

Playing in the Name of Life: Biopolitics and the American Play Movement

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Abstract: This paper will explore the argumentation made by advocates of the American play movement during the Progressive Era. With reference to Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, this paper will show that the argumentation in favor of playgrounds in America's urban centers was, in fact, highly (bio)political. Contrary to what one might assume from taking into account the conventional historiography of the Progressive Era, the political endeavors of the American play movement (serving as an example for many other Progressive sociopolitical efforts) were not solely motivated by its advocacy's charitable character. Analyzed on the basis of the concept of biopolitics, the arguments in favor of public provision of playgrounds will expose the movement's true colors. These were mainly saturated with white, middle-class ideals concerning the act of play and the effects it had on children as well as on society as a whole. On the one hand, the activists sought to counteract the supposedly chaotic living conditions of urban centers by providing playgrounds for mostly immigrant children. On the other hand, they aimed at disciplining the individual bodies of these children through supervised play in accordance with Progressive ideals so that the children would eventually become productive members of society.

When thinking about notions of childhood that are characteristic of the Progressive Era, one most likely associates them with the image of children working in the factories of the rapidly industrializing United States. Formative for such associations are, for example, the now very famous photographs by Lewis Hine. He not only managed to capture the working child's experience but more importantly played a role in raising awareness and in encouraging political activism to address issues like child labor.¹ Against the background of these leading images, one tends to overlook another important component of the life of a

¹ For an overview of the Progressive Era and issues surrounding child labor in that period, cf. Boyer et al., chapters nineteen and twenty-one.

child during this period, which is pointed out by David Nasaw: “The children of the street worked hard—and then they played hard” (viii). Notions of childhood during the Progressive Era were thus also defined by their acts of play and, in a way, even contributed to the prevalent present-day understanding of this very concept. The Progressive Era witnessed political actions that sought to establish laws protecting children from the dark and dangerous surroundings of the factories—some of which were portrayed in Hine’s photography. Thus, the idea of providing children and adolescents with a safe space in which to pass their leisure time gained momentum, and eventually led to the formation of the play movement.² The rise of the play movement has to be acknowledged as one of the major factors conducive to constructing dominant modern American notions of childhood. Alongside scholars of various disciplines who claim that childhood is a sociocultural construct, Jane Eva Baxter elaborates on the contemporary (Western) discourses of childhood. She argues that these discourses are based on bourgeois notions of family and individuality as well as on an emphasis on the human being’s biological development, which society traces back to medically defined phases of personhood, such as childhood and adulthood (161, 163).

Discourses on childhood during the Progressive Era fit well into Baxter’s argument. According to Dominick Cavallo, those people active in the play movement “were middle class, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant” and focused mainly on children of the working class, who “dwel[t] in urban ethnic ghettos” (22-23). One of the major motivations for the play movement was its perception of the unsanitary and overall precarious living conditions of the mostly immigrant members of the working class: “Every major city had its rundown, overcrowded slum neighborhoods” (Boyer et al. 571) and “[l]ife in the slums was particularly difficult for children [as] [w]hooping cough (pertussis), measles, and scarlet fever took a fearful toll, and infant mortality was high” (572). As indicated by this description, the living conditions of immigrants and the working class, in contrast to those of the white middle and upper class, were purportedly a threat to the child’s life. Living in the slums was thus not only a matter of coping with bad conditions but also a menace to life itself.

Because life itself emerged as a crucial factor for political actions during the Progressive Era, it is appropriate to take into account Michel Foucault’s concept of biopolitics when analyzing the play movement’s argumentation. This enables me to show how discourses on childhood within the play movement were shaped by interests

2 Whereas many historical sources refer to the movement as the Playground Movement, I will be using the term play movement.

of improving not merely the living conditions of the affected children,³ namely their physical health, but consequentially the well-being of the population⁴ as a whole. In reference to the concept of biopolitics, I will depict how proponents of the play movement supported their arguments in favor of the improvement—or in Foucault’s terminology, the disciplining—of the individual (body) by stating that it would eventually benefit the social body’s wholesomeness. In this respect, I will mainly focus on a reoccurring argument made by the play movement’s advocates: supervised play’s allegedly positive effects on the individual as well as the social body. These standards were grounded on then-newly produced scientific knowledge and, at the same time, featured racial connotations.

1. THE PROGRESSIVE ERA AND BIOPOLITICS

It was around the turn of the twentieth century that processes of industrialization gained momentum, showing their face especially in the densely populated urban centers of the country, where they ultimately posed a threat to life itself. These threats first and foremost occurred on the level of the individual body, as exemplified by unsanitary living conditions and dangerous working conditions in the booming manufacturing sector (Boyer et al. 543-47). Actual threats to life on the level of the individual body would eventually also have bad effects on the wholesomeness of the social body. In order to counteract this course of action, people all over the country who were, for the most part, members of the white middle class started to engage in grassroots activism concerned with a variety of problems. This would become known as the Progressive Movement. David W. Southern explains the general situation with the following words:

Basically, the Progressive Movement was a response to industrialization and its troublesome by-products: the immense increase in corporate power, the problems of rapid urban growth and large-scale immigration, widening class conflict and labor violence, and wholesale political corruption. This broad movement consisted of hundreds of differing interest groups with an impulse toward change. Some of these

3 Although I will be referring to ‘children’ throughout this paper, as it is the case in the primary sources, it is important to note that most of the play movement’s argumentation is concerned with boys.

4 In contrast to the general contemporary understanding of this term, Foucault “does not imagine a legal or political entity (e.g., the totality of individuals) but an independent biological corpus: a ‘social body’ that is characterized by its own processes and phenomena, such as birth and death rates, health status, life span, and the production of wealth and its circulation” (Lemke 36-37).

contending groups came to a meeting of the minds often enough to pass mountains of reform legislation at the local, state, and federal level. (44)

The essence of the Progressive Movement was thus to employ political technologies in order to antagonize the by-products of industrial capitalism, which were, at times, life-threatening. This was attempted by fostering a political climate that would focus on the improvement of living conditions. While, at times, the Progressives differed in their attempts and political endeavors, their actions can nevertheless be ascribed to a certain set of commonalities, as Southern points out.

Progressives were neither radicals nor revolutionaries, but rather moderates who wanted to preserve and improve the political system instead of abolishing it. While most of the time they started out as grassroots activists, their ultimate endeavor was always to achieve some kind of larger governmental action in order to solve the problems that were caused by unregulated capitalism. Progressives also based their politics on the newly evolved authority of scientific knowledge, for example in order to improve all different kinds of societal aspects in accordance with one of the era's key demands: efficiency. In addition, concerned with issues of social justice, Progressives primarily directed their political attention to the poor. Lastly, the notion of morals played an important part for Progressives in their endeavor to combat such characteristics as greed and selfishness as well as the 'social evils' of the streets, where alcohol, gambling and prostitution were a daily occurrence (Southern 44-45).

Since it was during the Progressive Era that American society renegotiated its state by e.g. shifting the focus of political argumentation to the enhancement of life, this period serves as a prime example of a specific form of modern power that I will attempt to explore through the biopolitics of the play movement. In an article published in 1910 in a scientific magazine, the first secretary of the Playground Association of America (PAA), Henry S. Curtis, states:

Before one can discuss intelligently the question of play and the responsibility of the public to furnish it, it becomes necessary to consider the nature and function of play in the life of the child, and the kind of responsibility that the government, in its larger or smaller units, owes to its constituents [...]. For play, in fact, seems to be the expression of life itself, springing forth spontaneously everywhere as its first activity. We work because we must; we play because it is our nature. I know of no better basis for a theory of optimism than this. (118-19)

By 1910, the PAA had been established for four years already, and as it was institutionalized on both a municipal and the national level, it provided the movement with a certain kind of stability (Liles 294-95). The PAA grew out of decentralized groups that were active in urban centers all over the country and that eventually

merged into a nationally organized institution. This type of organizational development was emblematic for the Progressive Era (Cavallo 2, 31-32). By proposing governmental support of play and playgrounds for children, Curtis's quote serves as an example for the scope of political reasoning at that time. What becomes evident from this quote is that, for those who advocated it, the act of play was much more than just a simple activity. Rather, it represented, as Curtis claims, "the expression of life itself" and something that "is our nature." Play was thus boosted as being massively important for the (biological) existence of human beings.

The link Curtis makes between the activity of play and human life itself is typical for the argumentation of the Progressive Era. In fact, Benjamin McArthur states: "The campaign for playgrounds and small parks was as much a manifestation of the Progressive spirit as widows' pensions, workmen's compensation, and anti-child labor laws" (376). It was during this time in the United States that scientific discourse gained major societal recognition. Many of the sciences we are now familiar with, like psychology and sociology, were just starting to become leading factors in the organization of society and were frequently referred to in the realm of politics. In the Progressive Era, "[t]he desire to quantify and make knowable something seemingly out of reach and nebulous" flourished, just as "public health statistics, social science, census data, land surveys, and cartographic technologies emerged as epistemological tools which consolidated state power" (Gagen 839). Thus, scientifically produced⁵ knowledge became one of the major factors for political argumentation. Concerning Curtis's conception of the nature of play as the expression of life itself, this link may not become apparent immediately. However, his mentioning of play being something natural suggests a reference to some kind of scientifically acquired knowledge about the biological aspects of human life. It is precisely this reference to an allegedly scientific knowledge that leads him to say that there is "no better theory of optimism" that one could rely upon when arguing in favor of public responsibility to provide children with playgrounds.

My analysis of Curtis's argumentation has been influenced by the insights provided by Foucault's concept of biopolitics. Thomas Lemke elaborates on Foucault's notion of biopolitics by stating that

"life" emerges as the center of political strategies. [...] [Thus] biopolitics denotes a specific modern form of exercising power. [...] [It] stands for a constellation in which modern human and natural sciences and the

5 The term 'production' needs to be understood in a Foucauldian sense, which means that it stands for the manifestation of power mechanisms, whereas power itself needs to be acknowledged as a productive and not repressive force (Lemke 34-37).

normative concepts that emerge from them structure political action and determine its goals. (33)

Biopolitics, in the way Foucault conceives of this concept,⁶ hence enables one to expose the arguments made by Curtis in a fruitful way because it also takes into account its political rationality.⁷ The games played in the streets appeared to be neither “related to physical and psychological development [nor] to political socialization” (Cavallo 22). This factor is important insofar as it was the PAA’s self-proclaimed purpose “[t]o study playground construction and administration; to experiment with new features; to collect all available knowledge on the subject; [and] to give publicity to playground information and data” (35). The establishment of playgrounds was thus not solely a way of providing children with safe surroundings to play in. It also enabled those in control to produce scientific knowledge on the children who played in the playgrounds. In this respect, the PAA thoroughly engaged in the biopolitical discourses that emerged during the Progressive Era, e.g. by collecting and publishing data on the topic. While Curtis calls for governmental action, which is translatable into the Foucauldian notion of “a specific modern form of exercising power,” he does so by referring to an alleged ‘naturalness’ that is inherent to human life itself, thus putting ‘life’ at the center of his argument (118-19). His quote aptly illustrates the reasoning of the American play movement and thus serves as an example for the rhetoric of (political) argumentation of the Progressive Era in general.

It is not merely the accentuation of life itself that leads one to draw a connection between Progressive Era politics and the concept of biopolitics. By way of Foucault’s multifaceted definition of biopolitics (which, at times, he interchanges with the term ‘biopower’), it becomes clear that the aforementioned processes of institutionalization also play an important role:

First, biopolitics stands for a historical rupture in political thinking and practice that is characterized by a rearticulation of sovereign power. Second, Foucault assigns to biopolitical mechanisms a central role in the rise of modern racism. A third meaning of the concept refers to a distinctive art of government that historically emerges with liberal forms of social regulation and individual self-governance. (Lemke 34)

6 While today Foucault’s conception of biopolitics might be the best known, the concept itself (in its various interpretations) has been a factor for over one hundred years (Lemke 9).

7 Foucault conceived of ‘political rationality’ as a ‘rationality of politics,’ which emphasizes the fact that political rationality is concerned with the knowledge that is intrinsic to the concept’s technologies (Lemke, Krasmann, and Bröckling 20).

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Thus, one has to acknowledge Foucault's notion of biopolitics not as an easily definable concept but rather as a complex entity that includes a variety of political practices, which, at their core, are concerned with matters of life and death.

These various practices, according to Foucault, emerged within the realms of modern liberal states when political technologies started to focus on (biological) life concerns such as birth and death rates as well as health status. It is important to acknowledge that Foucault does not perceive liberalism as an ideology. In fact, he describes liberalism "as a principle and a method of rationalizing the exercise of government" (Foucault 74). Additionally, his understanding of the concept of government is not restricted to the sphere of institutionalized political power within the realms of liberalism, but also incorporates the ways in which we as human beings govern ourselves (Dean 28). Thus, what eventually became the focus of the exertion of power within the realm of modern liberal societies was no longer the "deprivation of goods, products, and services," which could, in extreme cases, have led to the death of a human being (Lemke 35). Instead, the focus shifted onto the supply of goods and services that would enhance biological life.

Paraphrasing Foucault, Lemke states that the emergence of biopolitics depended on the linking of "two 'basic forms' of power over life: the disciplining of the individual body and the regulatory control of the population," i.e. the social body (36-37). What is characteristic of discipline and regulation is that "[t]hey are not independent entities but define each other" (37). Thus, data and information, especially on phenomena such as birth and death rates as well as health status, became central elements in this political endeavor. These numbers would then allow an "analytics of government" (45) aimed at enhancing biological life of the individual as well as the social body. In order to achieve this, political technologies were applied on different levels, oftentimes making use of the scientific knowledge that was inherent in the data produced about life itself.

In reference to Sidney Milkis and others, Eileen McDonagh states that "the Progressive Era [can be portrayed] as a second founding of the American state [because] it was a time during which the social contract defining the scope and structure of state power [...] [was] renegotiated" (146). If successfully rallied for, the particular endeavors would be enforced by governmental law. Thus, in accordance with Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the Progressive Movement was defined by its political endeavors to supply goods and services in order to improve the life of the individual as well as the social body. Since life itself became the focus of the new form of power exertion within the political realms of the Progressive Era, and since most of the people active in the Progressive Movement were members of the white middle class, the question of who would ultimately be part of the reemerging American state

was a matter of biopolitical mechanisms. In the following chapter, I will therefore attempt to approach this question from the perspective of biopolitics.

2. APPROPRIATING PLAY

Even though the first playgrounds had already been set up by the end of the nineteenth century, mostly as by-products of social welfare organizations such as the famous Hull House in Chicago, it was not until 1906 that proponents of the play movement came together on a national level to found the PAA (Howell 961-62). The playgrounds the PAA sought to create were, as Dominick Cavallo puts it, “an organized alternative to unsupervised street play” (25). This understanding of a playground is important insofar as it hints at the fact that people involved in the play movement were indeed aware of children’s ability to play on their own in the streets. In reference to this aspect, Victor von Borosini wrote in 1910:

In the East we know many such quarters, where especially the Italians, Negroes, the Jews and Poles dwell. Have they any place for recreation? Their children, yes; for imaginative children will make use of any place and any thing for play, even in the overcrowded cities. The street is, and remains, their only playground in connection with the houses and alleys in the neighborhood. (142)

As this quotation shows, the activities taken on by the (immigrant) children in the streets were actually acknowledged by the play movement’s advocates as genuine acts of play. Their way of playing was even recognized as an act of exerted imagination. These children did, in fact, play, even though they were not provided with a space which fit the standards of a playground according to the play activists.

Yet, these activists dismissed streets as spaces of play and rallied officially for the establishment of playgrounds so that children would be able to act out their supposedly natural desire to play. What the play movement considered natural was thus highly biopolitical, since playing in the streets was considered a threat to the children’s health. In order to counteract the threats of the street, the play movement advocated for the establishment of a space that would allow for the disciplining of children’s bodies through play. Thus, one might say that the “organized alternative to unsupervised street play,” as Cavallo calls it (25), sought to improve the (biological) life of mainly immigrant children in the name of the social body. Therefore, the play movement, in its own way, enacted the general political rationality of the Progressive Era with all its biopolitical characteristics.

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When looking at some of the activists' statements made in its favor, it becomes evident that the play movement was, in fact, more than just a call for the protection of children. In September 1898, Charles Zueblin, one of the leading figures of the Chicago play movement, wrote that "[a] 'return to nature' is as necessary a demand for the modern city as it was for the romanticists of the eighteenth century. There can be no successful life which ignores nature" (145). As this shows, the argument in favor of play and playgrounds was also connected to a much broader understanding of what a successful life needed to look like. It was, to a large degree, the general uneasiness that people active in the play movement felt toward their rapidly changing urban surroundings that led them to rally for the issue. The ever-growing industrialization of American urban centers and the accompanying influx of mostly immigrant inhabitants were central aspects that the play movement's proponents sought to fight. Hence, they called for a place that would provide something of a "return to nature," which would lead to a "successful life" (145).

At the same time, Zueblin stresses that playgrounds and parks are necessary "for hygienic reasons" (146). As already hinted at in the introduction, the living conditions in the urban centers were unhygienic, at times to a life-threatening degree. Nasaw further elaborates on these conditions:

In the working-class and immigrant residential districts, [...] the sewers were always clogged and the streets and alleyways filled with garbage. It was here that dead horses lay for days, bloated and decaying, children poking at their eyes and pulling out their hair to weave into rings. [...] It was here that tuberculosis raged and babies died of exposure or cold or heat or spoiled milk, that pushcarts, streetcars, and horse-drawn wagons fought for space, and children were crushed to death in the duel. (9)

Thus, the parks and playgrounds the play movement sought to create were, first and foremost, means to counteract those kinds of conditions. Children needed to be provided with a space to play in that corresponded with the play movement's notion of nature; to the activists, that was precisely what seemed to be missing and could be made out as a reason as to why children's lives seemed incomplete.

The way in which life was led within the realms of these immigrant quarters did not seem appropriate to people like Zueblin. By claiming that a "successful life" could only be had through "a return to nature," he declares life in the "ill-paved, unclean, and ill-smelling streets" unsuccessful and, thus, in need of mending (148). Recalling Foucault's thoughts on biopolitics, the endeavor to establish playgrounds in these neighborhoods may thus be interpreted as racism, "an expression of a schism within society that is provoked by the biopolitical idea of an ongoing and always incomplete cleansing of the social body" (Lemke 43-44). The general notion of this racism, which

grounds itself in the “idea of society as a biological whole” and finds its form in “state actions” (42), can also be found in Curtis’s reasoning in favor of playgrounds, which I mentioned in the first chapter. Against the background of Curtis’s appointment as secretary of the PAA after its founding in 1906, and also keeping in mind his article’s main intention, which was the call for “public provision and responsibility for playgrounds,” his argumentation serves as a prime example of Foucault’s thoughts on the kind of modern racism that developed in the late nineteenth century.

Since the conditions of many immigrant quarters appeared as a menace to life itself, these conditions could be made out as an unclean feature of the social body. By producing the dichotomy between “ill-smelling streets” (Zueblin 148) and the supposedly natural surroundings of playgrounds and parks, the play movement’s proponents propagated a romantic vision of nature. Furthermore, they failed to acknowledge that, while denouncing the man-made effects of industrial capitalism such as overcrowded streets, their call for parks and playgrounds within urban centers was, in the end, nothing less than that: The spaces they wanted to establish constituted, in essence, an artificially produced form of nature, already molded on an intellectual level in accordance with political rationality.

The play movement’s argumentation in favor of nature thus also needs to be understood as a specific notion of biopolitical action, which simultaneously downgraded the urban conditions that were produced by its residents. By doing so, the living conditions of the immigrants, and, by implication, the immigrants themselves, were practically defined as unnatural. This stood in stark contrast to the natural surroundings that the play movement advocated for. This dichotomy between what counts as natural—and should therefore be taken into reference for political endeavors—and what does not was also an issue for Curtis, who claims:

The world of nature holds out to the child a thousand invitations whose subtle appeal he can scarce resist. The forest calls to him from its shadowy depths and speaks of mysteries hidden within that untraveled country, and of animals and birds’ nests [...]. The city world of brick and stone, of asphalt streets and rushing cars has no such appeal. The brain was not evolved through reactions to these stimuli, and it is not until later that their charm is felt. (120-21)

This starkly romanticized view of what nature has to offer in contrast to urban surroundings is especially telling if one keeps in mind the dichotomy’s axiomatic racial connotation. What is crucial in Curtis’s argumentation is not only that he constructs nature as a much more promising surrounding than the urban city center but also that he makes a connection between nature and the (biological) human life. He claims that natural surroundings, regarding the appeal they offer to a child, will ultimately benefit

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the child's (biological) development. Thus, he engages psychology, one of the era's newly established fields of scientific knowledge. According to Elizabeth Gagen, psychology's "introduction of techniques and technologies [...] satisfied the fundamental components of 'biopower,' which both individuated bodies and positioned them against a norm" (829). Curtis's call for the application of such techniques in order to promote the (biological) development of children reveals itself more clearly by the following statement:

To play, and play alone, his whole physical, emotional, intellectual and social nature responds, and the child becomes a unit. [...] A boy can not play ball without a ball field, swim without a swimming place or climb trees without trees to climb, and these the city has not furnished. He can shoot craps or pitch pennies on the sidewalk, he can play jackstones or tell stories on a doorstep, he can do various things in the alleys and stables, but these are not the types of play by which the race developed or by which "in distant ages children grew to kings and sages." (120)

Just like Borosini, Curtis acknowledges the actions carried out by the children in the streets as a genuine form of play. To him, though, games like "shoot[ing] craps or pitch[ing] pennies on the sidewalk" are not beneficial, since they apparently do not promote the child's process of becoming "a unit." Providing children with a playground where they could play the right kind of games, such as a ball game, is, according to Curtis, just as conducive to the child's individual development as it is to the development of "the race."

The play movement's reasoning in favor of public playgrounds was thus multifarious, often exposing its biopolitical character. The movement emphasized the importance of providing adequate spaces where appropriate games could be played in order to enhance the child's individual development upon which the wholesomeness of society ultimately depended. In order to exhibit the play movement's biopolitical traits, I have looked into the dichotomy it creates between nature and urban environments as well as its connections to playgrounds and immigrants. I will now focus on the role of play in the context of disciplining the mind and the body.

3. PLAYING IN THE NAME OF LIFE

A prevalent argument of the play movement was that once state actions such as the public provision of playgrounds were applied, the social body would benefit from these actions in numerous ways. According to Curtis, a playground would counteract, among other things, "[t]he fall of [the] countr[y]." He supports his assertion by stating

that, “[i]n times of war states require soldiers, who must have health and physical stamina” (122). While this example appears to be rather extreme, it nevertheless shows the entanglement of discipline and control in regard to the individual and the social body. Since children would grow into adults, who in times of war had to be fit to serve their country on the battlefield, their physical soundness was not only of interest on the level of the individual, but even more so on the level of the social body. There were other, much more prominent examples, though, that exposed the link between these two mutually dependent components of biopolitics.

One of the recurring arguments made in favor of play was the effect it had on the children’s minds and bodies. According to the play movement’s advocates, play would ultimately lead to the disappearance of characteristics that were considered bad and unhealthy. Moreover, playing on a playground should foster characteristics that would be beneficial for the children’s later adult life. The argument that playgrounds and the act of organized play would improve the physical condition, and eventually the mental state of the child, was a central argument of the movement’s proponents from early on. This can be seen in an article by Sadie American, a social worker from Chicago:

With children as with adults character more clearly reveals itself in leisure moments than in busy ones. [...] [W]atch children when they do not think themselves observed, and selfishness and greed and disregard of rights manifest themselves. In a playground with proper supervision children for their own good soon recognize that they must regard others’ rights, and that in order to enjoy themselves they must permit others to do so [...], and these habits help to build up men who make good citizens, carrying the same principles into adult life. (159)

What becomes clear from this quotation is the acknowledgment of children as self-contained actors who were, in fact, able to act independently. However, if not properly supervised, the revelation of the children’s character would prove neither beneficial to themselves nor to their surroundings. American further claims that without decent instruction, the children would later express bad characteristics: “Selfishness,” “greed,” and “disregard of rights” were some of the traits that Progressives understood to be the major societal problems of their time. In that sense, American’s call for the establishment of playgrounds was first and foremost an endeavor to eliminate such bad characteristics within the social body at large. Later on in the text, she further elaborates on the effects that these bad traits would lead to if left unchecked. By referring to statistics and official reports, American comes to the conclusion that letting children spend most of their time in the streets would result in furthering “juvenile rowdiness,” thus provoking “a sense of hostility between the children and the guardian of public order” (166-67).

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American's ultimate argument in favor of public provision of playgrounds is that it would foster "principles of good citizenship" (166). Her main point for the public establishment of playgrounds is grounded in the supposedly positive effects that properly guided play would have on the public order. Therefore, play within the realms of a playground would discipline the individual children's bodies, as well as their minds and characters, in accordance with the requirements that the state demanded from its citizens. This way, a general climate of disorder in the streets would be regulated to keep the public order intact. That the establishment of a general public order of the state was in fact, American's main argument for the provision of playgrounds becomes most apparent at the end of her text:

When we realize, in acts as well as in words, that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure; when we see that construction from the foundation up is more profitable than destruction [...] then we will know that to provide proper playgrounds for children of a larger as well as smaller growth is to insure such men and citizens as go to make a republic of men fitted to govern themselves and to lead the world in the onward march against all that cramps man's development and prevents his becoming free in the fullest sense of the word. (170)

The very solemn language of this extract not only shows the importance that, according to the play advocates, went along with publicly provided play but also exposes the element of governmentality that was inherent in their argumentation. The children were supposed to be guided in their play so that they could learn how to properly guide themselves in their adult life. The production of "good citizens" "from the foundation up," then, would be profitable for the development of the state, because only as a "good citizen" was one able to advance the condition of the population.

This kind of argumentation is also prevalent in a text by another Chicago Progressive activist, Graham Taylor, who served as the secretary of the Playground Association of Chicago and was one of the first people "to rent vacant lots in slums, equip them with play facilities, and hire directors to supervise children's play" (Cavallo 29). Although he put forth his arguments around twelve years after the aforementioned text by American, one can nevertheless detect the still prevailing biopolitical notions of the play movement's reasoning in his article. Chicago was already among the prime examples of implementing the movement's endeavors, for instance by having built a grand park system on the city's South Side (Cavallo 30). As Taylor's text proves, however, the play advocates still saw the need to improve the situation of the children further in accordance with the movement's standards. By referencing the then-general director of field houses and playgrounds of the South Park Commission in Chicago, E. B. DeGroot, Taylor demonstrates the positive effects that the parks and

playgrounds had on children. According to him, as the reports by DeGroot show, the social value of these spaces lay in their ability to keep children “out of worse things they might be doing”⁸ but also proved to be “a factor of high efficiency in promoting health, good character and public-spirited citizenship” (97).

Thus, years after Sadie American’s call for the establishment of playgrounds, which she had founded on the argument that they would produce better citizens, the scientific knowledge that Taylor based his text on seemed to prove her right, showing in, among other things, the children’s “*esprit de corps*” (97). This *esprit de corps* manifested itself not only on the physical level but also mentally, according to the president of the West Park Commission, B. A. Eckhart, whom Taylor quotes in his article with the following words: “In these playgrounds and in their work lie the beginnings of social redemption of the people in large cities” (100). Hence, the provision of a playground was linked to more than just physical health. This line of argument supports the effects that play supposedly also had on the mental health of children.

This connection between morality, character, and the physical strength of a child is also reflected in the work of one of the leading child-development psychologists of that time, Granville Stanley Hall. According to Gagen, Hall argues that “individual character was simply a matter of correct muscular functioning, as thought was ultimately a muscular function” (833). Thus, the play movement also frequently drew on one of the key elements within the realms of biopolitics, namely scientific knowledge, in order to support its cause. However, since the shaping of good character and proper morals was one of the play movement’s major goals, it is no wonder that scientific knowledge of that kind gained recognition among the play advocates. After all, there was no better place than a playground to train a child’s “strong physique [and] quick muscles,” which were considered to “provide the basis for intelligence, quick memory, sound judgment, and an obedient will” (847).

According to the play advocates, all of the effects mentioned above would only be possible, though, if the children were guided by a social worker serving as an instructor. Amalie Hofer Jerome, a member of the Chicago Playground Association, explained in 1910 that

it is a well-known statement among educators that children reveal themselves in their play [...]. [Thus a] playground leader has the opportunity to see and know not only child nature, but human nature at

8 One needs to keep in mind that advocates of the play movement not only dismissed rather conventional acts of play in the streets, such as shooting pennies on the sidewalk, but also fought against the street culture in general, which had led to the development of places such as dance halls and saloons (Boyer et al. 568, 580, 583-84).

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its very fountain, and to direct this nature up into the forms most acceptable to society as a whole. (131-32)

This statement reveals that the sole public provision of a space to play in was apparently not enough. According to McArthur, who refers to the 1900 *Report of the Chicago Vacation School Committee*, “[t]he play leaders had to be well trained, possessing certain desirable characteristics: the playfulness of a child, the endurance of a spartan, the patience of Job, the missionary spirit of a Jesuit, and the wisdom of Solomon” (387). Leaders on the playground were thus more than simple organizers: They also served as figures of identity for the children. The play leaders’ tasks were also not restricted to directing the children’s movements, as the quasi-religious description suggests. Additionally, there was another important function that needed to be fulfilled, as Jerome explains:

The social leader of the playground [...] will bring the old people back into the game, and will supply forms of folk recreation and invite the participation of those who do not ‘two-step’; in other words, will warm up the child nature, the play spirit, in the old man and the old woman, and so keep the passing generation in sympathetic accord with the generation which is just unfolding. (132)

It was of importance that play leaders brought with them the potential to reunite possibly alienated family members because it served to counteract the Progressives’ fear that families were drifting apart. The family was still seen as “the most sacred of American institutions” (McArthur 388). Hence, Jerome declares that “[w]hen the family splits up for its recreation, there is danger [...]; without a wholesome influence of family life, there is danger” (132). Keeping the family together was therefore the only way to “have wholesome conditions” (132). Playground leaders were thus more than just authoritative figures for the children. The presence of such people would also favor the stability of America’s most sacred institution, the family. According to the Progressives’ logic, the family was—similar to the playground—a place that would provide children with a certain discipline on their way to becoming good citizens. As Jerome explains, divided families were not only dangerous to the children’s upbringing, but also to society as a whole. The figure of the play leader, then, also functioned as a disciplining force of the child’s individual body on the one hand, and as a corrective force helping to preserve the integrity of family units on the other. Play leaders would thereby benefit the social body as a whole twice over. The only way that children would be able to develop into good citizens, according to the play movement standards, was if their play was guided by a play leader.

4. CONCLUSION

As my analysis has shown, the American play movement aimed for much more than solely providing the urban poor, mostly immigrant children, with a safe space to play in. Just as much as other political endeavors of the Progressive Era, it needs to be acknowledged in its whole complexity, which reveals itself if the concept of biopolitics is taken into account. The establishment of playgrounds was a means to counteract the circumstances that threatened perceptions of what 'life' should look like from a white, middle-class point of view. Starting out as a private interest group which eventually turned into a national public association, the movement's development resembled that of many other political endeavors of the Progressive Era. At the beginning of this paper, I proposed the argument that one needs to acknowledge our contemporary understanding of such a seemingly 'natural' phenomenon as childhood as a sociocultural construct. My examination of the American play movement has revealed how far-reaching historical processes actually are, since their respective political technologies have exerted a major influence on our contemporary understanding of what it means to be a child.

In this paper, I have attempted to show the engagement of the play movement in the general debate of the Progressive Era and to reveal the ways in which some of the movement's key goals were translated onto the situation of the affected children. In doing so, I have demonstrated the racist connotations of the movement's endeavors to discipline the mostly immigrant children by counteracting their urban living conditions. The American play movement wanted to promote forms of organized play in order to counteract those conditions of the streets that did not fit their standards, and which they considered unhealthy for the individual as well as the social body. An analysis of the play movement's argumentation against the background of Foucault's concept of biopolitics has shown that it was not merely the affected children's well-being that motivated the play advocates' actions but rather the harmful conditions of urbanization that supposedly threatened the social body. Since the act of play was seen as a fundamentally human and intrinsically social necessity, it serves as a fitting example for the interdependence of the individual and the social body, the two opposing poles that are central to the concept of biopolitics.

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