

DRAFT: PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

**Infancy, Generation and Experience: Notes on the
Sociological Empirical and Toward a Political Theory of
Children's Association**

[Dr David Oswell](#)

**Department of Sociology
Goldsmiths, University of London**

***What is the Empirical?* Colloquium,
Goldsmiths, June 2007**

1. Introduction

In some ways we have come a long way from Locke's story of the Dutch ambassador's account of weather so cold that it freezes water so hard that an elephant could stand on it [and upon hearing the story, the King of Siam responding: 'Hitherto I have believed the strange things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man; but now I am sure you lie' (1688/1978: 33)]¹ or of similar stories, such as from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950)², of probability and reliable witnessing. Much recent theoretical labour, especially in the fields of science and technology studies and cultural theory and some sub-disciplines of anthropology, has shown how the empirical is far from settled in the site of the scientific observer, not only inasmuch as the scientist is fallible to social forces, but inasmuch as matter observed is agentic, motile and sticky. Matter under the microscope always affects the vision of the experimenter. Whether that matter is fixed or only known through the traces it leaves, the eye's vision is always clouded. It is in this sense that writers working in these still relatively new fields talk about the

¹ 'If I myself see a man walk on ice, it is past probability: it is knowledge. But if another tells me, he saw a man in England, in... winter, walk upon water hardened with cold, this has so great conformity with what is usually observed to happen, that I am disposed, by the nature of the thing itself, to assent to it... But if the same thing be told to one born between the tropics, who never saw nor heard of any such thing before, there the whole probability relies on testimony; and as the relators are more in number, and of more credit, and have no interest to speak contrary to the truth; so the matter of fact is like to find more or less belief. Though to a man, whose experience has been always quite contrary, and who has never heard of anything like it, the most untainted credit of a witness will scarcely be able to find belief' (Locke 1688/1978: 336).

² "'How do you know," he asked, "that your sister's story is not true?"... Then Susan pulled herself together and said, "But Edmund said they had only been pretending." "That is a point," said the Professor, "which certainly deserves consideration; very careful consideration. [But] does your experience lead you to regard your brother or your sister as the more reliable? I mean which is the more truthful?... If there really is a door in this house that leads to some other world... if, I say, she had got into another world, I should not at all be surprised to find that other world had a separate time of its own; so that however long you stay there it would never take up any of *our* time. On the other hand, I don't think many girls of her age would invent that idea for themselves."... "But do you really mean, sir," said Peter, "that there could be other worlds – all over the place, just round the corner – like that?" "Nothing is more probable," said the Professor...' (C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 1950: 54-7).

confusion of epistemological and ontological tongues. Knowing is making and doing is being and the kiss of being is uncontained (cf. Callon, Latour, Haraway, Law, etc).

In the middle of these translations across knowing and being, the human and technological, the natural and social, and the natural sciences and human sciences, any history of the modest masculine witness is put in its place in the past (Haraway, 1997; Shapin and Schaffer, 1985; Shapin, 1994). And yet I think that there is good reason to revisit that past not in order to resurrect old debates, but to re-form and in-form present ones. I want to offer a brief and cursory genealogical account of the emergence of a domain of children's experience and frame that account in the context of a series of questions about the infancy or maturity of the subject of experience. In doing so, I want to say a few things about the subject of the empirical and its associational being.

2. Infancy and Experience

The empirical carries a relationality to 'maturity' and to 'infancy'. Giorgio Agamben, in his 'Infancy and History: An Essay on the Destruction of Experience' provides an account of the philosophical reasoning of experience, the subject and maturity running from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. He discusses the separation of experience and science in Montaigne and he focuses on how death is conceived as the limit of experience; experience is conceived in the context of the movement toward death, namely in the context of maturity. Then through a discussion from Descartes to Kant to Husserl and Heidegger on the relation between the transcendental and the empirical, he comes to the twentieth century concern with language and subjectivity. In

Freud, Agamben sees a reversal of the relationship between experience and maturity, such that the limit of experience is now turned backward to infancy; a passage that Agamben also sees in grammatical terms as a turn from the first to the third person inasmuch as the primary site of experience is now seen as the unconscious. In Benveniste and others, Agamben both understands the 'I' as textual position and infancy as providing that 'moat' between language as a system and discourse as utterance. Agamben provocatively states that 'the constitution of the subject in and through language is precisely the expropriation of this "wordless" experience; from the outset, it is always "speech". A primary experience, far from being subjective, could then only be what in human beings comes before the subject – that is, before language: a "wordless" experience in the literal sense of the term, a human *infancy*, whose boundary would be marked by language' (Agamben, 2006: 54).

In some ways, albeit unacknowledged, some of Agamben's text rests on an earlier work, Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1*. This volume, which both criticises the aethetico-politics of surrealism and the philosophy of Heidegger, less explicitly and in a much smaller fashion makes reference to childhood and the experiences of the everyday. He quotes Baudelaire on childhood and the marvellous. For Baudelaire, 'the child sees everything as a novelty', 'is always 'drunk', has a 'deep and joyful curiosity' and 'when confronted with something new' has 'that stare, animal-like in its ecstasy'. The adult who can recapture that childhood at will, has the 'physical means to express' him or herself, and is able to 'bring order into the sum of experience' through an 'analytical mind' is seen as by Baudelaire as a 'genius'

(‘The Painter of Modern Life’ quoted in Lefebvre, 1992: 107). In contrast, for Rimbaud, Lefebvre tells us there is no need to ‘return to childhood’ for ‘he was a genius as a child, and when he was no longer a child, the genius left him’. Rimbaud, Lefebvre continues, ‘never reached maturity, the sphere of distinctions between intelligence and reason, the senses and the mind, things and concepts’. For Rimbaud the ‘symbol and the sensation are no longer distinguishable’ (ibid: 109): the poet muses ‘[s]weeter than the flesh of sour apples to children, the green water penetrated my pinewood hull... and sometimes I saw what men thought they saw...’ (Rimbaud, ‘The Drunken Boat’ quoted in Lefebvre, 1992: 109).

For Lefebvre, the turn of the century poets, but also the Surrealists and the Magic Realists – those who all bathed in the marvellous everyday – could only provide a ‘reactionary’ perspective on everyday experience. Lefebvre offers little in the way of a ‘progressive’ understanding of the relationship between childhood and quotidian experience though. But he does offer a strange footnote to a discussion of the ‘reverse image’ in the films of Charlie Chaplin. Children’s fiction, he argues, offers a ‘break with – and transport out of – normality’ (ibid: 262), but also ‘the children’s press and children’s literature have their own set of themes. Less structured than, and differently structured to, the world of the adult, the child’s world does not require the same reverse image. In fact there is no world of the child. The child lives in society, and in his eyes the adult world is what is strange and marvellous – or odious. *Simply being a child makes him already a critic of adult everyday life*, but it is in this everyday life that he must search for his future and disentangle his own potential. In the works which are most successful from this point of view, a

familiar animal (a dog, a duck, a mouse) supports a reverse image in which the trivial changes into fantasy and the fantastic, with an element of explicit criticism' (ibid: 262).

Such views would certainly be at odds with much of contemporary sociology of childhood. And that may be no bad thing. But we should be wary of *a priori* aligning childhood and children along a series of binaries between maturity and infancy, speech and pure experience, and the mundane and the marvellous as if children and childhood could simply signify a world of pre-social creativity and novelty, a veritable innocence of experience. Such views would certainly also be problematic with regards to any attempt to frame the issue of children's rights and political representation.

3. The Emergence of Children as a Collective Experiential Subject

Sociologists are want to remind us – over and above historical evidence to the contrary – that childhood was invented as a social institution within conditions of modernity around the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries (Aries, Jenks, James and Prout, etc). In the context of a discussion about 'the empirical', this is significant because it might suggest that a whole new domain of experience emerged, not only for children, but for others as well, as a correlative of this new sociological category. We can certainly accept some of this story, but much is left wanting.

It is from the mid- to late-eighteenth century that a medium emerges through which children's experiences can not only be discussed by adults inquiring as to the nature of this type of personhood (something that has happened

certainly since the ancients), but also become the site in which children themselves can reflect on themselves and give voice to themselves. In 1744 *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* is published by John Newbery (Darton, 1932). From 1752 to 1800 eleven periodicals were published for the young of England (Drotner, 1988). Across Europe and the US, children's novels and fairy tales are published. Although the magazines, novels and fairy tales were often guided by a moral demand for improvement, they offered young people perspectives that were largely absent in the past. Young people were now the subjects of narrative, rather than the objects of prose. Moreover, young people engaged not simply with adults, but with other young people. The young were given character and voice. Dialogues were held between the young. Whatever the authority of the adult author, a centripetal force had emerged in the context of that authority. A dialogic space for children pulled against a historic adult monologism (cf. Bakhtin).

In the late eighteenth century, alongside the growing children's fiction, the publication of encyclopaedias and taxonomic collections for children emerged as a new cultural form. In 1770 Francis Newbery published *The Natural History of Birds by T. Teltruth*, which contained appropriated passages from Thomas Boreman's *Description of Three Hundred Animals* (1730). *The Good Childs Cabinet of Natural History* (published in 1801 by John Wallis, London) contains chapters on Beast, Birds, Fishes, Insects and Flowers and within each chapter a series of images and descriptions of particular species.³

³ It is in many ways unsurprising that in the same year, 1801, that *The Good Childs Cabinet of Natural History* was published, Victor of Aveyron was discovered wandering the hills and fields of southern France. Victor the 'wild child' – for all the efforts of Lucien Bonnaterre, Jean Itard and Madame Guerin in trying to lead the boy into language, moral sensibility and pose, manners and social taste and

Darton, in his five century survey of children's literature in England, tells us that natural histories for children would bear the generic traces of a wide range of literary forms, such as collections of fables, 'decayed history', fabulous monsters and fairy tales. This genre of writing for children might be seen as 'legend' (cf. Foucault, 1970), but it also demonstrates an understanding of children in the context of scientific enquiry and construes children as subjects of scientific experiment and investigation. The child is constituted with the authority of the scientific gaze. They are able to bear witness to nature. They are authorised to give testimony to the empirical before them and to have credibility conferred to their experience. But equally this is a science of the marvellous real, both fact and spectacle. Although the children's encyclopaedia takes the form of tabular expression, its nomenclature and the ordering of its signified are 'non-scientific'. Its content in this sense is mythic and popular. It is a *marvellous* natural history.

The emergence and development of a domain of literary experience for children was predicated then on an ability to move from a stage illiteracy to literacy, from infancy to childhood.⁴ Far from being, as Neil Postman (1979)

gentlemanly association – was forever unable to escape his infancy and muteness. He is forever associated with the garden, the woods, the floors, the filth, the grunts and animal demands, and the hot potatoes (Bonnaterre, 1800; Itard, 1801; Lane, 1976; Malson, 1972).

⁴ The growth in periodical, novelistic, and scientific literatures for children is made possible in the nineteenth century due to demographic changes and increased rates of literacy. In the UK child labour was commonplace and there was a high infant mortality rate. But from 1801, the date of the first census, to 1871 (one year after the public provision of schooling), the British population increased from 8.9 million to 22.7 million. This was due to a fall in the death rate and an increase in the birth rate. The early nineteenth century also witnessed an increase in the rates of literacy in the British population and an increase in religious revivalism. In the 1830s three-quarters of working-class homes possessed books, mainly religious. In 1801 13.8 percent of all working-class children between five and fifteen attended Sunday schools, but by 1851 the figure was 75.4 percent. Although illiteracy was not a 'primary obstacle' to children's engagement with a children's literary culture (cf. Drotner, 1988: 31), it – alongside 'a taste for debased, sensational fiction' – was identified as a pathology (Donald, 1992: 53). Such concerns only intensified as the century progressed and the new one began. As James Donald argues

has argued, a means of differentiating adulthood from childhood, literacy and literary culture for children – and hence the emergence of a cultural medium that makes visible children as a collective experiential subject - is made possible only because children have access to a world of literary signification, to a form of signification that is mobile and translatable, a 'literary culture' that is both literary and visual (in the sense that it is both of the 'gram' and the pictorial).

In the context of the question of experience two things are important. Firstly, the adoption of literary signification for the child is both a transition from infancy to childhood, but also seen as a necessary perversion of the primary experiential relation between infant and world. In this respect both Rousseau and Locke agree on the 'imperfection' of words (cf. Rose, 1984: 46).

Jacqueline Rose in her work on children's fiction notes the importance of Locke in the innovation in pedagogic publishing for children; she refers to the publication in 1756 of *A Little Lottery Book for Children, containing a new method for playing them into a knowledge of the letters* as a demonstration of Locke's idea of pictorial language. But she states that Locke's proposal for an intimacy between word and image (that is now so typical of young children's books) 'was inseparable from a deep suspicion of written language, and a desire to hold the written word as closely as possible to the immediacy of the visual image' (Rose, 1984: 46). [We might add the Locke talks about an immediacy not simply to the image, but also to the thing and to play cf. Locke,

'[t]he illiterate became the target of the "administered" forms in which the standard language and the national literature were taught in the elementary schools set up after Forster's Education Act in 1870' (Donald, 1992: 53).

Some Thoughts Concerning Education.] Rose also notes that in Rousseau's *Emile* 'the child is being asked not only to retrieve a lost state of nature, but also to take language back to its pure and uncontaminated source in the objects of the immediate world... [T]he constant stress throughout [is] on the purity of the visual sign... Whether it is a case of physical gesture and expression, or of pointing out objects in the real world, what matters is that signs should immediately *speak*' (Rose, 1984: 47-8). For Locke, infants are experiential subjects (i.e. they have the capacity for experience and to be experienced) and it is only by virtue of their being so that 'human understanding' is possible. For Locke, but also for Rousseau, our relation to the empirical is necessarily mediated by the condition of maturity. Although Montaigne may have posed experience in the context of maturity and death, it is Rousseau and Locke who frame experience in the context of infancy and signification.

Secondly, as also pointed out by Rose: '[l]anguage for children – how it is spoken both by and to the child – is subject to strictures, and characterised by differences, which need first to be located inside the institution where language is systematically taught. This is an issue which bears on our relationship, not only to children's writing, but to literature as a whole – the fact that language has an institutional history which determines how it is written, spoken, and understood' (Rose, 1985: 89). My concern here is not with the institutionalisation of a dominant literacy or the shaping of an English literature, but with the configuration of a medium (literary culture) as a medium of children's experience in the context of 'nationalisation', 'standardisation' and agencies of the state. Certainly the school was important,

but so were other institutions of welfarist state policy (cf Sommerville, 1982; Hendrick, 1997). In this sense, through the historic capacities and capabilities of the nation-state (cf. Sassen, 2006), a collective experiential subjectivity for children was able to be formed. This subjectivity is to be differentiated from earlier framings of experiences for the child inasmuch as this experiential domain is collective (i.e. children's experiences) and it is formed through the territorialisation of the nation-state. To talk about the emergence of children's experience is not to produce children within the unitary category of childhood. The category of 'childhood' is an empty category, devoid of the experiential. Moreover, children's experience is not constituted through the symbolic. It is not a 'discursive' production and nor is it an 'imagined community'. On the contrary, its standardisation is through a series of 'social' practices whose relationality is through a set of indexical and contingent connections. Thus, the relationality between literacy, schooling, and children's literature does not constitute a unitary domain, a domain understood through a single measure or sign. Rather the connections made constitute a 'plane of consistency' (across fields of social productivity both eventful and non-eventful). Children as a collective experiential subject is a multitude, a multiplicity.

4. Considerations

There are three issues to consider: a) the child was the object, not subject, of experience prior to this moment; b) the focus on the child's body as a site of experience is not counter to the circulation of the child as an image (i.e. as in much sociology of childhood), but both are correlatives of each other; c) and that subjectivity is typified not by a performativity, but by a generationality of body matters. Let me address each very briefly in turn.

a) From Object to Subject; From Singular to Plural

Many social and cultural historians concerned with antiquity and the medieval period have been critical of any sociological and social historical simplicity. Without falling into the false binary of the social against the natural, a group of French medieval historians have argued and demonstrated how concern for the child was clearly evident in Europe from the fifth to the early sixteenth centuries (cf. Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1999; Fossier, 1997; Riché and Alexandre-Bidon 1994; see also Orme, 2001). Children are documented in their everyday lives in the context of the church, in places of education and learning, in the family, at work, in the castle and on the streets (cf. Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1999; Riché and Alexandre-Bidon 1994). There is no doubt that there were understandings in the medieval period of what a child was and how to care for it. The 'raising' (*tollere*, to take up) of the child by the father in order to hold-off the threat of abandonment was more than a literal act at the birth of an infant, it was also a metaphor for the growth of the child (Boswell, 1988).

That the infant and the child were the object of experience and discourse is not at issue – and we could look further back in time to the ancient Greeks and Romans (cf. Dixon, 2001; Becchi and Julia, 1998a and 1998b) or further a field geographically. What is at stake is that in these accounts provided by medieval and other historians is that the child is by and large (although not exclusively) in the singular (i.e. a son or daughter, or a child learning, and so on) and lacking any experiential subjectivity (i.e. children are not, by and large, subjects of the accounts provided, whether as authors or as actors). If I

can poach from Deleuze here, the child has long been constituted as 'a life' (cf. Deleuze, 2001). The child has long been 'a child', a child with 'no name' and yet one who 'can be mistaken for no other' (Deleuze, 2001: 29). Children have long been seen as objects of affect and affection. The problem of children's experience does not introduce the problem of intimacy toward the child nor even the reciprocal feelings for the adult (as parent or teacher). We know that just is not the case (cf. Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1999). But what it does do is situate children's affections for each other on a horizontal plane. Only when children have experience do they have particularity; only then do they escape the confines of being 'a pure event' and become non-eventful, everyday, un-instituted and significant.

b) Children's Experience is Embodied Because it Circulates as Sign

The opposition between body and image is crude and many - from Canguilhem, Foucault, Haraway, Latour, and others - have countered any philosophy of the image that construes the sign as the death of *soma* (cf. Oswell, 2006). In that light we should read Aries's classic account from the diaries of the physician Heroard of the infant dauphin Louis XIII not in the context that poses a social constructionist argument against a biologicistic one, but in the context of an emerging focus on the body of the child, such that that focus is provided by a circulation of signs and interests. For Aries, Heroard's writings indicate a complete lack of modesty toward the infant Louis XIII. He states that '[n]o other document can give us a better idea of the non-existence of the modern idea of childhood at the beginning of the seventeenth century' (Aries, 1960/1986: 98). Before that time there were certainly child prostitutes and adults that preyed on young children's vulnerability. Girls in domestic

servitude were often open to abuse and once 'dishonoured' many found their way to the streets and the brothels (Alexandre-Bidon and Lett, 1999).

However, it is significant that the sexualisation of the young dauphin is recounted by a physician and that his account is a vivid demonstration of the relationship of the sovereign palace household to the body of the young, naked and bare child. Heroard's account marks the beginning of a new relationship to the child, one that describes and catalogues and visualises their body along a scale from sexualised fantasies to medical definition (cf. Foucault, 1979).

Cultural historians, such as Ludmilla Jordanova, have talked about the popularisation of medicine in the eighteenth century in such a way that does not simply repress the child's body under the weight of discourse, but demonstrates how that body – in all its complexity – is articulated and re-articulated (Jordanova, 1986). Equally, Carolyn Steedman's history of a relationships between the development of physiology and childhood shows how in the mid-Victorian years in Britain there was an elision of 'growth and childhood and childhood and death', that 'is to say that by embodying the problem of growth and disintegration in children, children become the problem they represented: they become the question of interiority' (Steedman, 1994: 76). There are very many good reasons, then, for thinking about the emergence of children's experiential subjectivity as fundamentally bio-political (cf. Foucault, 1979 and 2003).

c) The Generationality of Body Matters

Steedman's historical analysis of the interiority of the child and the problem of growth is central to our understanding of children as a collective experiential

subject, but also to a more general sense of experience as growth. A notion of growth as interior to the body of the child is to be distinguished from earlier ecclesiastical writings on original sin and infancy (i.e. what has wrongly been seen as a problem of innocence and experience) and natural philosophical work on predetermination (i.e. the problem of the homunculus). For example, in relation to the former, recent work on St Augustine (whose writings initiate the medieval discussion of original sin) show how he constructs the infant not as one who commits actual sinful acts (i.e. not guilty of specific sins), but as a 'non-innocent' (i.e. one whose soul is informed by the sin of Eve) whose baptism brings the infant into the community of the Christian church (cf. Stotz, 2001; Traina, 2001). It is only as the infant develops speech that the child becomes accountable for their actions and is thus capable of actual sin. And in relation to the latter, preformationism holds that the embryo is not a moment of creativity and growth, but a point of sameness with the soul of parent. The embryo and later the infant and child are merely larger versions of the same soul that is enclosed in the soul of the forbearers and their forbearers and so on.

In contrast then, the generationality of interiorised life becomes a condition of the experiential relations of children in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century physiological writings on development and interiority fold growth into the body of the child but only inasmuch as this constitutes a collective experience for all children. Moreover, literary culture – as a plane of consistency, a condition of existence for children's collective experiential subjectivity – constitutes character as the basis of interiorised life. For children to have speech (i.e. organised voice), that speech must be expressive

of an interiorised life. In contrast to any notion of a performativity that stages life according to any directorial (and centrifugal) authority, literary culture performs children as themselves performative and the matter upon which any performance is actualised is growing (i.e. it has generationality).

5. Civil Institutionalisation and the Noise of Speech

To construct children as an experiential subject is to construct them with speech (i.e. to undo the claim that others have had of them in formation of dialogue – speech and counter-speech). To do so, leaves short the unspeaking, the infant. In his ‘Preface’ to the English translation of *Infancy and History* (1993), Agamben refers to Aristotle’s distinction between voice and language (or speech). Agamben talks about the difference between *phone* and *logos* as that which ‘opens the very space of ethics’ (Agamben, 2007: 8) and he talks about that space as ethical inasmuch as it is one that cannot be articulated. The expression Agamben uses to *not*-link voice to speech (*phone* to *logos*), ethics to politics, is that of the ‘moat of infancy’. The space in-between is what in the body of the main essay Agamben argues ‘coincides with that historico-transcendental region – before the subject of language and without somatic substance – which we have defined above as *infancy*’ (ibid: 67). Infancy, then, for Agamben is between nature and culture, between voice and organised speech, and between the household and the political realm. He says ‘[i]nfancy is an *experimentum linguae* of this kind, in which the limits of language are to be found not outside language, in the direction of the referent, but in an experience of language as such, in its pure self-reference’ (Agamben, 2007: 6). For Agamben infancy is a way of understanding the limit of language, not as the ineffable, but as ‘something superlatively sayable: the *thing* of language’

(ibid: 4). And although this is beyond Agamben, thinking the thing of language requires that language itself is much more than word alone, much more than phoneme as sound-image; the experience of language itself must include both the formal and the substantive (cf. Oswell, 2006).

If infancy stands before language, it is not as an absence to be represented. Maturity and experience do not follow the sublation of presence and absence, of representation; rather they move through translation. Children's voices are translated in their presence and in the presence of their infancy. Infancy is not that which is foregone in order to speak. It is neither household nor *polis*; it is to speak *from* one's genealogy. It is not simply that infants literally have no speech, but that children have no organised speech. Children may have collective experience, but they have no authority in the political realm. They have no civil institutions. And although there are plenty of adults who speak for their experiences in civil society, children have no political speech. In that sense, the invocation of children as a collective experiential subject needs to be posed in the context of their lack of institutionalisation. Children have associational relationality but no institutional authority. This might be posed in terms of a democratic deficit and calls by adults for more representation. But children suffer from a surplus of representation; they don't need more. Children don't need more clarity or transparency for their voice. In many ways they already have this. Any shift from associational experience to civil institutionalisation for children should only add the capacity to make noise, to add substance to their voices, to add the capacity for interference. It should allow them to interfere and move between social relations and to extend their passions, to infuse.

6. Conclusion

To conclude by returning to the topic of the day, I want simply to say that what is empirical needs to be framed, not in an abstract philosophical context of the contemporary nature of social fact (or factishes cf. Latour), but in the context of the genealogical emergence of subjects of experience: namely, of subjects of experience that can bear witness to a changing world and for whom a world is disclosed. This is not to return to a latent humanism, but it is to recognise that any talk of objects and technologies as having agency and as having objectivity (in the Latourian sense of the recalcitrance of objects) needs equally to provide an account of how these things have become social and cultural subjects. In the absence of a convincing account of that genealogy, any talk of a parliament of things needs to be tempered with an understanding of the limited authority of their witness... Either that or to provide an account of the empirical that is disarticulated from the experiential: namely, facts (or fictions) without subjects.