CHILDREN, SPACES AND IDENTITY
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CHILDREN, SPACES AND IDENTITY


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Learning to Be Adults: Games and Childhood on the Outskirts of the Big City (San Isidro, Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Daniel Schavelzon

Introduction

Johan Huizinga was the first to open our minds to the need to study play in archaeology, to define its central role in the construction of civilization. He began bluntly by saying: ‘Play is older than culture, (…) and animals did not have to wait for man in order to learn to play’. But the controversy that was triggered by the methodical study of childhood in the west, namely the books of Philippe Ariès and Lloyd deMause (1982) with their erudite footnotes and dozens of bibliographical references each, brought a realisation that archaeology still had much distance to cover in this respect. It was not easy to probe into this area in the early days of historical archaeology in Latin America, not just because of the sheer dimensions involved, but also because there were great controversies among authors, which made it difficult to take sides. In order to achieve what Europe was doing in Nordic archaeology – where the question of the archaeology of childhood came forward in the 1970s – we lacked experience and excavations in an activity that was only just beginning here.

Knowledge of the archaeology of childhood eventually grew in the region. The controversy surrounding Processualism and gender archaeology led to penetration into uncommon fields, the latter in particular looking into minorities and the unrepresented, moving away from the mainstream and towards marginal or subjugated individuals and groups. By the 1990s the issue had taken root, and by 2000 papers and congresses had appeared all over the world. By the time the Society for the Study of Childhood in the Past and its corresponding journal had been created, the issue had grown and was recognised by historical archaeology.

Changes in the way childhood was viewed advanced from the recognition of the most obvious objects (marbles, dolls and other toys) to finding play spaces and the social role that this represented. One example shows us this process: in 1764, Johann J. Winckelmann, wrote in what is now considered a foundational text for archaeology,
Winckelmann made various assumptions: that those ceramics had been for children and were not models for other artisans – or some other thing beyond our knowledge – as scale models were, and that they were also toys, for children to play with. Our understanding, and surely that of the 18th century too, is that to play is to have fun, and according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia de la Lengua Española*, the first definition of the word *‘jugar’* (to play) is ‘to do something with joy and for the sole purpose of entertaining oneself or having fun’. We might also add that it is also part of psychological mechanisms for constructing fantasies. From a modern viewpoint it may not seem that those vessels had had such a purpose; in playing, a child does many other things, basically reproducing the universe she is part of, and logically what Winckelmann believed was for entertainment was no more than what adults gave to children so that their world continued without change, to be reproduced over and over again. That is, if we accept that they were toys and had no other function.

Any attempt to explore the archaeology of children is no easy task, and this can be seen in the slow progress of the bibliography on the subject, beginning with the issue of gender in the 1970s, to then move on to the recognition of the absence of children and childhood. There are still questions of childhood that have not been studied and we will try here to explore one of these. Without leaving aside the toys whose significance is now recognised in archaeology, it is important to understand which children played and how and where they played. For this we will see the material evidence of play in objects, not all of which are toys. We will see it reflected in indicators that show actions over the material culture by children but which judging by their simplicity and low cost cannot necessarily be explained by differences in social class, but by the type of activity performed and the physical place in which it took place. It may be that parts of a broken porcelain doll were replaced with carved wood, the interpretation being that the doll was passed down to servants or slaves, but it may also be the solution of someone who was simply poor. But the intact doll may have belonged to a girl from the family but used for playing with a slave girl. We shall also see that this was the local custom. Imagine a society when children can interact with the children of slaves or servants until puberty (by the age of 12 such play came to a complete stop) and this custom is sustained until the 20th century (Fig. 9.1).

Have children always played? This is a question to which the initial answer appears to be yes, from our point of view influenced by modern psychology. We can assume that play has indeed been a constant presence in the history of childhood, which in turn brings up the need to define what we understand as *play* in each time. Hence this is not a question that can be answered with any certainty. Neither documentary history nor archaeology appears to be able to confirm it, at least in our understanding of the word. We do however believe that entertainment has always existed, that there must always have been fantasy; children played with whatever they had to hand, whether adults’ objects or objects made especially for them. They fought, ran and got up to what we would now call mischief,
transgressing adult codes, and since Roman times this has been documented in art. They may have been punished as sinners for this, or such transgressions may have been part of teaching about freedoms, but it still happened. And we know that adults’ reactions were violent to the point of verging on sadistic, and so biographies, letters and memoirs of childhood throughout the world rarely describe happy situations prior to the 19th century. Such situations are anecdotal, remembered affectionately, memories that water down the conflictive elements, but they are still loveless. We have 19th century paintings and prints of street scenes in which poorly-clothed children play-fight, rolling on the ground or intruding into the adult leisure activities, as Ariès argued, while the well-dressed show off their clothes, clean and upstanding. Parents’ tyrannical obsession leading to infanticide was not a 19th century construction; restrictions on freedom and child labour have always existed and are not inventions of the modern family.

In local art the social differences can be clearly seen from the 1820s on, although of course one has to see it behind the facades of model families in their functioning, as seen in the Alfaro family described here. It is that society that gave us artists such as the French-educated Carlos Pellegrini, who in the early 19th century painted children, games and social roles as part of everyday reality. While children began to appear in the iconography at the start of that century, children’s stories would have longer to wait, at least until 1860, as did children’s hospitals and memoirs of childhood. It is interesting that such memoirs were not written to be read by children but by adults. For children, reading meant manuals of etiquette. Noé Jitrik writes that in this regard, that attitude of remembering childhood was part of:

…a feeling of pride at belonging to a preordained class and the most brilliant group (...) which makes its members constantly return to themselves. There is a reclaiming of the family and of childhood (...) to establish a family line, to somehow explain this preordination, the mission to be fulfilled.\textsuperscript{12}

Is it a problem that there is a lack of toys or certain objects because they did not survive? It is hard to say. It is true that mass use of toys occurred in the 19th century, and locally around the middle of the 19th century toy numbers increased greatly with
large-scale imports from 1852 with the re-opening of the port to British imports. But we can ask a simple question regarding toy soldiers, known from the 16th century, which were common in training the child for an undoubtedly violent future. Hans Christian Andersen published one of his most widely-known stories, *Den Stanhaftige Tinsoldat* (*The Steadfast Tin Soldier*) and from that time and until my generation tin soldiers were used and every child had as many of them as were affordable. There were surely hundreds of thousands of them buried under the city, and yet not one has ever been found. There is a no doubt a complex explanation for this, but what we have learned is that although many non-perishable objects existed en masse, this does not indicate that they will be frequently found.

The role of children in a male adult society, where they were considered *potential adults*, even beings who if not involved or straightened out in their infancy would become deformed adults, appears to have been far more common than the outrage that this causes in us today appears to indicate. It is interesting that it is thought to have been a custom that came to an end with the Enlightenment, an end inspired by Rousseau, and which only occasionally continued into the 19th century. My own generation saw that in various Latin American countries up until the 1970s, our children’s friends were constrained for years (Fig. 9.2).

The questions of love versus authority, the difference between boys’ and girls’ clothes, and the possibility of outdoor activities applying only to boys developed differently.
according to the country and continent. It was thus understood that the passing of child
education and orphanages to the state was part of the modern concept of progress.
Consequently, the bourgeois revolution exhorted mothers and the industrial production
system in society to forge closer ties between parents and children, producing toys
that influenced these relationships and constructed new adult responsibilities towards
childcare and achieving family happiness. This again is Ariès’ hypothesis regarding the
great change that occurred in the late 18th century, but it is also true that this did not
guarantee that it would be done.$^{15}$ It is true that the bourgeois revolution produced the
social construct of childhood, but it was not the only cause, and the words of deMause
are still true when he paraphrases St. Augustine many centuries before Freud: ‘Give
me other mothers and I will give you another world’.$^{16}$

Perhaps because of this it is so common that in ancient places in the world where
playthings have been found, they are associated with the entertainment of adults.
The link between chance and entertainment and divination is one commonly made:
knucklebones, chips, dice, dominoes, chess, backgammon or coins tossed in the air,
all activities that do not appear to have been related to children like today. We still
use the words game and play for adult competition, such as in sport and the Olympic
Games. Play, as we know thanks to Johan Huizinga and his 1955 book on the world
of play (2000), was associated with the amusement of baroque courtiers, soldiers with
their colourful uniforms and flags, and the leisure of wealthy social classes. Even in
the lower classes in colonial times, the sadistic entertainment of cockfighting was out
of bounds for children. Dolls and miniatures in Egyptian tombs, or Pharaohs’ games,
including the Royal Game of Ur at the British Museum, were always for adults; no
child could have touched the magnificent miniatures of domestic life found in the great
Egyptian tombs. And in the shorter term material evidence continues to provide scant
information for before the late 18th century.

In each period and place the relationship between children and adults has been varied,
complex, invariably one of suffering, if not cruelty. Not all children played or were happy
or had a universe of fantasy like the 19th century imagined and psychology encouraged
in the late Victorian period. At least in general terms parents did not feel affection for
their children, did not prevent unfortunate situations, exploited their children and even
drove them to their deaths without feeling guilt. The renowned Argentine children’s writer
Eduarda Mansilla tells us how during her joyful and wealthy childhood her father, for
whom she felt great affection, would at Christmas give her and her siblings exquisitely-
wrapped gifts which were sometimes found to contain potatoes and carrots, so that when
they excitedly unwrapped them they would learn to ‘prepare for disappointments and
heartache’. And that in the mid-19th century, among upper-class European-educated
people.$^{17}$ It is not surprising, then, that all of Mansilla’s stories end in tragedy (Fig. 9.3).

Generally childhood has been a time of suffering for the vast majority of children,
to the extent that the concepts of family happiness are considered ideas developed in
modern times – understood as after the Ancien Régime – at least in terms of an ideal
to be sought by all of society. If our sense of childhood was invented in the 19th
century or in the Enlightenment, or even if it already existed, it remains controversial in history. Ultimately it is not a problem different to that of the material presence of other non-dominant social groups, such as women, old people, the disabled and the sick, sexual diversities or servants of all kinds. Slavery, gender and indigenous groups have been able to gain visibility in recent archaeology and today occupy a place, which children presently occupy, while the rest still await their turn.

**LOCAL PRECEDENTS**

Historic archaeology studies into childhood in Argentina began in the 1980s with urban archaeology. The issue came to light when a primary school was excavated in the town of Quilmes in 1995 and no other objects were found that were not school objects. But in many others excavations that had been carried out at houses and rubbish pits in Buenos Aires before that, child objects had indeed appeared that could be attributed to that social group, such as clothing and toys, but the condition of these finds did not allow any further analysis besides mere recognition. So before the end of the 20th century we already had a list of what a white middle to upper-class girl or kid usually wore. It was in 2000 that we managed to find, in a house built in the late 18th century, what we consider to be a ‘children’s room’. There the objects were related to study, sewing practice, female child beauty and play. This was, then, the place where children learned their future role as adults, boys and girls separately, through a private home education still in the colonial tradition, where they took lessons in reading and writing (boys) and sewing and how to dress (girls). And they also played. The evidence was quite clear: while the number of marbles in two square metres was 26, in all the rest of the house – an excavation of 30 square metres – there were only three. While writing implements numbered 21 per square metre, in the rest of the house there were four in total. The dating of the place was determined by coins from 1854 to 1886, which coincides with the establishment of free State education in Argentina. And it is highly possible that the high number of coins was also due to children’s games too. Later, in 2004, we found under the wooden floor of a brewery which then became a school, there was a school context from c. 1970 in which toys were mixed with learning elements.

When a rubbish pit was excavated at a suburban residence in San Isidro in 2003, in a place that today is a residential neighbourhood for people with high purchasing power,
it was possible to identify the difference between games and toys. The pit contained family waste from between 1833 and c. 1900. The pit contained family waste from between 1833 and c. 1900. There we found two types of evidence: traditional toys and objects that had clearly been used for playing. We are interested in analysing objects from domestic life that children used for play as the mark from this activity is left on them. In addition to this there were photographs of the children and their family and various written documents.

The questions that arise are: are handmade toys prior to the period of great development of commercial toys or from the same time? Were they the toys used by slaves’ and house servants’ children who could not afford others? Or was it the boys who played outside the house with objects that were impossible to use inside? Did they invent those games and toys because the import market did not offer enough variety, i.e. are they the fruit of their own creativity?

**The Cultural Material of Toys**

In the case of Buenos Aires, the material evidence shows that the presence of children and childhood is visible in material remains, whether as objects created for children’s play or as evidence that indicates it, but until now only from the early 19th century on. It is evident that many of those artefacts were mechanisms that, judging by their form and the way they were used, not only reflected the cultural standards of their time but also taught children to reproduce them, but there were also many other objects that were simply for fun. One object is a white, luxuriously-dressed doll in a house where tea was taken from miniature tea sets; another is marbles which were played with on the dirt floor: boys and girls were separated by their physical relationship with play which indicated the future of each gender. The reality of the children who constructed their world shows that it is true that ‘children do not write history, they make it’ and that not all toys and games are evidence of children training for adult life, but fortunately more than that. But play was part of the indoctrination of future generations in their social roles, in what they should and should not be, do and appear to be or do. We want to maintain that although there is little evidence, children created and recreated from their own fantasy, that all was not mechanical, cause and effect, and that childhood also had a place for freedom and creativity, to varying degrees. To deny this is to think that the human being has no capacity to respond to the cultural imposition, including being a child; not all games are bought. There are infinite ways of escaping reality, the imagination has no limits, and children might swim in the river, roll down hills and run through surrounding farmland, where they would eat what grew there, even though they would be punished for it. Children broke taboos and then hid this, and this was why there was such a strict prohibition on so much as setting foot in the ‘third courtyard’, that of the servants, after the age of 12.

**The Alfaro Family Home**

In 1833 a wealthy businessman, the scion of a Spanish family, bought a house in a new settlement on the outskirts of Buenos Aires on his return to the city after years living
in the city of Carmen de Patagones, on the southern frontier of the territory Argentina had taken from the indigenous. His name was Don Emilio Alfaro. Within a few years he would once again have an important role, becoming the town’s first Mayor and founding a family with great local power. He was murdered for his participation, albeit minor, in the political events of the time. Fortunately for the archaeologists, the house remained physically unchanged for over a century and rubbish was thrown into a pit in the garden during the same period, between 1833 and the late 19th century. The discovery of this enormous pit, with a surface area of two squared metres and nearly eight metres deep, was one of the most interesting finds in Argentine archaeology, especially since the enormous amount of animal fats in the pit (beef invariably tended to go to waste), meant that most of the content was airtight and completely preserved.

Among the objects recovered were some which could be attributed to the children of the family, who we know from documents and photographs of the second owner of the house, son of Don Fernando, Fernando Máximo Ireneo del Corazón de Jesús Alfaro. He was an amateur photographer who photographed his children, including when they were playing. What is most striking is that the children did not only use toys that we imagine were traditional among the wealthy classes of the 19th century, such as marbles, dolls, or writing on blackboards, but also invented different games and made their own fun with objects reused or adapted through their own inventiveness. We wonder who invented these games and non-commercial toys, whether it was the householder’s children or the slaves’, and I think we can show evidence that it was both (Fig. 9.4).

Taking advantage of the institutional irregularity stemming from the beginning of the independence movement, San Isidro was founded without legal authorization around 1810 by a parish priest who used church land to obtain money. The site is on the south bank of the River Plate, on the road from Buenos Aires that goes north along the riverbank, with a slight incline towards the water. As the area produced a great deal of fruit, wood and cattle, and the nearest town had constant floods, San Isidro grew rapidly. And the children’s games have close ties to the geographical location of the place and its ecology. In tune with the ownership of the house, the evidence of the games
corresponds mostly to a white, European-influenced society, but not all the games are standardised or determined by the market. As for the servants’ children’s games – African servants were still enslaved at the start of this family’s history, and would later be freed – not only do we not know anything about them, but also the photographs of the family show us that they played games with the children of the house; we do not know if they had other games. And we believe that the supposition that anything handmade necessarily belonged to the children of the servants is not a valid option. This could be due to poverty, or because it was not possible to replace toys due to restricted access to imported goods, and other personal decisions. There is no doubt that slaves’ and servants’ children had different toys, but the attribution of one to the other is not necessarily a question of costs, it may be merely a generational transfer.

In this respect, dolls are an important cultural marker. Although play itself goes back to antiquity and no one knows how far back the idea of using scale human figures goes, what is interesting is how much this transformed into a mechanism for reproducing social roles: dolls as a female game, in which girls learn and repeat over again until they have incorporated ways of dressing, behaving, using the house, and understanding their physical and social limits. Observing dolls’ houses is an excellent way to see the dos-and-don’ts of the social class they belonged to; of course, the girl who had a house and dolls to play with was one who could afford them, and in play saw all the levels of the fixed social scale, especially hers and those of the servants, and understood where each object went. What is interesting about the case of the Alfaro family, reproducing the local custom of having slaves at home, is that children could play together up until puberty. The photographs show this situation: the poorly-dressed African child poses with a doll that she would never have been able to afford and dressed in clothes that she would never be able to wear. Perhaps for the young girl of the Alfaro family, even for her parents, this would have been an act of sharing, a very Christian sentiment. Psychologically for the other girl it would have reinforced daily her situation of inferiority and lack of future, knowing that when she reached the age of twelve that world would come to an end. Participating with the toys of the mistress, actively or passively in the patriarchal domination, reproduced the system of domination and hierarchies. It may be no coincidence that there are no photographs of boys playing, only of girls, because the photographs were taken inside the house. Boys ran, got dirty, and rolled on the ground with their marbles and other games. There was always this element of outside-inside, male-female, movement or rigidity.

**Fishing with a Wine Bottle**

From some unknown time and up until the 20th century, children used bottles to fish for small fish called *mojarritas* on the coast of rivers, lakes or ponds. The system involved taking a wine bottle, usually with a push-up, and perforating it with gentle taps until a hole was made in the bottom and the top of the bottle was corked. When the bottle was floated horizontally on the water with breadcrumbs inside, the little fish would swim into the bottle to eat the breadcrumbs but would not be able to get
out because of its tendency to swim along the side of the bottle. It was taken out of
the water using a string tied to the side to the bottom of the bottle so that the bottle
would come out with the top down and the water would not spill out. It was simple,
effective, cost nothing and was no doubt fun. Bottles of this type were found which
had been broken intentionally and would otherwise be inexplicable. Furthermore, in
other contexts their significance would be quite different.32

Bottle Races
In a few places in Buenos Aires and its surrounding area where the land was uneven,
such as the hill leading to the river as just from the Alfaro house, so-called bottle races
were common. This involved placing bottles horizontally on the ground, filled with dirt
or water to give them weight and speed when they turned, then send them rolling down
the hill. The winning bottle was the one that arrived first and in one piece, avoiding
obstacles, stones or other hurdles placed by the players. This was seen in bottles with
innumerable blows, wear and rolling marks on the exterior surface (Fig. 9.5).

Cutting the Bottle
This is a simple and entertaining game: cutting a bottle in half in seconds. There are
two ways: one is to place a string around an upright bottle on the part which is to be
cut, whether horizontally or obliquely. The string is dipped first in a flammable product,
such as alcohol, kerosene or oil, and knotted. This is then set alight until the burnt string
comes off and in that instant the bottle is placed in water and quickly breaks in half,
cleanly and effectively, because of the difference in temperature. It naturally leaves
sharp edges, but the fun was in making complex oblique or partial cuts. In one case
the ‘shoulder’ of the wine bottle was cut off, leaving an oval-shaped window or hole.
The other way is to scratch the bottle with a sharp object and then strike it, cleaning

Fig. 9.5. Bottle with irregular rolling marks on the surface, a possible result of games on the
hill down to the river (photograph Patricia Frazzi).
cutting at least one of the halves, although the other half may break. We have found four bottles with the incision made prior to being cut.

**The Catapult or Slingshot**

A universal toy, the elastic slingshot was common in the 19th century and was constantly used by children for entertainment, as being a weapon, albeit a rather tame one, it could be used to hunt birds, an activity described by Henry William Hudson in the south of Buenos Aires in the early 19th century, and for fights, and among the boys of the house and their friends or enemies.

We have no evidence of the slingshot itself, as wood and elastic do not leave visible remains, but we do have the ammunition. In the region, because of the high humidity of the land, it is common to find a palm tree (*Jubaea Chilensis* or Chilean Wine Palm) of low proportions whose round fruit is known locally as ‘coquito’, a little over two centimetres in diameter, with a small hole that is left when detached. When it falls from the tree and dries it becomes a perfect projectile, spherical, cost-free and effective when thrown at high speed. Its presence in the rubbish pit may indicate its use in these domestic wars – it is not edible – or that it was thrown out in the cleaning. But one has been found filled with small lead balls of two-three millimetres. This must have given the projectile a rare force and speed which may have been lethal, which may explain how it ended up in the rubbish pit.

**Board Game Pieces**

Traditional pieces, that is, pieces rounded by friction and taken from broken ceramic objects, have been common finds in all historic archaeology in Argentina since the 17th century. Those measuring 3–5cm in diameter are considered to be part of board games but used for other purposes. The most common game in which these pieces were used was backgammon and draughts, for which we believe the board, was chalked out on the floor and the game played there. The pieces are made with quality materials, ivory in this case and bronze at other sites in the city. We cannot verify whether this, in addition to use outside the house, implies ethnicity or poverty. One uncommon piece has been found, made with a fragment of decorated white pottery with gold painted relief in which it is evident that the motif was chosen intentionally. Another piece is square.

**Games inside the House**

Various objects have been found that indicate games that were possibly made at home and for which traditional toys produced by the market were used: European porcelain dolls, tea sets for doll’s houses, ceramic, earthenware or glass marbles, a pane of glass in which the family surname has been written, and a dog that must have been the upper part of an English earthenware tureen. In this case it is interesting that the object was salvaged after a possible breakage in order to play with it. And while they are not games but objects for children’s use, there are various blackboards, one of which features sums carved with an inexpert hand, possibly as part of a school exercise.
Lastly there is a game which in all probability belonged to the adults, although one so simple that children must have played it too, or at least participated in the activity with the grown-ups: knucklebones. The bone had on its two flat sides a bronze or iron surface and generally a lead interior to give it the right balance; depending on the way it fell one would win or lose. In the case of this bone the metals were removed before it was thrown away, no doubt to be reused. We know of its use as a gambling game since 1646, as a custom brought over from Spain.

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NOTES
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11 Cowen 2001
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14 Robertson 1982
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18 Lucy 2005
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*The Knucklebone*
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