

Call for Papers:

Fifth International Political Anthropology Workshop in Ireland on

Play: The creation of culture and the modern world.

24-25 February, 2012

Waterford Institute of Technology

Organised by the Department of Applied Arts, Waterford Institute of Technology, the journal *International Political Anthropology*, and the School of Sociology & Philosophy, University College Cork

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Huizinga's classic anthropological and historical work *Homo Ludens* suggests that play is the foundation of human culture. Play is at once serious and light, separate from ordinary existence and yet has a higher significance for all existence. Play is at once a representative competition, a test or trial played out within certain limits, and a competition for representation, an attempt to embody or symbolise the truth. Interestingly, competition and representation are both at the heart of modern democratic politics, in terms of electoral races and governmental representation of the 'will of the people'. Furthermore, these two also form the core of the contemporary nexus of capitalism and consumerism; competition for resources, jobs and markets; representation of brands and visible identities.

According to Huizinga the spirit of play is greatly diminished in modernity, but before that even, the corruption of play can be seen in Bateson's study of the Naven ritual. Amongst the Iatmul, ceremonial, ritualistic and symbolic behaviour became normal, that is, play became constant. Another clear example could be Elias' study of the 'court society', where etiquette, strategy and performance became a normal mode of life. Thus, the problem is not with play itself, but the loss of distinction between playful and mundane life; or the permanence of liminality. Indeed, the absence of distinction between play and other forms of life can even be seen within dramaturgical social theories such as Goffman or Butler.

Recent sociological research has shown that play and creativity have become idealised, incorporated and re-deployed by businesses, corporations and institutions. In education, play has been identified as vitally important, but sometimes as a means to other developmental ends. While there is no point in Puritanically rejecting play, it is important to approach the modern uses of play with caution. Although play is a vital creative and rejuvenating force, it cannot be forced.

Modern politics also has a peculiar relationship to play; it is utterly serious, formulaic, bureaucratic and flat, yet also a constant performance of a role or a play with masks for a media saturated public sphere. Simultaneously, the sense of politics as a representative competition/competition for representation has been almost eclipsed by the technical management of supra or non-human factors such as environmental risks, natural resources, demographic trends and markets. Yet, these economic crises might also be understood as an endless game without limits.

Play is clearly the well-spring of culture in music, art, literature and dance, and furthermore play is the repository of tradition, a collective heritage from which new generations borrow, improvise and innovate, keeping the past alive and regenerating the future. This fusion of play and tradition responds to contemporary experiences, migrations, hybridisation, globalisation, rationalisation, individualisation, recreating meaning in a changing world. Unfortunately, these creative arts are often relegated to 'mere' entertainment, or analysed as the mere froth disguising real social processes. As play, creative arts should hold out the possibility of rejuvenation and renaissance, yet 'playfulness' can also devolve into interminable irony, referentiality, subversion and parody. Furthermore, 'creativity' as a modern ideal implies a break with tradition – with tradition stymied as stultifying formal convention rather than a precious gift. Nonetheless, art remains a potent source for human culture.

The aims of the workshop will be, first, to revisit the relevant literature and concepts on play, and second, to link these with issues in politics, society and art in the contemporary scene and in the emergence of modernity.

We are inviting plenary and session papers that address the relationship of play to:

- work, economics and organisations,
- politics, the public sphere and protest,
- culture, ritual and recreation,
- art, heritage, creativity and tradition.

Deadline for abstracts is **Friday February 3rd**.

Feel free to contact the convenors earlier for consultation and information.

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