



Philo, C. (2018) When Teddy met Teddie. *Children's Geographies*, 16(4), pp. 455-458. (doi:[10.1080/14733285.2018.1457754](https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2018.1457754)).

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Deposited on: 23 March 2018

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When Teddy met Teddie

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Teddy

I no longer live with Teddy. He decided to stay at my parents' house when I went to university, probably because he is a creature of haunts and habits. Teddy – for that is his unimaginative name – was not my original teddy, and he always struggled to fill the role vacated by his predecessor, also called Teddy, who was left on a train when I was very young. Original Teddy, even now, possibly retains a higher place in my affections than replacement Teddy: the former really was my most crucial 'transitional object' as I grew from 'crib geographies' (Aitken and Herman 1994) into the bedroom geographies of a small boy. Replacement Teddy was nonetheless a significant actor in the context of my micro-world-making from circa 4 to circa 12 years of age. Unlike original Teddy, he almost never accompanied me, being very much a stay-at-home bear rather than constant travelling companion. Typically he inhabited my bedroom, sometimes sitting on my bed but more normally standing on a shelf (**Figure 1**), where he increasingly spent his days as I grew into my teens, the call to be involved in my activities becoming ever rarer. Indeed, he saw me less and less as my bedroom ceased to be a site of sustained encounter and more a functional site of sleep, clothes-changing and homework. It mattered to me that he was there, however, and it matters, not massively but in a small way, that he remains there still, on the same shelf in the same room in the same house. A day may arrive when he can no longer stay there: perhaps then we will be reunited wherever I am then living.

Teddy was not alone in my bedroom, even when I was away, for he was one among a menagerie of other cuddly and not-so-cuddly toys, the specificities of whom are now lost in the mists of forgotten childhood. What I remember more vividly is that Teddy and this menagerie lived with a much larger population of objects lodged in every cupboard, drawer and under-bed space. These objects included hundreds of toy vehicles, particularly the small Lesney Matchbox cars, buses and lorries, and hundreds of toy soldiers, particularly the small Airfix sets and cheap imitations bought in plastic bags at the seaside. There was also a motley array of other things, always miniature, such as tiny wooden balls (the origins of which escape me) that I had coloured as if they



Figure 1: Author's Teddy, wearing clothes knitted by author's maternal grandmother (source: photograph by Hester Parr)

were little people, alongside miscellaneous ornaments – a green bunny from my paternal grandparents' house sticks in mind – as well as stones, blocks, bits of plastic and other oddities such as a pepper-pot and a small green pipe (imitating a smokers' pipe) which looked like a face with a long nose. In my imagination, these objects were all alive, with personalities, friendships, intentions and capabilities: they were the agencies that gave life to the micro-world-making in my bedroom, conversing, scuttling about doing stuff and having adventures. As I grew into my early-teens, they were enlisted into sports teams playing football and cricket on my bedroom floor, usually as teams featuring in the Inchworth and District leagues and cups. I recall, for no obvious reason, that my bedroom and occasionally parts of the house elsewhere became known as Inchworth, sometimes conceived as akin to a British civil parish and other times a nation-state (depending on the scale and scope of my play at that moment).[1] Teddy and this expanded, multi-actant 'gang' were the animators of my small bedroom world; and I richly remember the importance of the diminutive size, the microscopic detail, the

smaller the better. I was already a ‘micrologist’ (after Adorno: see Philo 2017) and it suddenly occurs to me the extent of continuity between my bedroom world-making and many of my academic orientations today. Others may think ‘this explains a lot about Chris’.

Teddie

An inspiration for my 2014 *Children’s Geographies* lecture (Philo 2016) was the work done by the figure of ‘the child’ in the theorising of Theodor Adorno, the German critical theorist associated with the so-called ‘Frankfurt School’. Adorno – often called ‘Teddie’ by family, friends and colleagues – is commonly regarded as a forbidding scholar, known for a curmudgeonly stance towards most facets of modern culture. Yet, as hinted in my lecture, Adorno often considered figures such as the child, the clown, the animal and other ‘marginal’ beings when rehearsing broader claims about modernity, enlightenment, capitalism, totalitarianism and transcendence. These figures intruded as means for him to glimpse alternative ways of existing, perhaps different forms of social relations, apart from the ‘big structures’ that, in his critical diagnoses, seemed destined to blight humanity’s remaining days on this earth. They allowed scraps of escape and even magic to feature in his otherwise melancholic adult world,[2] in which regard he was influenced by maybe his most significant intellectual interlocutor, Walter Benjamin, similarly drawn to the micrological powers of the discarded, the faulty and the small at the heart of great urban capital-metropolises.[3] One writer suggests that ‘one has the sense of Adorno as a child prodigy who never grew up (because he didn’t need to)’ (Jeffries 2016: 49), someone who kept close the magic of childhood micro-world-making.

An instructive instance arises in a section called ‘Toy Shop’ towards the close of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 2005), originally published in 1949 when he was exiled from Nazi Germany in the USA. *Minima Moralia* comprises fragmentary reflections on how the living of an ‘immediate life’ is lost under the cumulative weight of societal alienations, not least the demand that everything be reduced to the quantitative exchange-values of modern capitalism. He begins by quoting from Christian Friedrich Hebbel (1813-1863), a German poet and dramatist:

Hebbel, in a surprising entry in his diary, asks what takes away ‘life’s magic in later years.’ ‘It is because in all the brightly-coloured contorted marionettes, we see the revolving cylinder that sets them in motion, and because for this very reason the captivating variety of life is reduced to wooden monotony. A child seeing the tightrope-walkers singing, the pipes playing, the girls fetching water, the coachmen driving, thinks all this is happening for the joy of doing so; he [*sic.*] can’t imagine that these people also have to eat and drink, go to bed and get up again. We, however, know what is at stake.’ Namely, earning a living, which commandeers all these

activities as mere means, reduces them to interchangeable, abstract labour-time. (Adorno 2005: 227)

Deploying standard Marxist terms and concepts, Adorno proposes that the child marvels at the 'use-value' of the marionettes and the circus performers, immersed in the animated worlds there enacted, and cannot see – or even resists seeing – the 'exchange-value' of the human labour implanted in the production of these objects or spectacles. Adorno further contemplates the child playing with toys:[4]

In his [*sic.*] purposeless activity the child, by a subterfuge, sides with use-value against exchange value. Just because he deprives the things with which he plays of their mediated usefulness, he seeks to rescue in them what is benign towards men and not what subserves the exchange relation that equally deforms men and things. The little truck travels nowhere and the tiny barrels on them are empty; yet they remain true to their destiny by not performing, not participating in the process of abstraction that levels down that destiny. ... Unconsciously they rehearse the right life. (Adorno 2005: 228)

In my bedroom, I was the small boy with his trucks travelling nowhere, purposeless in terms of adult society,[5] enrolling Teddy and his gang in the whirl of an immediate life, here called 'the right life', where use-values trump the abstractions of exchange-values. For Adorno, it is necessary to return to children and their toys – Teddie meets Teddy – in order to expose what he laments as a fundamental wrongness, 'deforming humans and things', in the present social constitution.

This claim brings me round to John Horton's lovely commentary on why academic geographers are reluctant to acknowledge their cuddly toys. For much of the time – and maybe more now than in the past when non-instrumental scholarly values were arguably more prominent, although caution must be expressed about envisaging some prior 'golden age' – we (Western) academics are tangled in exchange-relations, forever asked to account for our time and efforts in a neoliberal web of time-cost accounting. At the University of Glasgow, we submit to the regular Time Allocation Survey (TAS), categorising our activities into chunks of time set against different income streams, one implication being that many standard scholarly activities (such as penning or even reading this piece) should be avoided because they are not obviously supported by – or productive of – an income stream. More broadly, we are encouraged always to be conceiving of ourselves as workers who should be earning money, with our scholarship (our ideas, writing, presenting) positioned as primarily about income generation, even in the indirect sense of how our publications and esteem might stack up in the academic market-place when the likes of tenured posts, research grants or REF scores are being decided.[6] At a conference such as the one mentioned by Horton, much of what we do is still understood by our research managers – and internalised by us too, I suspect – as bound into the production of exchange-value. Even as most of us resist such reductionism, questions about capital are never that distant: who paid for my

attendance, why and with what expectations? did my performance impress so that I might secure a future salaried position? did I risk my professional standing in any way that might, somehow, have knock-on effects for me further down the line, maybe with financial implications? To be sure, other pressures obtain – with deeper epistemological roots in what is taken as *serious*, credible, properly focussed academic work, rather than being *trivial*, playful, mere pottering – which likely feed into why academics at a conference do not readily raise their hands to admit to owning a cuddly toy. That said, theoretical connections can easily be drawn between such pressures and the exchange-values generated by what are routinely ‘valued’ as ‘valuable’ forms of knowledge, set against those that are ‘devalued’ and dismissed as ‘value-less’. By the token of Adorno’s analysis, therefore, we academics are thoroughly ensnared in exchange-values; hence simply too alienated from the small spaces of childhood world-making – of childhood use-values – even to recognise the ‘value’ of discussing our own childhood toys in the adult realms of the lecture theatre. And Horton is right: this alienation is to be regretted and should be challenged, since it cuts us off from ‘the right life’, as scholars and as human beings. Teddies rule.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to John Horton for his commentary, and to Tracy Skelton for inviting me to contribute this response. And to both Teddies.

Notes

- [1] For a careful excavation of a more developed instance of childhood world-making by an academic geographer, the American J.K. Wright, with respect to his childhood fantasy-world of Cravay, see Keighren (2005).
- [2] Adorno’s *oeuvre* is often portrayed as a ‘melancholy science’ (eg. Rose 1978), a phrase that Adorno used when introducing the text consulted below, *Minima Moralia*: see Adorno (2005: 15).
- [3] There is much to say about the Adorno-Benjamin connection and the centrality here of ‘micrology’: see Philo (2017, footnote 12, p.37), but also the accessible and evocative brief discussion at the following [url: https://schlemielintheory.com/2016/12/11/groping-for-small-things-robert-walsers-portrait-of-the-philosopher/](https://schlemielintheory.com/2016/12/11/groping-for-small-things-robert-walsers-portrait-of-the-philosopher/).
- [4] I briefly alluded to these purposeless toy trucks in Philo (2016, footnote 16, pp.637-638).
- [5] Joanne Thomson and I argued along these lines in an earlier *Children’s Geographies* paper (Thomson and Philo 2004) when questioning how children’s play becomes enlisted as something with a dully adult ‘educational’ logic and purpose, and when the insistence becomes productive ‘doing’ rather than just lazy ‘being’.
- [6] The REF – or UK Research Excellence Framework – entails a periodic exercise when all academic units across the UK are assessed for the research quality of their outputs, environment and impacts (beyond the academy). Every score allotted to an output contributes towards the final ‘quality profile’ of a unit, and hence to a financial settlement whereby a certain amount of core national (non-research council) funding is allocated to that unit. Put like this, the exchange-values of our scholarly outputs (monographs, chapters,

articles, etc.) become crystal-clear. Some other nation-states have equivalent assessment schemes.

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