Hide and Seek

Uncovering the Politics of Playtime

Sarah Fishman

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Since the publication in 1960 of Philippe Ariès's foundational, if problematic, *Centuries of Childhood*, the history of childhood has developed into a rich and varied field.¹ At the annual conference of the Western Society for French History in 2018, a call for panelists for a roundtable on the history of childhood expanded into two separate panels ranging from the medieval era through the thirty glorious postwar years. The panelists and the audience grappled with questions about the social construction of age, the ages of childhood, and the challenges of finding sources for a group that left few "ego documents." Although children per se never exercised political or global power, attention to children clarifies how critical children were to political and international systems. Material generated by children themselves can be difficult to locate, but adults generated plenty of material about children. The intersectionality of the history of childhood with fields like labor history, urban history, the history of the welfare state, and the history of psychology parallels the intersectionality of children themselves, who come from every race, social class, and gender. All humans, it turns out, start out as children.

The three articles in this special issue take an innovative approach to understanding children and childhood in France, focusing on the issue of play. Clearly central to children's lives, play also highlights how adults thought about and tried to shape and control children's lives. As these three articles make explicit, many of the activities that children engaged in as they played were performative, which is reflected in the linguistic equivalence—use of the same verb, *jouer*—between what children do and what actors do when they perform. Often adults fretted about children's play in factories, on the streets, in parks, and in institutions.

Miranda Sachs, Elvan Sahin, and Jonathyne Briggs explore different aspects of play over three consecutive eras from the Belle Époque to the years after World War II. One factor loomed over France throughout this half-century—the ever-growing fear about France's relatively low birth rate, referred to as *dénatalité*, in the face of the booming population of rivals like

Germany. First noticed in the 1856 census, in some years the number of people who died exceeded the number born. Although France's population continued to grow, its rate of growth slowed dramatically over the nineteenth century. The defeat by Prussia in 1871 seemed to confirm the link between population and national strength, intensifying population anxiety and raising the stakes of childhood. France needed not just to increase its birth rate, but also to ensure the survival, health, and proper upbringing of the children it had. Concern with the number of babies born spread across the political spectrum, one of the few issues shared from the monarchist right to the republican left, especially after World War I, which killed more than a million young men and the children they might have had. Fear about population and national strength meant that things like parks and recreation were not just fun and games, not peripheral to France's future, but essential to the nation's survival. Play, not trivial, was too important to be left to children's own devices.

Sachs, Sahin, and Briggs all invoke another common theme, linking children's play to physical space. Both Sachs and Sahin consider debates about urban space, who populated it, how children used it, and how adults managed, or tried, or failed to manage it for children. The rising attention to the protection and health of children informed a shift apparent from the Belle Époque of Sachs's article to the interwar era of Sahin's work. In the Belle Époque, Sachs argues, adults worried about protecting themselves and their businesses from the depredations of mischievous youth while also ensuring that those young boys grew up to become hardworking, serious, patriotic citizens. By the interwar years, Sahin's adults focused primarily on protecting children, in particular young children, by providing safe and sanitary spaces for the children's sake. Parents articulated a new right, children's right to play, which entailed real alterations to the urban environment. The creation of play spaces for young children set parents of young children against parents of older children, who struggled to advocate for the rights of older children/teenagers to public spaces for their activities. Parents of young children also struggled to protect their children's play spaces against pet owners, who could be equally fanatic about their charges.² With most middle-class parents of autistic children encouraged to place those children in psychiatric institutions, parents' voices remain unheard. But autistic children attracted a great deal of attention from experts on child psychology. After World War II, Briggs discovered, some autism experts no longer advocated holding them in psychiatric institutions for life. Their goal, however problematic their diagnoses and unlikely their cure, was to secure play spaces for autistic children, using their play as a form of treatment.

Miranda Sachs, in "‘But the Child Is Flighty, Playful, Curious’: Working-Class Boyhood and the Policing of Play in Belle Époque Paris," explores reports about working-class boys, both from the workplace and from the city. On the one side, factory inspectors cited the playful nature of young children as the cause of horrific workplace accidents, deflecting responsibility

from employers who used child labor and failed to ensure a safe workplace. Outside the workplace, however, working-class boys used city spaces for their leisure activities. At that point, rather than calling them “playful,” police and other adults labeled these same boys as dangerous hooligans. Their activities, per numerous descriptions, often “tested the boundaries” as Sachs explains, between the youthful shenanigans expected of boys and criminal behavior. Sachs finds examples of the fluid boundaries. Throwing rocks into a pond is okay, but throwing rocks at trains is not okay. Playing games is okay, but gambling is not okay. Sharing items among themselves is okay, but pilfering them from shops is not okay. Sachs raises central questions. What was considered play? Who got to define it? Her work also illustrates that adult efforts to control and socialize France’s youth extended beyond schools and workplaces. Rather than leaving children to themselves, adults created organizations to provide safe places for boys to play, sent them to summer camps, and created sports leagues, all of which represent the Foucauldian double edge. Provision of such services for the benefit of working-class boys also meant increased control and supervision of all of their time, not just school and work hours, and for years after they left school. With most middle-class boys continuing in school through early adulthood, the focus on working-class boys in public spaces meant that local cops ended up substituting for parents, schoolteachers, and employers. However, in what the boys did, what the police enforced, and what they let slide, Sachs reveals that both boys and cops shaped the system in a complicated two-way dance.

Elvan Sahin’s article, “Sandcastles, Ball Games, and Scooters: Unearthing Children’s Play in the Public Parks of Interwar Paris,” moves forward to the interwar years, focusing on urban parks. While Paris has many green spaces, parks, gardens, and squares, those green spaces for the most part had not been created as places for children to play. By the 1920s, parents had succeeded in staking a claim to space for their children to play outdoors, in public parks, especially for preschool children. Parents cited experts who insisted that children needed exposure to the outdoors. To protect the health and advance the fitness of children, Paris needed to provide parks and to ensure that those play spaces were safe and sanitary. Public parks represented one kind of solution to the problem of unsupervised youth. But Sahin examines the complications of creating space for children. Forms of play varied with children’s age, entailing different kinds of spaces considered appropriate for children’s play: sandboxes for preschoolers, playing fields and cycling lanes for older children. Sahin delineates heated debates about who got to use public spaces and how. When it came to the layout of urban parks, Sahin confirms what Sachs found. Even if adults, in theory, held absolute power over children, in reality children and young people, through their behavior, played a role in reshaping public spaces. Giving in to the reality of older children’s use of cycles, scooters, and balls, adults ultimately reconfigured park space to accommodate those activities while also protecting younger children’s play spaces. In this two-way process, parents, children, teens, pet

owners, and enforcers of rules struggled to control and define space and play.

Jonathyne Briggs adds the dimension of ability/disability to the consideration of children, play, and space in his article “Reinventing Play: Autistic Children and the Normativity of Play in Postwar France.” Focusing on autistic children, Briggs reveals that play largely determined how adults viewed, diagnosed, and treated autistic children. Defining the play of nonautistic children as the norm, experts prior to World War II simply denied that autistic children’s activities constituted play. Rather, their behavior represented the absence of play, signaling their divergence from “normal” childhood. In the postwar decades, Freudian theorists, particularly Bruno Bettelheim, explained autism as a psychogenic disorder resulting from childhood trauma. Cold, aloof parents—mothers in particular—had elicited the aloofness of the autistic child, the avoidance of physical and eye contact. French experts deduced from the psychoanalytical explanation of autism a treatment linked to play. French autism circles and experts clung to the Freudian psychoanalytic approach for much longer than those in other places.³ In the United States, for example, experts by the 1990s had redefined autism as a neurological disorder.⁴ Briggs, however, found three key experts after the war, in the infancy of society’s understanding of autism, who questioned judging autistic behavior based on arbitrary standards of what constituted play. Maud Mannoni, Françoise Dolto, and Fernand Deligny observed and took seriously autistic children’s play, both using it to understand the disability and incorporating play as an integral part of the treatment. Briggs argues that these experts validated something critical and essential to autistic children. Disabled children also needed to play, and they had a right to play. What the children did—spinning, flapping, and lining up objects—was play. The solution was not to send autistic children to rigid institutions, but to places that allowed them to play as they wanted.

As it happens, all three articles center on boys, which is not surprising since the sources for all three articles all point to boys. Sachs incorporates gender into her analysis of boys and their play as an aspect of a performative masculinity of boyhood. In Sahin’s paper, complaints about disruptive play at work and in public spaces centered on boys, since girls had less freedom to roam the city and engaged in different activities. Briggs’s cases also involved only boys, most likely owing to the gender disparity in autism, which impacts more boys than girls.⁵ But girls and girlhood have also generated a growing and rich scholarship, including Miranda Sachs’s recent study of working-class girls.⁶ If boys’ healthy outdoor activities and sports formed future good male citizens, experts considered activities like playing with dolls and pretending to cook equally critical in forming France’s future wives and mothers. Reformers also insisted on the need to supervise activities and create safe spaces for adolescent working-class girls.⁷

All three articles point to the post–World War II apotheosis of play as essential to children, key to child development and socialization, and even-

tually key to the molding of productive, disciplined adults. They illuminate changing understandings of childhood and of the boundaries of age. Using play opens up questions about how play was defined, how that changed over time and by class, how it impacted urban space, and the role parents and even children themselves played in these changing discussions. These three rich articles reveal just how fruitful the focus on play can be in understanding the past.

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Notes

1. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Vintage, 1965). Although few scholars would agree now with his argument that childhood was a modern invention, his original and innovative book opened the door to thinking about childhood in historical terms. For a more recent overview, see Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Polity Books, 2018) and Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (New York: Longman, 1995) as well as the book accompanying a radio series on childhood, Hugh Cunningham's *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006).
2. For an excellent overview of the development of modern-day pet ownership, see Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
3. A key recent work on autism in French still takes a psychoanalytic perspective. See Jacques Hochmann, *Histoire de l'autisme: De l'enfant sauvage aux troubles envahissants du développement* [History of autism: From the wild child to Pervasive Developmental Disorders] (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009).
4. The US Centers for Disease Control page on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) defines it as a "developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges." CDC (Centers for Disease Control), "Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)," www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html (accessed 29 October 2019). Recent works on autism that reflect the change in understanding of the disorder in the United States and England include Roy Richard Grinker, *Unstrange Minds: Remapping the World of Autism* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Adam Feinstein, *A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Chloe Silverman, *Understanding Autism: Parents, Doctors, and the History of a Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Mitzi Waltz, *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (New York:

- Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Maja Holmer Nadesan, *Constructing Autism: Unraveling the "Truth" and Understanding the Social* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Jordynnn Jack, *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Steve Silberman, *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (New York: Penguin, 2016); and Bonnie Evans, *The Metamorphosis of Autism: A History of Child Development in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
5. According to the CDC, "ASD occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, but is about 4 times more common among boys than among girls." CDC, "What Is Autism Spectrum Disorder?" <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html> (Accessed 29 October 2019).
 6. Miranda Sachs, "When the Republic Came for the Nuns: Laicization, Labor Law, and Female Religious Orders," *French Historical Studies* 42, no. 3 (2019): 423–451, doi:10.1215/00161071-7558329.
 7. For more on the history of girls and girlhood, see Colin Heywood, "On Learning Gender Roles during Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France," *French History* 5, no. 4 (1990): 451–466, doi:10.1093/fh/5.4.451; Sarah Curtis, "The (Play)things of Childhood: Mass Consumption and Its Critics in Belle Époque France," in *Childhood by Design: Toys and the Material Culture of Childhood*, Megan Brandow-Faller (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018), 67–88; Linda Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne: Textbooks and the Socialization of Girls in Modern French Primary Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Rebecca Rogers, "From the French Republican Educational Reforms to the ABCD de l'égalité: Thinking about Change in the History of Girls' Education in France," in *Educational Research: Discourses of Change and Changes of Discourses*, ed. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 137–151; Mary Jo Maynes, Birgitte Søland, and Christina Benninghaus, eds., *Secret Gardens, Satanic Mills: Placing Girls in European History, 1750–1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 69–82; Rebecca Rogers, "L'éducation des filles" [The education of girls], in *Une Histoire de l'éducation: Anthologie de l'éducation et de l'enseignement en France XVIIIe–XXe siècle* [A history of education: Anthology of education and instruction in France from the 18th to the 20th century], ed. François Jacquet-Francillon, Renaud d'Enfert, and Laurence Loeffel (Paris: Retz, 2010), 165–171; Isabelle Bricard, *Saintes ou pouliches: L'Éducation des jeunes filles au XIXe siècle* [Saints or fillies: The education of young girls in the 19th century] (Paris: France Loisirs, 1985); Laura Struminger, *What Were Little Girls and Boys Made of? Primary Education in Rural France, 1830–1880* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983); Véronique Blanchard, with Anaïs Vrain and Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy and Audrey Chenu, "Le corps des filles à l'épreuve de l'enfermement: Dialogue entre une sociologue, une historienne et une ancienne détenue" [Girls' bodies and the ordeal of imprisonment: Conversation between a sociologist, a historian, and a former juvenile detainee], *Délibérée* [Deliberations] 8 (2019): 50–60, doi:10.3917/delib.008.0050; and Samantha Presnal, "First Courses: Culinary Play and Children's Cultivation in the *Fin-de Siècle Dînette*" (presentation delivered at the 46th Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History, 2 November 2018).