

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas S. Henricks. *Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. 239 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07318-2.

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More Than Child's Play

I was pleased to be asked to review this book. Many years ago, while undertaking my doctoral thesis on the subject of children's video game play, this book would have been extremely useful to me. At the time, references to children and play were drawn almost exclusively from the psychological, developmental paradigm. In addition, it was necessary to track down writers on play in general from a variety of disciplines in order to synthesize and construct an argument which took a sociological focus. What this book does so nicely is to bring the consideration of play into sociology and the history of ideas—a move which is long overdue. What it does not do is to restrict its focus on play as the domain of childhood, but to usefully demonstrate play as human expression. This in itself does the study of play an enormous favor. Thomas S. Henricks notes in his introduction that the study of play belongs properly to no single discipline, and, further, that the topic cannot be said to be of great concern within any one discipline. Henricks book is a serious attempt to “de-trivialize” play and to demonstrate that play is vital for societies. “Child's play” it is not.

However, the book does more than this, and the author has set himself no small task. Henricks addresses the life works of some of the great thinkers of modernity. He provides not just an accomplished interpretation of their work as it relates to the topic, but includes biographies of the “founding fathers” which ground their later works. In this way, the text is not only a useful text for sociologists and anthropologists of play, but it is also a valuable tool for historians of social thought about play. The life stories and writings of Johan Huizinga, Karl Marx, Emile

Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman are addressed in separate chapters and the author usefully presents, analyzes and discusses each theorist's work in relation to his focus of play as human expression. While I was initially surprised that Brian Sutton-Smith and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi were not present in the contents list, it soon became clear that their contribution to the debate is ever present and resonates throughout the text. In the introduction, Henricks sets out his approach. He starts from Huizinga's challenge to the study of play. By focusing on the example of sports, throughout each chapter he applies the work of the theorists mentioned above to his main themes. The conclusion nicely ties up the work, and Henricks readdresses Huizinga's definitions and develops his argument, which essentially is, as his final sentence reveals, that “play gathers together the emotional, cognitive and moral dimensions of existence into sharply distilled moments. In such ways, human capacity is diversified and thickened, and societies themselves are made stronger” (p. 230).

Play Reconsidered is a vital contribution to the study of play from sociological and historical perspectives. If play is to be taken seriously in social thought and research, Henrick's efforts will have to be followed with empirical studies. These will be required to test and develop Henricks's claim that societies are made stronger through play. Such studies might bring to the fore a distinction which is not emphasized (understandably so) in this text: the difference between child and adult perspectives on play.

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