



John Tenniel

kings, queens and pawns

pamela reynolds

Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* makes Alice's dream journey into moves across a chess-board. The Red Queen takes Alice to the top of a small hill:

For some minutes Alice stood without speaking, looking out in all directions over the country - and a most curious country it was. There were a number of tiny little brooks running straight across it from side to side, and the ground between was divided up into squares by a number of little green hedges, that reached from brook to brook.

'I declare it's marked out just like a large chess-board!' Alice said at last ... 'It's a great huge game of chess that's being played - all over the world - if this is the world at all, you know. Oh, what fun it is! How I wish I was one of them! I wouldn't mind being a Pawn, if only I might join - though of course I should like to be a Queen, best.'

The Red Queen declares Alice a Pawn and sets her on her journey across the board promising her that she will be a Queen when she reaches the eighth square.



John Tenniel

... those in power accord children as little care and attention as if they were pawns in a game.

Carroll parodies the world of adults in the absurdities of Alice's moves in life's chess game. It often strikes me, working with children in southern Africa, that those in power accord children as little care and attention as if they were pawns in a game.

Children as figments of the imagination

Alice comes across the Red King snoring beneath a tree. Tweedledee says to Alice:

'He's dreaming now, and what do you think he's dreaming about?'

Alice said, 'Nobody can guess that.'

'Why, about you,' Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. 'And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?'

'Where I am now, of course,' said Alice.

'Not you!' Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!'

'If that there King was to wake,' added Tweedledum, 'you'd go out - bang! - just like a candle!'

Adults as Kings 'dream' children in that they design childhood to suit the political, economic and social requirements of particular societies. Their designs do not always match with the needs and desires of children. When children protest, the dream can fall apart.

Within adults' dreams, children can be little kings, captured for political or ideological purposes and used as tools in the games of grand masters.

Jewels in a tarnished crown

The Executive Director of UNICEF, James P. Grant, reports in *The State of the World's Children 1989*, that

the advances already achieved during the 1980s in immunization, ORT (oral rehydration therapy), family spacing, and in the drafting of a Convention on the Rights of the Child, are among the great humanitarian achievements of our times. But they are the jewels in a tarnished crown.

The tarnish is caused by the failure of many third-world countries' economies to flourish, partly as a consequence of rising debt repayments and falling commodity prices. The total debt of the developing world is over US\$1 000 billion and in the last ten years real prices for the developing world's principal commodities have fallen by approximately 30 per cent. Taking everything into account, the report says, the southern world is now transferring at least US\$20 billion a year to the northern hemisphere. The real cost is being paid by the poor and by their children. Grant blames the debt on irresponsible lending and irresponsible borrowing. Grant adds:



Soweto. July 1989 (above)

And when the impact becomes visible in rising death rates among children, rising percentages of low-birth-weight babies, falling figures for the average weight-for-height of the under-fives, and lower school enrolment ratios among 6- to 11-year olds, then it is essential to strip away the niceties of economic parlance and say that what has happened is simply an outrage against a large section of humanity. The developing world's debt, both in the manner in which it was incurred and in the manner in which it is being 'adjusted to', is an economic stain on the second half of the twentieth century. Allowing world economic problems to be taken out on the growing minds and bodies of young children is the antithesis of all civilized behaviour. Nothing can justify it. And it shames and diminishes us all.

Children, along with their poor parents, are pawns in the international game. They can be pawns too in national, ethnic, gender, community and family machinations. The litany of abuse is well known. But like the Red King who dreamt Alice, we can put our imaginations and our creative powers together to design a world in which children can play and work in



Gill de Vries/Arango

'Allowing world economic problems to be taken out on the growing minds and bodies of young children is the antithesis of all civilized behaviour.' James P. Grant

safety and health.

Statistics on trauma caused by war, poverty, gross misuse of resources, and the abuse of human rights, including those of children, are, in southern Africa, amongst the worst of the world's regions. Three of the world's six countries with the poorest economic and social indicators are in southern Africa: Mozambique, Angola and Malawi (see table). The other countries of the region, including South Africa, fall into the half of all countries with the worst indicators.

The table (drawn from tables in the UNICEF Report) pulls together key economic and social indicators for the main southern African countries plus three countries whose Gross National Products (GNP) per capita are similar to South Africa's.

It illustrates South Africa's economic dominance of the region (76 per cent of regional Gross Domestic Product - GDP), and the country's poor performance in general terms given its relative wealth. Most of South Africa's indicators of economic and social performance are comparable with those in Zimbabwe and Botswana. These countries enjoy only a third and less than a half, respectively, of South

Africa's GNP per capita.

South Africa's record is dismal compared to other countries with the same average GNP per capita, for example, Mexico, Malaysia and Hungary, whose infant and under-five mortality rates are far lower and whose life-expectancy is higher.

The best hope for quickly improving South Africa's indicators lies in a redistribution of income and improved access to services. Government's expenditure priorities must be moved away from defence and law and order to training and employment, especially of teachers, medical professionals and urban managers. Unemployment, now more visible than before because of rapid urbanisation, will cause the greatest difficulties in the immediate future. High inflation and low growth can be expected to lower real wages for many low-status workers over the next decade as the labour supply increases. Major redistributive measures such as free or low-cost health and education will be vital to bolster family welfare.

Beyond South Africa's borders, reduced military and security expenditure would help to free governments to spend more on social services and formulate development-oriented budgets. A stronger regional economy would be the best guarantee of improvements in the conditions for children. The opening game has to be played by South Africa.

The King's messenger

We have called, thus far, for the kings to re-order the context in which childhood can be experienced. However, within the structures that determine people's lives, there is great scope for freedom and variety in the shape that children's lives may take. We should celebrate the plurality of societies in the region. We should create spaces in which children, like queens, the finest strategists in chess, can help mould their destinies in a myriad of ways.

The philosopher Michel Foucault set out in his work to make perceptible the political and social processes by which societies are ordered. He wanted to show people that a lot of things that are a part of their landscape - that they think are universal - are the result of some very precise historical changes. They do not necessarily have to be accepted. He said:

All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made.

There lies the challenge. We need to examine closely the institutions that handle children and change them where we find them wanting. There are two examples from the institution of education that illustrate the need. The first ex-

We have called ... for the kings to re-order the context in which childhood can be experienced.

ample has to do with a dyslexic child. The boy's mother, some years ago, made a request to the provincial education authorities that her son be allowed to use a typewriter during his matriculation examinations as it greatly facilitated his ability to reply to questions well. The authorities replied by letter refusing permission, saying 'The system cannot handle individuals.' Then scrap the system!

The other example is a recent one. A six-year-old girl has a father who is in detention. His arrests, his frequent spells in prison, his disappearances from her life have upset her profoundly. He is a man of the church and she cannot understand what it is all about. She wakes, her

mother says, early each morning and dresses quickly fearing that she will be late for school. She is very anxious during the long drive there. Why? Because, at her school if a child is late she is put into detention.

Let us minutely examine the words we use, the rules we make, the threats we proffer, the pain we cause children. To do so we need to document their experiences and stand up beside them to demand change. It is almost as if, like the White Queen, we punish children before they have had time to live. The White Queen lives backwards and her memory works both ways:

'I'm sure **mine** only works one way,' Alice remarked. 'I can't re-

member things before they happen.'

'It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards,' the Queen remarked.

'What sort of things do you remember best?' Alice ventured to ask.

'Oh, things that happened the week after next,' the Queen replied in a careless tone. 'For instance, ... there's the King's messenger. He's in prison now, being punished: and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday, and of course the crime comes last of all.'

'Suppose he never commits the crime?' said Alice.

Key indicators of Economic

World country rank	Countries in Southern Africa*	Under 5 mortality rate		Average required annual % rate of reduction ⁺ 1987-2000	Infant mortality rate (under 1)		Life expectancy at birth (years) 1987	GNP per capita (US\$) 1986
		1960	1987		1960	1987		
3	Mocambique	330	295	10,5	190	170	47	210
4	Angola	346	288	10,3	208	169	45	470
6	Malawi	364	267	9,8	206	151	48	160
44	Lesotho	208	139	5,1	149	101	57	370
45	Zambia	228	130	4,7	135	81	54	300
53	Zimbabwe	182	116	4,3	110	73	59	620
60	South Africa	192	98	3,7	135	73	61	1850
63	Botswana	174	95	4,1	119	68	59	840
Indicators from 3 countries with GNP per capita similar to South Africa's:								
73	Mexico	140	70	3,9	92	48	69	1860
90	Malaysia	106	33	3,4	73	24	70	1830
105	Hungary	57	19	2,9	51	17	71	2020

KEY

* The UNICEF Report lists 131 nations in descending order of their 1987 under-five mortality rates (shown in bold type). Numbers before the countries give their rank order.

+ The average annual reduction rate required, to achieve the United Nations' target of reducing under-five mortality rate to 70 or less by the year 2000, or halving the 1980 rate, whichever is less.

'That would be all the better, wouldn't it?' the Queen said ...

Alice felt there was no denying **that**. 'Of course it would be all the better,' she said, 'but it wouldn't be all the better his being punished.'

'You're wrong **there**, at any rate,' said the Queen. 'Were you ever punished?'

'Only for faults,' said Alice.

'And you were all the better for it, I know!' the Queen said triumphantly.

'Yes, but then I **had** done the things I was punished for,' said Alice; 'that makes all the difference.'

'But if you **hadn't** done

them,' the Queen said, 'that would have been better still; better and better and better!'

We laugh at Carroll's parody. Yet we remember the adolescent boy who killed himself because he had been imprisoned after a demonstration and, under torture, had revealed his comrades' names and, upon release from prison, his family and community had turned on him and he could not bear the shame. The White Queen could not have improved on that. We punish children for failing to live in tune with the bizarre societies that we create. We make them pawns in our mad games.

Let us call for a resolution to first-third world financial flows; for a

redistribution of the region's wealth; and for a questioning of the institutions, including the family, that handle children. We can, at the very least, document children's experiences and create fora where children can seek advice and be heard sympathetically. We can lobby those in power and shame them into re-drawing the landscape of children's lives. □

*Pamela Reynolds directs the Childhood Action Research and Documentation Institute in Harare and is the author of **Childhood in Crossroads**, reviewed on p. 51.*

and Social Performance

GNP per capita av annual growth rate (%) 1980-86	Gross domestic product (GDP) (%) 1984	Total population (millions) 1987	Population annual growth rate(%) 1980-86	% population urbanized 1987	Av.growth rate of urban popln (%/p.a.) 1980-85	% of central government expenditure allocated to:			Debt service as a % of exports of goods and services	
						health	education	defence	1970	1986
-7,6	2,9	14,5	2,7	23	5,3	—	—	—	—	—
—	4,9	9,2	2,6	26	5,8	—	—	—	—	—
-0,7	1,1	7,6	3,2	13	—	6,9	11,0	6,0	7,8	40,1
0,5	—	1,6	2,7	18	5,3	6,9	15,5	9,6	2,7	4,2
-5,3	2,7	7,6	3,5	52	5,5	7,2	16,0	—	6,4	16,8
-0,1	4,8	8,8	3,7	26	5,0	6,2	20,9	15,2	2,3	22,3
2,8	75,8	33,0	2,2	57	3,3	8,2	14,9	13,6	—	—
7,4	1,0	1,2	3,5	21	4,5	5,0	17,7	6,4	0,9	4,3
Total 83,5										
-2,0	—	83,0	2,2	71	3,6	1,4	11,5	2,5	23,6	36,8
1,1	—	16,2	2,7	40	4,0	—	—	—	3,8	13,7
1,5	—	10,6	-0,1	58	1,3	3,6	1,6	6,9	—	35,9

Sources:

Grant, James P. 1989 *The State of the World's Children*. United Nations Children's Fund; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tables E:88-9; 1:94-5; 5:102-3; 6:104-5.

Wilson, F. and Ramphela, M. 1989 *Uprooting Poverty. The South African Challenge*; Cape Town: David Philip.

Fig. 1.10c:29.