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Child abuse in the postmodern context: an issue of social identity

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This paper begins with the problem of the well-documented increase in reported cases of child abuse in western society over the last thirty years. It then examines the idea that the dominant image of childhood and the character of the relationship between adults and children in any socio-historical period is indicative of the condition of the wider society. From this basis it investigates the transition from a state of modernity into that of postmodernity in western society and develops two models, or 'visions', of childhood which correspond to those structural forms. These visions are of 'futurity' and 'nostalgia' respectively. Returning to the issue of child abuse, the paper concludes that the current magnification of the problem is understandable in terms of the loss of personal identity endemic in the postmodern condition.

We might rightly suppose that children have been and will continue to be a constant component of human society. Individuals and collectivities reproduce themselves both biologically and culturally and children are practical embodiments of these processes. Children constitute the perpetual renewal of human relations. They are encoded bio-genetically but also imbued with social values and cultural capital through early socialization and formal education (1). Children are a concrete presence with needs, demands, dispositions and a burgeoning intentionality but they also comprise analytic trajectories in terms of the psychological projections and collective expectations of the larger, and more powerful, adult group within society. The former is a world created for them through their 'natural' character and the latter a world constrained for them through their 'social' status. The latter is the world that we refer to as 'childhood'.

The vast body of literature written with a concern for the history of childhood indicates that the socio-cultural context within which the 'natural' child has lived through the ages has varied considerably (2). The phenomenological outcome of this well-documented diachronic instability has been that childhood itself has not been a constant within the historical process. As a social status childhood has come to be variously recognised and understood through its apprehension in routinely emergent collective perceptions that are grounded in changing politics, philos-

ophy, economics, social policy or whatever. Such knowledge is a central feature of this paper, we must envision the child within a broad cultural context.

The written history of childhood is a territory well charted and populated with persuasive ideas that have, in many senses, burdened us with a vision of the child through modernity that has overwhelmed our capacity to theorize the child in the rapidly transforming conditions of late-modernity. This is an unfortunate consequence in two ways: one, that we all might tend to operate with an outmoded and inappropriate set of expectations and demands on today's child as an existential practice (3), and two, that we are unreflexive concerning our own relationship with childhood and the compound set of issues in regard to our own individual self-identity, our shared senses of collective value, and our general appreciation of the condition of late-modern society.

An increase in child abuse?

This paper is concerned to initiate the articulation of a new and different vision of the child, however, it sets out from a modern social problem. This is the problem of child abuse that we now recognise as an intensively documented aspect of the contemporary practical relationship between adults and children. More specifically then, my starting point is the seemingly unprecedented increase in child abuse in western societies over the last three decades. Such abuse is not singular in its manifestations, which include physical (4), sexual (5) and psychological or emotional (6) forms, its etiologies are manifold and its impact on the individually engaged personalities is complex, in every sense. In this paper, however, I realise 'abuse' as a unitary phenomenon for I am interested in the nature of our collective responses to it rather than in the construction of a morphology of its types or in the production of a causal analysis to account for its occurrence (7). To this end I attempt an examination of the application and meaning of the very idea of 'abuse' within modern discourses about childhood, that is, I investigate its intentional or purposive character. In this sense actual child abuse is only the beginning of our real topic and the kernel of my theoretical interest in child abuse is the current collective upsurge of interest in child abuse. Finkelhor had prefigured this perspective in his work, specifically on sexual abuse, when he wrote;

> "Whenever a social problem appears suddenly, and of great magnitude, we are apt to wonder why. More than any other social problem in recent memory, sexual abuse has risen precipitously in public awareness from virtual obscurity to extreme high visibility. Why has this emergence been so dramatic?" (8)

What I suggest then, is that the phenomenon of child abuse has emerged as a malign and exponential growth towards the conclusion of the 20th century not because of any significant alteration in the pattern of our behaviour towards children, but because of the changing patterns of personal, political and moral control in social life more generally which have, in turn, effected our vision of childhood. Whereas an antique vision of the child rendered abuse unseen or unintelligible, modernity illuminated mistreatment and highlighted the necessity of care. However, the late-modern, emergent vision of the child, discussed here, brings abuse into prominence through scrutiny and surveillance (9) but also through the peculiar structural demands on the constitution of personal identity and social relationships wrought through accelerative social change.

What is clearly true is that a vastly increasing number of cases of child abuse are reported now than was the case 30 or even 20 years ago. This primarily indicates a conceptual and methodological discrepancy between 'incidence' and prevalence' (10). However the increase was, at its inception, viewed by many commentators as a social trend, and initial explanations for this apparent trend were sadly simplistic, a weakness stemming from the face-value positivism at the heart of their grasp of the issue. These explanations were threefold: (a) deriving from the 'functionalist' or 'New Rightist' (11) view of the family it was argued that the family, as the primary bonding unit within modern society, had fallen into disarray. Relationships do not last, partners change more frequently and children are, thus, rendered vulnerable to the abuse of surrogate parents as they are unprotected by incest taboos or paternal love. (b) Accompanying this destabilizing of the affective centre of social life, it was argued, the moral and sexual climate has altered in the wake of the 60s and adults are less constrained by behavioral prohibitions than

they previously were. (c) With the decline in respect for prohibition, it was supposed, there had arisen an increased level of behavioral expectation, presumably the voice of a previously underexpressed desire for more sex and violence. None of these explanations, all critically reviewed in Finkelhor (12), are peculiarly instructive and appear to owe more to right-wing political ideologies extolling the virtues implicit in a stable social system, than they do to the considered analyses of social scientists.

Perhaps of more interest, and certainly approaching the concerns of this paper, are the explanations that begin to place the recorded increase in child abuse in the socio-political context of changing attitudes. Kempe, an American paediatrician with an established research record in this field, holds the view that child abuse is a constant and perennial feature of human societies (13). It was Kempe who 'discovered' child abuse in the form of the 'battered baby' syndrome. The newness of the problem took on a different and more subtle form when Kempe & Kempe drew a distinction between changing social practices and changing social attitudes in relation to child abuse.

> "A book on child abuse could not have been written one hundred years ago. If an investigator from the 1970s were to be transported back to the 19th century so he could survey the family scene with modern eyes, child abuse would be clearly visible to him. In the past, however, it was largely invisible to families and their communities. Before it could be acknowledged as a social ill, changes had to occur in the sensibilities and outlook of our culture". (14)

Freeman (15) writing in a similar vein, but from within a wholly different tradition, argued forcefully against the belief that child abuse is a recent invention. In fact he asserted that such practice is rooted in our earliest myths and history. His work set out to establish a socio-legal chronology of the benchmarks in statutory child protection in the UK. An example that he used was the '1883 Report of Commissioners on Employment of Children in Factories' which had both explored and latterly deplored the cruel and exploitative attitudes and practices of adult workers towards children employed on the shop floor. The report made strenuous recommendations for change and positive reform and, Freeman indicated, these could be read as demonstrating a significant shift in the condition of public awareness. However, Freeman also informed us that there was no evidence to suggest that these recommendations brought about a diminution in the abusive practices and in total there was insufficient historical evidence to convince us that child abuse is more or less prevalent today than it had been in previous epochs. Consequently Freeman was able to conclude that the 'discovery' of child abuse in the late twentieth century is not necessarily attributable to an increase in actual abuse.

The politicization and high-profiling of child abuse was further discussed by Mayes et al.(16) who suggested that it was the child protection movement and the womens' movement that were instrumental in instigating a change in public awareness and professional practice in relation to this issue. They also indicated, quite rightly, that both of these agencies had formulated the problem in different manners and proposed relatively divergent remedies. I suggest further that both groups have, in effect, constituted the phenomenon in different ways stemming from different ideological auspices. The child protection lobby tended to promote accounts in terms of family dysfunction, traceable to Parsonian systems theory (17). Here the basic model was that of a homeostatic unit generating social stability through the allocation and maintenance of social roles, and psychological stability through the satisfaction of need-dispositions. Explanations of child mistreatment occurred in relation to the failure of appropriate allocation or satisfaction, thus within such an holistic explanatory framework all family members were potentially complicit in the exercise of abusive practice (18). Such explanations sanctified the family and a view of the necessary role of the properly patterned relationship between men and women in promoting a healthy and thriving environment for the child. Child protectionists, as a consequence, recommended the preservation of the family through remedial therapy. The politics of the movement was located within the preservation of the going social order and as such contained no critical analysis of existing power relations.

This last omission provided the departure point for the womens' movement. Through a spectrum of feminisms child abuse became recognisable as part of a continuum of male violence. Families could be analyzed in terms of the twin axes of power provided through gender and age, with the vast majority of

abusers being identified as men. Child abuse was realised as an instance of the patriarchal reproduction of oppressive social relations (19). Sexual abuse was regarded as rape (20) and all forms of child mistreatment, in that they are perpetrated, it was argued, by men, were to be viewed as the inevitable consequence of status hierarchy that exists between men and women and children. Such explanations were radical in indicting the social system, recommending its deconstruction, protecting and removing the victims and criminalizing the assailant.

Corby (21), writing to produce a theoretical basis for our understandings of child abuse rather than adding to the available repertoire of 'quick-fix' solutions that the urgency of child-protection practice demands through day-to-day pragmatics, provided an interesting account of the recent political history and policy context of the phenomenon. He stated that;

> "...child abuse is not a new phenomenon...Nevertheless, fresh attempts to tackle child mistreatment are usually accompanied by the declaration that it is a new and as yet undiscovered problem. This 'newness' is seen as an important part of the process of establishing it as an issue requiring resources to tackle it. Often what is new about the problem is the way in which it is being defined or interpreted. This in turn can be linked to wider issues and concerns in society." (22)

While not wholly agreeing with the materialist reduction at the heart of this passage I fully concur with the acknowledged persistence of the phenomenon, with the idea that its topicalization is an hermeneutic issue, and with the structuralist assertion that such a reinterpretation is bound through homology with the wider network of configurations that make up the society.

Williams (23) has stated that the quality of our system of education, and by implication our child-rearing practices, reflects upon the quality of our culture. I would certainly hold to the view that the texture of adult-child relationships in any historical period can be seen as indicative of the condition of the social bond. We need then to attend seriously to this phenomenon of supposedly increasing child abuse in as much as that it refers to the wider state of the society. If the child is an icon of the condition of the social structure at any particular time, and thus currently emblematic of our collective responses to the impact of late-modernity, how do we seek to explain the increased attention paid to the abuse of today's children in relation to the altered circumstances of late-modern society?

The child in modernity: 'futurity'

Let me unpack some of these assertions and then attempt to analyze what I see as the new liminality of the postmodern child. Firstly, where did the modern child arise from? It was Rousseau who promulgated the manifesto of the child in modernity through *Emile* (1762), with its immanent, idealist, rational characteristics. Since that time Western society, it is generally supposed, has not looked back. Rousseau forged an uncontestable link between our understanding of the child and the emotions of the heart. He announced that humankind is naturally good and that it is only the constraints implicit in certain social structures or the corruption of some forms of social institutions that renders it bad. Children, who Rousseau regarded as the bearers of this 'goodness' in a primal condition, were properly to be educated and socialized according to 'natural' principles. Rousseau's 'savage' (a being wholly without the anthropological connotations of primitiveness), is a child highly charged with dispositions to love and to learn, and equipped with the propensity to become a good spouse, parent and citizen. Such an ideal being, the very image of modernity's child, is a stranger to avarice and is imbued with a natural altruism and kindliness. More than this, Rousseau's already overburdened creature is simultaneously the repository of all necessary wisdom. This child embodies an affective certainty which need not answer to objective, external criteria, and which is further insulated from scrutiny by Rousseau's implicit relativism and thus privatization of beliefs. We witness here the distillation of the principle of 'care' governing the modern relationship between adults and children but more than this we see the inauguration of the powerful commitment to childhood, in Western society, as a form of 'promise'. A 'promise' of unimagined action, but also an extension of our own plans and a hedge against our own action as yet incomplete. Such a commitment has, for several generations, enabled us to indulge in pleasant reveries concerning tomorrow.

Once, it is assumed, we were unutterably beastly towards children (24), at one time we did not attend

to their specificity and difference at all (25), and for whole epochs we routinely abandoned them (26), but following the optimistic illumination of the Enlightenment children have become our principal concern, we have become their protectors and nurturers and they have become our primary love objects, our human capital and our future.

> "If the philosophy of the Enlightenment brought to eighteenth century Europe a new confidence in the possibility of human happiness, special credit must go to Rousseau for calling attention to the needs of children. For the first time in history, he made a large group of people believe that childhood was worth the attention of intelligent adults, encouraging an interest in the process of growing up rather than just the product. Education of children was part of the interest in progress which was so predominant in the intellectual trends of the time". (27)

All of the neo-Enlightenment histories of infancy and maturation attest to this grand conceit, their analyses encourage our modern complacencies by regarding the archaeology of child-rearing with a disdainful backward glance. The brevity, ignorance, brutality and general ugliness of antiquity's parenting, we imagine, has been supplanted by a vision and attitude which has become crystallised into the form of a rational machine for nurture, the family and its macrocosm, the state. The modern family has become the locus for the confluence of politics and individual psychology, but beyond this it has emerged as both the primary unit for and also the site of governmentality (28), that is, it both absorbs and, in turn, distributes social control.

Through modernity childhood has gradually sequestered adult experience, it has claimed a greater duration within the total life experience, it has usurped and assumed greater and yet greater segments of adult labour: cognitive, affective and manual. Beyond this childhood has absorbed increased material provision and it has established this patterning of acquisitions as a 'natural' right policed by an ideology of care, grounded unassailably in the emotions. Adults 'sacrifice everything' for their children and they, in return, are expected to experience 'the best time of their lives'. Adults have relinquished this space and this power in relation to a strictly moral dimension epitomized through the concept of 'dependency' but this, perhaps, disguises motivations of optimism, investment, and even a contemporary re-working of Weber's 'salvation anxiety'. Parental love and benevolent adult paternalism in general are not in question here, but rather the forms of social structure that accelerate their intensity and expand their currency. It is no great leap to see the absolute necessity and centrality of the modern nuclear family as the pivotal social space in this system of socialization.

The organization of this patterning of relationships and the emergence of a quasi superiority in the affectual attitude has, of course, not occurred in isolation, nor simply through the grand inspiration of Rousseau's romantic vision. The reconstruction of human relationality into the architecture of the modern family has been a recognizable compliment to the division of labour through industrialization, not cynically planned, but not 'naturally' evolved either. The modern family has become the basic unit of social cohesion in advancing capitalism, and though loving and supportive in its self image it has become the very epitome of the rational enterprise. Families are cellular, mobile, manageable and accessible to emergent forms of mass communication, unlike the extended families that preceded them. They are also self-sustaining, self-policing, discrete yet wholly public in their orientation and, as I stated at the outset of this paper, both biologically and culturally reproductive. They are a major component in the exercise of the contemporary principles of adaptation and integration; they are instrumental in their rationality by facilitating change while demonstrating stability to their members.

The modern family enabled the modern state to invest in 'futures'. The ideology of care both lubricated and legitimized the investment of economic and cultural capital in the 'promise' of childhood. Childhood is transformed into a form of human capital which, through modernity, has been dedicated to futures. The metaphoricity through which the discourse of childhood speaks is predicated on the absent presence of a desired tomorrow; with 'growth', 'maturation' and 'development' writ large at the level of individual socialization, and 'pools of ability' and a concern with the 'wastage of talent' at the level of formal state socialization. As children, and by way of children, we have, through modernity, dreamt of futures, and in so doing we have both justified and sought justification for modernity's expansionist urges in the post-Darwinian conflation of growth and progress.

The extant vision of childhood through the nineteenth and twentieth century had become one of 'futurity', and the much vaunted accretion of a 'caring', 'helping', 'enabling', 'facilitating' mode of nurture instances both the explicit awakening of a collective attitude more sensitive to children's needs, but also an implicit recognition of their worth and thus appropriate usage. The apparent gradual diminution of child abuse through the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century can be seen as a considered shift from immediate to deferred gratification on the part of an increasingly enlightened adult society.

The child in postmodernity: 'nostalgia'

I now continue to view our phenomenon in the context of wider structural changes. Just as modern patterns of consumption have outstripped nineteenth century economics, the late-modern division of labour and its accompanying social structures have mutated beyond the communities and solidarities described by classical sociology. Thus everyday late-modern modes of relationality have outgrown the mid-twentieth century nuclear family. Things are not as they used to be and that is not a consequence of the erosion of the family, although this is what the rhetoric of contemporary politics often suggests in a variety of attempts to divert the level of problematic from the global and national to the local, and indeed the personal. Families have changed, as have the character of the relationships that they used to contain, and which, we should note, used to contain them (29). However this change is not causal, it is part of the set of emergent conditions that have come to be appraised as late- or post- modernity (30). It is within this context that, I argue, a new vision of childhood has arisen and one of the signposts towards this new vision is the unprecedented increase in child abuse from which this paper began. It is a vision very different from the 'futurity' of modernity.

Bell (31), and later Touraine (32), were perhaps the first to awaken or attention to the alteration in the traditional fabric of relations that made up modernity. Both these liberal, or indeed neo-Conservative, theorists revealed that traditional secular beliefs and taken for granted categories of community membership no longer prevailed. Bell, proclaiming an end to ideology, arguably instigated the era of the 'post-' with his thesis describing a change in both the mode and relations of production. The productive base, Bell and also Touraine informed us, had transmuted, through market forces and advances in technology, into the 'post-industrial', and the system of social stratification, long since recognisable in terms of polarization had, through a series of social movements, thickened at the waist to contain a middleing service class such as to diffuse conventional class antagonisms, and altered into the 'post-capitalist'. These two concepts, Bauman stated, "have served the purpose well: they sharpened our attention to what is new and discontinuous, and offered us a reference point for counter arguments in favour of continuity" (33).

Previously assumed points of attachment of the individual with the collective life, like social class, work group, local community and family, were now seen to be losing their adhesion in line with the demands of a post-Fordist mode of production, global economies and networks of communication, and the exponential inroads that techno-science continues to make into the previously located centres of knowledge and authority. Individuals are now much more recognisable through their immediate location and project than through their group affiliations or previously established identity. The new experience of history at both the individual level and the level of institutions, is one of discontinuity rather than of continuity.

The living through of modernity, a practice stemming from a firm belief in enlightenment and emancipation, gave rise to a confident cultural attitude of 'being in control'. This was a control based on: the possibility of objective knowledge through rational process; the primacy of centred, communicating selves; and the conviction that difference was reconcilable through analysis and discourse. Such bases ensured that the ensuing attitude was both sustaining and comfortable. This attitude was deeply rooted in the necessity, the viability, and the moral certainty of 'progress'. Human progress committed social action to the perpetual struggle for higher forms of life. Contingency, the condition that ruled the pre-modern (the 'savage' before Rousseau), was now part of a strategic calculus weighted in the favour of homo sapiens by the guarantees of our applied sciences.

The excitement and the purpose of social being, the dreams and the promise embedded in our children,

were all to reach for the stars, to control more and more of the wantonness of the cosmos, and to produce human culture as the triumph of finitude over infinity. What could not be achieved today could be set in train for tomorrow. The sufferings and deprivations and ignorance of our parents were certainly not going to be visited on the next generation, our future, our children. There would be no repeat of the Holocaust, but also mass education and mass consumption.

That the natural has become tamed, through modernity, ensures that all phenomena become both social and historical. In this sense the pre-modern contingency inverts and all phenomena become dependent upon human conduct, including their forms of knowledge and interpretive procedures. Despite the fact that nature occasionally strikes back, with a Los Angeles earthquake for example, its character is anticipated and its impact minimized. A new omnipotence was released into the human attitude, instancing perhaps a 'second passing' of the deity: the first recorded by Nietzsche irrationalism; the second etched onto the public memory by Hiroshima. However as Heywood stated;

> "This is not just to do with the problems attendant on the nature of modern weaponry and warfare, of global industrialization, of the revolutionary, 'deconstructive' impact of capitalist market systems on all aspects of human relationships...At a deeper level it is related to the termination of nature and tradition in late-modernity."

and he continued that this has been expressed,

> "...in terms of the appearance of a fully socialized nature, marking the emergence of human power as globally decisive and unchallenged, without equal, limit, confining shape or *telos*, its old adversaries -nature and the 'second nature' of traditional cultures now having been vanquished. The possibility, indeed the necessity, of radical self-formation confronts individuals, institutions and whole societies. Opportunities to fulfil the emancipatory promise of enlightenment are balanced by the potential for social, ecological, political and cultural calamities on an unprecedented scale." (34)

These observations are informed by Beck's (35) concept of a 'risk society', and they exemplify Giddens's (36) tightrope between 'ontological security and existential anxiety'. Within these tendencies of late-modernity, personal actions and personal aspirations take on a different form. The previously centred, continuous self of modernity becomes more of a reflexive project involving disparate interactional planes rendered coherent through a revisable narrative of self-identity. And, in the same manner that institutions hold together through the ingenious practice of 'crisis management', the reflexive project of the self sustains through the artfully renewable strategies of auto/biographical stories. The late-modern calls forth a constant, reflexive, re-presentation of self (37). This is, of course, critical to the experience of being a child but more significantly, in the context of my argument, critical in terms of how adults now understand and relate to children.

The social spaces occupied by adults and children have changed, not just in place but in character, and the spaces previously allocated to fixed identities of adults, and children, and families have transmogrified. But this spatial dimension of social experience is not alone in its new-found versatility, its pacing has changed as well. Following a stable period of historical inevitability, we are now also witnessing innovations in the vocabulary of time which drastically alter our relation to a whole set of cultural configurations, established under modernity's motif of 'progress'. As Virilio has put it;

> "The loss of material space leads to the government of nothing but time...In this precarious fiction speed would suddenly become a destiny, a form of progress, in other words a 'civilization' in which each speed would be something of a 'region' of time. (38)...The violence of speed has become both the location and the law, the world's destiny and its destination." (39)

This impacts directly upon our vision of the child. Through modernity, time itself was measured and contained, it came to be expressed in minutes, days, weeks, years and in categories such as generations. We marked out our personal ability, responsibility, functionality, mortality and general expectations of self, and others, through such divisions. We elected a periodic framework within which we might assemble unconnected events and ascribe to them the status of achievement or 'progress'. Generations have been gathered by such devices and the coincidental accumulation of social action has been defined under the detached title of a particular era (40) – as, for example, the 'swinging 60s'.

Although the formal divisions on the clock and calender are unchanged our collective expectations of appropriate chronological advancement have altered: people make late entry into education; marriage is

not a necessary temporal goal and is also a repeatable experience; families are established at the limit of a woman's band of fertility and by men of an age ensuring that they will not see their children through adolescence; occupational careers are interrupted and individuals opt for early retirement; vast numbers of people experience a lifetime of unemployment. The previously indelible normative markers of social experience (in the form of 'achievement' and 'status') are becoming relativised, sometimes through the pressure of material circumstances but equally because of the expression of a proliferation of new and different senses of 'purpose'. Indeed, 'purpose' is no longer linked to 'progress'. The higher forms of life, to which modernity since enlightenment aspired, were the utopias of freedom, equality, goodwill, peace and prosperity, all long since recognised for their unattainability and their ideological content. Such utopias are now treated as mere ciphers, as hazy images deriving from the reveries of 'futurity', the dreams dreamt through children and through their childhood promise. When we return to real, active people, we witness not dreams, nor yet the realization of nightmares, but a pragmatic state of disenchantment. Rather than a life spent in pursuit of utopias the late-modern condition is one of the avoidance, or minimization, of dystopias. Horizontal strategies for the annulment of convention occur, a process of de-traditionalization. Alternative life-styles are so common and widespread as to find difficulty in expressing their alternativeness 'to'. For example, gross financial materialism lives alongside holistic medicine, health foods, body culture, astrology, narcotic addiction and dealing, arcane 'new age' belief systems, serial killers and single-parent families. This is no list of pathologies but a glimpse at the many facets of the late-modern experience, some are bizarre and criminal, others are benign or simply diverting. All of these expressions, and many others, are met in the street and all are now shadows of the mainstream.

In the context of this decline in collective aspiration, or 'disenchantment' (41) with the sense of purpose previously exercised by the concept of 'progress' [what Lyotard (42) refers to as the death of a metanarrative] people are resourceful in their search for both alternative reasons for being and also new points of attachment to a collective life. Although, as Giddens (43) argues, the late-modern individual may be less well imbued with a strong sense of the fixity of the inside and of cultural inheritance and may, therefore, have developed a robust adaptive strategy of bargaining and negotiation with the outside, it is nevertheless the case that members of a late-modern society continue to seek out both coherence of self-identity and continuity with the past.

It will be recalled that the classical sociological actors who populated Durkheim's emergent 'organic solidarity' at the end of the previous century, were perpetually insecure in the face of the potentially destructive 'anomic' forces inherent in modernity's form of the division of labour. Their external response was to develop a secular credo of interdependency, but their internal response was to re-establish a supportive mosaic of 'mechanical solidarities' in the form of work groups, professional guilds, churches and families. This inward search for coherence and continuity sustains into late-modernity but, as I have argued, these nineteenth century sources of integration are not so readily available. However, there are two visible indices of the maintenance of an inward pilgrimage within late-modernity. The first, I suggest, is the obvious growth and, at the same time, destigmatization of psycho-therapy in Western societies. Psychiatric and psycho-therapeutic regimes tend to be conducted through regressive narratives with individuals 'finding their way' through the excavation of roots and attachments from the past – the 'inner child'. The second index is the real child, that is our new vision of the child and our practical relationship with it.

Late-modern society has re-adopted the child. The child in the setting of what are now conceptualized as postmodern cultural configurations, has become the site or the relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration and the social bond. The child is now envisioned as a form of 'nostalgia', a longing for times past, not as 'futurity'. Children are now seen not so much as 'promise' but as primary and unequivocal sources of love, but also as partners in the most fundamental, unchosen, unnegotiated form of relationship. The trust that was previously anticipated from marriage, partnership, friendship, class solidarity and so on, is now invested more generally in the child. This can be witnessed empirically in a number of ways: through the affectual prolongation of adolescence; the disputed territory that children con-

stitute during parental divorce; the uprating of children's status through the modern advances in children's rights (like the 1989 Children's Act in the UK); the modern iconography of the child in Third World aid politics and in Western campaigns against addiction and criminality.

The instability and necessary flexibility of all forms of relationship, other than that between adult and child, through late-modernity make them unreliable repositories for 'the inside', whether in the form of feelings, altruism or sociality itself. As Beck has stated;

> "The child is the source of the last remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship. Partners come and go. The child stays. Everything that is desired, but not realizable in the relationship, is directed to the child. With the increasing fragility of the relationship between the sexes the child acquires a monopoly on practical companionship, on an expression of feelings in a biological give and take that otherwise is becoming increasingly uncommon and doubtful. Here an anachronistic social experience is celebrated and cultivated which has become improbable and longed for precisely because of the individualisation process. The excessive affection for children, the 'staging of childhood' which is granted to them – the poor overloved creatures – and the nasty struggle for the children during and after divorce are some symptoms of this. The child becomes the final alternative to loneliness that can be built up against the vanishing possibilities of love. It is the private type of re-enchantment, which arises with, and derives its meaning from, disenchantment." (44)

Oddly enough, children are seen as dependable and permanent, in a manner to which no other person or persons can possibly aspire. The vortex created by the quickening of social change and the alteration of our perceptions of such change means that whereas children used to cling to us, through modernity, for guidance into their/our 'futures', now we, through late-modernity, cling to them for 'nostalgic' groundings, because such change is both intolerable and disorienting for us. They are lover, spouse, friend, workmate and, at a different level, symbolic representations of society itself. As Scutter stated in an analysis of children's literature;

> "...the child is characteristically associated with values that *seem* to be in opposition to those ascribed to adults, just as Peter Pan seems to be set in antithesis to the adult growing world. But the contemporary child and adolescent...again and again proves to be a superior repository of those values the adult world ascribes to but falls short of. The child makes a better adult." (45)

Although this work is from within a literary textual world it is highly instructive. Peter Pan's Neverland is no longer a recalcitrant state from which children have to be prised to get on with 'futures', it is, what was: love and care, reciprocity and sociality. Scutter continued;

> "...Neverland is actually not a child realm but an adult realm." (46)

We need children as the sustainable, reliable, trustworthy, now outmoded treasury of social sentiments that they have come to represent. Our 'nostalgia' for their essence is part of a complex, late-modern, rearguard attempt at the resolution of the contradictory demands of the constant re-evaluation of value with the pronouncement of social identity.

As we need children we watch them and we develop institutions and programmes to watch them and oversee the maintenance of that which they, and they only, now protect. We always have watched children but once as guardians of their/our future and now because they have become the guardians. Our expanded surveillance has, needless to say, revealed more intrusions into their state of well being. Child abuse, from which we began, has clearly 'increased' through the magnification and breadth of our gaze. This is evidenced from two sources.

Firstly, as we noted earlier with reference to a shift in Kempe's perspective (47), the 'invention' of child abuse in the 1960s seems to transform into a 'discovery' of child abuse in the 1970s. The prevalence of child abuse as a social practice, far from spontaneously re-generating in the second half of the twentieth century, had, in fact, been constant, which is testified to by Kempe's renewed interest in the historical dimension of the phenomenon. However, the incidence of child abuse during that period, in terms of reported and recorded occurrence, was to be treated as a novel phenomenon, an expanding phenomenon, and a phenomenon worthy of further explanation in itself, as I have attempted here.

Secondly in Dingwall et al.(48) who, in making an essentially ethnomethodological point concerning the routine practices of rate-producing agencies, examine the psychological and social processes by which social workers decide whether or not children are being abused. Dingwall et al. develop the concept of pro-

fessional strategies and put forward two models, the 'pessimistic' and the 'optimistic'. The former, it is suggested, is that which is adopted by social workers in the face of governmental, media, local and public pressure (for example, during the moral panic created by the 1987 Cleveland 'affair' in the UK) and consists of a 'better safe than sorry' approach, involving all children being regarded as potentially abused, which in turn leads to a dramatic increase in reported cases. The 'optimistic' strategy which derives from a different climate of expectation, or, ironically, emerges as a reaction to the backlash often caused by the former strategy, involves actual abuse being regarded, by social workers, as the least plausible diagnosis of a family problem.

Nevertheless, the dramatic increase in the reported occurrence of child abuse during late-modernity is not reducible solely to the improved technology of our scrutiny nor just to our diligence, however enforced. It is, as I have sought to argue, due to the intensity of the collective response to those very late-modern conditions. What is being so jealously preserved through the new, 'nostalgic', vision of the child is the meta-narrative of society itself. The story of the post-modern child and its abuse makes up a palimpsest.

To abuse the child today is to strike at the remaining, embodied vestige of the social bond and the consequent collective reaction is, understandably, both resounding and vituperative. The shrill cry of 'abuse' is a cry of our own collective pain at the loss of our social identity. The source of blame for this abuse whether projected into the form of psychopaths, perverts, devil-worshippers, colluding mothers, men, or even incompetent social workers should really be sought in the way that we have, over time, come to organize our social relationships.

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