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# Playful democracy, democratic playfulness and philosophical dialogue(s)

## *Reflections from two conference ethnographers*

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## Abstract

This chapter unpacks the development of philosophical practice through our involvement as “conference ethnographers” in the fifth Philosophy at Play conference. It is both an ethnographic engagement with the conference, its content and location and also a philosophical exploration of questions raised by both this conference and the wider philosophy at play project. As part of our dialogue, we reflect on the tensions between play as a force for democracy and as a site of democratic practice. As part of this, the chapter considers the antagonisms of academic conferencing, instrumental scholarly praxis (including the production of a set of academic papers) and the place of play(fulness) in creating the space necessary for critical insight and practice.

This chapter offers reflections from two conference ethnographers appointed to the three-day Play and Democracy conference held in Prague in June 2019. As ethnographers, we continually observed both formal and informal aspects of the conference and its broader context. We would meet at the end of each day and engage in a dialogue about what we had observed, in order to prepare for our “ethnographers’ report” to the conference the following morning, discussing both the content of papers and workshops and also more meta-level observations about delegates and the Philosophy at Play “tribe”. These dialogues inevitably developed into fuller although necessarily incomplete philosophical discussions about play, democracy, philosophy and ethnography. It is for this reason we decided to present the chapter also as a dialogue that both reflects and diffracts our conversations in Prague, including their rather rambling nature. The chapter offers thoughts on the conference (both the specific fifth Philosophy at Play conference in Prague in June 2019 and the biennial conferences in general) as well as philosophical musings on play and democracy stimulated by the papers and presentations at the conference. In this sense, we are doing both ethnography and philosophy.

**Wendy:** I remember being intrigued when we were invited to become conference ethnographers for the Prague conference. Conferences, yes, we were familiar with them, and particularly with the *Philosophy at Play* conferences, having co-founded them with our colleague Emily Ryall and hosted the first four at the University of Gloucestershire, UK. And we were familiar with ethnography. It was the conjunction of the two that was intriguing, and which required a rethinking of each. Ethnography as “writing the tribe”: I think we understood the “tribe” as both the ongoing, shifting, small but collegiate “Philosophy at Play tribe”, meaning the people who participate in conferences and their consequent publications, and also *this* conference in *this* place at *this* time. We recognized that this was not to be traditional ethnography in the sense of an outsider describing objective truths about our exotic “tribe”. We were already deeply implicated, already invested, and very aware of the need for ethnography to be acknowledged as a political and ethical endeavour. From a disciplinary perspective, the “tribe” is heterogeneous, going part way to meeting our aim of building disciplinary and paradigmatic bridges between scholars and practitioners of play: there are those interested in

children's play, gaming, sport, performance, arts, aesthetics, ethics, politics and more. Yet in terms of philosophical perspectives, apart from a notable few, standpoints and participants are largely from the minority world. This means that the bridges may have a few precarious stones in place but are not yet built.

It was also important to pay attention to the situatedness of the conference, to the city of Prague. This conference was the first to have a theme – Play and Democracy – and the conjunction of theme and place offers up rich seams to explore. Given your deep connection to and knowledge of Prague, Malcolm, you will have more to say on that.

Having outlined the context, then, how does one do and be a conference ethnographer? You termed it “authorized snooping”; it was definitely what Renato Rosaldo (1994) referred to as “deep hanging out”. But beyond that ...? Should we think of it more in terms of doing philosophy ethnographically, if that's possible?

**Malcolm:** I had a similar response, in the form of a metaphorical quizzical raised eyebrow wondering at the meaning of being a conference ethnographer: it seemed so constrained. I'd done my first degree in anthropology, so long ago that in some settings it felt like the discipline was still being defined by its methods, but recently enough that there were exciting debates in the field confronting decolonization about what it meant to do “ethnography at home”. In this case I saw the problem of being ethnographers in a “home” we were in sizeable part responsible for, but also one that was changing and leaving “home”. In C. Wright Mills' (1967) terms, it was a case of making the familiar strange, of developing a sense of estrangement through adopting an ethnographic lens, even if this lens was partially autoethnographic. This conscious desire for estrangement was an important aspect of our discussions, in and before getting to Prague, and shaped our daily ethnographic analyses as well as our philosophical musings. One thing was clear; we were not off to be strangers in an exotic community, even if we were using an ethnographic disposition.

Having said that, the conference offered some exciting prospects. The theme promised a tighter focus than we'd seen before while adding the possibility of an injection of political philosophy to the boundary crossing – although in the event the liberal political philosophers were largely absent, some contemporary radical democrats made an appearance. But as you say Prague resonated with this theme, partly because of its association with a long tradition of dissent. I'm not sure this resonance had much impact on the conference goers, how relevant it might be to a three-day conference or how we grasped it ethnographically, other than producing several Czech focussed papers and workshops. I suspect that there might have been a tourist element to it. This is possibly an effect of the alienation of academic conferences from their surroundings as anything else.

The resonance for me was most powerful in the recent past. It was the efflorescence of playfulness in some of the cultural tendencies associated with the Prague Spring, and in the intensely serious play of the subsequent democratic groupings that became Charter 77, many of which were centred on the Prague Jazz Club, although Club stalwarts the Plastic People of the Universe tested the limits of “jazz” with their psychedelia. (I'd seen PPU doing a free gig in Kampa a few years earlier, and found myself musing that if that was what “democracy” sounded like, it was no wonder the Communist era state under Presidents Svoboda and Husák and their post-Prague Spring establishment was so unsettled by it.) In the Jazz Club I see in the spirit of Jaroslav Hašek's (1973) seriously absurd *Good Soldier Švejk* and his slightly earlier absurdly serious “Party of Mild Progress within the limits of the Austro-Hungarian law”. Yet, with tourist Prague over-run with images of *Švejk* this antagonism between the deadly serious issue of democracy and the playfulness of this long-run Czech tendency seemed to me to add gravitas to the invitation. It was not just Prague-in-general that did that – the conference venue is next to Kavárna Slavia that had been a Charter 77 hangout, while the 17 November memorial along the road at the Czech Bar Association building (at Národní 16 - and noted in Martin Pehal's chapter) was a reminder of the seriousness behind much of that playfulness. This

was a playfulness that had survived the demise of hope for a left that had lived through the 1953 workers' uprising in East Berlin, the crushing in 1956 of both the Hungarian revolt and Polish demonstrations but not so successfully through the Prague Spring. All of these things came together for me in a sense of responsibility not just to the little "tribe" we'd had a hand in forming, but to a much bigger and more auspicious force.

This question of being in Prague hit me quite forcefully the day before the conference itself where we were among the several hundred thousand attending a rally in Letenská pláň opposing anti-democratic tendencies in the Czech national polity (see Benjamin Shepard's chapter also). It was a good spirited, engaged rally with a serious message, some witty banners, earnest speakers, voluminous cheering and amid it all a young rally participant sitting among the throng, resting on a bunch of backpacks in the middle of the park surrounded by the legs of other participants, reading a book (Figure 15.1). I couldn't help but see this as expressing distress over the state of democracy alongside an expression of scepticism about the event and the system, where the fictional world was far more appealing. I'm making that up, of course, I have no idea what the novel was (or even if it was a novel: in my fantasy it was something by Ursula Le Guin or Octavia Butler) or what their motivations were (they may have been the custodian of their friends' bags) and I may well be attributing my own attitudes to electoral "democracy" onto an unknown person. Even so, this occurrence started my conference on a playful note wrapping into a single ethnographic moment an expression of opposition to anti-democratic tendencies of the kind we're seeing across many national and other settings, an engagement with resistance to that tendency and, in playfully participating, more than a little contempt for the whole thing.

*Figure 15.1* At Letenská pláň, 23 June 2019.

Figure 15.1 Back view of a person sitting on grass, leaning on rucksacks, reading a book, surrounded by the legs of people standing near.

My reader-at-the-rally is showing some of the many ways of doing democracy with and through play. The complexities of these multiple ways of engaging struck me in two of the conference workshops. First, in the two sessions dealing with Prague's Velvet Carnival, Martin Pehal, Radek Chlup and Olga Cieslarová took us into an annual event that engages with the principles of the Velvet Revolution through a parade that uses satire to promote support for struggles around contemporary social issues. A big part of the discussion and activity in these sessions turned on the ways we might raise issues in a satirical way while complying with the Carnival's requirement that messaging be non-verbal – that is, that the satirical call to action be conveyed through costume, image and unspoken and unwritten performance. The big struggle for many in the workshop was the dual tension of remaining playful and trying to limit the greater polysemousness of the visual and other forms of non-verbal communication, while also trying to get beyond awareness raising to encourage specific actions as responses. Whereas in this case we grappled with the limitations of dissent and the challenges of articulating pathways to change, the workshop led by Jeff Watson and Kiki Benzon, and that wrapped up the conference, explicitly played with modes of engagement with majoritarian politics, in this case the US political system. The workshop itself was conducted by five undergraduate students – Kathryn Dullerud, Jordan Kessler, Iris Kim, Mahira Raihan and Cynthia Syren – who had developed a series of table top games exploring and developing knowledge of and approaches to participation in electoral, legislative and other forms of systemic political democracy. Here we played games that focused not on the "what" of democratic participation but the "how". In these workshops we had an approach to engagement with systemic democracy focusing on a failure of representative democracy to deal with subaltern and minority experiences and forms of injustice on the one hand, and on the other a failure of civic education resulting in weakened participation in representative democracy and limited understanding of issues "such as campaign finance, corruption, and political compromise" (USC Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study, 2020). It might be stretching a link to breaking point, but in the workshops and the reader at the rally I saw playful

politics that offered the opportunity of being beyond resistance to the generation of forms of democratic practice that in my world I associate with post-Prague Spring political discourses, including “the power of the powerless” (Havel, 1991). There is a principle of the Left, or at least my Left, that if we limit ourselves to resistance we set ourselves up to fail. Utopian visions are essential, but so too is the feasible and a sense of viable tactics, which is what both these workshops offered, ways to do politics towards a better world along with a bit of fun, some play/fulness, some enjoyment.

One of the earliest things that came up in our ethnographic discussions was the question of conjunctions, where the looseness of “play and democracy” was recast as “play for democracy”. That is, many of the initial discussions at least seemed to focus on this flow from play to democracy, with democracy as the practice and as a goal of play/fulness/ing. With that came an apparent application of agency to play and a suggestion of a problematic objectification of democracy, although the flow wasn’t all one way and we also saw playfully engrossing workshop sessions (and one keynote) shaped by the principles of participatory democracy. The problem of the objectification of democracy in this flow was that it tended to leave the what, why and how of democracy unexamined – amid the deep inquiries into play, there was the risk that democracy was getting let off hook. That said, it wasn’t quite let off the hook – it was clear in almost all the discussions and workshops that we were toying primarily with ideas of participatory, not electoral or representative democracy. In an analytic sense, this question of conjunctions was our first philosophical problem: what did it mean for our deliberations, and what did it mean for our practice?

**Wendy:** On the problem of three-day ethnography, as you rightly say, there was more to this ethnography than the immediate experience of the conference. There is no clear beginning and end, there is a history, and, as Brian Massumi (2011, p. 1) says, “philosophical thinking must begin immediately in the middle”. In addition, we had announced our ethnographic role to participants and the conference pack included some ways for them to engage, including a box for them to post their own ethnographic notes (see Figure 15.2).

*Figure 15.2* box for collecting notes from participant ethnographers.

Figure 15.2 A box with the label “notes of ethnographers”, with sheets of paper visible inside.

I agree with you to some extent that play, playfulness and playing were very much in evidence in the papers and workshops; democracy less so, but I don’t think it was completely let off the hook. I enjoyed the playfulness of Suzanne Kass’ workshop, where she had us writing a love song to democratic institutions or political representatives we did not like, drawing the analogy that if love affairs fail, it is always someone’s “fault”. Not a deep philosophical engagement perhaps, but the process did make us think about what we understood democracy to be. As one of the participant-ethnographers noted, “people don’t always vote for their own ideas; they change their minds mid-vote”.

On a slightly more serious note (if seriousness can be contrasted with playfulness?), Tony Fisher set the scene in his opening keynote with an in-depth exploration of democracy, noting the ambiguity of both play and democracy as concepts. He argued that, with democratic systems becoming increasingly managerial and technocratic, alongside the principle of democratic expression through the voicing of dissent, democracy might be seen as the author of its own precarity: a kind of “dangerous play”. Play, he said, presents a tension between the impulse to freedom and the constraints of the requirement to play by the rules. Perhaps this tension is at the heart of democracy also: the tension between freedom and the rules laid down by a democratic state is one that echoes through much analytical political philosophy, particularly freedoms of the individual autonomous rational agent (as seen perhaps in the libertarian strand of contemporary populism, including the contempt for experts and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic that we are living through as we write

this). Yet it is a tension that was not evident at the conference; we might even assume that such a modernist ideal had been passed over for more collectivist, or perhaps relational, concepts.

Most contributors chose to draw on thinkers from the continental tradition, meaning that there was an absence of liberal political philosophers. This was pointed out by one of the reviewers of our proposal for this volume, who also suggested that John Rawls' thought experiment of the veil of ignorance, a return to an original state, is a *playful* device that can help us imagine other, better, more equal worlds. (What such playful devices might we dream up for a similar contemporary thought experiment?) Yet, despite Rawls' contention that a group of people designing a political system without being aware of their own social status will lead to a fairer, more equal society, he imposes his own values onto the product of this playful process, since of all the principles he suggests might come out of such a playful thought experiment, the greatest equal liberty principle takes priority (Rawls, 1971). The rational, self-interested man (*sic*) still reigns supreme even when attempts have been made to start from an original state attempting to erase all such assumptions. For me, this merely highlights the situatedness of knowledge creation.

I agree, though, there was a stronger focus on play and on how we might think of the words in between "play" and "democracy". You asked, at the end of our brief ethnographers' report on the morning of day two of the conference, that if we are looking at democracy *for* play, what does "for" mean?

You may want to explore that further, but it took me somewhere else – to another conjunction in fact. Some presenters played not so much with ideas of a teleological, instrumental play *for* democracy as an end point, but with a processual, intrinsic play *as* democracy through practices that subvert, disrupt or perhaps just momentarily displace the demands of more powerful and controlling forces. This is a minoritarian politics, a politics of the everyday rather than the majoritarian, upper case Politics of democratic governments. It is a Deleuzian line of flight, a deterritorialization of molar forces that does not necessarily intend to overthrow unjust systems and the worst excesses of an uncaring neoliberal late capitalism, rather it is the creation of a more vibrant world for the moment of playing, a moment where life is better, as our friend and colleague Stuart Lester (2020) put it. Playing is a form of participation *in and of itself* as well as a tool *for* democratic participation.

We saw this particularly in some of the speakers addressing the play of children, members of society generally excluded from both governmental processes and the organization of everyday time and space; indeed, Rawls (1971, p. 215) suggests that children's "lesser liberty" is to be accepted as one of the "natural features of the human situation". For example, drawing on Michel de Certeau, Lucy Benson suggested that powerless children use play as a tactic "in the field", as a form of everyday resistance to the strategies of the more powerful, hatched in boardrooms. Or the "notes from the field" of research on the play of Venezuelan children playing in refugee camps, with a photo of a boy in a cardboard box that was emblazoned with the logo of a humanitarian aid organization, both a classic play resource and an emotive symbol of power. The reappropriation of this and other resources, and of the space, did not dismantle inequality but gave rise to moments of intensity and even pleasure (Rosana Kohl Bines, Carolina Moulin and Liana Biar).

Of course, where there is deterritorialization, reterritorialization will follow, and as such, play (particularly but not only the play of children) can be colonised by more powerful others for their own purposes, as we saw in Einar Sunsdal and Maria Øksnes' discussion. This tension between a teleological play *for* democracy and a processual, relational play *as* democracy was particularly evident in or between the papers considering children in educational contexts, for example, the educational philosophies of John Dewey and Jane Addams that saw the purpose of education as preparation for democracy (Laura Camas and Gonzalo Jover); or Faith Ibarakumo Kenaminikpo describing how drama can be used to teach rights and democracy; or Dag Nome's examination,

drawing on Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, of how toys in a kindergarten were actors within assemblages of democratic processes such as talking, listening and the experience of resistance.

Discussions on play's instrumental and intrinsic value have spanned all five conferences and will no doubt continue to do so. In thinking about play *for* democracy, how does the "for" play out across issues of subversion and resistance?

**Malcolm:** There are times when my not-so-inner sophist comes back to bite me, especially when I'm being a smart-alec with it – play *for* democracy/democracy *for* play huh? We can think about this in terms of everyday play/ful practice, but also in a more abstracted dialectical manner. Thanks for bringing up de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactics, where the formal rules and provisions devised by the powerful are confronted by the everyday subversions of the disempowered. His work is good to think with and helps blur the distinction between *for* and *as* in the play/democracy relation. This is especially so in his idea of diversionary practice, of *la perruque*, in which he sees work as "free, creative, and precisely not directed towards profit", appropriating labour and an employer's other resources to the worker's own ends (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 24–28). That idea of freely creative work seems to me to link our notions of what play is to democratic practice to the utopian thinking that runs through swathes of political philosophy.

The question of playfully subversive political action is one that has been widely explored. One of the things that marks recent work on activism has been the emergence of texts that set out to "teach" playful subversion; the best of these treat it as one tactic among many. It's a tactic that seems to play out differently in settings that are more autocratic when compared to settings we think of as liberal democracies. In moderate to highly autocratic settings it is often depicted as outrage: perhaps the best-known recent instance was Pussy Riot's (2012) Punk Prayer which has all the characteristics of a Situationist *détournement* (Debord and Wolman, 1981) in the resignification of and new meanings attached to body movements that are trivial or meaningless while concurrently recasting Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour as an intimate part of the new Russian State. In this case the subversion took on layered aspects, notably in the performers' prosecution for blasphemy by a nominally secular state, when it was widely understood that the most blasphemed against was Putin, the explicit target of the Prayer.

In the debates that followed the trial, we saw a clear articulation of the limits of playful subversion, for instance where Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, one of the imprisoned Pussy Rioters, noted that "all our activity is a quest for miracles" (Tolokonnikova and Žižek, 2014, p. 29) and that unlike many commentators on contemporary issues she saved herself "from overindulging ... [in] unreflexively parroting as [their] own theories global capitalism's image of itself ... by living in a country that over and over again confronts me with palpable evil, staggering in its enduring, deep-rooted corporeality" (Tolokonnikova and Žižek, 2014, pp. 68–69). What's telling, in this context, is the way this sense of playfulness is woven into the "how to" guides that emerge from these settings. As a genre, these guides are often earnest and sincere, yet with chapter titles such as "Be a Pirate" (Tolokonnikova, 2018) or "Laugh Your Way To Victory" (Popovic and Miller, 2015), activists from these more authoritarian settings project a sense of playfulness.

The tone shifts with playful subversion in the less obviously authoritarian settings that we label liberal democracies, where discursive responses until recently have less often been ones of outrage, depending on the degree of sacralization of the target. When we look at the kinds of performances Shepard (2011; and his chapter in this volume) and Bogard (2016) discuss, at *détournement* as favoured by the Situationists at their peak and at political interventions such as the "Yes Men" or "Billionaires for Bush", in these seemingly less authoritarian settings we can see instances where tactics spill into strategy. If we go back to Europe's ancient world, to Athenian and Roman debates about democracy (for all the limitations of the Roman Republic and Athenian demos), there is a powerful tendency that juxtaposes democracy and tyranny. Here we see ancient and mediaeval

thinkers discussing and exploring tyrannicide and, especially in the earlier works, the reasons for the assassination of tyrants. Aristotle, in Book V, Pt X of *Politics*, makes the links clear. Noting that action is seldom inspired by a single cause, he highlights the principal causes of tyrannicide as revenge, fear and anger (which he combines into hatred) and contempt. It is this installation of contempt that underpins the strength of playful subversion, and that gives it strategic aspects while remaining principally tactical. Notably the powers that be seem to see subversion in all irreverence – here I’m thinking of the fifty or so people arrested in Minsk in 2010 for staging a pillow fight in commemoration of a mediaeval battle. So, one part of play *for* democracy lies in this subversion of power, its irreverence stimulating the contempt that is needed to bring about tyrannicide.

**Wendy:** I like the idea of the irreverence of playful protest as an expression of contempt, which is what makes it so powerful. I think this raises the question for me of the purpose of such playful protest (which takes us back to teleology). Play *for* democracy as strategy requires a purpose: might this be metaphorical tyrannicide, a toppling of “undemocratic” regimes, or something less absolute? Play/fulness/ing as tactic is a minoritarian line of flight, a temporary relief from the constraints of freedom, rather than an overthrow of unjust systems, as we saw in the refugee children’s play in the cardboard box or the schoolchildren’s resistance to rules. Yet, as you hint at, the for-as and the strategy-tactic juxtapositions do not need to be mutually exclusive binary opposites. The tactical acts of the children are performative, they change things, as Lucy Benson’s chapter shows. If playful tactics are understood as play *as* democracy, this implies they are democracy-in-action, the performance of democracy. Playful protest as both tactic and strategy may also be conceptualized as democracy-in-action as well as action-for-democracy. This line of thinking raises yet more questions. One is, of course, who gets to play? Who does “democracy” represent and who represents democracy? But let’s put that to one side for now and pick it up later, because these musings have also raised another question. If children’s play, as a disruption of adult control of time and space, is play *as* democracy, or democracy-in-action, and if playful protest aims to change tyrannical regimes through, amongst other ways, the expression of contempt, then we can ask the question: what does democracy look like?

**Malcolm:** I like that question, if for no other reason than it gets us beyond play as temporary relief (suggesting catharsis) with the implication that it conserves the circumstances that it offers respite from. There’s been a lot of discussion of the shape of democracy in recent years, much of which leaves me wondering about practice and the condition of being human. This takes me back to de Certeau and his comment about “work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed towards profit” (1984, p. 25). So in thinking about play for and play as democracy *that has taken a specific form* I was struck by the juxtaposition of “free” and “creative”. One of the fundamentals of play is that it is freely chosen: ever since Huizinga we have been explicit about that. A less explicit aspect of many of our discussions of play as freely chosen is its relation to alienation. Henning Eichberg (2018) suggests that play is concurrently the opposite of alienation and is alienating.

I am left reflecting on play, democracy and alienation as being at the core of Marx’s work in that his project is all about understanding how the incompleteness of human beings comes about and how to overcome it. His vision of non-alienated existence is a powerful one, as:

the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively.... The *senses* have therefore become *theoreticians* in their immediate praxis. They relate to the *thing* for its own sake, but the thing itself is an *objective human* relation to itself and to man [*sic*], and vice-versa. Need or enjoyment have therefore lost their *egoistic* nature, and nature has lost its mere *utility* in the sense that its use has become *human* use. (Marx, 1975, p. 352, emphasis in original)

Here Marx sees humanity as not serving private property, but as meeting its own collective needs, its species-being. This meeting of needs comes about by the liberation of creativity from the needs of capital to cater to the needs of humans: it is a vision of the supersession of exchange value into activities that are freely chosen, socially directed and motivated by species being. As Ollman (1976, p. 101) notes “there is no clear distinction in Marx’s writings between ‘activity’, ‘work’ and ‘creativity’”, however there is a clear sense that a key issue is the use to which that activity/work/creativity is put and in whose interests. We’re not used to associating Marx with play when in the big picture his humanist vision of the emancipation of the senses seems remarkably similar to our vision of play, with its emphasis on use value. If I may be allowed to “think out loud”.

My perambulations through play in this utopian vision of a liberated being, of creativity freed to meet human needs and of imagining a fairer and more equal society turn on the potential of participatory democracy to counteract alienation. This reinforces your case that the for/as distinction is not the hard binary. In this vision, counteracting alienation happens in the particular circumstances of daily life where the kid in the refugee camp deploys their logo-emblazoned cardboard box as transmogripher. This invokes a sociological deployment of alienation, requiring as Henri Lefebvre notes that we “particularize, ‘historicize’ and relativize the concept of alienation completely” (2002, p. 207). Once we have done that “disalienation” becomes not the abstract state of creative freedom Marx suggested in 1844, but an element in “perpetual dialectical movement: ‘alienation–disalienation–new alienation’” (*Ibid.*). Creativity, play and playfulness in this situation remain modes and sites of disalienation, both *as* and *for* democracy. They are antitheses to the alienation that pervades our discussions of play, bringing about new alienations that prompt new desires leading to change, so I am not seeing play as temporary relief as cathartic respite, but as transformation. In this scenario the perpetual dialectic rejects the instrumentalist linearity of play *for* democracy and democracy *for* play, proposing that each dyad exists in a dialectical relationship with the other – play, democracy, non-play, non-democracy – where play and participatory democracy as minoritarian politics constantly transform and recast each other (Figure 15.3).

*Figure 15.3* The dyads of the play-democracy dialectic.

Figure 15.3 Two arrowed axes: vertical axis is “play/non-play” and horizontal axis is “democracy/non-democracy”; arrowed lines also joining each word forming an outer diamond.

These musings come with a health warning and with a degree of nervousness resulting from the inherent binary logic of the Hegelian dialectic (“alienation–disalienation–new alienation”), even though its restrictive form is mitigated here by the dual dyad formation. The danger is that the binary logic of the dialectic creates sets of homological and oppositional relations that force commonality where it seldom exists. These binary relations are ill-suited to the fluidity of the playground. For instance, if we consider the contradictions in the lower left and upper right of the diagram – democracy↔non-play and play↔non-democracy – the NP<sub>1</sub>↔D→NP<sub>2</sub> sequence casts democracy as the liberatory force, while ND<sub>1</sub>↔P→ND<sub>2</sub> sequence makes play the driver of a liberatory struggle. That is to say, that even where the thesis and antithesis are abstract relations (the *for* in the play/democracy relation), the logic remains reductionist and binary. This is either a problem for the play–democracy relationship as a *strategic* phenomenon, or for the implicitly binary way I’ve asked the questions and the limitations of Hegelian dialectics. As Kate Bornstein (2017) has noted, in a similar discussion: “When gender is a binary, it’s a battlefield. When you get rid of the binary, gender becomes a playground”. The problem remains that even when the dual dyad relationship is considered, the six dialectics (or perhaps ten if we consider the contradictions between contradictions) remain binary antagonisms that are not playful even while the phenomena are and, given an inherent tendency to encourage us to reduce relationships to monocausal forces, dangerously abstracted from the everyday experiences of players, no matter the extent of their democratic urges or the form of their democratic practice.

This leaves unanswered the question of what *for* means in the play–democracy relationship. It does, as you identify, highlight that the gap was and is engagement with the subject of technocratic, managerial “democracy” – the individual, autonomous, rational agent. An engagement with this figure can be seen in groups such as Adbusters with its recurring theme over the past ten or more years of building a movement for change that improvises, or as they repeatedly put it “plays jazz” (Adbusters 2020; see also Martin Rosenberg’s chapter in this volume), and that links into a wider shift against neo-classical economics that builds a rejection of “Rational Economic Man”. Here is an aspect of a broad movement for change where there is a playfulness that is not only resistive, but that also critically engages with the rationality of modernity. In this engagement, this movement develops a critical positionality that decentres and provincializes the modernity Rawls doesn’t get beyond. My detour through the Hegelian dialectic is admittedly problematic in terms of that outlook, but the politics of the past ten years or so suggest that the democracy for play/play for democracy dual dyad challenges us to reject the individual, autonomous, rational agent. It also returns us to questions of the membership of the demos. I ask this especially in the context these discussions having taken place in the limited and exclusive character of an academic conference with its limited audience and reach.

**Wendy:** Ah, yes, the fundamental question of who belongs to the demos, this is the question I raised a little earlier. I suspect there might be different orders of “demos” in terms of majoritarian (suffrage, influence) and minoritarian (everyday, protest, resistance) politics, but there are parallels in terms of who gets to play in either. We haven’t said much about power here, although it is implicit throughout. When the system is stacked against you, you have more to lose in joining in with resistance, playful or not. This was highlighted in Tom Drayton’s paper on Extinction Rebellion (XR), who use both playful tactics and serious strategy. As he pointed out, the deliberate strategy for XR members to be arrested in order to protect the playful subversions within their cordon has different consequences for white, older, middle class protestors and young, working class Black men (cf. Drayton this volume). Yet playful tactics have also been seen alongside the deeply serious and angry #BlackLivesMatter protests in the wake of police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others. Much of this has used digital platforms, for example, the swamping of the pro-police #BlueLivesMatter hashtag with pictures of Smurfs, Squirtles and other blue-faced cartoon characters; or the jamming of the Chicago Police Department’s radio waves with N.W.A.’s “Fuck the Police” and other choice numbers; or flooding Dallas Police Department’s informant app with K-pop stans’ fancams (Alleyne, 2020).

All this helps to melt the binaries of play/not-play; democracy/not-democracy and tactics/strategy. But it doesn’t let us off the hook in terms of who is allowed to belong to our own Philosophy at Play demos, our “tribe”. Who gets to play in that playground, both in terms of contributors and the philosophers they explore? The cult of the neo-liberal academic conference imposes specific exclusionary rules to the game. We have explicitly wanted to attract both academics and practitioners, and playfulness was one tactic we have used. Despite our desire to disrupt conventions through the use of playful elements to the conference, these, although successful to some extent in producing a particular culture of the “tribe”, have been both spatially and culturally constrained. We have tried to be creative, open and flexible with conventions such as calls for contributions and the programming of the conference itself, but those conventions have a life of their own both within and outside our particular conference. Only those who feel they belong will put themselves forward; the “tribe”, whilst perhaps being more open than some, remains exclusive. This is the case not only across the academic/philosophy dyads but also in terms of which philosophers/philosophies are included. As one of the participant-ethnographers noted, “whose work is prioritised? For the next CfP, engagement with race/class/gender could be foregrounded”.

We are clear that, disruptions notwithstanding, these conferences are both academic and philosophical. So I thought I’d see what happened if I played with a version of your Hegelian dialectical dyads (see Figure 15.4), along academic and philosophy axes. Oh, the power of a

diagram! There must be something of value in there somewhere? The dialectic arises because we invite and then judge proposals based on whether they are both academic and philosophical, and yet we want to build bridges both across academic disciplines and between academics and practitioners. Of course, our decisions don't run along pure logic lines: proposals don't fit neatly into quadrants that mean they are accepted or rejected.

*Figure 15.4* The dyads of the academic–philosophy dialectic.

Figure 15.4 Two arrowed axes: vertical axis is “academic/non-academic” and horizontal axis is “philosophy/non-philosophy”; arrowed lines also joining each word forming an outer diamond.

You have spoken of material social practices in your discussion of Marx and alienation. You have invoked abstraction in your dallying with Hegel. If we go along with Kate Bornstein (2017) and melt the binaries, if we follow Lefebvre's (1940) triadic treatment of the problem of binaries in dialectics, then where does this take us? To Nietzsche of course: to the playground.

Bornstein (2017) continues her playground analogy: “Of course, there are playground bullies. But whereas the activism of any kind of binary politic is struggle, and opposition, and gaining ground at the expense of someone else, the activism of a playground is cooperation and coalition” (Figure 15.5). It is that cooperation and coalition we need to build through conjuring a playground where contributors and philosophers who have not yet felt this is their kind of playground want to come and play. Who knows, perhaps we started that work with our ethnographic reports at the conference in Prague, potentially prefiguring such a development on the Philosophy at Play terrain. I have a sneaky suspicion we might be going in that direction with the next conference.

*Figure 15.5* Melting the binaries, building a playground.

Figure 15.5 A jumble of words “play, democracy, academic, philosophy” at different angles and in different fonts; the arrows from the previous figures form a loose circular boundary that has a gap.

**Malcolm:** That's an important point about community building. In the neo-liberal university, the play(ful) community's subversion and resistance comes about by expanding the membership of its *demos* in a way that grapples with the issues at hand in our work while also engaging with and responding to the discursive and operative styles, modes and forms of those whom the neo-liberal academic conference excludes. This expansion is often at odds with increasingly institutionalized work around equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) that is limited by a focus on who, not how. The transformative power of this work is constrained by established structures and a neo-liberal drive that instrumentalizes knowledge and scholarship, where for instance professorial promotions can be shaped as much by income (grant and consultation fees) levels as they are intellectual contribution to a field. The focus on “who” means that EDI work often misses the need for systemic transformation while in many of the areas I work with this omission is highlighted by a decolonial demand, producing a transformative EDID-based approach. What might be read as the gap in your playground boundary (in Fig 15.5) opens up that opportunity. It also drew to mind Aldo van Eyck's (2014 [1962]) distinction between a public playground and an enclosed play-garden, and the difference between the fenced off play-garden and that marked by a hedge (see also Nélio Conceição's chapter). In a sense, we've been building a play-garden with a hedge. The neo-liberal academy can't cope with much more, it can be tweaked from within but even the most subversive remain constrained by funding and managerial systems that delimit possible outcomes to a narrowly conceived vision of academic practice (or perhaps that's just the limit of my imagination and my ability to negotiate the interstices of power in higher education's contemporary Gramscian war of movement).

At the moment it seems like we're community building in an academic play-garden where much of the work deals with the transformation of the *communitas* of the liminal play world as scholarly

practice and subject into the community of practice that is Philosophy at Play with our conferencing and our books and our toying with a book series. This doesn't feel like a democratic transformation. The question of philosophical and political praxis I'm grappling with is similar to one that we see in many of the Occupy-like forms of activism, that is one of scalability and the sense that it will require variable approaches. My Hegelian detour is idealist whereas the play/democracy dynamic is very much grounded in the here and the now of wherever it is playing out. Furthermore, its historicized confrontation with Power is likely at some stage to have the metaphorical if not literal appearance of the battlefield. While this view is probably a sign of the power of the residual historical materialism in my intellectual DNA, I can't help but expect that the non-binary playground is almost certain to run up against the binary battlefield.

This leaves to-be-further-explored another problem in for/as, strategy/tactics, majoritarian/minoritarian relations. In looking at where this exploration might go I'm taken by an observation by the curator Legacy Russell in her discussion of the American artist American Artist (that's their legal name, it makes for all sorts of digital disruption!) where she says that the impact of their (Artist's) name on search engine results "shows us how we might ourselves break broken systems via the creative re-application of these systems' own material toward the purpose of a strategic disruption and refusal" (Russell, 2020, p. 115). There are three things that strike me here: 1) this is about *strategic* change; 2) this change is effected by using the system's (left over and appropriated) material – the stuff of de Certeau's tactics where conscious use of the *perruque* might allow ways to transform the system through the subversion of its resources and practices; and 3) the issue is not only broken systems but unjust ones. That's quite a challenge for subsequent iterations of this project and its ethnographers.

Taking on the role of conference ethnographers has given us the chance to reflect on a philosophical project we've been involved in now for over ten years. The conference theme also pushed us to be explicit about an aspect of play studies that has been, to a large degree, a silent presence. As it turned out, the way the discussions of the play/democracy dynamic developed during the conference and in our subsequent dialogue has allowed us to reflect on and explore the for-as and majoritarian–minoritarian distinctions in ways that while provocative have left unanswered several significant questions and left untied several promising threads. We are grateful to our co-editors Petr Urban and Alice Koubová for discussions around these issues. At the heart of these questions and threads we see the potentialities and limitations of the Philosophy at Play crew and project in democratizing the interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral dialogue between and practice around play while also keeping open the gap in our play garden hedge to bring in more bring playful philosophers and philosophical players. We initially set out to construct this as a dialogue partly as a reflection of our working practice as conference ethnographers. It turned out also to allow us to develop a more open engagement with a set of questions where we have, in our discussion and this collection, barely scratched the surface. Hopefully the collection including our dialogue is only the first step along a many stranded path to ... wherever its playfully democratic form takes us, as a goal and/or as practice.

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