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Accumulation, excess, childhood: Toward a Countertopography of risk and waste

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Abstract

This piece grows out of my on-going project, 'Childhood as Spectacle', and my enduring concern with social reproduction and what it does for and to Marxist and other critical political-economic analyses. After more than 30 years of Marxist-feminist interventions around these issues, symptomatic silences around social reproduction remain all too common in analyses of capitalism. Working through these issues and their occlusion, I offer what I hope is a useful and vibrant theoretical framework for examining geographies of children, youth, and families. Building this framework calls into play three overlapping issues; neoliberal capitalism in crisis and David Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession, my ideas around childhood as spectacle, as a cultural formation associated with contemporary political economic crisis and its figuration of the child as waste, and how this figuration might be turned around to find libratory potential in and from the site of children's play and time.

Key words: childhood; play; risk; crisis; capitalism.

Resum. *Acumulació, excés, infància: cap a una contratopografia del risc i del residu*

Aquest article sorgeix del meu projecte en curs, 'La infància com a espectacle', i de la meva preocupació constant per la reproducció social en l'anàlisi marxista i en altres anàlisis polític-econòmiques crítiques. Després de més de 30 anys d'intervencions marxistes-feministes en relació a aquests problemes, els silencis simptomàtics sobre la reproducció social segueixen sent molt comuns en les anàlisis del capitalisme. Treballant en aquestes qüestions i la seva oclusió, ofereixo el que espero que sigui un marc teòric útil i dinàmic per a l'examen de les geografies dels infants, els joves i les famílies. La construcció d'aquest marc posa en joc tres aspectes que se superposen, el capitalisme neoliberal en crisi i la noció de David Harvey de l'acumulació per desposseïció, les meves idees sobre la infància com a espectacle, com una formació cultural associada amb la crisi política i econòmica contemporània i la figuració de l'infant com a residu, i com aquesta figuració es pot invertir per buscar en i des del temps del joc dels infants un potencial alliberador.

Paraules clau: infància; joc; risc; crisi; capitalisme.

Resumen. *Acumulación, exceso, infancia: Hacia una contratopografía del riesgo y del residuo*

Este artículo surge de mi proyecto en curso, 'La infancia como espectáculo', y de mi preocupación constante por la reproducción social en el análisis marxista y en otros análisis político-económicos críticos. Después de más de 30 años de intervenciones marxistas-feministas en relación a estos problemas, los silencios sintomáticos sobre la reproducción social siguen siendo muy comunes en los análisis del capitalismo. Trabajando en estas cuestiones y su occlusión, ofrezco lo que espero que sea un marco teórico útil y dinámico para el examen de las geografías de los niños, los jóvenes y las familias. La construcción de este marco pone en juego tres aspectos que se superponen, el capitalismo neoliberal en crisis y la noción de David Harvey de la acumulación por desposesión, mis ideas sobre la infancia como espectáculo, como una formación cultural asociada con la crisis política y económica contemporánea y la figuración del niño como residuo, y como esta figuración se puede invertir para buscar en y desde el tiempo del juego de los niños un potencial liberador.

Palabras clave: infancia; juego; riesgo; crisis; capitalismo.

Résumé. *Accumulation, excès, enfance: Vers une contretopographie des risques et des déchets*

Cet article provient de 'L'enfance en tant que spectacle', mon projet en cours, et mon souci constant à propos de la reproduction sociale dans l'analyse marxiste et d'autres analyses politico-économiques critiques. Après plus de 30 ans d'interventions marxistes-féministes par rapport à ces questions, les silences symptomatiques sur la reproduction sociale sont encore très courantes dans l'analyse du capitalisme. À partir mon travail sur ces questions et leur occlusion, je vous offre ce que, j'espère, sera un cadre utile et dynamique pour l'examen des géographies des enfants, des jeunes et des familles. La construction de ce cadre met en jeu trois domaines qui se chevauchent, le capitalisme néolibéral en crise et la notion David Harvey de l'accumulation par dépossession, mes idées sur l'enfance en tant que spectacle, comme une formation culturelle associée à la crise politique et économique contemporaine et la figuration de l'enfant en tant que déchet, et comment cette figuration peut être inversée pour regarder dans le temps de jeu des enfants du potentiel de libération.

Mots clé: enfance; jeu; risque; crise; capitalisme.

Summary

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Insecurity ricochets through contemporary life, often roosting in and around children and childhood. A welter of management strategies have been devised in a variety of quarters to mediate and manage these insecurities whether political-economic, cultural, or political-ecological. This piece grows out of my on-going project, 'Childhood as Spectacle,' and my enduring concern with social reproduction and what — as a theoretical formulation — it does for and to Marxist and other critical political-economic analyses. After more than

30 years of Marxist-feminist interventions around these issues, symptomatic silences around social reproduction remain all too common in analyses of capitalism. Working through what is at stake in these issues and their occlusion, I offer what I hope is a useful and vibrant theoretical framework for examining geographies of children, youth, and families. Building this framework calls into play three overlapping issues; neoliberal capitalism in crisis and David Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession, my evolving ideas around childhood as spectacle as a cultural formation associated with contemporary political economic crisis and its figuration of the child as waste, and how this figuration might be turned around to find liberatory potential in and from the site of children's play and time.

1. Neoliberal Capitalism and Crises of Accumulation

Global capitalism has been in obvious crisis since late 2008. The permutations of this crisis were shaped in the course of more than three decades of neoliberal policies and imperatives. Among them, the offloading of responsibility for social reproduction from the state and capital to individuals, households, and 'civil society;' disinvestments in the social wage more generally; privatization of public and common goods, spaces, and services; the commodification of formerly free or shared goods and services, and a generalized marketization and financialization of everyday life and its customary material social practices. This much is well known, as perhaps is that these concerted policies and practices were accompanied by others that fostered and called forth an entrepreneurial and self-sufficient self. There were and continue to be fierce struggles over these changes and the variegated attempts on the part of those in power, whose interests they served, to naturalize them.

This political economic situation meshes with David Harvey's notion of accumulation crisis (2003). Harvey argues that capital's periodic crises are crises of overaccumulation. In other words, there is a chronic tendency in capitalism to produce surpluses of capital in various forms — money, commodities, productive capacity — along with surpluses of labor, but for various reasons no apparent means to bring them together profitably. The key for capitalists is to find profitable ways to absorb and set in motion capital surpluses or face the sorts of devaluations associated with the current crisis. Harvey suggests three means to resolve such crises: *spatial*, which involves such things as opening new markets, developing new resources, or developing and deploying new pools of labor often through the strategies associated with accumulation by dispossession; *temporal*, which includes such things as investment in long-term infrastructure, public works, or the sorts of social investments, among them research, education and support of the arts, that take capital out of circulation for a long time; and *spatio-temporal* strategies, which combine the other two.

While Harvey is clear about how dispossession works through familiar strategies like privatizing common resources, the 'new enclosures,' or displacing people from resources, he's less clear on how class is braided with racial-

ized, sexist, imperial projects to foster, enable, and naturalize dispossession while at the same time diminishing the prospects for social investment. The costs of labor are routinely cheapened through disinvestments in the social wage and reliance on privatized strategies of social reproduction, which are constantly made invisible through their willed naturalization. Investments in children are thus a 'temporal fix,' and yet almost never the weapon of choice in defusing crises of overaccumulation. Why not make such questions central to discussions of accumulation crisis? What if surpluses were absorbed by investments in public education and health care or renovated public housing and new playgrounds rather than subprime mortgages and other predatory gimmicks of finance capital? The scale of dispossession is witnessed not just in uneven geographical developments like colonialism, gentrification, suburbanization, or 'urban renewal,' but also at the intimate scales of everyday life. Foreclosure takes place — quite literally — at the very heart of people's existence. Disinvestment in social reproduction is a key means of accumulation by dispossession. Global expansion is riddled with and enabled by intimate dispossessions (cf., Pratt and Rosner, 2006). Theories that fail to attend to this realm of contradiction only capture part of the picture, and neglect an enormous reservoir of political possibilities. These concerns drive my interest in children as waste and are at the heart of the cultural politics and counter-topographies I will trace in my conclusion.

2. Childhood as Spectacle

The crises in neoliberal capitalism I outlined above — along with other social, cultural, and environmental crises — have understandably produced all manner of insecurities about social reproduction and the future. Many of these insecurities play out around children and families' everyday lives. Childhood as spectacle is an expression of this anxiety and insecurity. Following Debord, the writing collective Retort (2005) marks spectacle as a colonization of everyday life, provocatively suggesting that it is globalization turned inward. Along these lines we can think of childhood as a site of inward colonization connected directly to accumulation under neoliberal capitalism. As spectacle childhood is simultaneously entwined in the production of what Retort calls 'weak citizenry,' not only of children, but among parents who succumb to 'idiot fashions and panics' trying to make and live in what might be thought of as a simulacra of community (Retort, 2005: 21). I have addressed these concerns in greater depth elsewhere (Katz, 2008), for present purposes I will simply note that childhood as spectacle calls forth three figurations of the child; as accumulation strategy or commodity, as ornament, and as waste. These three figurations are analytically inseparable even as they inhabit particular bodies and spaces quite distinctly.

Examining the affective politics and organizing concerns of these figurations, I have looked at children as accumulation strategies and as ornaments, focusing particularly on the modes of hypervigilant and precious parenting

associated with them (e.g., Katz 2006). This piece addresses the constituent outside of these figurations, the child as waste, which rests in part on a myth of their disposability because they are essential to capital accumulation, and the disciplinary practices associated with race, gender, sexuality, and class (cf., Wright 2006). Children as waste represent dispossession on the hoof as it were. Excessed by various regimes of capital accumulation, these young people have a value analogous to an industrial reserve army. At the same time they are a social body that must be contained and managed, and waste management around people as around things is big business. The child as waste is a specter that haunts the figure of the child as accumulation strategy, and its management through relations and practices of social reproduction enables, maintains, and propels particular modes of capital accumulation.

I will touch on three moments and means of managing children as waste, the ‘school to prison pipeline,’ the militarization of childhood, and the super exploitation of child labor (here focused on the ship recycling industry). In these three realms children are social actors and subjects of capital accumulation facing quite differentiated modes of power, but as I will note in the conclusion, there is a striking sameness to the discursive formations around them.

3. Children as Waste

The “school to prison pipeline” is shorthand for the material and discursive continuities between schools and prisons in the lives of poor children in the U.S. — particularly young men of color — who commonly attend poor and under-resourced schools, which limit the possibilities that their educational needs will be met and increase the chances that disciplinary infractions will be dealt with more harshly than is the case in more privileged environments. The combination of under-educating, stepped up policing and surveillance, and often-unforgiving punishment in certain school environments seems to streamline the way to prison rather than other futures for young people in poor neighborhoods (Krueger, 2009).

Michelle Fine and Jessica Ruglis (2009) convincingly analyze neoliberal education as a form of accumulation by dispossession. They demonstrate how students in poorer school districts — but others as well — are dispossessed from quality education and even a diploma as the funds for public education are siphoned into standardized testing, i.e., to the private businesses who produce, assess, and help prepare students for the barrage of tests they undergo throughout their schooling; the days spent in testing; and things like security and policing measures in schools, even primary schools. Dispossession also takes place as responsibility for education devolves from the state to local authorities to the individual household and child. The rhetoric of ‘personal responsibility’ around education is problematic in all sorts of ways. Poor children’s disposability is all too frequently conveyed by the state of their schools, the quality and array of available equipment, and the qualifications

and experience of their teachers (cf., Woodson 1933, cited in Fine and Ruglis, 2009). Fine and Ruglis astutely refer to these all too common conditions as ‘soft dispossessions,’ marking among them high rates of teacher turnover, dependence on uncredentialed teachers, and long-term substitute teachers who are not necessarily qualified to teach the subjects they teach. These practices are directly correlated with the percentage of students who qualify for free lunch (a U.S. government marker of poverty) (Fine and Ruglis, 2009).

Schools in poor neighborhoods may lack toilet paper or doors on restroom stalls, but they have metal detectors or sophisticated webcam surveillance systems. Some of them even have inserted RFID (radio frequency identification) chips in students’ school identification cards, which allow them to be tracked using GPS. Such schools may have disengaged or overwhelmed teachers, but omnipresent security guards and even police. Practices like these, which have become routine in many schools especially those in poor areas, criminalize youth, particularly youth of color, in ways that remind how idle members of the working class were disciplined during the early years of capital accumulation (cf., Linebaugh, 1992; Thompson, 1993; Federici, 2004). After-school, arts, and sports programs — all of which are means of absorbing surplus capital—have been cut or eliminated entirely while vigorous expulsion and detention policies are on the rise. Children even increasingly face expulsion from preschools (Gilliam, 2005; James, 2008), suggesting a ratcheting up of disciplined self-fashioning in all kinds of educational environments. Public universities such as my own, The City University of New York, are part of this process too. Where there was free tuition for all up until New York’s fiscal crisis of the 1970s (associated not coincidentally with the rise of neoliberal policies and practices as well as rising numbers of nonwhite students), there are now tuition and fees, which increase routinely making higher education all the more inaccessible to poor people.

All of these practices around education and its disinvestments and dispossessions can be linked to increases in dropout rates and increased time to completion of diploma requirements, decreasing the likelihood of young people going to college, but increasing the likelihood of detention and imprisonment, particularly in a bleak labor market. These sites become containers for managing young people dispossessed from future education and employment by these policies, and they *are* policies. The statistics are horrifying. According to the New York City Mayor’s Office of Statistics, the 2006 costs to keep one youth in ‘secure detention’ was almost \$171,000 a year. To educate one student in a New York City public high school was just shy of \$12,000. In other words detaining a young person costs the government about 15 times more than educating him or her. There is not ‘no money.’ Though there is a lot of dispossession and waste. These policies and practices make clear to young people that they are disposable, and that their futures — except as contained — are of little moment to the neoliberal social formations in which they come of age.

Another figure of waste is more explicitly violent, and can be seen in the militarization of youthful lives, particularly in the lives and life spaces of child

soldiers. In this realm the flattened construction of the child as innocent is not simply turned on its head as children are mourned as predatory and vicious, but children's innocence is itself exploited by predatory practices associated with the increasing blur between civilian and military life as much as with the strategies of children's recruitment and retention. Focusing on vulnerability, Peter Singer (2006) tracks the erosion of the boundary between civilian and soldier over the past century. Where 10% of the casualties of World War I were civilians, about 92% of those killed in the Balkan and African conflicts of the late 20th century were civilian. Children — often quite young — figure centrally in those losses, and not as 'collateral damage,' he notes, but as soldiers themselves. People younger than 18, and frequently as young as six, are active combatants in about 75% of all conflicts these days (Singer, 2006). Young people are commonly misled about the armed conflicts they are inveigled to join, but they are also abducted to serve in armies and militias, or find their way in economic desperation as safer means of securing employment are foreclosed. The result is that hundreds of thousands of children have fought or are currently fighting worldwide. Their disposability is manifest, but so is the attraction of military service when all other paths to viable future employment seem blocked.

In my work in Sudan I witnessed the contours of this hideous reality in formation as young rural boys were displaced from meaningful survivable futures in the agricultural economy. The state drew young men into the military by requiring enlistment in order to proceed on many of life's paths, among them the receipt of a secondary school diploma, an exit visa to work abroad, or a university degree. The fundamentalist Islamic leaders with whom the state was intertwined picked up where the government left off, framing the Civil War as a Jihad, which held out the promise of paradise to all martyred in service. Meanwhile in Darfur the government-sponsored terrorizing thugs known as the Janjaweed recruits teens and unemployed young people largely from nomadic and transhumance communities with few options or resources thanks to environmental degradation, war, and government resettlement policies. Similar stories are repeated around the world, north and south.

Young people are dispossessed from viable futures by their exclusion from education through various means including the school to prison pipeline discussed above, lack of land, lack of credit, persistent unemployment, war, famine, routine violence, environmental disasters, and other of the uneven effects of globalization and the policies that propel accumulation by dispossession. These wretched circumstances leave many young people open to recruitment by state sponsored military service, but also non-state militias, terrorist groups, liberation and rebel armies, and street gangs. While military service often provides recruits with valuable training and opportunities for future employment, it remains the case that many military operations, formal and informal, waste children's lives while they manage them as waste. It is important to note here that when children survive the often extended and revolving wars in which they are taken up, they are often wasted psychologically and emotionally,

suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at an age when there was little if any 'pre-traumatic' time to build on.

The final figure of waste is the child involved in extreme and debilitating labor. One of the most wasting forms of child labor, which has received some attention recently in the field of international law and labor regulations, is ship recycling. As the name suggests, ship recycling involves the dismantling of ships such as oil tankers and freighters, and the recycling of their materials as scrap and mechanical parts for use in other industries. While ships used to be dismantled mechanically in dry docks in the global north, they are now commonly beached in Southeast Asia where they sit in shallow water and are dismantled piece by piece into recyclable commodities — materials, machines, spare parts — and scrap. In a poor economy the number of ships put out of commission for scrap rises as does the demand for recycled products, which are less costly than new. The arduous and dangerous work of dismantling ships and tankers has fallen increasingly to children in Asia, most centrally in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, but also China, Vietnam, and Turkey. I consider this work here for three key reasons, it is extremely dangerous, it is itself about waste, and it is likely to increase in the ongoing global economic crisis.

Shipbreaking is extraordinarily debilitating, hazardous, and toxic work scorned by all but the poorest of the poor who have no choice but to participate. Many shipbreakers are under 18 years old with an untold number essentially indentured because of household debt. The shipbreaking industry is built upon a viscerally embodied form of accumulation by dispossession, and many of the bodies in question are children's. Characteristic of this industry, young people are recruited to shipbreaking with an advance paid to their parents, so that the youthful workers are essentially captive, toiling without wages under terrible conditions over which they have little control (FIDH, 2008). The work itself involves dismantling heavy machinery, which can and does fall on workers — crushed and lost limbs are a routine occurrence — and working in blazing hot environments filled with airborne toxic materials including heavy metals, asbestos, PCBs, rust, and fumes from acetylene cutting torches (FIDH, 2008). Young people who endure these brutal work conditions are especially vulnerable to noxious environmental conditions and potential disabling injuries. In Bangladesh, where about 60% of all large ocean vessels are currently dismantled, estimates vary, but between 12 and 25% of the shipbreaking workforce of 30,000 is under 18 years old, with another 41% between 18 and 22 (YPSA, 2005; FIDH, 2008). The waste of so many young bodies accrues to transnational corporations and underdeveloped debtor states in reduced labor costs and savings in materials, while its long term physical and psychic costs are borne individually.

The work of shipbreaking is itself about waste being recycled and repurposed. The industry basically cannibalizes whole ships and tankers and recycles most of their materials and machinery. In some lights ship recycling can be imagined as a 'green' industry. According to Greenpeace (2005), for instance, about 80%, of the steel needed in Bangladesh is provided from

shipbreaking. However, the hazardous labor conditions and environmental residues of the industry would make any claim to 'green' designation laughable if the very thought were not so tragic. It is indeed cannibalizing, and not just of materials.

Finally, the demand for recycled products in the poorest countries has increased tremendously with the economic crisis, which has exacerbated their already dire financial circumstances. While scrap metal and machinery such as generators cost substantially less than new, the hidden cost of these savings is taken in children's and other workers' lives and wellbeing. There is no metric in which these costs and savings are comparable, but again they turn on occluding the intimate dispossessions of global practices of accumulation.

4. Waste Management and Mimesis

Waste management — of all different kinds—is a big business, of course. It is a key site of social investment through the prison system, military, and other operations of organized violence; through killing labor practices; and through more routine management strategies such as the everyday corrosive violence of neglect, disease, debt peonage, and poverty. These material social forms and practices are means of channeling and containing excessed populations whose labor may be of little use in the present, but might be profitably tapped at another time or place. These bodies must not only be contained, but their visible containment serves to discipline those who are not waste. Waste management is also a way of not seeing (and naturalizing) the production of waste and its thick bloody integument with the production of value. In his fascinating work on waste and the production of value, Jesse Goldstein (2009) suggests that human waste management stages the "violence of erasure". This perspective spurs me to think about recuperation — and its political possibilities — from and in the site of waste, what we might think of as a mobilization of culture under the sign of erasure. In other words, how to recuperate and lay claim to all of the lost potential — flesh and mind — from the searing waste I've delineated here (cf., Goldstein; 2009). I address these concerns via the mimetic faculty, drawing thus on the writings of Walter Benjamin and two of his contemporary interlocutors, Susan Buck-Morss and Michael Taussig. In a parallel to shipbreaking, which is wasting but has the recuperation of waste (to capital) as its object, the mimetic faculty is creative and potentially recuperates creativity wasted¹. Fittingly the mimetic faculty crops up in play, what some consider a 'waste of time'.

1. Wole Soyinka famously referred to his generation and their creative potential as 'wasted' in the destructive political exigencies of post-Independence Nigeria (Wilkinson 1992). In a lecture I was privileged to attend at Rutgers University Soyinka (1999) spoke with passionate rage about the magnitude of the loss to the individual, the collective, the nation, and the world when young people's creativity is derailed and wasted.

The mimetic faculty is at the heart of much of children's play. In my ethnographic research on children's work and play in rural Sudan I noted how the children played while they worked, engaged in playful work and 'workful' play, and played at things that at other times they worked at. For example, they played vivid 'geo-dramatic' games of 'fields,' 'store,' and 'house,' wherein they created miniature landscapes which they animated by enacting the tasks and social relations associated with agriculture, commerce, and domestic life. In these activities the children transformed local debris, domestic waste, agricultural detritus, scraps, and dung into amazing imaginary worlds of farming and economic and social exchange in which they had a place; even a future. They internalized, worked out, and expressed the economic relations they saw around them, but with a little bit of a tweak — a gesture toward utopia — no one went broke, everyone had at least some assets, the exchanges were relatively equal, often riotous and always exuberant. The mimetic faculty was everywhere (Katz, 2004).

The mimetic faculty, Walter Benjamin tells us, is not simply the ability to see resemblances and create similarities between things, but is the flash of insight read off of or made in the process that impels a moment of invention. Playing at something has a fugitive or fleeting aspect that can spark a recognition that even the original is made up — a performance — and might be made different (Benjamin, 1978: 333; cf.; Taussig, 1993; Buck-Morss, 1989). Children play at all kinds of social roles, but also pretend that they are trucks, trees, monsters. Each act is a 'becoming other' *and* a way of coming to consciousness. The fluidity of the 'becomings' as much as the fictions, stagings, and restagings of play are key to its pleasures, and at the heart of the mimetic faculty. Play is identity-making. It is also world-making. In play children learn about and toy with the meanings and practices of their social worlds, but as Benjamin reminds, it's also where received meanings and relations are refused or reworked. Benjamin is especially insightful in thinking about playing with debris and the ways it accesses the social and historical. That sort of tactile knowing is in all of us, and its 'wild imagining' (Taussig, 1993: 21) has revolutionary potential. Such fantasies and reveries are reservoirs for thinking and making new ways of living. The dialectic ricochet between debris and value is exact and potent here (cf., Gidwani 2008).

Play — children's and others' — is intrinsic time; time lived as 'disposable,' though not at all a 'waste of time' as it is so often constructed. Marx saw disposable time as the basis of social wealth in the sense that it is time for creativity; for art, science, invention, but also because it is consumption time, an arena where surpluses can be sopped up and desires quenched (Marx 1973: 398, cited in Goldstein, 2009; cf., Lefebvre, 1991). Childhood is in many ways disposable time. How else can we understand 'play time' or the pleasures of 'doing nothing' in all of its fluid openness to everything. This kind of time is perhaps the greatest joy (and potential) of childhood. Play can be understood as a non-instrumentalist state of being and openness to becoming. It is generative and full of possibilities. If as Marx tells us, "the whole development of

wealth rests on the creation of disposable time”, isn’t that time — children’s time, playtime, thinking and imagination time — something not to be wasted?

At one level Marx was being elemental. Without time that exceeds bare survival — that is, disposable time — there’s no potential for building surplus. Non-productive time and time out of work are needed to expand and potentially make good on production time and its myriad surpluses through the material social practices of social reproduction, consumption, and leisure. A lot of the disciplining associated with capitalist production is focused on channeling that time and how it is ‘spent’ by whom, so that idleness is reserved for some and punished in others. At its core, then, disposable time is social time; it is a source and outcome of the creation of wealth. Disposable time is best understood *not* as waste but as wealth and potential wealth, as something to be shared, to be played with, to be reimagined as the very fiber of what it means to be a person, to be social. As Goldstein (2009) reminds, that ‘fund’ of time is also when art, science, and creativity happen. The best of work, we in academia are privileged to know, is like play, but beyond that ‘wild imagining,’ why not think a politics that builds upon and shares disposable time?

It is possible, for example, to restructure work time and meaning so that their logic is no longer that some work to the bone — whether through excessive hours, protracted commutes, or intensified productivity demands, while others are idled and made into waste that must then be managed and contained. The children with whom I worked made whole beautiful vibrant worlds out of shit. If that is not an inspiring metaphor for politics now, what is? Taking a leaf from the sorts of utopian gestures and imagination of these children’s play, but well exceeding it; an imagination that would refashion debris to make toys of garbage and elaborate worlds of waste is somewhere in almost everyone. That imagination — a revolutionary imagination, if you will — is always ready to be released into making something else. That something else is something to think about — to ‘play with’ — politically. It might be realized in making disposable time the social resource that it is through insisting on and making times and spaces for creativity, research, writing, playing art, music, drama, thought, dance and the like. This is not dream talk though its relationship to reimagining time — disposable time — as a social resource is dreamy. The current economic crisis could be redressed by rethinking and restructuring the working day. Production time could be reallocated so that more people would work fewer hours; thereby expanding the ‘fund’ of disposable time alongside security rather than precarity. More people working fewer hours would extend employment and rework leisure in ways that expanded wealth in the deepest sense of the term.

This sort of openness is perhaps the deepest lesson to learn from children’s play, and also the promise and danger of understanding childhood time in tension with the deep injustices associated with constituting certain children as waste, and hidden by the ruthless, global management of that waste. We are all in this together and the loss of anyone’s creativity or creative potential is a tragedy of the commons, a loss to our common future. No one is disposable,

and disposable time is a collective and expanding resource that has all kinds of possibility for making change. Change that cannot happen when the privileges of some are built on the dispersed waste of so many others.

5. A Countertopography of Waste

Countertopography is an idea I developed to connect disparate places and social formations by virtue of their analytic relationship to a particular material social practice, social relation, and/or cultural form (cf. Katz, 2004). It is a way of making good on simultaneity, of making visible what is too easily ignored or hidden by space (cf. Berger, 1974). With countertopography I wanted to produce a geographical imagination for a more associative politics — one that was scale and place crossing with practical entailments that could work across and against received distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

My intent here is to mobilize an abstraction for understanding the work done by dispossession and the making and managing of waste (human and not) around social reproduction. What sorts of countertopographies might be imagined, produced, and even traveled around the figure of the child as waste, children made excess, and social reproduction as an arena of accumulation by dispossession?

In looking at children as waste I was struck by the common language of disenfranchisement, of dispossession, of children’s self production and sober awareness of their own unfitness for productive futures. These material social practices create a field for exploitation and further dispossession — that is, *for a willed wasting of lives constituted as wasted*. Marking the ‘recruitments’ of young people into what is a surveillance apparatus at once global and intimate that includes the school to prison pipeline, the military and other structures of organized violence, and deadly labor practices as strategies of waste management with common grounds — descriptively different and experientially varied but in many key ways analytically similar — is a way to start working against the violence of erasure; both their own and the constitutive role of waste in making capital accumulation and capitalist discipline work. Making that waste and the violence of its management everywhere visible, and making it impossible to hide that waste by naturalizing it or displacing it on to racialized, gendered, classed others or elsewheres, or occluding it behind the tenuous glitter of children as accumulation strategies, commodities, or ornaments is crucial. On it and around it turns the possibility for rethinking waste and disposability as material social practices so that ‘disposable’ time — play time — becomes our time to change the world.

As Marx² himself tells us,

A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child’s naiveté, and must he himself not strive to reproduce

2. Thank you to Jesse Goldstein for sending me this quotation from the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973, p. 111).

its truth at a higher stage? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding, as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm?

That charm is something to organize around.

6. References

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