Play, puerilism, and post-modernism

W. John Morgan

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The purpose of intellectual activity is, I believe, to enable us understand the human condition and ways in which it can flourish. It may of course be enjoyable and fulfilling both individually and with others; and is integral to the human instinct for society and for play. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga pointed out, in a classic work of historical anthropology first published in 1938, that this should not be confused with puerilism. It would seem, he said, ‘…as if the mentality and conduct of the adolescent now reigned supreme over large areas of civilized life which had formerly been the province of responsible adults.’ He had in mind enthusiasm for mass movements and their ‘…rigmarole of collective voodoo and mumbo-jumbo,’ as well as ‘…an insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism.’ (Huizinga, 1955, p. 205). There should be a seriousness of purpose in intellectual activity, even in its play aspects, but this should not be confused with an earnestness in danger of rendering it sterile and even oppressive. Huizinga’s cultural pessimism was echoed by Herman Hesse in The Glass Bead Game, first published as Magister Ludi in 1946. Hesse claimed that since the Middle Ages intellectual life, in Europe at least, had evolved in two ways. First, through ‘…the liberation of thought and belief from the sway of all authority’ and, secondly, in a search for ‘…a means to confer legitimacy on this freedom, for a new and sufficient authority arising out of Reason itself.’ (Hesse, 1970, p. 19). The outcome however, was the mass popularity of the feuilleton, or what today we know as an op-ed, the emergence of mass media, and ‘…a deluge of isolated cultural facts and fragments of knowledge robbed of all meaning; together with ‘an accelerating distrust of the intellect itself, of its own virtue and dignity and even of its own existence.’ (Hesse, 1970, p. 23). Jacques Derrida examined some related themes in his paper ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,’ considered a manifesto of post-structuralism, and of the broader concept of post-modernism. (Derrida, 2001, pp. 278–294). Derrida was concerned with signs and symbols, the human capacity for play, the notion of relativism, and with the increasing fragmentation of the sense of self. His comments, understandably, focused on French intellectual example, notably that of Claude Lévi-Strauss; however the paper is both highly abstract and lacking in clarity. The post-modernism it heralded did not create the paradox identified by Huizinga and Hesse, but as an overly theoretical and yet still incoherent intellectualism it has damaged humanity’s capacity to find a resolution. The paradox still confronts us in a world of sound-bites, of Twitter, of shouts-down of speakers at universities; and in a retreat from discourse based on evidence and reasoned argument.

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Notes on contributor

W. John Morgan is Honorary Professor, School of Social Sciences and Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow, Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods, Cardiff University, Wales, U. K. The research for his Leverhulme project focuses on ‘UNESCO and the Cultural Cold War.’

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