FALL 2011 WINNER

Adam Perelman

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

Over the quarter, Adam wrote a series of insightful, linked essays on the history of urban American children’s play. The first analyzed the rhetoric of a 1903 New York Times article that constructed working-class children’s play, typified by the little east side boys, as “homogenous, simple, and even cruel,” in Adam’s words. In his second essay, Adam showed that working-class families are largely absent from academic investigations of playground reform, an important objective of the Victorian child savers. Misrepresented or elided in their time and our own, urban, working-class families are recognized for their contributions to the culture of play in this, Adam’s final essay.

Using on-line digital archives, Adam combed The New York Times and The New York Herald as well as the Playground Association of America’s official journal, The Playground, where he uncovered evidence of working-class families’ contributions to playground construction in New York City between 1900 and 1920. Beyond describing the playground movement’s many participants, Adam’s essay addresses the methodological and theoretical challenges of reconstructing the history of childhood. He affirms the use of report, photograph, and memoir to evidence child play and agency.

Because of this new, primary research, Adam is able to document urban children’s play in stunning detail: some joyously rush to play in the adult-sanctioned playgrounds, and some take to the streets, refusing the limits of space and activity imposed on them. Others resist adult control of their play even more explicitly when they strike publicly to restore a well-loved playground monitor. In Adam’s argument, children’s play is no longer the object of ideological reform alone, but also an expression of agency.

—Sarah Pittock
CHILD’S PLAY: HISTORICAL AGENCY AND THE NEW YORK CITY PLAYGROUND MOVEMENT

ADAM PERELMAN

That which parents do not or cannot control in the private sphere of the home, the city must control in the public spheres of park, playground, schools, and recreation centers.

—New York City reformer, late nineteenth century

I can’t go to the playgrounds now. They get on my nerves with so many men and women around telling you what to do.

—Eleven-year-old in Worcester, Massachusetts, late nineteenth century

For American social reformers at the turn of the twentieth century, urban children represented a problem. Crusaders for reform such as Everett Mero feared that through playing in the anarchic city streets, children endangered themselves, occupied valuable urban space, and allowed their “lawless tendencies” to develop (122). By no means, however, did reformers perceive this problem as insurmountable. Leading muckraker and reformer Jacob Riis expressed his peers’ conviction in the transformative power of political and institutional changes, arguing, “As we mould the children of the toiling masses in our cities, so we shape the destiny of the State” (1). This enthusiasm to “mould” children and childhood to reformers’ expectations manifested itself in the child-saving movement, which extended roughly from 1890 to 1920 (Macleod 26). Child-savers pushed for reforms in labor laws, juvenile courts, health care, and educational programs, as well as for establishing playgrounds and other organizations to structure play.
Much has been written about these child-savers, their reforms, and their motives. Most of these varied histories, however, share a common narrative gap: while historians have exhaustively documented the actions and intentions of upper-class reformers, they have largely ignored the historical roles played by lower-class, immigrant adults and by children themselves. In reality, as the Worcester child’s words above suggest, children were not as eager to let themselves be “moulded” as reformers or traditional histories would have it. Neither were children’s working-class parents simply passive in the face of reforms. In this study, I will examine the historical roles played by these two often-ignored groups—lower-class adults and children themselves—in the development of the New York City playground movement, an important component of the child-saving reforms. This investigation will reveal that working-class, immigrant adults as well as children themselves should be considered as historical agents, not passive objects; all made contributions to shaping urban space and children’s play at the turn of the twentieth century. In rewriting the history of the playground movement, this study will demonstrate the need to broaden methodologies and understandings of agency in historical studies.

**CHILD-SAVERS AND CHILD-OBJECTS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

In writing the history of the child-saving movement, scholars have particularly disagreed on the question of child-savers’ motives. Some historians have viewed reformers as altruistic, progressive visionaries; others have described them as conservatives interested primarily in preventing the spread of radicalism and maintaining existing class hierarchies; others still have attempted to reconcile these two extremities, acknowledging reformers’ mixed motives. Despite the diversity in these understandings of the child-saving movement, however, all share a central conceptual flaw in their limited conception of agency. Most historians have described the movement as if its only relevant actors were middle- and upper-class reformers. As Stephen Hardy and Alan Ingham note, the demands of the working-class, and their role in spurring and developing many reforms, are ignored: “If they appear at all, the immigrants and workers are but dimly-lit observers who watch their children’s progress from outside the playground’s boundaries” (290). Hardy and Ingham thus go on to argue for a reorientation of scholarship around the history of play to recognize the agency of the lower-classes.

Hardy and Ingham’s central argument about the need to expand our conception of historical actors is certainly important in considering the child-saving era, and
The present study will attempt to extend their analysis of working-class agency to the New York City playground movement. Yet even their critique does not take the question of agency far enough. In Hardy and Ingham’s proposed reoriented understanding of children’s play, the adults of the lower classes may gain an active role, but children remain in the margins, watching their playgrounds getting built around them. The question of how children influenced reforms, and how they responded, remains unasked. This study will not attempt to address the question of reformers’ motivations, a subject that has already received abundant—and often brilliant—attention and analysis from many historians. Rather, I will attempt to illuminate previous histories’ analytical gaps by considering the historical agency of marginalized groups, both adult and child, in the context of children’s play during the playground movement.

UNPACKING AGENCY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

In attempting to supplement these incomplete histories with a historical narrative attuned to a more diverse set of actors, what theoretical and methodological revisions are necessary? It is appropriate to begin by elucidating how exactly I use the signifier agency. Linda Gordon provides us with a colloquial but powerful definition in her analysis of individuals’ ability to be the “heroes of their own lives” (iv). In the context of this study, however, I will consider agency not only in terms of individuals’ capacity to shape their own lives, but also in terms of their ability to shape historical developments. Hardy and Ingham’s conception of agency as “the ability of humans to constitute or make their own history” will thus guide my analysis (285).

Historians have traditionally adopted a limited view of agency. As Mary Jo Maynes notes, hegemonic historical narratives assume as their subjects individual agents who are “posited as everything a child…is not supposed to be: autonomous, driven by the imperatives of rational choice, aware of how the world works” (116). Certainly, this bias towards seemingly independent, rational actors is reflected in the histories of the child-saving movement, as historians have focused on the reformers and investigated their motives—however those motives are explained—as explicating their rational choices. Because children are conceived of as dependent, not yet capable of navigating the world in a rational way, they are precluded from appearing as actors in dominant histories.³

In arguing for a broader conception of agency to guide studies of the playground movement, Hardy and Ingham suggest a model that differentiates between the levels
of “private” agency, “involving limited personal projects…inscribed within existing social relations,” and “public” agency, consisting of “public projects, such as military campaigns, political battles, or religious movements” (292). In this paper, I will problematize such simplistic models by demonstrating that these categories of public and private are in practice entangled and intertwined. Instead, my investigation will be guided by a model of agency as multifaceted, operating at many different levels simultaneously, and of social agents themselves as diverse and heterogeneous. This conception owes much to the powerful understanding of culture provided by theorists of cultural studies such as Antonio Gramsci. Rather than accepting either structuralism’s view of culture as imposed from “above” by “capitalist culture industries,” or social history’s understanding of culture as arising spontaneously from the people, these theorists have emphasized the mutually productive nature of these contradictory forces. Popular culture is thus conceived of as “a contradictory mix of forces from both ‘below’ and ‘above’; both ‘commercial’ and ‘authentic,’ marked by both ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation,’ ‘structure’ and ‘agency’” (Storey). Karen Sánchez-Eppler has applied this contradictory conception of agency specifically to children, with the understanding that they play many roles in creating culture. They are “objects of socialization,” as adults and institutions seek to instill in them certain behaviors and values; they are “forces of socialization,” as the discursive figure of the child is mobilized in the service of various political and social causes; and they are also simply children, individuals who are defined by but also redefine their social roles (xv).

Methodological concerns as well as theoretical biases explain traditional histories’ marginalization of certain actors. Hardy and Ingham note historians’ tendency to analyze the child-saving movement in national rather than local terms, necessarily leading to “a reliance on sources of a national currency” (291). These sources are, of course, from people and institutions at the center of society rather than at its margins: published works of reformers, minutes of settlement house meetings, publications of playground associations, and so on. As Hardy and Ingham ask, “when the sources are written by the elites, should we not expect the historian to write history from the top down?” (291).

Any attempt to challenge dominant conceptions of historical agency, then, will require attention to different types of sources. As noted by many scholars, personal narratives provide a powerful mechanism towards understanding individuals and societies. Jaber Gubrium, in his analysis of “the narrative turn” in many academic disciplines, acknowledges that to embrace personal narratives is not to assume objectivity or universality; rather, “it privileges positionality and subjectivity,”
offering insight into the social positions and subjectivities of the narrators (332). By analyzing personal narratives, as Barbara Laslett argues, we learn about the ways in which individuals and societies create and alter meanings and relationships (392). Narratives are particularly relevant with regard to the question of agency because narrators provide insight into their own perceptions of themselves as social agents, leading Maynes to note that “analyses of personal narratives ‘unpack’ individual agency” (117). This study will therefore rely heavily on personal accounts from memoirs and autobiographies.

Of course, there is also room for other sources in writing a broader history of the child-saving movement. Hardy and Ingham provide a model for such an attempt as they describe histories that have taken a local approach rather than a national one and therefore have been attentive to minutes of park commissions, city council proceedings, and local newspapers. As they argue, it is in these local records that the agency of subordinate groups comes to light through evidence of their petitions, lobbies, debates, and public campaigns (291).

Writing history that is attentive to children as agents presents its own distinctive methodological difficulties. As various scholars of children’s history have noted, “the sources documenting the history of childhood and youth are at best scattered, often sketchy and inconsistent” (Maynes 119). The voices of children themselves are particularly hard to find; Sánchez-Eppler observes that “there are as of yet no archives of children’s writing, and most documents penned by children are scattered, often unmarked” (xiv). As Howard Chudacoff notes, however, even adult recollections of childhood, despite their inevitable distortions and limitations, offer unique insight into the experience of childhood (xiii). I therefore consider both writings of children and autobiographical recollections of childhood in reconstructing historical narratives.

**WHO PLAYED? REWRITING THE HISTORY OF THE CHILD-SAVING MOVEMENT**

At the turn of the twentieth century, New York was a city of extremes. With the amalgamation of the five boroughs in 1898, it became the most populous city in the world after London; it also attracted the largest and most diverse flow of immigrants in the country (Ward and Zunz 3). This surge of immigration combined with the forces of industrialization and urbanization to remake New York on an unprecedented scale. By no means, however, did these forces of modernity
homogenize the city. Rather, New York City incorporated a diversity of physical, economic, and ethnic landscapes. In terms of architecture, David Ward and Olivier Zunz note, the city incorporated “a vast array of skyscrapers, department stores, and hotels juxtaposed with residential quarters both lavish and squalid, warehouses and port facilities, factories and sweatshops” (3). Ethnically, they conclude, New York was equally heterogeneous, with “an extraordinary jumble of neighborhoods and cultural clusters, a microcosm of American diversity” (4). Ira Rosenwaike’s study of the population history of New York City reveals strikingly uneven ethnic concentrations. Half of the city’s Italian residents, for instance, lived in a small area centered on Canal Street (83). East European Jews were even more concentrated, with three quarters of their New York population living in three wards on the Lower East Side. The Tenth Ward in particular became known as the “Jewish quarter” by the 1880s (84).

In this chaotic, heterogeneous metropolis, city streets and other public spaces became “contested territory as merchants, deliverymen, carriage drivers and others demanded more and more room for their needs” (Chudacoff 108). As they played in this disputed urban space, children thereby became actors in a social and political drama.

My investigation must be understood in the context of this diverse cityscape, with its profusion of ethnic- and class-specific neighborhoods. First, I will consider the agencies involved in the construction of parks and playgrounds; then, I will turn to the question of how children actually played, both within and beyond those sanctioned play sites.

Building Parks and Playgrounds in New York City

How did lower-class, immigrant adults and families as well as children shape the construction of playgrounds in New York City? Often, they did so as they fought towards the same goals as the reformers. Their agency is visible even in The Playground, the publication of the Playground Association of America and therefore a journal representing the viewpoint of the upper-class reformers. In celebrating the Outdoor Recreation League, an early, playground-focused outgrowth of broader reform groups, The Playground recounts the effort to establish Seward Park on the Lower East Side, explaining, “it was around this site that the organization fought its hardest battle and won, by its courage and persistency, for itself and the Park, a reputation enduring throughout the country” (5). Yet as the journal elaborates on the details of the park’s establishment, it becomes clear that it was as much a result of residents’ own enthusiasm as of reformers’ actions. The Playground narrates, “The
greatest interest was shown in the movement by the residents of the East Side. Penny subscriptions were raised by the children enthusiastically, with results published day by day in the Yiddish papers” (5). The publication of these results in Yiddish emphasizes their local, immigrant nature, rooted in the ethnic particularities of the Lower East Side with its concentration of Eastern European Jews, and expresses a sense of local initiative and agency that defies conventional histories. Though adults were certainly involved in this process—as, we can imagine, in the compilation and publication of these subscriptions—it is important to note that children themselves also played a role in the construction of their parks through their eager fundraising.

Figure 1. Children playing Ten Pin Pursuit at the Seward Park Playground circa 1908. Parks Photo Archive.

Of course, we must be careful in taking the preceding source at face value as evidence of lower-class enthusiasm for the park; when they sought to implement certain changes, reformers had incentive to present the immigrant class as desiring the transformations they brought. Yet this enthusiasm is corroborated in other, less prejudiced sources. The New York Times, for instance, reported a crowd of 20,000 children and an equal or larger number of adults who attended the opening of Seward Park (see fig. 1). In fact, so keen were the children on entering the park that when the gate was ceremonially opened, the rushing mass of children “took by surprise an unfortunate photographer who was just trying to get a picture of Mayor Low and knocked his camera helter-skelter” (“Seward Park is Opened”).

59
Immigrants were important not only in constructing playgrounds but also in maintaining them. When the Park Commissioners of New York City sought to remodel Seward Park in 1900, removing all playground elements such as swings, Lower East Side residents responded furiously and decisively. A petition, printed in both Yiddish and English, was distributed through the East Side, beginning its demands with the following proclamations:

We, the undersigned, residents of the lower east side, hereby earnestly petition your honorable body to include in your plans for the improvement of Seward Park and outdoor gymnasium and playground, such as the Outdoor Recreation League has maintained there. We believe that these provisions for play and exercise can be so combined with the ordinary attractions of a public park that all the people of every age and condition will derive the greatest possible benefit from this new breathing space. (“To Preserve Playgrounds”)

The confident “we” of the petition refutes historical narratives that strip the working-class—50,000 of whom signed the petition in the first week—of agency (“Children's Playground Threatened”). Here too, as in the case of the daily Yiddish papers, the multilingual nature of the petition emphasizes its emergence out of the ethnically specific character of the Lower East Side and its residents.

Similar dynamics of working-class enthusiasm and responsibility for playgrounds are evident in various other instances. A park constructed in the east-side Manhattan neighborhood of Yorkville, for instance, was spearheaded not by reformers but rather by the generosity of a local donor and the eagerness of his working-class neighbors: Rev. Albert L. Evans, discussing the development of the push for the park, explains, “This movement for the park has been quietly agitated in the community for more than six months” (“Plan for Public Park”). Many informal playgrounds were also spearheaded by local working-class residents rather than by child-saving reformers. In 1916, for instance, *The New York Times* reported several strategies adopted by neighborhood associations: many established unofficial playgrounds in vacant lots, while others sought “to turn the backyards of tenements into playground…the idea is to have a backyard playground a block long” (“To Turn Open Lots into Playgrounds”). So too, the fight to maintain the playground at Seward Park was reenacted in various forms at other locations. For instance, proposals to construct an administration building in Central Park in 1912 were met by resistance and mass meetings by residents who refused to give up valuable play space (“Park Defenders”). The working-class was even involved in higher-level, long-term planning: in describing “the first comprehensive
and combined effort for the betterment” of the East Side, in particular through parks and playgrounds, the *New York Tribune* emphasizes the leading roles of “social reformers, prominent residents, and local organizations” (“Comprehensive and Far-Seeing”). Because, then as now, New York City neighborhoods were class-specific as well as ethnically distinct, the reference to local organizations implies the involvement of people with diverse backgrounds. Playground development was thus a product of efforts by people of various social locations and classes, who did not agitate for reform in isolation but rather often established cross-class alliances for creating play spaces.

The struggle to convert Bensonia Cemetery in the Bronx into a park and playground offers a particularly fascinating example of how the working-class, children, and reformers interacted in shaping public space. In the public record, the most eminent figure in the movement is Samuel Sidwell Randall, who advocated for the decrepit cemetery to be officially transformed into a park, and later campaigned for its maintenance through various means, such as attending meetings of the Board of Street Opening and writing many letters to the editor of *The New York Times*. In large part because of his efforts, the cemetery was officially designed by the city as a park and playground in 1908 (“New Bensonia Playground”). Randall certainly fits the profile of a child-saving reformer: as Superintendent of Common Schools for New York City, and author of such texts as Mental and Moral Culture, and Popular Education, he clearly occupied a prominent position of power and was interested in “improving” popular culture (“Complimentary Dinner”). But careful attention to the historical record reveals that the transformation of Bensonia cemetery into a playground was not his fight alone. The official journal of the City of New York, *The City Record*, offers many revealing details in its record of the appeals to convert Bensonia Cemetery into a park. The first appeal, brought to the Municipal Assembly by James L. Wells on February 14, 1898, emphasizes the many social agents involved in the struggle, as Wells “voic[es] the sentiment of the entire community north of the Harlem river, in response to numerous petitions submitted by various persons and organized bodies” (961). Two days later, at the meeting of the Boards of Local Improvement of two districts in the Bronx, legal attorneys Welch and Daniels presented a plea that reveals more active forms of social agency in their explanation of the park’s current state:

The attempts heretofore made by the said estates to properly care for and maintain the same have been made useless by reason of the exposed position of the property, as the fences inclosing the grounds have been repeatedly torn down and removed by idlers and the small boys in the neighborhood. Every effort has been made heretofore by the heirs of the estates of said deceased owners
to properly guard and protect the graves of the dead from desecration, but for the reasons above noted their efforts have proved nugatory. The property-owners in the vicinity have repeatedly protested to the public authorities against the present condition of the cemetery, and some action should be taken by your Board, in the judgment of many, for the purpose of removing this public nuisance. There is no other way of accomplishing this result than to have the property condemned by the City for a public park or playground.

(The City Record 1367, italics mine)

Lower-class “idlers” and children thus effectively forced the hand of city reformers: they began treating the cemetery as a park and playground before it was officially designated as such, overcoming any attempts to keep them out and convincing the reformers to change its designation in response. This perception is confirmed by The New York Times, which reported in 1897, well before the cemetery’s official transformation to park, that it served primarily as “a hanging-out place for tramps and a baseball field for boys” (“Need of Small Parks”).

As we have seen, then, working-class individuals and children were critical actors in the playground movement. The fact that they generally supported the construction of playgrounds may be seen as intimating that they had merely absorbed the ideology of upper-class reformers and were, in that sense, political pawns rather than independent actors. To assume that, however, would be to undervalue their subjectivity and agency. As Hardy and Ingham note, child-saving reformers did not originate the ideal of providing play space for children. Rather, they benefitted from a pre-existing “broad-based, unsophisticated belief in the importance of open space as an instrument of safety and morality” (294). If working-class families supported parks and playgrounds, then, it is more sensible to accept that they did so “in their own real interest and not as dupes of capitalism” (294). Having investigated the various actors involved in playground construction, we now turn to the question of how children expressed their agency in the process of playing at—and, sometimes, of avoiding—these play sites.

Using (and Misusing) Parks and Playgrounds in New York City

In keeping with child-saving reformers’ conviction that competent supervision was necessary to maintain order and morality, many parks and playgrounds were overseen by paid supervisors. Some, however, operated on the basis of self-rule; those who used them governed their own activities. For instance, in Van Cortlandt
Park, *The New York Times* noted in 1912, “the countless games are left largely to regulate themselves. The stern figure of authority and supervision seldom broods over any part of the park” (“Self Rule”). In the sense of determining when and how to play in parks, then, children clearly expressed their agency.

Often, however, children expressed their agency more powerfully and in ways that were at odds with reformers’ expectations. Even when they played at the parks and playgrounds constructed by reformers, they frequently used the space and materials in unintended ways. Prominent playground reformer and Park Commissioner Charles B. Stover, for instance, recounts:

> Many a time I have met boys going to play ball on the fine Japanese lawn and everywhere else in Central Park where they should not be, and I have repeatedly taken them in my automobile to the foot of Seventy-second Street at Riverside, where we have provided two big diamonds for them…. Why cannot these be used instead of the park lawns? (“Not a Park Invader”)

Clearly, children played according to their own desires, not to the elaborate preconceived spatial plans of reformers.

Children also made their agency evident by refusing to use playgrounds altogether. Certainly, many playgrounds were popular. Children were so eager to begin using the Kip’s Bay Playground when it opened in 1900, for instance, that when the same Stover quoted above “lifted his hand as a signal that the grounds were open…several hundred small boys jumped from their seats on the fences and it was not necessary to open the door leading from the street” (“Kip’s Bay Playground”). This enthusiasm mirrors the jubilation that met the opening of Seward Park, discussed above.

But several factors also caused children to pull away from playgrounds and continue playing on the streets. First, children were often repelled by playgrounds’ authoritarian nature, as it was described by the *Times*: “The playground is divided, one side being for boys and one side being for girls. There are men to keep order among the boys, and women attendants for the girls” (“Seward Park is Opened”). As Nasaw argues, even when children enjoyed using playground equipment, “they did not relish the adult ‘supervision’ that came along with it” (36). The Worcester child quoted in the epigraph to this paper expresses a sentiment shared by many of his New York peers in his declaration that the supervisors “get on my nerves.” In contrast to the regulated playgrounds were the “unsupervised byways, yards, and vacant lots” where children could exert
their own control, an advantage Chudacoff cites in explaining the continued popularity of these unsanctioned play sites (114).

Children were also driven away from playgrounds by pre-existing local ties and loyalties, what David Nasaw calls their “highly developed sense of turf” (36). In New York, as in many other cities, children’s friends and social lives were largely determined by city block, and fights between rival blocks or gangs were common. Harpo Marx, who grew up on the Upper East Side, recalls that every time he left his home block, he was sure to carry “some kind of boodle in my pocket—a dead tennis ball, an empty spool, a penny, anything” to bribe any rival gangs who might catch him, and thereby avoid more violent retribution (qtd. in Nasaw 33). Because of this social structure that children maintained, heavily dependent on geography, many avoided even nearby playgrounds that were out of their “native” blocks or territories. For parents, too, home blocks represented more expedient play sites than playgrounds, since with their children on immediately local streets, “dangers were known and visible by mothers from the front room window” (Nasaw 38). Because working-class mothers did not often have the leisure time to accompany their children to parks, they valued highly the physical proximity of street play.

Because of these factors, as Nasaw infers from studies of children’s play in New York City as well as in Milwaukee and Cleveland, “children—and their mothers—preferred the streets as playgrounds to the supervised parks and after-school settlement house programs” (37). In fact, he concludes that 95 percent of children in New York City played on the streets, in defiance of reformers’ intentions (38). His conclusion that play continued to be centered on the streets is supported by other, less qualitative analyses. In 1913, for instance, well after the playground movement had taken hold in New York City, George Kibbe Turner’s description of children’s play in McClure’s continues to revolve around city streets:

The ingenuity of the young boy pitted against the problem of making a city street a playground is one of the most extraordinary things in a great city. Founded upon the elements of familiar outdoor games, he has invented or adapted half a dozen ways of amusing himself. A tin can is a football, a flight of stone steps and the sidewalk a baseball field, a pointed chip and a broken broomstick a ball and bat. And most elaborate systems count the score. (103)

This intricate description of urban games stands as a testament to children’s willingness and ability to shape their play-worlds themselves, transforming conventional urban
spaces into play sites and the debris of urban life into playthings.

Personal accounts of childhood games reveal similar themes of creative independence. Imagination plays a central role in the childhood recalled by Michael Gold, an East Side New Yorker:

> My gang seized upon one of these Delancey Street lots, and turned it, with the power of imagination, into a vast western plain. We buried treasure there, and built snow forts. We played football and baseball through the long beautiful days. We dug caves, and with Peary explored the North Pole. We camped there at night under the stars, roasting sweet potatoes that were sweeter because stolen. (qtd. in Chudacoff 132)

Gold and his friends were in good company in reappropriating unused urban spaces as play sites (see fig. 2). In alluding to a vacant lot near her New York City home, Kate Simon directly compares this makeshift play space to official parks, recalling that the lot was “as full of possibilities as a park…. The few girls who managed [to gain access to the lot] were never quite the same again, a little more defiant, a little more impudent” (qtd. in Chudacoff 131). Perhaps the independence of working-class children is summarized best by Sophie Ruskay, daughter of Russian immigrants in New York City, who recalls, “Children owned the streets…. If we lacked the close
supervision of the genteel world of maids and governesses, we gloried all the more
in our freedom from restriction” (qtd. in Chudacoff 130).

In expressing control over their own play, children even appropriated traditionally
adult forms of overt political engagement. When Arthur Copeland Brown, a play
leader who was particularly popular with children, was dismissed from his position
as supervisor at the Bronx House Playground, the local children responded in no
uncertain terms: boys who had played with Brown all summer called a strike at the
playground. An article on the strike from The New York Times is worth quoting
extensively for what it reveals about the children's determination:

In letterings, shaky but distinct, their placards read: “Mr. Brown or
Playground Closed.”

This is the mildest of the threats done into placards and broadsides adorned
with skull and crossbones, and occasionally with terrifying pictures of
boys with blackened eyes and missing teeth, pictorial warning to the
strikebreakers. All last evening the playground was picketed by the boys of
the neighborhood.

Sidney Schwartz…and Nathan Schenkman…are the originators and leaders
of the strike. Sidney is 12 and Nathan is 10, but they look on the Bronx House
Playground as an Armageddon, and they think the world of Mr. Brown.

Six large policemen prowled sheepishly around the playground all day
yesterday. They found the children orderly, but firm. The boys would not go
into the playground and they wouldn't let any other boys go into it. Most of
the girls stayed out, too. Today, however, according to the order issued from
the street corner strike headquarters of Leader Schenkman, no one will be
permitted to use the grounds. ("Strikers Hold Playground")

The author’s ironic reference to “Leader Schenkman” belies a powerful reality:
children organized in clearly political terms, claiming ownership of the playground
and its use. The children who composed the “Strike Committee” also wrote a letter
explaining their position and their demands to Eugene A. Philbin, President of the
Parks and Playgrounds Association, who replied graciously: “I want to thank you
for your very manly letter, explaining the position you took in relation to the Bronx
Park Playground when the services of the play leader in charge were discontinued.
I shall be very glad to give serious consideration to your request that Mr. Brown be
reinstated” (“Bronx Boys’ Strike”). Although the historical record offers no evidence as to the outcome of these political machinations, the strike stands as fascinating evidence that children understood themselves as agents for change and consequently took independent political actions. So too, it demonstrates that powerful adults such as Philbin acknowledged the legitimacy of their agency. His reference to their letter as “manly,” though not without a hint of good-natured irony, highlights the blurring of the conventional categories that mark adults as active and children as passive.

In light of the multiple voices and agencies involved in shaping children’s play during the New York City playground movement, Hardy and Ingham’s proposed distinction between “private” and “public” agencies seems misleading. Child-saving reformers may appear to match the model well as exemplifying public agency through their push for societal change. Even their reforms, however, defy simplistic classifications. For instance, the system of playground supervisors influenced the private sphere of children’s play, but simultaneously sought to improve society at a public level by instilling in children certain codes of appropriate conduct. Equally difficult to categorize is the agency of working-class communities. Immigrant parents, for example, shaped their children’s play through apparently public methods, such as the Yiddish petitions discussed above, but also did so through such private approaches as urging their children to play close to home. Most problematic to the dichotomous model proposed by Hardy and Ingham is the question of children’s agency. Childhood play may seem to match their description of private agency as involving “limited personal projects” rather than public crusades (292). But if children shaped their play both through private games and through public acts such as strikes, to which category does their agency belong? Moreover, if children’s play, despite its personal and small-scale nature, reappropriated urban space and sparked intense public debate and reform movements, how can we classify it as either public or private? Thus, our investigation reveals that agency is varied and heterogeneous, operating at multiple levels simultaneously and resisting easy categorizations.

**CHANGING THE RULES OF THE GAME: REORIENTING ACTIVISM AND HISTORY**

As we have seen, lower-class adults and children actively encouraged, contested, and otherwise shaped the playground movement. This analysis is relevant to contemporary would-be reformers who seek to sustain the legacy of the original child-savers. Education scholar Joe L. Frost, for instance, uses their movement
as a model for his proposed modern “child-saving movement to rescue children from the forgotten streets and slums [and] release them to play” (270). His rhetoric reveals an obliviousness to the agency of the people he seeks to save. The evocation of children waiting to be “rescued,” for instance, reduces them to passive objects. So too, in describing their homes as “forgotten,” he privileges the perspective of outside reformers; we can only presume that the inhabitants of those neighborhoods themselves have not forgotten about them. Our historical analysis of the playground movement problematizes this vision of reform, suggesting conceptual and practical revisions. Reform at the turn of the twentieth century was a bottom-up as well as a top-down process, and any movements today with the lofty goals of “rescuing” lower-class children will need to revise their strategies and their ideology by recognizing and incorporating the agency and the participation of lower-class families as well as of children themselves. Movements that are blind to the particular motivations, desires, and needs of these actors will, as the original playground movement did, have to contend with unexpected outcomes and unintended consequences.

More broadly, what does the preceding analysis tell us about history and its study? First, we have seen the importance of broadening historical methodology. Local sources and personal narratives must be placed alongside more traditional, national sources, with the understanding that these local sources reveal perspectives and agencies that are otherwise invisible in the historical record. Second, our analysis reveals the importance of careful attention to the concept of historical agency in tracing particular social and political developments. Even children, figured as symbols of dependence in traditional histories, are not passive objects but active historical subjects, fully part of what Harvey Graff has called “the dialectical dance of generations” (11).

Part of understanding this “dialectical dance” entails recognizing that agency always involves ambiguities and limitations. It is these limitations to which Sánchez-Eppler refers when she discusses “the ambivalent agency of childhood, always hemmed in by necessary dependencies” (46). Sánchez-Eppler finds this ambivalence in children’s literature, as the “rhetoric of childhood impetuosity, freedom, and power jostles against recognition of childhood’s subjugation and dependency”; we have found similar themes in our investigation of the New York City playground movement, with its clash between children’s desires and the impositions of parents, reformers, and other urban power structures (46). Clearly, children’s agency involves a complex mix of independence and dependence, of individuality and community, and of varied, intersecting motives and desires. But as children become adults, this
intricate web of agency and structure does not condense into simple independence, as traditional historical narratives assume in their representations of autonomous actors. On the contrary, it remains heterogeneous and complex. It is this insight that leads Maynes to note, “the problem of agency in the history of childhood is merely a special case of the problem of historical agency more broadly” (118). There is no simple temporal division in our lives as we transition from the sphere of childhood to that of adulthood, nor is there a simplification of our identity and agency as we grow older. Rather, as Maynes elaborates, “identities rooted in childhood [are] continually renegotiated over time” as part of a constant, lifelong process that incorporates both our agency over our lives and the structures that define it (121). In traditional histories of the child-saving movement, the agency of the reformers seems clear, while the passivity of the working-class and of children appears to be equally obvious. Rather than accept this dichotomous construction, however, we must recognize that agency and its limitations always coexist. All people, regardless of age, redefine their world even as they are defined by it.
ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Roy Rosenzweig’s *Eight Hours for What We Will* (151). The first epigraph, from the New York City reformer, is quoted in Chudacoff’s *Children at Play* (73).

2. I am indebted to Hardy and Ingham for their useful summary of these three main schools of thought among historians. Those historians they term as part of the progressive school have seen reformers as motivated by the desire “to liberate the downtrodden from some of the constraints of enveloping structures” (286, italics in original). This view manifests itself in the work of Joe L. Frost; he describes the reformers as “visionaries” who, though they chose to focus on different aspects of children’s lives, were all motivated by “the common purpose of saving children” (237; 62). In contrast, in the view of a second school of historians, labeled as the social control theorists by Hardy and Ingham, the reformers cared less about the lives of lower-class children than about preventing the spread of radicalism and maintaining existing relations of class and power. Organized games and play structures were, thus, not openings of freedom from capitalist power relations; rather, they were themselves “part of the steel fetters of capitalism” (287). The seminal theorist of this position is Anthony Platt, who concluded from his study of the establishment of juvenile courts that “the child savers should in no sense be considered libertarians or humanists,” as their reforms were motivated by fundamentally conservative and regressive principles and a desire to control poor, immigrant populations (176). The third and final historical viewpoint outlined by Hardy and Ingham is what they term the “realist” position. Realists would agree with social control theorists that reforms were motivated by the desire to condition children for productive lives under capitalism. Yet for them, this desire does not imply that reformers sought to close off opportunities for lower-class children; rather, reformers hoped to created equality of opportunity via their efforts. Paul Boyer provides us with an example of this position as he argues that “the underlying conviction [of the reformers] remained constant: the behavior and morality of the urban masses could surely be influenced for the better” (235).

3. Of course, this limited conception of agency has been a problem in histories not only of childhood but also of various other marginalized groups. As Maynes points out, feminist historians of women and postcolonial theorists of subaltern groups who have sought to interpret their subjects as historical actors have grappled with similar issues stemming from the inadequacy of dominant models of agency (116). Noting the similarities in prevailing histories’ marginalization both of children and of the subaltern groups discussed by postcolonial critics, some scholars have asserted that children in fact represent a subaltern group themselves. Joseph Hawes and Ray Hiner, for instance, argue, “Certainly the history of children, an inarticulate, powerless group, can be viewed as a subaltern field that challenges the historical establishment’s almost exclusive concentration on adults and adulthood” (47). However, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, whose “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is a seminal text of postcolonial criticism, has argued that the term subaltern should be reserved for those people who have “limited or no access to the cultural imperialism” in the context of postcolonialism; she decries scholars’ tendency to use it as more generically as “a classy word for oppressed, for Other” (“Interview” 45). In consideration of this plea against dilution of the term, this paper does not use the word *subaltern* in describing children (or lower-class adults).
4. Hardy and Ingham credit Perry Anderson for this model of agency. As they note, Anderson also defines a third level of agency: “revolutionary” agency, “the rarest and most recent,” which includes “conscious, collective programs aimed at dismantling, remodeling, and transforming existing structures,” as in the French, Russian, and Chinese Revolutions (292). In the case of the playground movement, however, as Hardy and Ingham note: “No group or individual, at least in the histories to date, even remotely considered play or the playgrounds as a means of transforming regularized social relations or structures. Regardless of how we view the reformers, it is clear that they never even questioned the underlying principles of property, capital, and labor. And by the same token, workers protesting the distribution and control of open space and leisure time never saw the playgrounds as a radically transformative issue” (293). Neither is there any evidence that children saw their play in revolutionary terms. This third level of agency is therefore not discussed in the present study.

5. For a description of Randall’s campaigning for the park at a meeting of the Board of Street Opening, see “Need of Small Parks” in The New York Times. For an example of his many passionate letters to the editor of the Times urging the transformation of the site into a park, see “Suitable for a Park.” In his letter titled “Another Park for the Bronx,” Randall celebrates the city’s designation of the area as a park. In “Gift Playground Neglected,” from a few months later, he berates the city for its slow and bureaucratic pace in establishing the playground. For instance, he complains—ironically and quite humorously—about a fence that had unexpectedly been erected by a local board around the area, referring to the site’s past as a cemetery as he concludes that the fence was “presumably to prevent the escape of the few remaining bodies interred within the enclosure.”

WORKS CITED


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