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Theorizing children's political agency

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Abstract

This chapter develops tools for understanding political agency and political events as they unfold contextually in children’s everyday lives. It discusses alternative understandings of the subject so as to grasp the scope of the subject’s autonomy as the ground for political subjectivity. Political agency is conceived in terms of subjectivity related to subject positions offered in the flux of everyday life. To bring together political subject and action, the topological settings of political agency are conceptualized in terms of polis. To illustrate the analytic potential of this approach, a case from the authors’ recent ethnographic research with early youth is analyzed.

Keywords political agency, subjectivity, children, youth, topology, polis

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I Introduction

Radical expansion in the notion of politics over the past two to three decades has brought the question of political agency to the fore in human geography, along with other social sciences. In present understanding political agency is not restricted to participation in social movements or institutional political processes but, rather, it refers to a variety of individual and collective, official and mundane, rational and affective, and human and non-human ways of acting, affecting and impacting politically (e.g. McDowell, 1992; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Katz, 1996; Flint, 2003; Barnett, 2008; Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Lestrelin, 2011; Kuus, 2015). Agency is considered an inseparable element of political geographical struggles and events because, as Kevin Cox and Murray Low (2003: 601) put it, “it is through agency that contradictions potentially get suspended and change occurs”.

A burgeoning literature discussing ‘the political’ in general or assessing agency in the context of particular political struggles has shown political agency to be a highly contested and multifaceted concept (e.g. Secor, 2001; Featherstone, 2003; Popke, 2004; Staeheli and Kofman, 2004; Thomas, 2009; Wright, 2010; Joronen, 2017). Yet, despite some calls for more work on the topic, attempts to theorize political agency in its own right remain scarce (Domosh, 1998; Agnew, 2003; Kuus, 2009). Stressing the importance of grasping agency as distinctively political, John Agnew contends that without this critical insight analyses may end up presuming political outcomes, so that “[p]olitics is already determined before anyone engages in it” (Agnew, 2003: 604).

Explicitly addressing this problematic, this chapter is an outgrowth of longstanding interest in the political agency of human beings who are often seen to fall outside the realm of

politics, or whose political roles and actions are considered when prompted by contingencies such as war or social unrest (Kallio, 2007, 2017a; Kallio and Häkli, 2010, 2011a, 2013, 2015; Häkli and Kallio, 2014a, forthcoming). Our interest was initially set in motion by what seemed a simple and innocent question: Why are children typically excluded from the concerns of political theory, to the point that the mere idea of introducing them in this context makes both children and politics appear outlandish? We came to realize that even when seen as participants in political events, children are often apprehended in ways that tend to rob them of any spontaneous agency that cannot be traced back to what is readily known to be politically relevant in adult terms (Kallio and Häkli, 2011b; see also Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Bosco, 2010; Bartos, 2012; Elwood and Mitchell, 2012; Marshall, 2016).

In the vast tradition of political philosophy and theory devoted to making sense of what politics is, youthful agency may seem a marginal concern. Childhood and youth are, after all, but passing stages in human development towards adulthood, which supposedly is the proper domain of the political (e.g. Hyman, 1959; Niemi and Hepburn, 1995; Highton and Wolfinger, 2001; McLeod and Shah, 2009). Yet we agree with Chris Philo and Fiona Smith (2003, also Philo and Smith, 2015) who argue that childhood is a particularly opportune condition through which to approach the question of political agency in general – a “critical case” in Flyvbjerg’s (2001) terms (for continued discussion, see Kallio and Häkli, 2013; Kallio and Mills, 2016). First, as hinted at above, it is precisely our interest in *children’s* political agency that has kept us from being content with standard definitions of what counts as politics. In fact, when political theories are brought to bear on children and youth, the issue turns out highly complicated and problematic (e.g. Valentine, 1997; Mitchell, 2006; Ruddick, 2007; Bragg, 2007; Thomas, 2009; Skelton, 2010). Second, taking children’s agency seriously demands us to ask questions that go beyond those prevailing certainties that may hamper

novel ways of assessing *politics* as an integral part of people's everyday lives. Gaining new insights on these problematics has been an enduring motivation for our work.

Taking up these theoretical questions has led us to focus on the "*phenomenologies of political action*", instead of developing "more and more elaborate *ontologies of the political*" (Barnett, 2012: 679, also Häkli, forthcoming; Joronen and Häkli, 2017). To bridge conceptual work on political agency with the phenomenology of political events, we highlight contextuality, both socially and spatially. Sensitivity to the contextual open-endedness of everyday political agency invites curiosity towards issues, experiences, events and actions that are or may become political in a given situation. While this expands the notion of politics, we do not propose that everything is, or should necessarily be seen, as politics. Still less do we seek to change its definition simply to make the word better fit our purposes, as Cresswell (2012) argues is the case with some NRT theorization.

We understand politics in an Arendtian sense "as a form of activity concerned with addressing problems of living together in a shared world of plurality and difference" so that "'the political' refers to the problematic of coexistence and association, and that the space of this sharing is constituted by active agents" (Barnett, 2012: 679, see also Kallio and Häkli, 2011a, 2013, 2017). According to this premise no matter, action or event is inherently political, yet anything can gain political weight through politicization, which may take place in broader or narrower social spheres. Issues and structures with long-term trajectories of contestation may seem self-evidently political, whereas others may continue to appear as non-political regardless of their particular import to some people in specific contexts. The feminist critique pointing to the political nature of private issues and spaces has for decades contested these divides, thus pluralizing the idea of the political (e.g. Aitken, 1994; Mitchell, Marston and Katz, 2004; Massaro and Williams, 2013). We seek to take these efforts further by developing a methodological approach that helps in identifying political aspects from

mundane situations without flattening the concept into an all-encompassing notion. As we will argue in this chapter, even the mere presence of a person in a particular situation may embody political agency if it involves an active stance by the subject.

We hence understand politics as a relational phenomenon. What makes things politically significant in each case depends on the situation and the context at hand. For us politics is about matters of *importance*, whether these be in the context of the state policy or a child's everyday life. In the former case, political issues are publically discussed and thus broadly acknowledged but in the latter case only the people involved in the child's private life may know what the stakes are. In most cases children's own political agency is prompted when matters that they hold particularly important are challenged or called into question, and when they have something at stake in these situations. To apprehend what is political in a given issue, event or action, we must be attentive to the question: In relation to which situation or site, for which persons or what group, community or assemblage, does this or that question gain weight? This query can also be formulated as follows: In which *polis* is a given agency constituted as political?

We realize that outlining the relevant socio-spatial contexts of everyday political agency in terms of polis mobilizes a concept that may seem parochial and burdened by its traditional uses, and thus incapable of addressing contemporary matters (cf. Marshall, 2010). Deriving from the ancient Greek city-state, it carries with it, among other things, patriarchal and hierarchical tones that, as Harvey (2000:157) suggests, may "be cast as oppressive and totalitarian". However, we share Raymond Williams' (1983: 21) conviction that while original meanings of words are an important source of etymological insight, these meanings remain open-ended and thus subject to historical and contextual change. Some recent attempts at freeing the idea of polis from its city-statist and territorial connotations and viewing it

rather as the relational realm of everyday politics testify to this dynamism (Ely, 1996; Elden, 2005; Dikeç, 2005; Marshall, 2010, also Arendt, 1958).

For us polis refers to the generic context of politicization. In this regard, it is shaped as a topological constellation bringing together people, issues, events, ideologies, places and objects here and there, now, before and in the future. It is a constitutive setting for people's view of themselves and (significant) others, influencing their awareness and understandings, and thus shaping them as political subjects. For us the phenomenology of politics springs from matters of importance in polis, however composed. In this spirit we have found an enlivened sense of polis a useful conceptual tool for capturing the many contextual and relational dimensions that pertain to children's political agency (see also Cavarero, 2002; Todd, 2011).

This chapter introduces the idea of the political as a human capacity and agency developing and unfolding throughout the life course from the early years on. We do not approach children and young people as age groups or generations demanding theories of their own. Rather, we are interested in childhood and youth as pertinent phases of life when political subjectivities are formed and different forms of political agency established. Due to this emphasis, the theoretical sections of this paper mostly refrain from discussing children and youth *per se*; we consider all human beings as situated subjects in polis with identities constituted along age, gender, race, class, and other social signifiers. However, in the section where we discuss our empirical study, we explicitly focus on the political agencies of children and youth.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First we outline our conception of the subject so as to arrive at a tentative understanding of the possibility and scope of autonomy as the ground of political subjectivity. We then seek to understand the conditions of possibility for political action. To this end, we theorize the subject's relative autonomy as conditioned by but not

reducible to its intersubjective constitution. Third, we bring together political subject and action by theorizing the social and spatial settings of political agency in terms of polis. To show how political agency can be understood as the coming together of subject, action and polis, we introduce a case from our recent ethnographic research with 11–16 years old people. By analyzing the case of ‘Sara’ we work out in detail and extend our earlier assessment of children’s political agency unfolding in relation to various subject positions offered in the flux of everyday life. We conclude by discussing the limitations and benefits of our conceptual tools in efforts to capture politics as experienced and practiced in children’s everyday lives.

II The intersubjectively constituting subject of action

All human sciences have had to contend with the ontological status of the subject, and thus it is the source of many divisions between incommensurable philosophical and theoretical positions (e.g. Lacan, 1960/1977; Sartre, 1966; Levi-Strauss, 1969; Rawls, 1971; Badiou, 2009). For us it is neither practical nor feasible to deal with the question in all its aspects, yet some interrelated issues concerning the status of the subject are highly consequential for the purposes of this chapter and must be discussed at some length. These include the question of what is the subject, can it be conceived of as autonomous, and how does it relate with subjectivity and identity.

The terrain of the subject can be sketched between two extremes. At one end stands the subject as a self-sufficient, enduring and sovereign individual, from which all consciousness and action springs. At the other end, the subject dissolves into a non-sovereign product of social and discursive construction, devoid of any stability, autonomy or unity of self. Both extremes are unsatisfactory in the light of contemporary debates. In the first case the subject continues to be a “refuge for older psychological and romantic models of the self”, an

atomized individual of modern political subjectivism (Wetherell, 2008: 78). The latter position, again, fails in responding to the simple question posed by Paul Ricoeur: “who is ‘I’, when the subject says he or she is nothing?” (Ricoeur, 1991: 78). He insists on the distinction between self (*ipse*) and identity (*idem*) in much the same way as Hannah Arendt distinguishes between the uniqueness of being whereby “nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live” (subject as ‘who’) and identity as a response to the question of what these unique beings are like (subject as ‘what’) (Arendt, 1958: 8).

Arendt’s work on the uniqueness of the subject is appealing because in showing how unique being is intertwined with the social constitution of identities she escapes both the foundational position of self-sufficient individualism and the anti-foundational overemphasis on decentered fragmentary identity. We will come back to this aspect of subjectivity as it pertains to political agency in the next section. First, however, it is necessary to examine more closely the two opposite ways of relating the subject with identity.

Two major strands of scholarship have explicitly theorized the relationship between subject and identity in a way that is illuminative for our purposes. Both consider identities as intersubjectively constituted but in questioning what this means to the ontological status of the subject, they tend to move to opposite directions. The first scholarship can best be captured in terms of post-structuralist conceptions of identity (e.g. Butler, 1990; Young, 1990; Benhabib, 1992), whereas the second operates variably under the rubric of the theory, ethics or politics of recognition (e.g. Taylor, 1994; Honneth, 1995, 2007; Fraser, 2000).

Judith Butler’s (1990, 1997, 2003) psychoanalytically attuned work on the role of performative repetition in constituting gendered identities has been influential across the social sciences. To account for subjectivity she explores the forces of domination operating through the subject’s attachment to identity categories given by regulatory regimes. For Butler to exist socially is to desire recognition offered by attachment to social categories that thereby

come to constitute the subject as fundamentally vulnerable to subjugation. In the face of this “psychic subjection”, individuals are always already “subjected or undergoing ‘subjectivation’” (Butler, 1997: 11). Thus, in her reading of Hegel Butler leans clearly towards an intrapsychic account of self-enslavement as a logic of subjection: “What Hegel implies [is that] ... the subject will attach to pain rather than not attach at all” (Butler, 1997: 61).

Butler’s work on subjectification is valuable in addressing the ways in which discursively structured subject positions condition political agency. However, her emphasis on the *individual* as the site of intersubjective relatedness to others is not without consequences for her understanding of political agency. Amy Allen (2005) argues that in probing into the possibility of recognition predicated on our vulnerability and dependency upon others, Butler ultimately fails to appreciate the dynamic and potentially non-subordinating aspects of human intersubjectivity. By being related and actively relating with others, people not only internalize constitutive and ordering roles but also gain stances from which to question, avert, and transform them.

Kathy Magnus (2006: 87) goes as far as to say that Butler employs “a reactive, minimalist, and unduly negative notion of agency. We are left with a subject who is only *as* subjected”. Lois McNay (2008) sums up much recent criticism of the undue precedence given to the role of categories and discourse in subject formation by stating that such theories “cannot explain certain subjective dimensions of agency such as will, self-understanding and intention which are crucial to explaining some of the political implications of action” (McNay, 2008: 195; see also Fraser, 1995; Campbell, 2001; Allen, 2005; Vasterling, 2010). One reason for this omission lies in what Adriana Cavarero (2002) calls post-structuralist theories’ preoccupation with the *what-ness* of being at the expense of the Arendtian question of *who* each one is – the “totally unique irreplaceable subjectivity” (Allen, 2005: 217).

Contemporary theories of recognition have set out to expand the notion of the subject's autonomy, subjectivity and agency. They are inspired by the 'struggle for recognition', an idea Hegel developed partly as a critique of the Hobbesian concept of the state of nature and its 'war of all against all'. Whereas Hobbes posited that the conflictual state of nature is overcome through the social contract, Hegel saw the struggle in itself as a productive force conducive to moral growth. For Hegel, subjects depend on mutual recognition for their existence as individuated selves and therefore the struggle for recognition is at once the source of individual autonomy and the foundation of sociality (Honneth, 1995). With his philosophical model, Hegel sought to describe the formative process leading to 'ethical life' characterized by the absence of misrecognition.

Similar aspirations have fuelled theories of recognition which are expressly motivated by attempts to redress forms of injustice based on misrecognition or withheld recognition of individual or group identity. In Charles Taylor's (1994: 25) words, "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves". Recognition, then, is not just a matter of due respect or courtesy but also a vital human need that may lead to serious grieving and result in identity political conflicts when it fails to be met.

For Axel Honneth (1995, 2007) struggle for recognition is a form of ethical life serving as the model for a society that meets the demands for recognition. It refers to the "entirety of intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realization" (Honneth, 1995: 173). Ideally, individuals come to realize themselves in the positive terms of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem that result from "undistorted and unrestricted recognition" by an approving and encouraging other (Honneth, 1995: 171).

Where this fails to happen, experience of disrespect is likely to occur, opening up a potential for social conflict (Honneth, 1995: 163).

While positing in Hegelian terms that the subject is constituted intersubjectively, theories of recognition must nevertheless retain a degree of autonomy to subjective being. This is because of the import they place on the *experience* of recognition as the basis of human well-being. For Taylor's point about a person's need to have her or his identities rightly recognized by others, there has to be a locus for experience that cannot be ontologically collapsed into them, however intersubjectively negotiated. Similarly, Honneth's claim that ethical life is based on possibilities for individuals and groups to experience recognition, presupposes a subject distinct from the "intersubjective structure of personal identity" – otherwise it would be impossible for a person to determine whether a given act of recognition is just or not (Honneth, 1995: 173; see also Anderson and Honneth, 2005).

Hence, for recognition theorists the subject's autonomy is not about individual sovereignty but rather about *the possibility for being in relation to one's identities through subjectivity*. Subjective probing of one's identities is particularly dynamic during the early years of life when people learn about their worlds in practice and through education, yet it continues throughout the life course. When moving between different life situations and geographical contexts, learning more about the power relations and ensuing inequalities embedded in them, people acquire new identities and start to see themselves and others in new ways. Hence, as people are being-becomings in all phases of life (Thomson, 2007; Pozzo and Evers, 2015), in theoretical terms there is no difference between children, youth, and adults as political subjects.

III Political subjectivity as relative autonomy

In developing his theory of recognition Honneth appropriates George Herbert Mead's (1934) thoughts on intersubjectivity as the foundation of identity formation, so as to embed Hegel's metaphysical theoretical model into "empirical events within the social world" (Honneth, 1995: 68). For this project Mead's account of the intersubjective constitution of 'me' has much to offer. Honneth accepts Mead's theoretical insight according to which "individuals can only become conscious of themselves in the object-position", that is, "a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective" (Honneth, 1995: 74-75). This is how 'me' emerges as the subject's social self, functioning as a dynamic source of moral development. In practical engagements with others, an individual acquires the normative point of view of its interaction partners and applies their moral values to make sense of its own actions. As one's sphere of interaction broadens from childhood's narrow circles to cover the whole society, one's 'me' comes to reflect the social norms of 'generalized other' needed for socially accepted membership in one's community (Honneth, 1995).

Had Honneth contended with merely appropriating Mead's account of how moral subjects become mature members of their societies through an intersubjective constitution of 'me', his theory of recognition would bear close reminiscence to determinist understandings of the subject. Yet, in contrast to the Butlerian concept of the subject's psyche as always constituted in dialogue with social norms (Butler, 1997: 102), Honneth uses Mead's conception of the 'I' to account for "the creative deviations with which, in our everyday action, we ordinarily react to social obligations", where the subject's 'I' is the source of everyday practical spontaneity, and "unconscious force ... [that is] the collection site for all the inner impulses expressed in involuntary reactions to social challenges" (Honneth, 1995: 81). What makes Mead's conception of the subject's 'I' so potent for understanding human political agency is precisely the way in which it explains why there may be experiences of

incompatibility with the norms of the social environment, experiences that cause “one to put one’s own ‘me’ into doubt” (Honneth, 1995: 82). The subject’s ‘I’, then, is the source of its relative autonomy from its intersubjectively constituted social identity ‘me’, and subjectivity is the dynamic relation between them.

In his work on intersubjectivity Mead mostly views the ‘I’ in terms of William James’ and John Dewey’s pragmatist thought as the subject of presently ongoing and as yet incomplete activity, thus the source of uncertainty and novelty. According to Mead, the self can only ever be experienced as an object and therefore as ‘me’, whereas the ‘I’ is the elusive ongoing agency that the agent cannot experience directly precisely because ‘I’ is not an object (Markell, 2007). Hence, while ‘me’ is routinely reflected upon as the object of past and future actions, the ‘I’ exists only in the present tense, responding open-endedly to situations:

Even in the case of a person who is ‘simply carrying out the process of walking,’ [Mead] suggests, ‘the very taking of his next steps’ nevertheless puts him in a situation that is ‘in a certain sense novel.’ The ‘I’ is, one might say, a name for this irreducibility of the response to the antecedent situation. (Markell, 2007: 123)

Together with the understanding of ‘me’ as the subject’s socially constituted self through which one relates to the exigencies and norms of the social world, the Meadian concept of ‘I’ clearly represents an important *source of the subject’s relative autonomy that we consider essential for understanding political agency*. The subject as ‘I’ explains why individuals cannot be thoroughly reduced to the effects of intersubjective and discursive constitution; yet, as the autonomy is relative to the subject’s social self, it does not lead back to the liberal notion of the autonomous self-sufficient subject.

In a nutshell: 'I' refers to the subject's agency as an ongoing doing and existing in the world here and now, the one unique presence in the world that each and every living being has. This presence turns upon reflection into an object of consciousness that bears the characteristics of 'me', ranging from a coherent understanding of oneself as a person to a mere fleeting sense of being. That is, 'I' refers to seeing itself, *not* to the objectified subject that does the looking, as expressed in the sentence "I see".

We adopt this insight as the basis of our conception of the subject. It paves the way for an understanding of political agency as at once socially conditioned and open-ended (Colapietro, 2006). We agree with McNay (2008) who concludes that Honneth's theory of recognition has contributed positively to our understanding of subjectivity by underlining its dialogical nature and ineluctably contextual, situated and practical generation. These are all features that classical pragmatism has helped foreground. A restored Meadian conception of subjectivity is helpful in developing an understanding of political agency from the perspective of the lived reality of embodied social relations. This approach, we argue, is applicable in the study of children, youth and adults alike. In the next section, we move to discussing political agency and its spatiality in terms of polis.

IV Becoming and being political in polis

Above we have introduced the idea of political subjectivity as vested in the dialogue between the subject's 'I' and 'me', neither of which can exist without the other. Political agency we understand phenomenologically as activity related to problems of living together in and through the spaces that this sharing constitutes. Importantly, as subjectivity exists and develops from the beginning of social life, children belong to the political realm by definition:

“With each new birth, a new beginning is born into the world, a new world has potentially come into being.” (Arendt, 1953: 321, also 1958: 9).

When it comes to the geographies of political agency, ‘I’ and ‘me’ map out differently. Through the subject’s ‘me’ all human beings relate to the social worlds in which their political agencies unfold. As an intersubjectively constituted social self, ‘me’ has both a history and an orientation toward the future, and thus existence beyond the here and now. It is the object of consciousness when the subject reflects upon or talks about her/himself, but importantly, the reflection is carried out by the subject’s ‘I’. The subject’s ‘me’, therefore, owes the powers of its agency to the ‘I’ that animates it, yet the ‘I’ has no social existence without the ‘me’ that gives the subject all the characteristics that make it a potent political actor.

This readily points to the importance of *contextuality* for political agency. If human beings only existed as ‘I’ subjects, we could conceive of the contextuality of political agency simply in the situational terms of here and now. All politics would then unfold in relation to the conditions and other subjects presently at hand, and children’s processes of socialization would merely involve elements from their here-and-now environments. We consider the recent interest in immediacy and immanence a welcome attempt to capture such political geographies in a novel way (e.g. Horton and Kraftl, 2006). However, as human political agency takes place through the subject’s ‘me’, the constitution of which reflects a broad array of different contexts and situations, the contextuality of political agency takes on much more temporal and spatial complexity (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2009; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; Dawney, 2013). Habashi (2017: 17) describes the dynamic processes of political socialization as involving “multiple agents, realities, and relationships between local and global discourses that assist in forming youth’s perspectives and actions”. This complexity we wish to capture by the term *polis* that we use to refer to the different kinds of spatial and temporal settings

where our political agency may arise and unfold – contexts in which we have something at stake (see also Cavarero, 2002; Dikeç, 2005; Elden, 2005).

Because we understand politics relationally, the relevance of polis in our theorization of children's political agency goes well beyond the idea of a scene or arena for political action. Indeed, it is only in relation to a polis that this or that matter will gain significance and become political to people. For example, the children and youth who took part in our study in Southern Finland and Northern England had encountered partly similar yet largely different politicized matters in their lived realities, which called forth and dampened distinct political agencies. Politics is fundamentally social, just as the 'me' through which it unfolds is fundamentally intersubjective. This is an important aspect of political agency, underlining that politics is not about the whims and vagaries of the liberal sovereign individual but, rather, the subjectivity that empowers political agency is conditioned by the social and spatial settings where matters of importance get politicized. Whether shaped as a setting for institutional or everyday politics, however spatially constituted, polis both engenders and conditions youthful political agencies.

For outlining the complex contextuality of children's political agency it is useful to begin by considering topography and topology as two different kinds of configurations of spatiality (e.g. Mol and Law, 1994; Giaccaria and Minca, 2011; Allen, 2011a). Topography refers to the conventional understanding of cartographically representable space (e.g. territories, regions, locations, and metric distances). Disrupting this understanding, topology captures relational and discontinuous space where proximity is defined less by distance and more by the intensity and frequency of social relations that shape the space (Murdoch, 1997; Law, 2002). Along with Mol and Law (1994), we consider topography and topology as complementary rather than alternative understandings of spatial relations, neither of which

alone provides an all-encompassing account of the spatiality of polis (see also Häkli, 2008, 2013; Häkli and Kallio, 2014b, 2016; Kallio 2017b; Kallio and Häkli, 2017).

A topographic space, such as a voting district, represents the more conventional understanding of political space. It keeps informing most institutional political practices, including policies that seek to promote children's agency, and also many studies that assess these processes (e.g. Cohen and Torres, 2015; Derr and Kovács, 2017; Carroll, Witten and Stewart, 2017). Hence, when children are given the chance to exercise their right to participation in matters concerning them, they tend to be approached as members of a particular district (e.g. school, residential, municipal, national), supporting a specific group or candidate (e.g. age group, class mate, school representative), with a certain history of previous choices in formal participation, level and success in education and other activities (e.g. hobbies), and nationality, ethnicity, race, family, neighborhood, class, gender – and age (Kallio and Häkli, 2011b; Kallio, 2017b; Kallio *et al.*, 2015).

However, formal participatory practices such as voting call forth only some aspects of our political selves. We can be certain kinds of political agents when participating in institutional polises but not *all* kinds of agents. This is because the institutions of representative democracy tend to offer us official, legally grounded, territorially organized, norm-bound subject positions that hail us in very particular ways. Thus, for example the geographical assumptions pertaining to children's politics tend to overemphasize locality and physical proximity, implying that things near are more important to children than things far (e.g. Murtagh and Murphy, 2011; Said, 2012; Jansson, 2015). However, a growing literature following Cindi Katz's (1996) and Doreen Massey's (1998) early insights counters this idea by emphasizing the multiple spatial frames and scales of children's political agency (e.g. Bosco, 2010; Bartos, 2012; Elwood and Mitchell, 2012; Marshall, 2016; Kallio and Mills, 2016; Habashi, 2017). These studies have made it abundantly clear that the geographies of

children's concerns – their polises – are much more complex and malleable than may have been thought. These politics cannot be identified from a merely topographical perspective.

To complement the traditional approaches, we seek to make sense of political agency by studying the topological relations influential in people's everyday lives. As we conceive of politics relationally, topological configurations of space seem particularly promising as an account of the differentially constituted settings where everyday political agency may unfold. We subscribe to John Allen's view that "topology represents an opportunity for geographers to think again about how it is that events elsewhere seem to be folded or woven into the political fabric of daily life" (Allen, 2011b: 318). In topological terms, the polis of political agency does not exist simply as a continuous physical space – a location, place or region in which the agency takes place – but rather it is a space constituted, held together and performed by relational intensities configured by what is significant or important for those involved, in a given moment or period of time (see also Featherstone, 2008; Barnett, 2012; Secor, 2013).

To grasp the polis as a non-Euclidean space, it is necessary to begin from the question of what constitutes membership in a polis and how it calls forth political agency in the flux of everyday life. To offer what can only be a very tentative account for these questions, we will turn to our recent ethnographic work focusing on children's political agency as practiced in relation to particular subject positions they encounter in their everyday lives.

V Struggle over subjectivity: Sara's mundane politics

Let us first recall how Markell (2007: 129) underlines the role that 'I' plays in the open-ended intersubjective constitution of 'me' "located less in [the individuals] than in the world they share, in one mode or another, with others". This move has two major consequences for

understanding the phenomenology of political action. First, political agency, and along with it the formation of the first polis in which an individual partakes, begins at the birth of a child. Our political agency, then, begins when we enter into social relations that animate the dialogue between 'I' and 'me' and our (significant) others. Consequently, our agency in the polis is marked less by the battle between some authentic inner self and the demands coming from the society than by the way in which we relate *subjectively* to situations, events and positions offered to us in the course of our lives. This seemingly subtle move is important because it shifts the relationality of 'the political' from within the individual into the social world that the embodied individual encounters in multiple different subject positions, either averting, accepting or altering them through individual or concerted action (see also Ortner, 2005; Simonsen, 2007; JT Allen, 2008; Gökariksel and Secor, 2010). These positions may be set by the demands of a particular situated social interaction, or they may be of much more complex origin, reflecting particular discursive positionings, action histories, societal processes and future orientations. Either way, the space for political agency is opened up by the subjectivity that dwells in the space of indeterminacy between the situated agency of our 'I' and 'me' as our social self.

With this understanding of the subject we now move on to illustrating our conception of children's political agency. In what follows we refer to the subject's 'I' and 'me' as always present in the subject as 'who', founded on subjectivity that animates human political agency. We do this because the distinction is analytical, not empirical, and thus it is not feasible to pinpoint 'I' as isolated from 'me' in any particular sequence of action. What we can observe, instead, is the dynamic interplay between the subject as 'who' – the unique subjective existence in the world unfolding largely beyond reflection – and the subject as 'what', the social self-negotiated intersubjectively in relation to subject positions proposed and available in a particular polis. As we seek to make evident, in empirical analysis it is possible to assess

how these two facets of the subject animate political agency differently: the ‘who’ as based on the relative *autonomy* of the subject, and the ‘what’ constituted in and thus *constrained* by the social world.

As relating to subject positions takes different forms in diverse settings, political subjectivity is contextual and multiform. Unless living in total isolation, which hardly ever is the case, political subjects are plural and thus capable of positioning themselves differently in distinct political systems (Ortner, 2006; Venn, 2009). This dynamism may become overtly evident through the practices of naming and nicknaming, as is the case with our recent school ethnographic study with eleven- to sixteen-year-old kids. Children are typically given nicknames by their family members, schoolmates and other peer groups. Often these are agreeable to them, or even coined by the children themselves, which means that they readily accept and enact the distinct subject positions afforded by the names context-specifically. As one of the girls describes it, her ‘school self’ may lie down in a puddle to fool around, whereas her ‘familial self’ committed to her mother’s norms and moralities could never do that (for a detailed analysis, see Häkli and Kallio, forthcoming). But, importantly, nicknames may also be unpleasant or even humiliating. In these cases children may lean on the plurality of their polises to avoid subordination related to an unpleasant subject position they cannot ignore. This may require constant effort, as was the case with Sara, a girl in our study. The following analysis is based on two in-depth interviews and participant observation in her school.

Sara is an eleven-year-old girl living in Tampere, Finland. Her family consists of father, mother and a big sister aged twenty. They live close to the city center in an area of traditional wooden houses with relatively large backyards, surrounded by green parks, walkways and ponds. In socio-economic terms the neighborhood could be identified as middle-class but socio-culturally it is best characterized as plural. With reasonably priced housing, ample yards

and location close to the social sciences university, the area has become popular among academic staff, students and artists, but there are also residences allocated to people with drinking problems and villas owned by wealthy people, which together form a rather mixed social environment. Sara's family affiliates with people of alternative lifestyle philosophies, sharing for instance interest in non-Western cultures and a critical attitude towards commercial media. Their house is close to the school where Sara attends a music-oriented class. Nearby there is also a well-known youth circus art school she has attended for seven years. On top of that, as a music lover she takes double bass lessons at the music school in the city, plays the piano at home, and visits regularly the close-by music hall for classical concerts.

In talking about Sara's familial life, we learned to know a young person who highly respects the philosophy of her family that opposes many mainstream cultural conventions. For example, unlike most participants in our study, she feels very affectionate towards Russia. Her stance is based on cultural aspects that are not usually well known because the media, school education and common discourses all emphasize geopolitical relations. Also, owing to her sisters' student exchange year in Japan, she has become a great fan of Japanese culture. These dispositions are contrasted with the Anglo-hegemony that dominates popular culture in Finland. Sara is proud of her differing opinions about cartoons, books, films, music, TV and other popular media, and does not avoid bringing them up in school. These acts are prime examples of "critical distancing ... integral to the processes of disidentification" (Venn, 2009: 5). At stake in this juxtaposition of preferences is nothing less than 'who' and 'what' she is in the school community, and who gets to define this.

In our interviews it became apparent that Sara moved fluently between her different social selves, which led us to explore in-depth her subjectivity as reflected in relation to negotiated identities. As proposed by theories of personhood (e.g. Harré, 1997), she implicitly

conceives of herself as an indivisible self capable of entering her worlds through different identity constructions recognized by others for what they are. What was helpful to us in analytical terms was her ability to reflect on their distinct character, a capacity embedded on her subjective experience of ‘not being my identity’.

When discussing her home and family, Sara only takes up positive things. Her response to the question concerning her favorite things at home is a case in point: “I don’t know, at home everything is always so nice that it is hard to say.” She shares most of her personal matters with her sister who is more or less her best friend outside the intense and intimate youth community of the Circus that forms basically her other home. Her attachment to family members and friends from this hobby has its flipside in problems with other peer relations. Most importantly, Sara finds herself as an outsider at school. She says that she differs from the other girls in many ways, including attitudes, opinions, interests, outlook, habits, and upbringing, and this has placed her into a weak position in the class. The situation is gendered in the sense that, whereas Sara feels that the boys treat her “like anyone” and she can fool and joke around with them, for the girls she is a constant object of gossip and backbiting. This was verified in our participant observation at the school and interviews where none of the girls mentioned Sara in a positive light. Sara conveys that her attempts to find a place among the girls have repeatedly failed. In her own view, the problem is not herself as a person but the certain kind of relationship that has developed between her and the group of girls – what we see as discomfort with her social self at school. This became perceptible for instance in the following discussion:

Interviewer: You said that they only know half of you. Which part do they know?

Sara: It’s actually less that they know, say one quarter. They know a different me – that I am not like them, that I am not at all like the others, that I do different things and I

have been brought up differently [...] They have not bothered getting to know me well enough for me to show them my enthusiastic side.

This reflection is illuminative of Sara's experience of the distinction between her sense of self and identities. She sees that she is not the girl whom the others disregard, or not that girl *only*. She even realizes that the ways in which the other girls know her are influenced by interpretations based on *their* subjectivities, meaning that she experiences nothing in her identities as permanently fixed. Sara's feeling of unease is based on her political subjectivity opened up by the distance between her ongoing unique existence ('I'), and the many social selves ('me') through which she relates to her polis. It facilitates her critical distancing from the subject position that the school community offers, and attachment to alternative subject positions that she can lean on in other contexts. To realize how this happens we should take a closer look at the major subject positions that Sara relates to in her everyday life.

Each time our discussion touched upon school life Sara's tone of voice changed, pointing to its heavily politicized nature in her experience. It soon became evident that school as a social milieu is the least desirable element of her relational everyday politics. Sara's social marginalization is epitomized by an unfriendly naming practice she cannot escape in the school community (see also Nicolaisen, 1999; Pace, Lowery, and Lamme, 2004). The subtle nicknaming occurs through a particular way of pronouncing her surname initial, making it sound like 'hag'. This hurtful naming is easy to conceal because the initial is commonly used to distinguish her from another girl in the class with the same first name. Consequently, the teachers too end up unknowingly calling her 'hag' in a seemingly legitimate way, and thus upholding the repressive subject position that Sara is constantly struggling with at school.

That the school nickname is particularly agonizing for Sara became evident from the way she acted when her classmates told us about it. She clearly did not want us to know and at first denied the practice, but when the word was out she could only admit the fact. At that point she added, so quietly that only we could hear, that “In Circus they sometimes call me ‘Sushi’”. This second nickname recognizes Sara’s particular affection to everything Japanese (technological inventions, cultural product, clothes, styles, the language – and food), and reveals yet another important subject position in relation to which she leads her everyday life.

Our conversations about her circus hobby revealed a community very different from her school class. Instead of creating juxtapositions that build uneven power relations and subordination, the Circus accommodates differences between people, their opinions and habits. In an Arendtian (2005) spirit, it appears as a supportive part of her polis where living together in a world of plurality and difference is possible and enjoyable. In this atmosphere the things Sara respects *about herself* get positively noticed. As ‘Sushi’ she can rely on others’ support, live to the full and trust that this will not be turned against her. Cheerfully she conveyed that in Circus she may joke around, laugh at herself, make fun of others, and take risks and fail without the fear of losing face. She also finds herself competent in the hobby activities and a person respected by others. The next excerpt is illuminative of Sara’s feelings of liberty and proficiency that feed her aspirations toward the future as well.

Interviewer: “In your circus art hobby, what would be the greatest thing ever, a dream come true?”

Sara: “That Circus would become school, a kinda school where they teach both circus and school things.”

Interviewer: “Meaning that when you go to school, you’d actually go there?”

Sara: “Yes.”

Interviewer: “Ok. So, what would be a great thing that could happen to you in your present school?”

Sara: “I don’t know really.”

Interviewer: “What about when you move to secondary school then?”

Sara: “That I’d be better appreciated there.”

It seems evident that the subject position of ‘Sushi’ is of crucial importance to Sara’s critical distanciation from being ‘hag’. Even if the subjective negotiation of her social self in Circus may not affect ‘what’ Sara is at school at the moment (her social self being so established that changing it seems unfeasible), it has a profound influence on ‘who’ she is, shaping her political subjectivity both presently and for the future. Being ‘Sushi’ works to raise her self-esteem, provides a rescue from the position offered to her at school every day, and opens up a hopeful window toward the future as she knows that she can relate to peer communities in different ways. Hence, Sara’s alternative identity provides her with the means to practice political agency and actively resist the ongoing subordination in the school. It also builds ground for negotiating her social self differently in a new school where she hopes to get a fresh start; she was thinking of choosing a school beyond the school path that most of her classmates would take. In this sense it is crucially important that there are environments and social settings, such as the Circus, that allow Sara more agreeable subject positions, helping her to cope with situations of anxiety.

Unlike it may first seem the challenges that Sara faces at school and her responses to them are not individualistic or encapsulated in this institutional setting. Her aspiration to be a particular kind of political subject does not reflect the “self-understanding or reasoned action” of the liberal subject but, rather, it is based on “commitment to a certain construction of the public self: not a ‘subject position’ but a willful ‘stance’ whose content, form, and

consequences are not entirely foreseeable by anyone” (Gambetti, 2005: 435). How she acts in her polis is therefore neither a triumph of voluntary action nor a fully predetermined social process, but a relational struggle on intersubjectively negotiated matters of importance. Moreover, this polis is a multi-scalar and poly-dimensional constellation of relational intensities. Seen topographically, the negotiation over her identities is surely embedded in and conditioned by the perimeter of the school class. But the social and spatial context of the politics at play can hardly be reduced to the school. In topological terms, the polis of these struggles involves all members of both Sara’s and the other girls’ families, their significant others, the symbolic and material settings of their daily lives, the prevailing moral, cultural and geopolitical values in their lived communities, the discursively constituted truths about life in Tampere and Finland, and so on. Polis thus understood is people, places, objects and ideas involved, here and there, now, before and in the future, brought together by what is at stake in the given event – it is an inalienable part of the constitution of children’s politics.

VI Conclusion

In this chapter we set out to develop tools for understanding children’s political agency and political events as they unfold in their everyday lives. To this end we first discussed alternative understandings of the subject so as to grasp the possibility and scope of the subject’s autonomy as the ground for political subjectivity. Our goal has been to theorize the intersubjective constitution of the subject in a manner that goes beyond both the post-structuralist dissolution of the subject and the liberal conception of the subject as an isolated sovereign individual. To understand the ways in which political subjectivity translates into action that can be understood as political we have theorized political agency in terms of subjectivity related to subject positions offered in the flux of everyday life. This conception entails that regardless of their phase of life, people are always considered both as active

political beings in their everyday lives, and transforming political subjects. Finally, to bring together political subject and action we conceptualized the topological settings of children's political agency in terms of polis. To illustrate the analytical potential of our approach, we presented a brief analysis from our ethnographic work on political agency in everyday circumstances.

With children as a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg, 2001), we argue that political agency along the conceptual lines of subject, action and polis can be studied in any type of event, social setting, or scale of action. What follows from this is that the meanings of the political may not be known in advance and thus need to be worked out empirically. However, to avoid the trap of “political everything”, the relational reading of political agency requires that in each case it is explicated why certain agencies are to be considered politically relevant and how the polis in question shapes this relevance – be they situated in public or private spheres of life. This principle drives us toward exploring the phenomenology of political action, instead of asking ontologically what is, or is not, politics (cf. Dean, 2000; Barnett, 2012).

To theoretically grasp children's political agency, we have proposed that it is analytically divided into political subject and political action, and contextualized in polis. Through Honneth's thought we found Mead's original idea of ‘I’ and ‘me’ as intertwined but distinguishable aspects of the subject a compelling theoretical grounding for the subject's relative autonomy. For us such autonomy is the condition for any human political agency beyond determination by the intersubjectively and discursively constituted identities and subject positions seated in existing social power relations. Without this autonomy political agency would always be seriously thwarted by the subject's social constitution and it would be very difficult to account for unpredictable political acts.

In our understanding the subject as ‘who’ is constituted in a dialogue between ‘I’ and ‘me’ – the agent that is always now and here, and the agent as an object of reflection. ‘Me’

refers to the intersubjectively negotiated social self to which we ourselves and others relate to when seeking to define the subject as ‘what’. The fact that ‘I’ cannot be reduced to ‘me’ is the source of subjectivity in human political agency. The latter may denote a variety of things in different situations and contexts, which we refer to as polis. These can be topographically and topologically constituted assemblages where political subjects have something at stake and where political agency unfolds. Conditioned by the subject’s relative autonomy, political agency is undetermined but limited by the conditions that the polis provides. By exploring how the varying dynamics and moralities of the polis enable and condition everyday political agency, we can see more clearly the connections between different actors and matters at stake as motivations and potentials for particular kinds of political action. This, we suggest, will provide tools for understanding children’s political agency in many different kinds of settings and circumstances.

The case of Sara that we analyzed to illustrate our conception of children’s political agency has its restrictions but also benefits. The analyzed discussion focuses on a struggle in school community, making the power relations between the players apparent and the relevant polis easy to imagine. However, as some of our observations readily indicate, everyday political events are usually more complex and entangled, and thus harder to explicate in terms of political agency (Kallio and Mitchell, 2016; Kallio and Häkli, 2017; Häkli, Pascucci and Kallio, 2017; Häkli, forthcoming). Therefore, especially in empirical studies that target less explicit cases, it is important to strive for relational readings of the political so as not to ignore those who do not appear as the most influential participants. As feminist and post-colonial scholars have underlined, only such analyses may capture the political agencies that in more traditional approaches tend to go unnoticed (e.g. England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Valentine, 2003; Popke, 2006; Secor, 2001).

The approach we have developed facilitates the study of many different kinds of youthful political agency in situations and settings ranging from intimate experiences of subjectivity to reasoned environmental activism to geopolitical events on a world scale. What brings forth the political in each case is some question that gains importance to those involved in the respective polis. When polis is seen a key element in the politicization of issues and agencies, as we propose, it is clear that the latter may gain significance through developments and events that defy any simple relation to location or scale. Thus, topologically understood, the politicization of a given issue in a young person's everyday life (e.g. a sense of self-worth, sustainable diet, or gay rights) may occur at an intersection of personal experiences, public debates, social norms, institutional regulations, legal orders, and beyond. With such conception of polis we no longer need to resort to the categorical distinction between everyday politics ('politics') and institutional high politics ('Politics') but, instead, are more attuned to analyzing how the public and private, individual and collective, personal and institutional become enmeshed in the ways in which children's political agencies unfold in the world. This insight we propose as an inspiration for further theoretical and empirical work on the political agency and polises of children and adults alike.

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