play is activity and creativity – and nevertheless it has some similarities with the eternal and quiet things. The play “interrupts” the continuity, interrupts the flow of the continuous referring of our life to final ends, it differs from the other ways of living, it implies distance. Exactly when it seems to defer from the coherent flow of life, on the contrary it significantly refers to it, representing it. ²³

Ironically, play is mystified exactly in those places designed for play because of the attempt to force it into one concept or one dimension that can never represent its multiple facets. The same process seems to be happening to childhood which is ever more under the thumb of training curricula designed to create and care for the citizen of the future. Thus a space *for* children seems to express in spatial terms the denial of childhood because it confines the child to a restrained and functional world, in preparation for his/her future and never allows pure enjoyment of the present in itself, here and now.

Children's play is not only, as commonly affirmed, a way for reaching and experimenting with adult competences but is rather a resource to be used by children in their everyday life activities in the peer culture. ²⁴ Therefore play is not a fiction that children display for other reasons but is a *way of being* and a way of constructing their unique culture.

An example of an adult attempt to translate children's activities is the interpretation of role play as being a means for the social and emotional development of children. Like most adults, also child researchers most often see role play as the direct imitation of adult models. Kids do not, however, simply imitate adult models in their role play rather they continually elaborate and embellish adult models to address their own concerns. ²⁵ As stated by Corsaro: «Kids appropriation and embellishment of adult models is primarily about status, power, and control». ²⁶

¹⁹ Pier.Paolo ROVATTI (2008), *Prefazione*, in Eugene FINK, *Oasi del gioco*, p. XI.

²⁰ Eugene FINK (1957), *Oasi del gioco*, p. 18.

²¹ *Idem.*

²² *Ibidem*, p. 20.

²³ *Idem.*

²⁴ William C. CORSARO, « Peer culture », in Jens QVORTRUP, William CORSARO, Michael-Sebastian HONIG (eds), *The Palgrave handbook of childhood studies*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

²⁵ William C. CORSARO, « Interpretive reproduction in children's peer cultures », *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 55, 1992, pp. 160-177.

²⁶ William C. CORSARO, « Riproduzione interpretativa e culture dei pari », in Valerio Belotti, Salvatore Lamendola (eds), *Il futuro nel presente*, Milano, Guerini Scientifica, 2010, p. 57.

Engaging in role-play is for children one of the routines within which they live and construct their peer cultures, which are not separate from the adult world. Children are always participating in and are part of two cultures – the child's and the adult's - and these cultures are interwoven in different ways across space and over time.²⁷

Whether taking on imaginary or real roles (teachers, mothers, cash clerks etc.) to play is for children a way of enacting one of the many *selves* they can play; selves that are not less artificial than the ones taken on as sons, siblings or students in everyday life.

What I wish to argue is that children are aware, more often than we think, that what they are doing is playing – and that many of children's activities are termed as such by adults - but for them playing is not less real than other activities.

So, the question is what kind of play are these “institutions for playing” promoting? Are they promoting the children's play, where the children are the only ones who can give sense to their actions, or the play designed by adults as an educative experience, coming from a modern ideology that divides the world between play and work, and limits children's experiences to just the play-side of life?

We now separate children from the world of work; we dichotomize play from work; we deny the significance of the child's contribution to the cultural forms of everyday life. We infantilize children's perceptions and “school” their minds through the domestication of their critical curiosity and consciousness.²⁸

This subdivision mystifies children's experience through a constant devaluation also of the very activity of playing,²⁹ commonly represented as something of low importance and insignificant compared with other activities.³⁰

Play is «sociability»³¹ but it is also a very serious activity where power and recognition are *at play*. However, when this activity is developed under the eyes, and sometimes with the participation, of adults the play patterns change because there are also intergenerational dynamics between children and adults. The question is then to understand which *shape* the play takes and, with it, which shape childhood takes in a play-centre. What space is left for children growing up in a risk society - which has projected upon them all its anxieties and social phobias – where they can run the risk of doing something unexpected?

Inside this progressive narrowing of children's spatial freedom, play too is subjected to a process of *normalization* which tends to remove it from such basic components, as uncertainty, risk and chance.

Adults often name children's activities as “play” but the real sense given by children is different, because within child peer cultures to play is a way of interacting with the social world. This doesn't mean that children do not know the difference between fiction and reality, simply they do not always think of role-play as a fiction. Playing is for them a place where they find freedom from their daily role as a “little boy” or a “little girl”.

Today Eleonora and Giada went into the play-room called the “soft space” because there are a lot of mattresses, carpets and one big hole with a lot of soft balls in it. They started to play pretending that the big hole was the sea, or in same way a place full of water, where for one turn each they pretended to be drowning. They placed themselves at the corner of the hole submerged by the balls and waving one hand towards the other friend they shouted “Sister, help me! This for four, five times then they took some little puppets and asked me to guard them while they were running around the room and jumping inside the

²⁷ William C. CORSARO, *The sociology of childhood*.

²⁸ Valerie POLAKOW, *The erosion of childhood*, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 8.

²⁹ Erving GOFFMAN, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction. Fun in Games and Role Distance*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1961.

³⁰ Barrie THORNE, *Gender play. Girls and boys in school*, Buckingham, Rutgers University Press, 1993.

³¹ George SIMMEL (1917), *Forme e giochi di società. Problemi fondamentali della sociologia*, Milano, Feltrinelli, (1983).

hole. In particular, there was a dog puppet that Giada used sometimes as if it were a real dog and other times as if it were a rope to give to the friend who was drowning or a line for doing the conga. At one point Giada turned to me and said «Keep it mum» leaving to me the little dog. I nodded in agreement understanding the play she wanted to play. After a while she turned to Myriam and said «Mum, keep it». Myriam replayed “yes” with a low voice, but when Giada called her again «Mum» she asked her seriously «Why are you calling me Mum?». And Giada: «It’s only pretend!». (Excerpt from field notes)

If the play, as sustained by Bateson,³² needs to be played accepting the uncertainty of crossing the borders of reality to move within another field run by others rules, we could say that the play assistants reveal an attitude of not wanting to play or an incapacity to play another role with other rules. While they are playing, all the participants assume that they are sharing the truth of the illusion produced by the play that can only be demonstrated by joining it. In the fieldwork account the two girls after having introduced me into the «magic circle»³³ of the play try to include also the play-assistant, Myriam, telling her “Mum, keep it”. But, after the second time that the child had called her “Mum”, the play-assistant broke the circle saying “Why are you calling me Mum?”. «Play creates a framework for behaviour» and every framework implies a certain «style of behaviour».³⁴ The ready answer of the girl «It’s only pretend!» reveals not only her acknowledging of the framework but also her capacity to enter and exit the roles creating, recreating and interpreting the meanings of the interaction. Myriam, on the contrary, showing her incapacity to exit from her main role, acts as an agent of a fixed culture which she just has to *transmit* to children. A culture where the “adult must act as an adult”³⁵ and where it is not educative that a child calls you “Mum” because of the risk of an excessive affection for an adult who is not a parent. Redl, analyzing the ways in which play “can be spoiled”, claims that an «activity can lose its traits of play both for an excessive degree of proximity to the real world as well as for an excessive distance».³⁶ In the case observed, the play-assistant “spoiled” the play not only by not being able to keep a distance from the reality but also by having reaffirmed it.

The play overturns the generational order adult-child, it creates disorder within it, turning the fool into a king and the king into a fool.³⁷ “To play the game” means exactly this: accepting the loss of certainty that your own mask gives you, with the warranties and the status linked with it, and the adoption of a new, completely unknown mask. Not playing *with* the children the play assistant has refused the creative value and the potential of the play to change the generational order internal to the play-centre. As stated by Gregory Bateson: «almost every activity people do can be a play. It is the attitude they adopt that denotes it as a play».³⁸

During my observation I rarely saw the play-assistants playing with the children, they were most of the time concerned with designing the space for children to play but they never entered into the play-frame created by the children.

The point is that it is not a question of “being an adult” but of playing differently our own adulthood, paying attention to «the relational processes whereby people come to be known as children, and whereby children and childhood acquire certain characteristics»³⁹ and, we could add, whereby others come to be known as adults.

³² Gregory BATESON, *Steps to an ecology of mind*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

³³ Anna BONDIOLI, « Il gioco, lo specchio, la cornice: oltre i confini », *Aut Aut*, 337, Gennaio-Marzo 2008, pp. 22-37.

³⁴ Gregory. BATESON (1956), “*Questo è un gioco*”, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 1996, p. 36.

³⁵ This sentence was very often repeated by the play-assistants.

³⁶ Gregory BATESON (1956), “*Questo è un gioco*”, p. 143.

³⁷ Anna BONDIOLI (ed by), *Il buffone e il re. Il gioco dei bambini e il sapere dell’adulto*, Scandicci, La Nuova Italia, 1989.

³⁸ Gregory BATESON (1956), “*Questo è un gioco*”, p.142.

³⁹ Berry MAYALL, *Towards a sociology for childhood. Thinking from children’s lives*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2002, p.27.

During play the risk is to question adult features and the position of power linked with adult roles, this is the reason why the assistants play an “educated play” with the children, whose risks have already been assessed and the objectives pre-determined. But if play continues to be educative and to be interpreted just as educative, the real risk is that it will disappear together with the potential to construct a more equal child-adult relation.

***Infantilism.* Theorizing children as subalterns**

To talk about childhood means to talk about a *discourse* which has been constructed in time and space to be used when speaking and referring to children. On the other hand, talking about children means talking about subjects who live in a specific space, even if small and under adult supervision, and whose daily life is influenced by the deep meaning of this discourse.

The concept of *Infantilism*, with “I” as a capital letter, takes a step forward, compared to the other two concepts of childhood and children, and aims at expressing, paraphrasing *Orientalism* by Edward Said,⁴⁰ a way of *coming to terms* with children that is based on the children’s special place in *adults’ experience*. What I shall be calling *Infantilism* is, following this trail, an interpretive category functional in describing the childhood image from an adult point of view.

In its wide and popular meaning, the term infantile is commonly used as a pejorative expression, indicating all those behaviours, ways of acting and thinking, considered childish. The image of the child, in this way, is often used as a metaphor for expressing triviality, immaturity and senselessness. The language, therefore, through a metaphoric use of the child, reveals the place designated to children in society. This term, used to describe adult bad behaviour in society, is at the same time an indicator of an adult conceptualization of children.

However, this is not just a delimited or sporadic way of interpreting children in commonsense, but reveals a system of thought that constructs the child’s status in the generational order. A system, that is an integral part of western culture, built over centuries of scientific knowledge (medical, psychological and pedagogical), supported and reproduced by institutions, policies, images and commonsense notions.⁴¹

Infantilism, as a cultural construction through which to read different expressions of child-adult relations, expresses and represents all of the myths, discourses and doctrines which encompass the world of children. It appears also as a form of *exotification* of childhood, mythicizing the child’s otherness to adults and promoting images of the child with semblances of the *noble savage*.

Even the childhood sociologists, as part of the same system, are often victims and creators of such representations. As an example one could think of the first studies developed on childhood issues in which children were studied only in play-places and during activities “for children”, completely separated from the social context in which they normally lived.⁴² From these pioneer studies, which contributed to collecting a large volume of children’s everyday life accounts, originated also one of the sociological models, “the tribal child”, formulated within the new paradigm for childhood studies⁴³ which may be helpful in this discussion.

The process of *infantilization* of childhood – as mentioned by Polakow⁴⁴ – needs to be understood within power relations and cultural dominance among adults and children. Which means –paraphrasing Said – that the child has been infantilized not only because it has been discovered to be “infantile”, in the meaning adults give to this adjective, but also because it *could be made* “infantile”. It recalls, in this way, an idea of passivity of the subject that, within the order of

⁴⁰ Edward SAID, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin Books, 1985.

⁴¹ Nikolas ROSE, *Governing the soul. The shaping of the private self*, London-New York, Routledge, 1990.

⁴² See also Iona A. OPIE, Peter OPIE, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969.

⁴³ Allison JAMES, Allan PROUT (eds), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (Second edition), London, Falmer Press, 1997.

⁴⁴ Valerie POLAKOW, *The erosion of childhood*.

interaction, can be *spoken* by the adult language that classifies and normalizes it in its symbolic system. It is in the language that is defined a relation of dominance and subalternity. He who owns the power of nomination, the power to talk and to construct the language, owns also the power to design a cartography in which to locate those who do not hold the same communicative codes. Through the interpretive lens of Infantilism, in fact, the child, just because he/she is not completely socialized to adults values, does not master the communicative and cultural codes of the adult society. This leaves the child more exposed to expropriation of his specificity and to translation into another symbolic system.⁴⁵

The point is then not just to highlight similarities but to join together the child's subjectivity with the category of subaltern and thus begin to describe his position within the child-adult relationship.

The term *subaltern*, derived from Gramsci's thought, referred to «all the groups socially oppressed by the dominance of the hegemonic classes, in the case in point the proletariat, which, by definition, was neither joint, nor organized and, consequently, disadvantaged in the attempt to build a class-consciousness through which to counter the elites' power».⁴⁶

This concept has been widely reframed by the current thoughts of Cultural and Post-colonial studies, and in particular by the scholars of the School of Birmingham, by Edward Said and the collective group of, the better known, Subaltern studies. What is of great importance in the concept of subaltern, as well as in the concept of hegemony, is the role of language in the construction of a self-consciousness and, also according to Foucault's thought, in the definition of the oppressed as a subaltern.

Can the child speak? Speaking in terms of children's cultures

The theorization of *Infantilism* and of the child as a subaltern, here proposed as an interpretive tool of children's culture, takes its place in the current thoughts known as Cultural studies and Subaltern Studies. This, as says one of the foremost subaltern and postcolonial studies theorists, Gayatri Spivak, can be very enlightening for describing children's place in society because in her questioning subalterns' "speak", she is analyzing their possibilities to develop their capacity to speak and their agency.

Within the child-adult relation the fact that the child does not own completely the same communicative adult codes makes him subaltern not only because he does not have the conditions to 'speak itself', but also because he is told, described and understood by an adult code that he does not yet know.

Affirming that he/she is not able to "speak itself" does not mean that the child does not speak but that he/she speaks *another* language. As long as its language is translated within the adults' symbolic system, the fixed one, it will be continuously stated that the child does not speak and, in this way, even its agency will not be acknowledged.

Related to this point is another important theme of Spivak's theoretical thinking, that of translation as a metaphor of culture – defined as well as «translation»- and as a playfield for the relation between the subaltern, who speaks an idiomatic language, and "the translator", who speaks the «standard language»⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ It's not for a coincidence that the concepts of "socialization" and "acculturation" originated from the same historical period and owned the same cultural roots. In both cases there are people, the child and the primitive, who still do not know or manage properly the social and cultural value predominant in a specific society.

⁴⁶ Alessandra DI MAIO, « Subaltern Studies », in Michele COMETA, Roberta COGLITORE, Federica MAZZARA (eds), *Dizionario degli studi culturali*, Roma, Meltemi, 2004, p. 489.

⁴⁷ Regarding Spivak's continuous considerations on the concept of "translation" see: «The politics of translation» (1993) or «Translator's preface» (1976), in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, where she reframes the role of the translator starting from her own experience of translation of Derrida's book, or her comments on the works by the Bengal writer Mahasweta Devi, «Coei che dà il seno: per l'autrice, la lettrice, l'insegnante, la subalterna, la storica...», (2005).

According to Spivak, the translation is «to transfer from one to the other», where the *other* is the «source of one's utterance».⁴⁸

Given the indissoluble link that, as it is represented, ties the native speaker to the translator, for Spivak «Translation is thus not only necessary but unavoidable. And yet, as the text guards its secret, it is impossible. The ethical task is never quite performed».⁴⁹ However because of the eagerness to go beyond the text peculiarity and reach a more general intelligibility, we cannot avoid an action of translating, that, in order to be really such, needs to be performed within an ethical relation, founded on the act of hearing.

This founding task of translation does not disappear by fetishizing the native language. Sometimes I read and hear that the subaltern can speak in their native languages. I wish I could be as self-assured as the intellectual, literary critic and historian, who assert this in English. No speech is speech if it is not heard. It is this act of hearing-to-respond that may be called the imperative to translate.⁵⁰

For Spivak it is not enough to recognize the other's difference and the relation one has with this other. Recognizing the other's difference, saying for example “he/she speaks his/her native language”, does not imply recognizing the other until this recognition does take place within a dialectical thought of the other who moves following a rigid and opposite logic. «No speech is a speech», and no speaker is a speaker, «if it is not heard», says Spivak. So what I mean here by “hearing” is the relationship between one person and another and not simply a relationship in which you can mirror yourself. According to Spivak we should leave a dialectical logic of recognition of the otherness, build always against a dominant subject who defines the order of interaction, and break this binary scheme toward a plurality of ways of imagination.

This action of re-imagination cannot be developed within dialectical theories of the otherness inverted, reinforcing one part against the other, for example the one less powerful and more marginalized, but a major consideration has to be given to the everyday practices of the *other ones* that in their deployment through the net of power are able, sometimes, not to be caught in a trap.⁵¹

In this way I should like to rethink the child-adult relationship focusing on the question of children's speech and on children as speakers.

If the traditional view of the child anchors him to the image of one who “is not yet able to communicate”, and therefore who “doesn't speak”, we cannot just be satisfied by affirming his difference, “he speaks his native language”, but we should understand how this difference is constructed. In other words, we should be aware of the pitfalls of dialectical thinking, not only when it constructs the child as the other, as the minor one, but even when this otherness is glorified, especially when children are taken out of the context in which they live. Even in this acknowledging of children's nature we cannot be sure to overcome the risk of fetishism of the child, underlined by Spivak in the relation native/subaltern. This fetishism will take place as a form of exotification of the children's difference (as seen in the studies carried out by Opie and Opie), which tries to affirm a form of primordial genuineness which will not preserve children from an objectified position functional to the person that is translating the child within this dialectical relation. Anthropologists themselves run the risk of being fascinated by their subjects of research mainly because of the difficulty of keeping the right distance from them.

If this otherness is defined within the Infantilism frame, the child will be conceptualized alternatively as troublesome and “in need” or as vulnerable and as a threat.⁵² Both images will call

⁴⁸ Spivak notes as translation «In Bangla, as in most North Indian languages, it is *anu-vada* –speaking after, *translation* as *imitation*», Gayatri C. SPIVAK, «Translation as Culture», *Parallax*, 6: 1, 2000, pp. 13 -24, p. 21.

⁴⁹ *Idem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁵¹ Michel DE CERTEAU, *L' invention du quotidien*.

⁵² See also Chris JENKS, *Childhood*, Routledge, London, 1996; Peter MOSS, Jean DILLON, June STATHAM, “The child in need” and “the rich child”: *discourses, constructions and practice*, in «Critical Social Policy», vol 20 (2), pp. 233-254, 2000.

for an educative action by the adult, who will construct the adult's image in opposition to the child's images.

If this otherness is broken up into the multiple senses which emerge from an ethnographic child-centred observation of children's practices, that means, carefully considering all the expressions of «peer cultures», we can pose the basic conditions for reconfiguring this relation within an intercultural, and no longer educative, paradigm. This does not mean considering children's culture as an essence, nor radicalizing children's difference to adults, as though they were two detached and autonomous worlds, a conflict "we against them". We all know what little chance children have of living on their own, even in those places designed specifically for them, where they have more possibilities to create autonomous cultures, and how impossible it would be to even think of children outside of the relation with adults.⁵³

The question is then to acknowledge this relation but also the distance existing between child and adult life without either minimising or strengthening it, as, on the contrary, seems to happen in the *educative discourse*, but simply following its swings.

So often scholars have spoken about the culture of childhood as a flow, a movement, something that does not have a defined or constant shape but that comes out:

only in the space and time over which children have some power and control: [...] in the space and time dedicated to play distanced by teacher's eyes [...]; in the spare time from the scheduled on the adults world. «Children's cultures» appear, thus, in the interstices of the spatial and temporal order.⁵⁴

Only by keeping the right distance children have the possibility to "speak" and to express their agency, even if interstitial and tactical. Their otherness is not founded on their being other from the adult, but in the everyday practices deployed by children within the educative/normative structure around them.

Children's otherness, so conceived and constructed, could be a key concept in the process of creating the passage from an educative paradigm to an intercultural one when interpreting the child-adult relationship.

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⁵³ Leena ALANEN, Berry MAYALL (eds), *Conceptualizing Child-Adult Relations*, London-New York, Routledge-Falmer, 2001.

⁵⁴ Allison JAMES, Chris JENKS, Allan PROUT, *Theorizing childhood*, (2002), p. 92.

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