

Play at work: questions of historical interpretation

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This paper discusses the historical background of the use of ludic (play) technologies in managerial practice. It is an exercise in what Reinhart Koselleck called ‘the practice of conceptual history’. Contemporary organisations use play in multiple fashions. The paper revolves around several questions: is play a simple form of extended exploitation, work intensification, oppression? Or is it a manifestation of an emancipatory process? Is this kind of deployment of play in management ideologies new? Is it universal, or is it particular to a certain cultural and historical context?

To try to interpret ‘play’ is a guaranteed day-trip onto shifting sands. Play is a universal phenomenon but with no universal definition. There are games and humour, irony and sarcasm, gambling and tempting chance, poetry and theatre, role playing and masks, ritual and festival, carnival, dance, and trance, music and figurative arts, and so many other forms of playful imagination and expression. But none makes sense other than its ‘local’ context and horizons of interpretation. Play is omnipresent but always eludes generalisation.

Play has always been a key cultural concept for ordering experiences and expectations at personal and cosmic levels. However, what counts as ‘play’, what it means, have remained open questions because play turns out to be an eminently historical-contextual phenomenon in the case of the human species, and therefore a phenomenon which escapes final definitions and generalisations. Many authors have fallen victim to the temptation to offer a final outline of play in general – most notably, the eminent Dutch medievalist Johann Huizinga whose seminal work (1955) has ended up being seen as unsatisfactory from both a historical and anthropological perspective simply because it has overstretched its ambitions. For others, play remains explicitly an elusive concept and their historical analyses of the concept of play are remarkably relevant: especially important is the work of Mihai Spariosu (1989, 1991, 1994 – co-edited with Ronald Bogue) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1997). In the field of organisation and management studies play has been less of a focus. A few case studies offer excellent attempts but their conceptual interests are not in play itself (Grugulis et al. 2000, Grugulis 2002, Korczynski 2002) and even when they do treat play specifically their interpretation is foreclosed by a rather mechanical Marxian (labour process theory) position. For others (Carr 2003, Kallinikos 1998), there is more to play in organisations than meets the eye but their essays are less historically oriented.

Our paper is focused upon the historical and cultural interpretation of the deployment of the concept of ‘play’ in current managerial ideologies and practices. It should be seen, on the one hand, as an addition to existing literature on the use of historical

methods to the analysis of management phenomena, and, on the other hand, as a commentary on current themes in work organisations.

I. Play at work: examples

Like many other aspects of the theory and practice of management, the idea of what constitutes or defines the concept *work* and therefore legitimately of concern to managers came under intense scrutiny during the 1980's. Various terms the 'cultural turn' (Barley and Kunda 1992) or the 'turn to life' (Berger 1964) it was to produce a huge increase in the aspects of people's lives that management could legitimately involve itself with. With these changes managerialism (as a label one can use to define the ideology of this new vision of a managed society) was to produce a very rich and heterogeneous set of discourses that sought to gain legitimacy for an unheralded managerial intervention into the life-world of citizens. This managerial 'juggernaut' (to paraphrase Giddens) has produced some very strange discursive arrangements and has taken life (discursively at least) into an Orwellian world of Newspeak – an oxymoronic world of 'tough love', 'empowerment', 'knowledge management'. It is the relationship between one such pair of apparently opposing concepts and practices that caught the eye of the authors: *work* and *play*.

Play has long been identified as an aspect of organisational and corporate life. The paternalist social reformers of the nineteenth century, the so-called era of Industrial Betterment in the US (Barley and Kunda 1992) and their British equivalents, Wedgwood, Cadbury and Salt, sought to provide many services to their workers; housing, hospitals, libraries and schools for example, that were not directly involved in the rational efficient production of work. Some of these notions of 'betterment' involved play and games, the setting up and supporting of sports clubs by firms for example (Manchester United, currently the largest soccer team in the world, began life as a club for railway workers). To a large extent though these investments in the well-being of the workforce were clearly delineated from the day job, the two arenas were distinct, the role and involvement of employers and their managers did not extend from the realm of work into the realm of play.

As the twentieth century began the separation between the two concepts continued, if anything strengthening and hardening. Indeed the notion of 'systematic soldiering' that 'playful' working out of rates of production by groups of working people under 'ordinary' management, was a central concern for the newly constructed 'scientific' managers called into being by F.W. Taylor and others. Play has since been viewed as antithetical to the rational and efficient management and control of organisations. Under the forms of mass-production that the ideas of Taylor and the practices of Ford made possible the role of play was variously seen as something that might well be good for working people to engage in, but 'in their own time'. Playing in the works time was seen as subversive, as wrong, as resistance to the natural order, as *mis*-behaviour, by both sides of the labour process.

As the century progressed the rigid regimes of scientific management came under regular and increasing pressure due to the perceived dehumanising and alienating outcomes for workers situated within these regimes, various attempts to shift management discourses into a more normative or 'softer' form are outlined by Barley and Kunda (1992) but it was not until the 1980s and the so called 'cultural turn' that a

major change becomes apparent in the concept of play at work. There had been developments, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s to the ways in which management education was developing. This produced an increase in the use of management games and simulations that were developing alongside technological, particularly computing innovations, (see Babb 1966 and Newstrom 1980 for example), but these were largely contained within educational and training situations, not really relevant to the serious work-place.

Following the publication in 1982 of Deal and Kennedy's book *Corporate Cultures*, we find them discussing a particular working 'culture' – what they call a 'work hard play/hard culture'. The important point here is that the concept 'play', prior to this viewed as outside or even opposite to work, has now been brought within the workplace, and as such amenable to managerial consideration. Play was now something of concern for management and workers within corporations on a day to day basis. For Deal and Kennedy successful organisations, especially those that operated in low risk, high volume, team-based, sales orientated and customer focused environments (a much more prevalent form of organisational setting today than thirty years ago), operated within a 'strong culture' that they labelled, the 'work hard – play hard culture'.

Evidence that work hard/play hard cultures have survived and developed in the intervening twenty years have been well documented. An excellent example can be gained by viewing a television documentary series called *Slave Nation*, made by Darcus Howe and shown on Channel 4 in the UK in 2000. In one episode, Howe spends time in a call-centre in Derby, the home of the online bank egg:!. What follows is a brief description of the opening scenes.

In a building that resembles a warehouse or a factory hundreds of people are gathered into several collective 'work' stations, i.e. a number of desks, with computer terminals and tables and chairs, there are also a number of pool tables and table football games in the spaces between. Around the walls of this vast warehouse-like building, are posted league tables, the teams have names that represent sports teams e.g. Team Juventus head the league. There are posters containing figures and statistics, the posters are big they need to enable people from across the floor to see them and see if their team is climbing the league.

The 'work' stations themselves appear bedecked in balloons and various brightly coloured posters. The people themselves are dressed casually some in jeans and polo-shirts (not a suit in sight), some are in fancy dress, many are wearing funny hats.

'The places we work in are kitted out with designated chill out areas. So if you need to get away from the grindstone, there's always somewhere to go and sit. You can even take in a game of pool or table football. On top of that, we have a relaxed, informal dress code – we want to get to get to work feeling comfortable.' (An employee)

This is the home, or workplace of 'egg-people', a term used by staff to describe themselves. Some are 'egg-couples', that is 'egg-people' who are in a relationship where both work for egg:!. They spend their days at the call-centre and their evenings at the nearby sports centre, playing football for an 'egg-team', or running as members of the

egg: running club. Monday to Friday, they spend their time as ‘egg-people’: most hours in a day are spent together, ‘working hard, playing hard’, as they like to put it. While at work during the day they may be in competition with each other, as members of different teams within the call centre striving to win the monthly sales league (as members of Team Juventus, for example), simultaneously they may be competing against each other at pool or table football, again representing their team, as the company web site states:

“You see, it’s not all about work, there’s lots of opportunity to relax as well. So when you start, you’re almost bound to find the kind of fun you like.” quoted on company website <http://new.egg.com>, accessed 10/08/04)

What we see here with the egg: call centre is a very clear development of the work hard/place hard culture outlined by Deal and Kennedy in 1982. At egg: the ideas and interpretations offered by Deal and Kennedy have been instrumentalised and made manifest. With the growth of the personal services sector and the developments in the information and communication technology that both supports and produces such services, the situation at egg: is very likely to be mirrored many times across call-centres the length and breadth of the country. Indeed organisational researchers provide evidence of such developments in call centres and other very customer focussed organisations (see Grugulis et al. 2002). What we may suggest here is that work and play are now co-present in many areas of contemporary organisational life and both aspects are amendable to managerial intervention – what then of the future. What signs are available within the cultural and managerial landscape that may enable us to consider the future scenario of play at work?

We choose to interpret here a handful of such signs. Three new(ish) books published since 2000 and two management consultancy services offering cutting-edge experiences for executives. The books are *Serious Play* by Michael Schrage, *Play Zone* by Lewis Pinault and *The Play Ethic* by Pat Kane. The management consultancies are New Integrity (www.newintegrity.org/new_integrity.htm, accessed May 2005) and Impetus Training and the Xplicit Porn School, (<http://www.xplicitpornschool.co.uk>, accessed May 2005). This is not the place for a through review of these volumes; instead what we provide is a broad restatement of the main arguments put forward by the authors with relation to the future shape of the debates surround play at work.

The major themes that are visible through a reading of these texts are that the world of work is on the cusp of a radical shift. Corporations and businesses that will flourish as the twenty-first century progresses will be those that can meet the demands of the ‘new economics of innovation’ (Schrage, 2000). In order to achieve this each author offers slightly different frameworks. For Schrage it is through an assessment of an organisations ability to produce ‘prototypes’ and manage ‘prototyping’ that can offer an insight into the workings of organisations. In carrying out such an analysis Schrage introduces virtually the whole vocabulary of consultancy, business education and Human Resource Management (HRM) terminology produced throughout the 1980s and 1990s. But, at the core of all of this Schrage places what he calls ‘Serious Play’ a concept which he does not really develop beyond highlighting the ability of play to unleash and mobilise the resources of creativity, in a way not dissimilar to the role of business games and role playing much beloved of management educators from

the 1970s onwards. In this way Schrage highlights the continuities of the use of the concept of play at work over the last three decades.

Serious Play also figures in the 2004 publication *Play Zone* by Lewis Pinault. In his view the contemporary world of business is so chaotic and complex that no form of linear, rational intervention would be successful. For Pinault, a research practitioner with the Imagination Lab Foundation established by the LEGO Group it is the creation of 'play zones' within organisations that will provide the necessary information and 'knowledge' to allow corporations to make sense of the contemporary world. Peopled by strategic thinkers and supported by all measure of the latest computer supported technology, to say nothing of LEGO figures and bricks (used to make 3-D metaphorical models), the 'play zone' generates Serious Play. Serious Play allows the "hidden order" of business chaos to emerge' (Pinault 2004:2). The future for Pinault will 'see the emergence of a new breed of player, alchemists who will use – and need – the right mix of magic and fun to unleash the deepest powers of Play.' (Pinault, 2004:192). This need to see the 'unleashing of the powers of play' in the name of work, calls for managerial intervention to move into more intimate areas of human relationships - areas that until now may have been viewed as too *risqué*. For example, in the following extract Pinault recounts an observation from a session of Serious Play:

"I want more sex?"

This assertion spilled out in a stream of other express desires, but this one was getting my full attention – well almost. I was also watching the woman's hands. Nicely articulate in their own right, and connected to a face and figure that made their own demands. As she said this her fingers intertwined and caressed and intelligently probed an unlikely recipient of sensuous attention, a complex of LEGO bricks. She'd built it, and with the amount of 'pop' and 'snick' occurring as she spoke I guessed a new configuration, drawing on energies newly released from her subconscious, was about to emerge." (Pinault, 2004:13-14, original emphasis)

This example, playing reference to desire, the unconscious, the erotic and the creative signposts another line of development to be found within the 'new' literatures on play and managerial action. Again, from the 1980s onwards there has been a whole slew of managerial and consultant based activities that have sought to involve more and more of the 'self' of the people working within an organisational settings. For example efforts to manage emotion (Hochschild, Goldman), knowledge (Stewart, Nonaka) and the recently published book by Andrew Kakabadse called *Intimacy: an international survey on people's sex lives at work*, which offers managers a model to understand the 'sex lives of people at work, (Kakabadse, 2004:30). Are these examples from the world of management and work simply coincidental or are they more representative of a wider cultural shift? This question leads us to the third source to be highlighted – *The Play Ethic* by Pat Kane.

Pat Kane (jazz musician, management consultant, activist and editor of an on-line journal entitled *Play Journal*) sub-titles his book – "A manifesto for a new way of living" and the subjects covered range from the music channel MTV to the work of philosophers such as Carse (1986) and psychologists such as Csikszentmihalyi (1975).

For Kane work is simply one site amongst many where play is leading to 'transcendence in the everyday'. Along with spirituality play is about 'embracing change rather than fearing it' and this is due to 'play being grounded in a deep common reality for humanity' (These quotations are taken from <http://www.newintegrity.org/documents/SpiritInBusiness-PlayEthicpresentation.ppt>, accessed May, 2005, one of the sites of the consulting arm of the Kane empire called New Integrity formed by Kane in 2003 to 'help organisations and individuals think, feel and imagine their way through the challenges of living in a profoundly interconnected world. We seek to build a 'new integrity' for each of our clients – an identity and consciousness which can improve their ability to act decisively in these complex and dynamic times.')

For Kane, 'the Play Ethic opens up the infinite possibilities arising from full engagement of heart, body and soul.' (idem). In so doing, overcoming the workaday life that most of us inhabit. The message is that life should be seen as an infinite game in which 'Infinite players cannot say when their game began, nor do they care. They do not care for the reason that their game is not bound by time.' (Carse, 1986:7-8). An important part of this infinite game is the discovery of 'infinite sexuality' as an expression of one's 'genius' manifest in infinite 'sexual desire' which binds partners but not to traditional systems of family relationship; rather they meet on a different plane, a plane of continuous enjoyment. As Carse remarks, 'infinite players do not play within sexual boundaries, but with sexual boundaries, (Carse, 1986:100ff.).

We highlight this erotic twist of the discussion of play, found in both *The Play Zone* and *The Play Ethic* to signal a shift in the aspects of subjectivity being made available to organisations in their effort to be successful and competitive in the twenty-first century. From the teams of service workers observed by Deal and Kennedy twenty years ago to the customers of our last example there are some continuities, but on the face of it there appear to also be some major differences.

We finally offer what might be seen as our most extreme example. In the UK *Sunday Times* 'Style' supplement of 9th January, 2005 was an article entitled, '*Xplicit Executive Relief*'. This article reported on a new teambuilding exercise that involves a team of colleagues working together to produce a pornographic movie scene. The consultancy, a partnership between Impetus Training and The Xplicit Porn School charges corporations up to £5,000 per day, for this the clients are provided with actors and equipment. The ideas and directions come from the individual team members, aided by the consultants. What are we to make of this? Is having to share ones sexual phantasies with work colleagues reconfiguring the relationship between self and work? Or is simply a bit of harmless fun – is a team engaged on such an exercise working hard or playing hard? Of course this example may easily be dismissed as marginal – but its very occurrence is indeed of historical interest. There are many other examples of managerialised texts where the concept of play is called into use. What are we to make of them? Do they indicate anything new and/or culturally significant in the ways in which play and work interact in 2005?

II. Conceptual history as context for historical interpretation

In this paper, we will explore possibilities offered by conceptual history with regard to the concept of ‘play’ as it features in the examples above.

‘Conceptual history’ (*Begriffsgeschichte*) is a project which grew in post-war West Germany and is represented, amongst others, by Erich Rothacker, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Otto Brunner, Reinhart Koselleck, Werner Conze, or Joachim Ritter¹. The project is somewhat similar to work by Raymond Williams, Quentin Skinner, and J. G. A. Pocock in Britain, or Arthur Lovejoy in the USA. It draws on modern German hermeneutic and existential phenomenological thinking represented mainly by Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer. Although there are sharp distinctions between these authors, Reinhart Koselleck² (1985, 2002) offers a relatively clear reading and deployment of elements from these traditions in the field of history.

Ricoeur ends *Time and Narrative* asking: ‘Having left Hegel behind, can we still claim to think about history and the time of history?’ (1988: 207). In other words, can we think about ‘history’ and the ‘historical’ in human existence if we renounce the idea of a full, complete ‘mediation’ between the present and the past? If cannot have a full reconstruction of the past, how can history be more than another bedtime story? To answer this, Ricoeur turns to Koselleck and his reading of Heidegger (1985: 267-288) – such is the weight of the latter’s contribution.

Pivotal in Koselleck’s thinking is an existential vocabulary derived from Heidegger’s philosophical anthropology (1927) placed at the core of what we might term (human) ‘historicity’. His basic assumptions are very close to Ricoeur’s (1984-1988, 2004). Put simply, history is the expression of human life itself; it is, in fact, the only way in which human life can be lived. As such, it does not have either a mechanical beginning, nor can it have an end. The temporal unfolding of history is beyond the simplistic linearity of what might be termed ‘natural time’. The time of history is, for Koselleck, the time of the existential human being, of the *Dasein* (*Being-there* – shorthand for ‘person’) as conceived by Heidegger: the creature who is what it is first and foremost because it understands its temporal condition and its possibilities. This understanding is *Dasein*’s ontological core. Human beings are aware both of the certainty of their temporal finitude and of the creative openness of their lives’ horizons; the future holds both fear and hope. Humans are also aware of their past but not as a dead, forgotten shadow; rather, the past is perpetually ‘present’ in *Dasein*’s interpretation, understanding, and anticipation of its own condition (the past is a relationship with ourselves and the world similar to Proust’s imagery of a continuous ‘search’ of time passed in the quest for life’s continuation in the future). What we might term ‘historical consciousness’ is, for Koselleck, equivalent to Heidegger’s ‘being in time’.

But how can concrete historical work be undertaken on the basis of Heidegger’s *opus* with its crystallised ontological vocabulary? For example, how can we make sense of

¹ A detailed exposition of the enterprise of conceptual history is available in Richter (1995).

² Less known in the English-speaking world because much less of the work of the school he represents has been translated. He contributed to the vast encyclopaedia of ‘Basic Concepts in History. A Dictionary on Historical Principles of Political and Social Language in Germany’ which tends to be perceived more as a historical record than an original contribution to knowledge.

the relationship between play and work in contemporary managerialised work organisations in terms of Dasein's specific historical manner of being-in-the-world and being-with-others, as Heidegger might phrase it? Indeed, there can be no direct transposition of first philosophy into a historical hermeneutics. This has been shown both by Koselleck and Ricoeur: Heidegger's system of categories can only be a starting point for concrete historical interpretation. Although Heidegger's philosophy is apparently a phenomenology of everyday life, he never intended to prescribe norms for an *empirical science* of Dasein's 'lifeworld'. To understand and to make Heidegger's existential phenomenology a basis for historical work requires some conceptual 'mutations'.

Koselleck offers a two-fold, very pragmatic development in this direction. First, he configures an anthropological, 'metahistorical' set of concepts to grasp the 'life-force' of Dasein's historicity. In the study "'Space of Experience" and "Horizon of Expectation": Two Historical Categories' (1985: 267-288), he settles on a view of the 'historical' originating in Heidegger's section 65 of *Being and Time* (1962: 370-380, entitled *Temporality and the Ontological Meaning of Care*). Heidegger argues that time is the ontological ground of Dasein's existence in a specific way: (a) time is lived by Dasein with a sense of the meaningful, active co-presence of past, present, and future; (b) 'existence' in time is, for Dasein, a combination of 'ekstases': Dasein 'stretches towards'³ the past, present, and future in every moment of life (in other words, man's temporal existence is marked by a consciousness of time as being made of significant determinations coming from the past, the present and the future, and from whose interweaving 'meaning', 'life', and 'world' – as 'lifeworld' – emerge); (c) these three 'ekstases' of temporality do not contribute to Dasein's everyday existence in equal measure or manner. For Heidegger, *'The primary meaning of existentiality is the future.'* (1962: 376). In other words, it is the permanent anticipation of possibilities and the imagining of the 'future' which is the 'existential principle' of man's being in time.

This is the key in which Heidegger's message is read by Koselleck: life is about being in the next moment, as it were, 'caring' for one's future existence by anticipating it in 'hope and fear' (Ricoeur 1988: 208) and drawing upon 'experience' (which implies a living, active, sense-making notion of the 'past' as a fundamental part of the articulation of existence). Dasein is a creature of permanently anticipated possibilities but in the face of a permanent awareness of finitude. Heidegger argues that 'Dasein is constantly "more" than it factually is.' (1962: 185), or as Macquarrie paraphrased it:

'Man is possibility. He is always more than he is, his being is never complete at any given moment. He therefore has no essence as an object has.' (1973: 32)

This fundamental tension of human existence is the 'motor' of the permanent working out of the 'historical' as an interplay between interpretations and possibilities unfolding in time. Koselleck uses the terms 'space of experience' and 'horizon of

³ *ek-stasis* literally means 'standing outside', which can be seen – very abstractly – as existence's perpetual moving towards its own 'potentiality-for-Being' in its 'care' to carry on being. Albeit abstruse and apparently impenetrable, this kind of vocabulary is actually indispensable for the kind of philosophical enterprise Heidegger was engaged in. Although it can sometimes be tamed through some sort of paraphrasing, his idiom is actually much easier to understand in its own terms.

expectation' to capture this temporal 'polarity' which have paradoxical spatial echoes. He calls them 'metahistorical' – or anthropological – categories which transmute into cultural-historical language Heidegger's *'Being-already-in'* as the 'past' (the 'having been' part of Dasein's life but not as a dead element); and the *'ahead-of-itself'* as the hopeful and anxious anticipation of possibilities, the horizon towards which Dasein 'intends'⁴ itself, the life process itself as the future.

Koselleck argues that we can investigate historical sources by looking at how 'experiences' (the 'presence of the past' in the sense above) and 'expectations' (the 'presence of the future' articulated in anticipations) manifest themselves in human 'action' – in Ricoeur's words:

'...it is within the dimension of acting (and suffering, which is its corollary) that thought about history will bring together its perspectives.' (1988: 208)

In other words, in the actions of people, we can detect the working out of the tensions between 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'.

How do experience and expectation take concrete shape? Here Koselleck inserts a second and fundamental aspect of his historical approach: the notion of 'concept'. The working out of 'experience' and 'expectation' becomes manifest in the way people understand and narrate (in a hermeneutic sense) their lives. This takes the shape of multifaceted narratives and discursive exchanges between people in the world. But do narratives have the power to shape history? Which will be more captivating than others for articulating expectations? Are there stable (ahistorical) narrative structures forming the bedrock of history? Koselleck suggests that we can make sense of some of these aspects by looking at how fundamental historical concepts change throughout history thus changing the shape of history.

What is a 'concept'? Briefly, a 'concept' is a mediator between a certain 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'. For example, in European history 'freedom' functioned as a fundamental concept mediating between the continuities of traditions and institutions, but also as a major source of contestations. 'Freedom' in the 20th century characterised both the vocabulary of the establishment and that of emancipatory movements (from the Suffragettes, to the Civil Rights Movement, to the UN Human Rights Charter). For both sides, the concept of 'freedom' set forth a range of possibilities of continuity and discontinuity in the terms of which, crucially, human action ensued in certain forms.

The task of conceptual history is to trace (cultural) destinies of concepts which mediate the tensions between 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'. But, a concept is not simply a word, nor is its presence and emergence simply taking place at a textual level; nor are concepts significant in perpetuity (there is no ahistorical structure of certain concepts which guide human life – such as kinship would be for Lévy-Straussian anthropology). Indeed, the meaning of concepts is not simply bound up with the ahistorical structural alternatives offered by linguistic grammatical and semantic structures. Not every word functions as a concept in any language at a given

⁴ We use this term in relation to the phenomenological category of 'intentionality' as the mode of being of thought and interpretation.

moment in historical time: for example, terms such as ‘modern’, ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘work’, or ‘play’ in the social-cultural history of ‘Europe’ (which is itself a concept) are ‘concepts’, in Koselleck’s sense; whereas words such as ‘ping-pong ball’, ‘apricot’, or ‘shoe’ are not concepts in this historical frame of reference. In our interpretation, concepts are elements of vocabulary which evoke aspects of what Dupré (1993: 3-5, 87) termed the ‘ontotheological synthesis⁵’ of an *epoch* and which have a historical effectiveness in shaping the ways in which tensions between ‘experience’ and ‘expectation’ are stabilised and contested.

Koselleck’s argument is that there is a level of historical unfolding which is neither that of ‘events’ nor of ‘structures’ (as Febvre, Braudel and others would argue), but one of conceptual historical movement⁶. His idea of a conceptual history comes as a response to the (rather conveniently) ignored issue raised implicitly in Febvre’s statement of social history’s unit of analysis:

‘There are no “creative” theories, properly speaking, because as soon as an idea, as fragmentary as it may be, has been realised, however imperfectly, in the domain of facts, it is no longer the idea that counts and acts, it is the institution situated in its place, in its time, incorporating within itself a complicated and protean network of social facts, producing and enduring in turn a thousand diverse actions and a thousand reactions.’ (Febvre, cited by Chartier, in La Capra and Kaplan 1982: 16)

Two fundamental issues are raised here: where do institutions or structures come from? And if structures resist human action, where does the dynamism of history come from? Febvre’s statement was a powerful rebuttal of the histories of the so-called *ancien régime*, the histories in which only great men (monarch, politicians, diplomats, philosophers, writers – the latter being the subject of the comment above) acted and whose actions shaped the history of all. Yet, in spite of his constructive intentions, the questions remain. Arguably, Koselleck’s approach unfastens such rigid structural determinisms of social history to the open historical horizon of an existential perspective in which, at the level of concepts, we can grasp yet more of the living historicity of Dasein.

For example, institutions are themselves specific resolutions to the tensions between ‘experiences’ and ‘expectations’; institutions are (as the etymology of the word suggests: *institutio* means *custom* in Latin) embodiments of certain historical perspectives mediated by certain conceptual patterns. Blumenberg (1990: 163) argues, on this basis, that institutions are ‘distributions of burdens of proof’ – i.e. distributions of conceptual orders which mediate the need to stabilise the relationship between ‘space of experience’ and ‘horizon of expectation’ at any given historical moment. The movement of history is, amongst other things, action intended to redistribute burdens of proof, to renegotiate what is established in the name of new ‘expectations’ and interpretations of possibilities. The legislative process illustrates

⁵ The synthesis of three fundamental axes of a historical worldview: the sense of what the world (or cosmos) is, the sense of what is the world’s transcendental source, and the sense of the human interpreter is (Dupré 1993: 249). These major themes are not however abstractions; they are guides for the everyday negotiation of Dasein’s existence in the world.

⁶ In this regard, Koselleck chose his words with care – he did not use the words ‘evolution’ or ‘development’ because he considered them to be historically determined in themselves.

very well this continuous institutional arrangement of concrete social life in terms of 'burdens of proof'. The currency for this continuous renegotiation of an institutional arrangement is a certain economy of concepts which carries, as it were, historical time (as an expression of existential time). Similarly, the notion of 'work hard/play hard' organisational cultures put forward by Deal and Kennedy recycles a certain concept of entitlement to reward changing its range of significance by inserting 'play' into 'work culture', legitimating the integration of 'work' and 'play' spheres.

Koselleck's view of the rise of modernity is an elegant illustration. His argument is that modernity emerges when a new series of concepts changes the Medieval relationships between 'experience' and 'expectation'. For a long time, 'expectation' had been formulated in the conceptual terms provided by 'the Christian doctrine of the Final Days' (Koselleck 1985: 277-278) and in which the future was tightly bound up with the past (as the possibility and promise of a return to Jerusalem). Everyday life was indeed, for many generations, shaped by this conceptual framework. Expectations and actions that 'went beyond [challenged – authors' note] all previous experience were not related to this world' (Koselleck 1985: 277), alternative futures were not 'real', or historically legitimate; literally, did not exist. And even when the anticipation of Christ's second coming did not (repeatedly) occur, the expectation of the End of the World remained the conceptual ground of 'experience' and shaped 'expectation' for succeeding generations' self- and world-understanding.

Modernity, for Koselleck, breaks up this conceptual continuity between 'experience' and 'expectations'. New concepts, expressed in new *topoi*, open an increasingly wider gap between the 'space of experience' and the 'horizon of expectation' at individual and collective levels in European cultures. The confounded expectation of the End gave way to a new concept of the future: the notion of *progress* emerges and shifts the ground of historical experience. Three new *topoi* (or *tropes* – conceptual 'moves', in our terms) characterise modernity: (a) the idea of the coming – and living in the horizon – of a *new time*⁷ (made possible by *progress*); (b) the idea of an *accelerated rate of progress*; and (c) the idea of *man as maker of history* ('freedom' and 'emancipation' from what Blumenberg (1985) calls the 'theological absolutism' of the Middle Ages reconfigure expectations of man's historical agency and power in the world).

Koselleck argues that these fundamentally new concepts express changes of experiences and expectations in Europe characterising the cultural period which we call 'modernity'. Embodied in multiple actions, institutions, new myths, new concepts, laws, etc., modernity is testimony to a new ethical, political, economic, cultural relationship between 'experience', 'expectation', and 'action' as the existential foundations of historicity. Koselleck argues that the specific nature of the modern relationship of experience to expectation is the opening up of wide gap between the two, a gap in which experience is no longer a 'positive' contributor to the formulation of expectations, but rather a hindrance. Modernity is the age in which freedom manifests itself in expectations formulated *against* experience, the future is always a taking a stand against the past – which is, of course, the precondition of what moderns take as 'progress'. The last *topos* above – the cultural idea that history is the subject of human action, which lies at the heart of concepts such as freedom,

⁷ In German, 'modernity' is literally denoted by the term *Neuzeit* – literally, 'new time'.

participation, secularisation, etc. – is perhaps key in our interpretation of play and work in the 21st century.

III. Conceptual history in operation: notes on management, play and work

The all too brief introduction to Koselleck's work and the relatively simplistic hints at the nuances of conceptual history in the previous section need a complement. We will offer here a more detailed set of notes on the 'practice of conceptual history' using the case of play as a concept figuring in contexts exemplified in section I.

This section will be organised in two parts: first, we will interpret potential alterations (discontinuities) in managerial uses of 'play' since the 1980s; secondly, we will trace 'play' as an indicator of 'experiences' and 'expectations' of work in the 21st century and its cultural continuities with modernity.

1. The concept of 'play' and management ideas since the 1980s

Are there significant discontinuities in the use of 'play' as a concept in managerial ideology in contemporary organisations? Are new 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation' configured through its use?

In a conceptual-historical approach to play, we focus on three aspects. First, has anything changed over the last two decades in the elaboration of what counts as play in the workplace: have the *criteria of constitution* of the concept of play changed? Secondly, has play's value as a concept changed? Has play been transvalued in a significant manner? This a question regarding changes in the *modes of appraisal* of play in management. Thirdly, has play become the object of new *types of reference*: is it part of a vocabulary redefining relationships between spheres of life: public-private, 'work-on-work' and 'work-on-self', or the production and consumption of 'culture'? Does play indicate changes in the ethics and politics of work organisations? Does it indicate new forms of liberation and emancipation, or 'closures' of possibilities? Is it a sign of the power of cultural 'producers' (managerial ideologues), or of its 'consumers' (non-managerial employees)?

(i) If we turn to the first of these, the *criteria of constitution*, we will advance in this paper the following proposition: the concept of 'play' has undergone a transition from a simple, rational and rather marginal *method of enhancing productive abilities* to a wider and more central *metaphor of personal and organisational life*. In other words, 'play' has changed its nature and its sphere. What is the evidence?

From examples offered in section I, we argue that although play has always been a part of 20th century modern organisations⁸, it has changed as a concept between its early, middle and late decades. Basically intolerable to the logic of mass-production assembly lines of the early 1900s, it became acceptable as a regenerative distraction (especially in the tense circumstances of the two world wars). However, play and work remained ethically separate spheres of the lifeworld and their co-presence was always a form of transgression and in need of careful separation: 'serious work' and

⁸ Of course, this goes much further back, but we will not extend the chronological record back at this point.

‘frivolous play’ could only come together as either subversion (misbehaving), or as lateral, extramural, passive, non-productive recreation of individual and collective working potential.

The post-war period, dominated by ‘systems rationalism’ (see Barley and Kunda 1992), saw an expansion in the use of play as managerial technology required for the stimulation of learning and innovative processes. In this guise, play extended its sphere from mere recreational moment, to productive context. Contributions such as Babb’s (1966), Newstrom’s (1980), Deal and Kennedy’s (1982), Kaagan’s (1999), or Schrage’s (2000) illustrate this repositioning. For them, play is effective because it engenders *mimesis*: assimilation and reproduction of behaviours in game-mediated learning settings (such as business simulations resemble flight simulators), or assimilation and reproduction of certain dimensions of organisational culture (such as Deal and Kennedy’s ‘work hard/play hard cultures’, or Schrage’s ‘prototyping’ as an activity which generates and regenerates productive innovation and productive organisational dynamism).

However, a shift occurs – mainly, in the 1990s – in the way play is related to work. As indicated in section I, ‘play’ and ‘playfulness’ change from a simple mimetic-productive device to a more complex set of modes of being and ‘feeling’ at work. Berg, Pinault, and (emphatically) Kane suggest a new implications.

First, the constituency of ‘players’ in organisations expands: from training settings and innovative processes confined to those who design, manage, or ‘think strategically’, new kinds of organisational members can and ought to play nowadays. To the extent that everybody in a service economy is a direct ‘executive’ of the main object of activity (managing ‘total’ quality, ‘delivering excellence’, being ‘knowledgeable workers, facing internal or external ‘customers’), everybody is to be involved in the full gamut of organisational culture. Indeed, the ‘cultural turn’ in management ideologies begun in the 1980s changed the way in which management ideologues and practitioners now see the involvement of the subject at work. The entire managerial vocabulary of the last two decades has been centred around opening up work and work organisations to the full involvement of subjectivity: quality and participation, empowerment and learning, knowledge work and knowledge management, self-management and self-actualisation, enjoyment and customer-orientation – have all become interlinked as key ingredients of productivity (how else might we explain the very possibility of offering pornography as context for teambuilding?). Pinault’s work makes this plainly evident: the new cultures are *for everybody* and *everybody’s*. Thus if there is to be play in organisations, then its constituency is the entire membership.

Secondly, play has not only expanded its ‘quantitative’ social sphere; it has also changed its quality. In the texts by Berg, Pinault and Kane, play at work marks a shift in the ethos of life. Not only is play no longer secondary, but it is pushed in a central position as an ultimate modality of mobilising organisational resourcefulness.

(ii) It might therefore be argued that these sources point toward a substantive change in the cultural-ethical value attached to play at work. A *reappraisal* is taking place through these ideas: a shift in the conception of the ‘self’ and the ‘world’ seems to be leading to a transvaluation of ‘play’ as a mode of being at work.

In Pinault's and Kane's texts, for example, a new combination emerges: on the one hand, they construct an image of a world which is complex and chaotic because it is the outcome of an intractable play of forces and energies; on the other hand, they suggest that the human subject too should rediscover its true nature, one in which the life-giving force is 'play' or being 'playful' (in other words, to live life to the full, to be fully what one can be – a favourite motif of Maslowian self-actualisation – the subject ought to treat life as play).

A new sense of what it means to be a self at work emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as *subjectivity* became the central platform of managerial work and self-understanding, generating a new conception of what constitutes a 'rich human resource'. Managerial ideologues produced the new mythology and categories required to capture this anticipated 'cornucopia' of human resourcefulness. The central category of this new mythology became, unsurprisingly, the 'self' and its intimate grammars, manifest in various practices of what Blumenberg (1985) called 'self-assertion'. This turn to subjectivity finds in play (in the 'ludic') a theme that allows a kind of polyvalent justification of the general call to mobilise all personal resources in the service of 'self-assertion' as the key to productivity. For the first time, it seems, such discourses do not *primarily* emphasise ideas of productivity, corporate performance and profitability, but focus predominantly on opportunities work provides for self-celebration. It is from this self-affirmation that economic value will emerge: this is the core of the 'strong culture' thesis since the 1980s.

But Pinault and Kane also establish a new relationship between play and the nature of the world. For them, playfulness is not just an 'optional' feature of work. It becomes compulsory because the world itself is a play of intractable forces. This is evident in their rejection of the dull and uncreative 'seriousness' of the Protestant work ethic (expressed in its formal rationality) in favour of a world-view emphasising the 'chaotic', 'uncertain', 'complex' and 'fast changing' nature of life itself. This requires a 'new (personal) integrity', a substantive new way of integrating one's self in the world. Play becomes the new rational mode of facing this (re)integration in a world where networking, connectivity, virtuality, globality, and so on, are the new dimensions of existence. Danah Zohar places, for instance, leadership at the 'Edge of Chaos' because:

'In chaos dynamics, "the edge" is the border between order and chaos, between the known and the unknown. In this age of intensified global interdependence and accelerated change, a mindset of reactivity and control will fail. Leading at the edge, we capitalize on what we don't know, we learn to lead with questions, to harness uncertainty for corporate benefit.'
(<http://www.dzohar.com/lwdetail2.htm>, accessed March 2005)

The transvaluation which takes place here is that 'play' becomes a *serious* proposition. No longer are play, enjoyment, or fun (as its contemporary corollaries) mere frivolity and self-indulgence. Schrage and the Xplicit Porn School present play and fun as 'serious' because play, enjoyment and fun are both entitlements (rights *sui generis*) for organisational members, and pillars of productivity.

The new, 'total' kind of 'play' suggests the legitimate expectation of a new horizon of being at work. In climactic promise, Kane anticipates no less than 'infinite possibilities'. What is the cultural import of this expectation/desire? Is it new?

(iii) The new *types of reference* made to play in managerial literature and practices, the omnipresence of the vocabularies of fun, enjoyment and so on, have opened up the everyday relationship between self and work to new possibilities. Initially, we detect reconfigured spheres of lifeworlds. Boundaries between work and play become blurred. Equally important is the new purpose of playing at work: play is not another tool for work intensification; it is an 'entitlement' of the 'hard working' self. Productivity follows naturally an overflow of personal well-being. Unsurprisingly, organisations blend ludic practices with what is termed 'wellness at work' (relaxation, 'positivity', fitness, emotional well-being, etc. are all part of new idiom of managerial *teleology* – explored in Costea, Crump, and Holm 2005).

The experience of work as self-renunciation, drudgery, and as a context in which being serious meant 'not enjoying oneself' (a reference to the now obsolete Protestant work ethic made explicitly in Kane's slides for *New Integrity*) should be replaced in 'playful' organisations by the opening up of a horizon in which one expects work (as human action) to be delivered from tension, suffering (in Ricoeur's sense), and a sense of self-sacrifice. Rather, the new ethos of work should be 'having fun' (leading, by implication, to new levels of liberation).

Perhaps more fundamental is the indication contained in these uses of play that a new understanding of the horizon of life is on the brink of emergence: the anticipation of life with no foreseeable end, or, at least, promising endless youth (a perpetually preserved and active 'inner child' is on the horizon), enjoyment, and self-expression.

2. *Play and work between 'experiences' and 'expectations': new or old themes of modernity?*

So far, we have suggested that play points toward a new 'horizon of expectation' for work. In this section, we will argue that this 'new play' does not break new cultural ground; rather it follows the wider conceptual rhythms of modernity. If managerial uses of the concept of play seem to contain novel elements in the short-term, they are also contiguous with some of the salient, longer-term features of the modern way of working out tensions between 'spaces of experience' and 'horizons of expectation'.

This is because the major *topoi* of modernity ('accelerated progress' and of always moving towards 'new times' through the essential agency of 'man' over history itself) also operate in the new concept of play constructed in managerial circles. The current movement of 'play' (with its associates: fun, enjoyment, wellness, happiness, etc.) indicates not just a discontinuity, but also a cultural continuity with the major themes of modernity several of which we will briefly mention here.

(i) First, play is associated with new images of the 'resourceful self' at work⁹. This images indicate profound affinities between these managerial vocabularies and an epochal feature of modernity conceptualised by Blumenberg (1985) as *'self-*

⁹ Evident in the multiple vocabularies of Human Resource Management focused on subjectivity.

assertion'. Blumenberg argues that a resolute historical movement against Christian theological absolutism generated a secular vision of human life centred upon itself, and placed in an infinite universe over which 'Man' must assert his mastery. This thesis took various forms in the last five centuries, but it has remained – conceptually – one of the central dimensions of what Dupré (1993) calls the 'onto-theological synthesis' of modernity. The new assemblage of work, play and self in contemporary organisations continues the modern theme of 'self-assertion'. Work increasingly absorbs attributes of an open horizon for self-assertion. In exchange, a win-win game of endless production-consumption-self-actualisation will ensue. The tropes of endless resourcefulness to be liberated at work against the background of a world of infinite possibilities are both a manner of presenting the world as infinite (when it is obviously painfully finite), and a manner of treating the taboo of finitude/mortality in a secularised world.

(ii) A related feature in the repositioning of self in work through play is the *immanent individualism* of the life-force of man. What play will enable is not a change of the world but a quasi-Gnostic change of self: a discovery of hitherto unknown personal powers (indicated by Pinault, Kane, Berg and Schrage). However different their particular arguments, the centrality of individualism indicates a clear continuity with modern culture. These play themes indicate not new, but intensified cultural processes.

(iii) Associated with self-assertion and individual immanentism is a less talked about cultural theme of modernity (present in managerialised play): the theme of '*world-alienation*' developed by Arendt (1958), Blumenberg (1985; 1990), Dupré (1993) (among many philosophers and sociologists from in the 19th and 20th centuries). In Arendt's formulation, the secularisation characterising modernity is not simply a degradation of Christian themes – rather,

'Modern loss of faith is not religious in origin – it cannot be traced to the Reformation or Counter Reformation [...] – and its scope is by no means restricted to the religious sphere. Moreover, even if we admitted that the modern age began with a sudden, inexplicable eclipse of transcendence, of belief in a hereafter, it would by no means follow that this loss threw man back upon the world. The historical evidence, on the contrary, shows that modern men were not thrown back upon this world but upon themselves.'
(Arendt 1958: 253-254)

Arendt adds,

'Whatever the word "secular" is meant to signify in current usage, historically it cannot possibly be equated with worldliness; modern man at any rate did not gain this world when he lost the other world, and he did not gain life, strictly speaking either; he was thrust back upon it, thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of reckoning of the mind, its play with itself.'
(Arendt 1958: 320).

At the end of the 20th century, the rise of 'soft capitalism' marks an intensification of this play of the self: the emergence of the 'self-work ethic' described by Heelas (2002: 80) as

[an attempt of] ‘the self as a self which considers itself to be something more, something much “deeper”, more natural and authentic than the self of what is taken to be involved with the superficialities of the “merely” materialistic-cum-consumeristic; the self as a self which has to work on itself to enrich and explore itself, in the process of dealing with its problems.’

Play is an important conceptual mediator in this new relationship. It amplifies self-assertion through new work practices but it also amplifies inwardness and a forgetfulness of the world. Play may be an expression of the modern self’s overcoming the absolutism of scientific reason when the latter becomes a cultural obstacle to self-assertion. The relationship is, of course, paradoxical (science is both the self’s liberator through technology, *and* its conceptual cage at the same time), but modernity is full of cultural paradoxes. In falling back even further upon itself, the ‘unworldly worldliness’ of modern man is intensified. Kane and Pinault represent directly this tendency: raising play to a mode of being which opens up ‘endlessness’ of the self, they take full leave of the ‘lifeworld’ and Dasein’s existence (real life’s ‘space of experience’) whose main axis is finitude. Yet their work is not ‘madness’ but sign of ‘progress’ inasmuch as they represent the fantasies (expectations) of the fully self-obsessed self.

(iv) Finally, what Taylor (1989: 53-91) calls the ‘ethical inarticulacy’ of the modern subject seems to be a key dimension in the ‘play’ ideology. His suggestion that the modern subject lives in a moral (historical) space characterised by ‘inarticulacy’ allows us to explore the continuity of the new concept of play at work and modernity.

Put simply, self-assertion and world alienation mark a gap between experiences and expectations for modern people that no coherent ethical ground can emerge. The celebration of the secular self, mediated by political and technological concepts (freedom and progress) encounters, at the dawn of the 21st century, the fundamental dilemma of finitude: neither the existential ‘self’, nor the world are infinite. The taboo on finitude which is at the core of ‘self-assertion’ faces us with an impenetrable ethical problem. None of the concepts which govern our ontotheological synthesis can cope with finitude in its tragic, existential reality. Caught up in self-assertion in an unworldly worldliness, the modern subject is suspended in a continuous ethical *aporia*: ‘good’ are at the same time ‘bad’ actions. Every act of self-celebration can be seen both as liberating and as unwarranted further limitation on the future and on others (best illustrated through mass-consumption of all resources). In our view, the weakening of our concept of finitude (of self and world) is at the core of this ethical inarticulacy. It manifests itself first and foremost in a gradual de-recognition of finitude and limits at the level of the everyday. Locked in itself, the subject cannot face its own self-referentiality; turning (desperately) outwards, it finds itself faced with a world which offers only alienating references (attractive but mostly hostile, the world today seems incoherent in the imagery of total fragmentation between cultural spaces according to their access to production and consumption). This contradiction is resolved by acting ‘inarticulately’ (noting the damage of technology but intensifying the hope placed in it). Thus an increasingly wide conceptual gap opens up between ‘spaces of experience’ and ‘horizons of expectation’, as Koselleck himself argued.

In our case, the new mixture of play and work is an epiphany of ethical inarticulacy which manifests itself at macro and micro-cultural levels. The way in which Kane, Carse and Csikszentmihalyi, for example, propose play as an infinite possibility of being and suggest that all life experiences should be turned into 'infinite games' is a cultural expression of this search for a way of leaving behind the 'space of experience' of finitude and reaching new horizons of 'infinity'. In fact, it is this idea of a world in which 'everything might be possible' and in which everybody is entitled to endless enjoyment (what Bruckner calls 'the utopia of fun' – 2000b), in which youth is prolonged (Bruckner 2000a), and in which life itself will be delivered from suffering and even mortality (and why not? what else is the current investment of hope in the promises of genetic elucidation of man's biological being?) that Taylor suggests (not in these terms) is the essence of what he terms 'ethics of inarticulacy'.

IV. Concluding remarks

Is the 'play' concept in current managerial literature a new move in, or a continuation of, existing cultural processes?

This paper suggests a possible historical analysis to such a question. The aim is to show that if we take the historicity of management phenomena seriously, there are various ways of interpreting their significance. We have sketched here a conceptual-historical approach. Albeit only a 'skeletal' argument, it draws attention to possible alternatives and ramifications of a cultural-historical analysis. The object chosen is notoriously ambiguous and open historically. It offers a wide scope for interpretations but is also fraught with vast theoretical and empirical dangers. We do not claim to have overcome them, but we have more questions than at the beginning.

These final remarks would perhaps be best served by formulating some of the questions. First, how credible and operational is an existential phenomenological view of subjectivity as a starting point for historical interpretation? Even though the temptation is to take the primacy of time in relation to being as a privileged premise for history, how clear is the vision proposed by the existential movement? What further conceptual developments are necessary to make a philosophical system into concrete historical instrument?

Secondly, what kinds of sources should conceptual-historical work pursue? Which signs would count as evidence plausible enough for deciphering such vague categories as 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation'? When we talk about 'concepts' as a unit of historical analysis, how do we related them back to the acting subjects, to intentionality (whose manifestation concepts ultimately are), and how do we related the subjects back to the constraints of their lifeworlds? In other words, what is the value of conceptual history of organisational practices? Where should it look for its sources? What is the relationship between action, text, structure, agency, etc.? With this we return to the major unresolved disputes of social and historical theory.

Thirdly, we are treading the dangerous ground historians themselves (no less Foucault himself) avoided: interpreting the historical *present*. How feasible is such an undertaking? How can we pretend to observe the rigours of historical work when phenomena are unfolding and we are part of them?

Despite formulating such intimidating questions – of ourselves, first of all – we will simply conclude that, although the project of a ‘total history’ is impossible, ‘another way remains, that of an open-ended, incomplete, imperfect mediation, namely [an understanding of] the network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present’ (Ricoeur 1988: 207, our addition).

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