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## **Are there politics in childhood?**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper sets out to explore children's worlds as potential fields of political action. Children are approached as competent political agents whose mundane lives are permeated by politics in which they have their own positions and roles. The paper discusses how children can be found to act politically in their everyday lives and, to some extent, also practice their own political geographies. The main objective is to propose a theoretical basis for recognizing the political aspects of children's agency and studying political geographies embedded in children's lived worlds.

**Keywords:** children, politics, politicization, the political, political geography, childhood studies

## Are there politics in childhood?

In the past twenty years interest towards children and young people's geographies has grown steadily in cultural studies and social sciences. Spaces and sites such as the home, the school, urban neighborhoods and virtual communities have been explored as significant contexts of children's everyday agency with and alongside other people. As part of this scholarship also power relations embedded in children's lived worlds have been acknowledged. Dynamics and power struggles maintained and produced by the children themselves, the imbalances and hierarchies concerning child-adult relations, and the society's pressures bearing upon childhood have been explored in various contexts (e.g. Morris-Roberts, 2004; Gallacher, 2005; Forsberg & Strandell, 2007; Gallagher, 2008; Thomas, 2009).

However, the political geographies consequential in children's everyday lives are rarely positioned at the centre of these explorations. Children's worlds are typically approached as social and cultural environments, but not as political arenas – i.e. spaces where the presence of human relations is organized by power (Brown 2002:569). Even studies that explicitly focus on power or empowerment tend to overlook the political dynamisms that direct and transform the power relations embedded in children's lived worlds. The scholarship foregrounding children's involvement or participation in political processes usually deals with issues readily known as belonging to the sphere of 'the political', be that civic activism, urban planning or policy making in schools. Hence, what politics means in each case is not derived from children's experiences and lived worlds but determined on the basis of policies and politics pertinent to adult communities and societies. This sustains the perception of children's mundane lives as *not* determined by webs of power relations forming around matters of importance to children themselves. Yet, if we accept that children are active members of their communities and societies (*beings*), and not merely objects of top-down socialization processes (*becomings*), we should reverse our thinking concerning children's political lives (see Arneil, 2002; Skelton, 2007; Kallio & Häkli, 2010).

In this paper we propose that power relations acknowledged and constituted by children themselves form the basis of their political lives. This is not to suggest that states, institutions, families, childhood professionals, policy makers, commercial forces, the media, close communities, and other actors who influence and effect children's daily lives would not play an important role in their politics – quite the contrary. Following de Certeau's (1984) thought, we think that the webs of power relations that children enact as political agents permeate their everyday lived spaces and encompass all of these actors. In other words, we presume that in no way different from adults children engage in various kinds of politics in which they have their own positions and roles – politics which cannot be known before children's quotidian lives are studied as potentially political. Hence, our objective is to show how children can be found to act politically in their practices of everyday life. While the political geographies that children form may at times center on aspects familiar from political struggles in general (e.g. status, position, territoriality), their political significance derives from and is generated in the context of children's lived worlds.

To demonstrate the difficulty of relating children and politics, we begin by portraying how children's politics are currently discussed and debated in spatially

oriented research, and consider the complexities of identifying politics in children's lived worlds. We then propose one way of approaching children's political agencies with the capacity of revealing as political such practices and contexts that typically appear as non-political to adults. To this end we re-conceptualize in political terms two cases presented in recent scholarship on children's agency and power relations. We seek to show that, children's political practices and lived political geographies are not as unfamiliar to us as it may first seem. Even though rarely identified in political terms, they are constantly noticed and reacted on by those living and working with children, and also reflected on in scholarly works. To conclude, we propose a tentative theoretical basis for 'politicizing' children's agency and the geographies situating in childhood(s)<sup>1</sup>.

### **Relating children and politics**

Within the multi-disciplinary field of childhood studies there are two major research streams that approach children's political roles from somewhat different angles and with diverse motivational backgrounds. First, there exists an extensive literature discussing children's roles and agencies in local, national and supra-national *policy making* (e.g. Lee, 1999; Matthews & Limb, 1999; Such & Walker, 2005; White & Choudhury, 2007; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009; Skelton, 2010). Following the paradigm of the 'new' socio-cultural childhood studies (cf. James & Prout, 1990; Alanen, 2010), this scholarship depicts children as active and in many ways skilled social and cultural actors who can and should be included in political procedures concerning themselves, i.e. heard individually and representatively in planning and decision making as well as in societal issues more generally. The work is typically motivated by the perceived need to bring children's voices to the public agenda, to empower children in different official and semi-official processes, and to provide children with opportunities to engage in local, national, and supra-national political movements and activities. In relating children with politics this approach stresses the importance of acknowledging children's rights and competences, and agencies that realize through participation in matters concerning them, set in the context of political-administrative procedures and policy making.

This line of research enjoys a broad support both within academia and the society, but is not without its critics. It has been pointed out that the 'adultist' official and semi-official arenas for this type of involvement tend to propose children roles that differ notably from those in children's everyday environments. Consequently, they demand specific ways of acting and therefore appear inviting only to select children (e.g. Matthews, 2001; Bragg, 2007; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Kallio & Häkli, 2011b). When children's political action is taken to situate mostly in these political arenas, led and defined explicitly by adults, politics is not considered as 'complex and multivalent struggle' where societies are constituted through action that takes multifarious and extraordinary forms (Staeheli & Kofman 2004: 3). Instead, through political involvement children may enter the public sphere of politics where common issues are deliberated by

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<sup>1</sup> The scope and the constituents of childhood vary between diverse locations. To foreground this plurality we use the concept 'childhood(s)' when referring to the position of a child as an overarching phenomenon. When addressing certain children's lived worlds we use 'childhood' in singular to stress their particularity.

representatives and politicians, and the contents of the political are readily known to parallel with 'Politics' or even *police*<sup>2</sup> (Rancière, 1999: 28).

The second major tradition relating children and politics springs from somewhat different grounds. An extensive scholarship seeks to address children's everyday lives in relation to certain politically relevant and often large-scale issues such as economic imbalance, new modes of governance, war, health crisis, and education (e.g. Stephens, 1995; Sheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Katz 2004; McIntyre, 2005; Kesby *et al.*, 2006; Mitchell, 2006; Abebe, 2007; Benwell, 2009). This work accentuates children's mundane agencies and elaborates the roles assigned to them in their everyday lives, but does not assume that children are fully aware of the politics of their doings because the political is understood as a constitutive force. Contrary to the research on political involvement and political activism, these studies mostly focus on the geopolitics of everyday life, acknowledging children as capable agents acting alongside with the other members of their communities and societies (cf. Punch, 2001; Gilmartin & Kofman, 2004: 123; Secor, 2004; Strandell, 2010).

The geo-economically and culturally oriented studies of childhood pursue to seize the politics of children's lives in different locations and settings and, in so doing, to contribute to research addressing social, cultural and economic politics from relational perspectives (e.g. critical geopolitics). The objective of these studies is to elaborate children's potential to influence in politically significant matters, while studying the outcomes of high politics or economic developments pertaining to the children's lives. Ethnographic methods are typically employed for determining children's attitudes, understandings, and practices concerning the issues at stake, supplemented with other types of data. This research strand has succeeded in exploring, for instance, the complexity of some large-scale geopolitical developments and protracted conflicts in novel ways. Moreover, scholarship focusing on the unjust and abusive standings that children are given in geopolitical conflicts and ambiguous local situations has made way to acknowledging children's political agencies as child soldiers, racial activists, and actors engaged in political struggles (e.g. Brocklehurst, 2006; Nakata, 2008; Habashi, 2008; Kallio, 2008; Hyndman, 2010).

However, when considering children's political agency more broadly, the focus on major (geo)political events and crises appears unnecessarily narrow and delimiting because the political agencies of those children who are not activists or involved in conflicts *per se* are seldom acknowledged (Habashi & Worley, 2008: 43). This means that the majority of children are conceived as free from political struggle in their everyday lives. Children are seen as if they were detached from the constant renegotiation and constitution of the political, only to become members of political communities when 'Politics' or 'politics' develops into a matter of interest to them (Arneil, 2002: 82). From a relational perspective this proposition seems absurd since it does not acknowledge politics as a pervasive aspect of human life, and political identities as socially embedded.

Two points merit attention before we move on to propose an alternative reading of the relationship between children and politics. Firstly, whereas children's politics has gained little attention in the academia, *young people's* politics and political agencies are

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<sup>2</sup> '[T]he set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution.'

fairly extensively discussed in social sciences and political geography (e.g. Matthews & Limb, 1998; Buckingham, 2003; Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2005; Cahill, 2007; Hörschelmann, 2008; Skelton, 2010; Kallio & Häkli, 2011a). Secondly, it is clear that 'Politics' and 'politics' cannot be strictly demarcated from each other, as Skelton (2010) aptly points out. Political involvement may take place on less official arenas, concern matters of particular importance to the participating youth, and be based on personal motivation rather than representation. For instance environmental issues, community planning, ethics of food production, questions of sexuality and disability, and animal rights often succeed to engage young individuals (e.g. Skelton & Valentine, 2003; Autio & Wilska, 2005; Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2005; Liddick, 2006; Cahill, 2007; Pallotta, 2008).

Work on the political agencies of the youth<sup>3</sup> has greatly advanced our understanding of the intermediary between policy making, political activism, and young people's reflections on issues of political significance. It is precisely young people rather than children whose agency is captured in studies that deal with this kind of action. Yet it is obvious that differently aged children and young people have dissimilar motivations, interests, capacities, and ways of making use of, submitting to, and resisting power relations (Kallio & Häkli, 2011ab). Moreover, the goal of youth political research is often to show that young individuals are capable of acting politically alongside with and in ways similar to adults as long as they are properly informed and assisted (Skelton & Valentine, 2003; Vanderbeck, 2009). Therefore underage people's mundane politics, building on their own grounds with relation to the subject positions offered to them *as minors*, are rarely taken up in these studies.

In all, the two major strands of scholarship that work to relate children and politics portray the relationship in a guise that leaves a sizeable caveat to be covered. To capture the politics in childhood at large critical scholarship should explore how political geographies constitute in lived childhoods, what these political worlds are like, and what kinds of dynamisms uphold and transform the political worlds where children act as competent agents. We next turn to the tradition of political theory as present in the social studies of childhood to search for tools for this task.

### **Tracing childhoods in political theory**

Although the field of children's geographies has extended notably in the past twenty years, scholars concerned with children's everyday environments have not shown *explicit* interest towards children's political agency or the political geographies that unfold in childhood(s) (Kallio & Häkli, 2010). This is somewhat surprising given that politics is increasingly understood in relational terms as 'struggle between friends and enemies' (Schmitt, 1976: 26); as a 'mode of acting that is put into practice by a specific kind of subject, deriving from a particular form of reason' (Rancière, 2001); as a 'force field, an intensity, not a substance' (Agamben, 2001, cited in Brown, 2002: 576); as 'dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human relations' (Mouffe, 2000: 101); '[purposive and

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<sup>3</sup> Officially 'youth' is usually considered to cover the period of life from teenage to nearly 30 years of age. The European Union defines youth to include ages from 15 to 25. Yet even in European countries youth is understood diversely. For instance the UK Youth Green Paper (2005) discusses the rights of young people between 11 and 19, whereas the Finnish Youth Act (2006) concerns all people before the 29 years of age, setting no minimum age to youth.

oriented everyday] activities in which beings engage and in which they invest themselves' (Isin, 2005: 381), to mention just a few relational readings.

However, several recent analyses have addressed political aspects in childhood *implicitly*. For instance, children's peer-cultural power relations, hierarchical child–adult relations, and adult's struggle over the definition of 'good childhood' are frequently brought up in childhood and youth research (e.g. Morris-Roberts, 2004; Gallacher, 2005; Forsberg & Strandell, 2007; Gallagher, 2008; Thomas, 2009). Hence it seems that whereas power relations situating in childhood(s) and children's active roles in these settings have been acknowledged and studied, children's everyday environments and agencies are yet to be fully analyzed as *politics*. Moreover, political theory's conceptual tools for discussing children's worlds with the 'polit' vocabulary appear inadequate for in-depth, multi-scalar, and relational spatial analyses (Ansell, 2009).

If politics has not operated as a driving theoretical concept in childhood studies, the same can be said about the place of children and childhood in political research. For instance Hannah Arendt (1959), one of the few political theorists to have commented on the matter explicitly, has argued that politics and children should *not* be brought together but, rather, kept apart as far as possible (see also Nakata, 2008; Kallio, 2009). Arendt formulated her thoughts some fifty years ago but they still capture surprisingly well the current mainstream thinking about children in relation to politics. Like in John Locke's world, children lead their lives in the private realm and on the social spheres so that politics do not belong to children's private and personal lives, any more than children belong to the public realm where politics takes place (Arneil, 2002).

Also theoretical work within political geography tends to identify children as pre-political or non-political beings, discussing them mostly as influenced by political action, or having stakes in major political processes (e.g. Jones, 2004; Campbell, 2007; Ó Tuathail, 2009; Hyndman, 2010). Yet, it would be unjust to propose that political theory has totally evaded children's lived worlds. For example childhood institutions such as the family, the school, and the reformatory have been taken up to discuss their roles and practices in reference to nation-making, government and social change (e.g. Arendt, 1977/1954:173; Foucault, 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lefebvre, 1990). These theorizations have been adopted in the study of certain politics of childhood, yet rarely by political geographers or theorists (e.g. Ploszajska, 1994; Gagen, 2004; Vandebroek & Bouverne-de Bie, 2006; Popkewitz, 2008). Perhaps consequently, children's political action and conceptions of the political within these institutional settings have gained little attention. Moreover, children's contributions to constructing power relations on their own grounds, using specific tactics to maintain political dynamics that underpin their own positions and interests, remain neglected topics in critical analysis.

This neglect feels unsettling because, as many political theorists stress, nearly everything has been politicized in the past thirty years, and the broad interpretations of the political as 'presence of any human relations organized by power' have virtually resulted in a 'political everything' (Brown, 2002: 569; Dean, 2000: 8). Significantly, as the politicization of the private and the personal was admitted at length, the ontological nature of the political became conclusively deconstructed. Whether we think that the previously private issues have become more public and thus political, or that the political has now expanded to cover private issues, in the current critical political theory the

boundary between private and public is unquestionably blurred (Staehele *et al.*, 2004; Pain & Smith, 2008; Browne *et al.*, 2009).

One might have expected the ‘political everything’ to traverse children’s lived worlds as well, but in fact these are largely absent from political theory. While surprising, this omission is also understandable. The concept of politics must be reserved to particular aspects of the social realm so as to retain its capacity to denote distinctions and prevent total inflation. And indeed, as our previous discussion shows, one ‘safe’ context for politicizing children’s matters and actions has been policy making that inevitably belongs to the public realm and thus is not contested as part of the political. Similarly, children’s lived worlds as shadowed by violent conflicts, racial struggles, communal crises, the world economy, and other traditional topics of critical analysis appear to be political beyond doubt.

From this vantage point it seems clear that the politicization of childhood is yet to be fully carried out in political analysis even though some studies have already started to pave the way to relational understandings of children’s political lives (e.g. Katz, 2004). Yet, the ambivalence related to the limits of ‘the political’ – often disregarded by those dealing with ‘explicitly political’ issues – sets fair challenges to the contemporary theorization of children’s politics. If politics may be public and private, personal and collective, well informed and intuitive, interest- and identity-driven, rational and irrational, official and unofficial, argumentative and performative, and practiced by adults and children alike, how are we to distinguish political aspects from other dimensions of human life?

In the past years, a number of definitions of what counts as politics have been put forward, reflecting diverse philosophical grounds (e.g. Schmittian or Heideggerian). What these suggestions have in common is the finding that if the political is not taken as an ontological given but its meanings are understood context-specifically, then every definition of politics is bound to be relational. Basically, then, all events, developments, places, actors, issues and matters that are currently recognized as political have gained their position through *politicization*, which in some cases has led to political normalization and institutionalization (e.g. the state, parliament buildings, UN conventions, world economy). What this entails is that, at least in our time, it makes no sense to strive for a universal definition or demarcation of the political because politics can be found anywhere. This resolution, however, leads inescapably back to the problem of ‘political everything’.

One way of circumventing the problem is to pose the question differently by not asking *what* is or is not political, but rather *how* things are political. In attempting to crossbreed insights from political theory and cultural studies, Jodi Dean (2000) has employed this strategy to encourage political theorists and cultural studies scholars to avoid oversimplifying the multiplicity of political domains, and to seek interventions instead of presuming the ‘political purchases’ in advance. Dean’s endeavor resembles feminist political geographers’ long-standing work to elaborate analytical tools for studying ‘other’ politics from gendered points of view (e.g. Staeheli *et al.*, 2004). These insights provide fertile starting points for politicizing children’s lived worlds, too. Yet, children’s and women’s social and political positions should not be paralleled straightforwardly since children by definition can not be full members of their societies



due to their social role as minors (Ruddick, 2007; Kallio 2007). This fact opens an important theoretical avenue for conceptualizing children's political agency.

### **Framing the political in childhood**

The most original aspects of children's politics are that children's autonomy as agents is limited, and they are not aware of the politics of their doings. This is not to say that they would not know what they are doing, or could not reason why they act as they do. Nor are we suggesting that children were typically unaware of the probable effects and consequences of their acts. Regardless of age, children perceive their worlds in their own terms, acknowledging power differences and the ways in which their actions relate to those of other people.

The most notable distinction between adults' and children's politics is that children do not perceive the world through the 'polit' imagination but make sense of events and happenings otherwise.<sup>4</sup> Although children do become familiar with certain aspects of politics little by little through political socialization, they are not by and large reflexive of their own lives as political (Habashi & Worley, 2008). Conversely, when they are reflexive, they usually act in relation to issues and events readily defined as 'Political', instead of engaging in political dynamism from their own starting points and from the subject positions of a minor. This aspect is a key premise in our endeavor to locate and demarcate the political in children's lived worlds. We subscribe to the relational reading of politics allowing for the contemplation of 'the constitutive':

'The constitutive implies an approach to the political as an ongoing process in which societies are made – are constituted – in and through struggle. This is understood to be a complex and multivalent struggle, involving actions and behaviors in both the formal spaces of the state and spaces of home, neighborhood, workplace, community, and media. These struggles have a strong normative element.' (Staeheli and Kofman, 2004: 3)

Leaning on the constitutive nature of politics and the socio-spatial positioning of children we propose that children's politics are based on their social positions as minors acknowledged by adults as well as children themselves. The complex and multivalent struggles that occupy children in their daily lives are rooted in the fact that, as minors, they can rarely refuse to adopt the subject positions offered to them. To be able to lead their lives together with other people, and to gradually take their places as full members of their communities and societies, children have to shape themselves and rehearse certain kinds of subjectivities and agencies. Yet the socio-spatial processes of subjectification and/or socialization through which this 'becoming' takes place are not straightforward or predetermined. According to the current understanding of children's

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<sup>4</sup> We do not wish to suggest that adults would always be reflexively and rationally aware about the politics of their action (for comparison, see Ringmar, 1996: 83). Rather, we want to accentuate that whereas adults' conceptions and perceptions of politics range widely, children's one's are gradually non-existent, regardless of the context or individual. As our empirical findings concerning children's participation in communal activities reveal, only when empowered to participate in adult-led policy making and activism, children may think of themselves as political actors (Kallio & Häkli 2011b).

agency, even the youngest individuals are not passive players who merely behave and follow certain paths of development, but social actors in their own right, taking actively part in matters that affect and interest them (Alderson, 2008). From this vantage point children's political agency comes down to young individuals' potential to adopt and negotiate the subject positions that are offered to them by their societies and communities.

The processes of subjectification/socialization that are central to children's lives are multi-directional and, rather than proceeding consistently, mobilize practices and counter-practices in myriad forms. In their critique of the individual–society dualism Henriques et al. (1984: 14) pointed out nearly thirty years ago that it makes no sense to disunite children as subjects from their social settings since they co-constitute each other. Therefore there are always notable variations in how such unavoidable subject positions as, for instance, family member (son/daughter/grand child/sibling) or schoolchild (pupil/student) are presented to children, how the proposed subjectivities are perceived, which tactics are used to enact them, and how children's responses are acted upon by their authorities and communities (cf. Thomas, 2009: 18).

To simplify, the children's political selves that form through subjectification/socialization are not fixed or hollow but fluid in a similar way as the social worlds that only exist through the subjects who enact them (Gambetti, 2007). The social worlds mobilized in institutional settings and other established environments are continuous in the sense that they are conceivable to their users but, at the same time, prone to transform in the practices of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984). Similarly, children's subjectivities are dynamic but constant enough to give them grounds for acting as persons, as *some-ones* who may develop interests in *some-things* (Ringmar, 1996: 83). To us, these processes through which the reenactment of the socio-spatially positioned childhood(s) takes place, present political struggle *par excellence*.

### **Politicizing children's lived worlds**

To illustrate how the tools developed in the previous sections may operate in practice we next elaborate analytically some recently published geographical works that we have found particularly inspiring in terms of children's political agency. The following should not be understood as a critical commentary on the authors' original arguments, but rather as an attempt to tease out the political from children's lived worlds as described in two insightful studies. Needless to say, all credit from the work belongs fully to the original authors.

Mary Thomas' (2009) recent article *The identity politics of school life: territoriality and the racial subjectivity of teen girls in LA* offers a prime example of a study that explores children's political communities and agencies but does not identify children's lived worlds explicitly as political. The abstract portrays the paper aptly as follows:

'This paper explores the processes through which teen girls attending a multi-racial high school in Los Angeles, California, USA, contend with racial territories and segregation on campus. They express discomfort and pain when their racialized bodies enter into the 'wrong' segregated territory and are met with stares, racial epithets, or silence. I argue that the girls' pain

indicates the power of social categories to mark their bodies, but that the girls' subjectivities exceed their bodies of difference. Rather, their narratives point to the ways their racial identifications are fundamentally social and intersubjective, or made in relations to other bodies/subjects, and spatial, articulated through struggles over territory and space at school.'

As the title indicates, in her paper Thomas unfolds the mundane politics that constitute the lived worlds of certain school girls from a racial perspective. Yet the 'polit' vocabulary appears scarcely in the article: It is used only in the headings and in the list of references. The girls' 'struggles over territory and space at school' are not identified as political agency, and 'the power of social categories' is not conceived as dynamics directing the political geographies of the girls' lives. To shun from discussing politics as it happens in the world, to paraphrase Arendt (1958), is typical in studies concerning the power relations present in childhood institutions (e.g. Ploszajska, 1994; Griffiths, 1995; Hey, 1997; Hyams, 2000; Morris-Roberts, 2004; Gallacher, 2005; Van Ingen & Halas, 2006; Gallagher, 2008).

Approaching the girls' lived worlds from the point of view presented in this paper allows for a slightly different kind of an analysis. First, we could explore what subject positions the school offers to the 'differently racialized' girls, both as an institution and a peer cultural arena. In relation to this the study might also consider how the girls conceive the positions offered to them, and which tactics they use to respond to the proposed identities. Furthermore, the analysis could be deepened by exploring how the school as an institution and the girls' peer cultural communities eventually come to accommodate these responses. This would enable the analysis to capture the dynamics of the schools' political geographies that are likely to expand further into the girls' lived worlds. Hence, for instance the homes and the free time environments only briefly discussed by Thomas might offer fruitful starting points for topological reflections concerning the girls' political lives (cf. Ansell, 2009: 201). These types of explorations are in position to provide fertile grounds for studying the processes of subjectification/socialization, i.e. the formation of the girls' mundane politics both as beings and becomings.

In a similar vein, young children's politics can be traced from their daily encounters. Lesley Gallacher's (2005) article '*The terrible twos: gaining control in the nursery?*' presents an example of such potential. Like Thomas, Gallacher refrains from taking up politics explicitly when discussing children's agencies and power relations at nursery:

"The terrible twos" are often described as a time of "gaining control", usually thought of as adults asserting control over children, who learn to control themselves. However, toddlerhood is as much about children learning to take control for themselves. This paper is an attempt to detail something of the social geography in the toddler room of a Scottish nursery, considering both styles of adult control and the ways in which toddlers attempt to appropriate and reconfigure space and time for themselves. That is, the ways in which space and time are negotiated in the course of day-to-day nursery life."

We may begin to identify the political aspects of these nursery children's lives by substituting the age-related terms momentarily with ones that have already gained political momentum. In the above case, replacing 'adults' with 'men', 'children' with 'women', and 'nursery' with 'home', brings us to a well-established research frame within feminist scholarship that finds the private and the personal self-evidently political. Indeed, a title such as *The hysteric wives: gaining control in the Victorian home* would hardly surprise anyone, whereas a paper on toddler's political agency and the political geographies in a Scottish nursery is still likely to be read in much more controversial terms.

In her analysis Gallacher brings implicitly up the subject positions offered to the toddlers at the nursery, children's ways of adopting these positions and adapting to them, and the authorities' tactics of confronting these responses (e.g. the section '*styles of control*', pp.253–255). Throughout the article she stresses that the nursery staff did all they could to make the children act 'nicely' and 'properly', to follow the routines and to maintain order. She also makes it clear that this 'policing', in Rancière's terms, was done context-specifically, holding to specific styles and means. Whereas one child was compelled to docility in a given situation, the other one was caressed to conformity. Children's ways of interpreting this ordering and mobilizing it distinctly are also described in detail and analyzed as follows (p.256):

'[...] they are discovering that they can, to some extent, manipulate others and negotiate the use of space to their own ends. The toddler room staff were aware of some level of manipulation by the children, particularly in those children typified as "manipulative" (King, 1978). However, this does not mean that other children were not manipulative; more subtle attempts at manipulation may have gone unnoticed. There was a very definite "underlife" in the toddler room composed of various "secondary adjustments", or ways of breaking and getting around the rules (Goffman, 1968). These include the use of available equipment and spaces in unauthorised ways ("make-do's") and more elaborate styles of "working the system". Perhaps ironically, the routine nature of toddler room life enabled the underlife to emerge and to flourish, as detailed knowledge of a system is required to perform effective secondary adjustments.'

This 'underlife', in our view, equals with the political geographies of these children's daily lives. As both Gallacher and Thomas aptly show, these types of dynamics are not detached from institutional orders or cultural norms, but rather overlap with and build upon them. As Thomas (p.14) puts it, 'Even explicitly resisting race's defining powers over the self marks the subject's intimate connection to normative difference.' Children's political worlds are thus embedded in and intertwined with adults' political worlds. Furthermore, Gallacher's 'make-do's', styles of working the system, and ways of breaking and getting around the rules, as well as Thomas' agential acts of ignoring, staying with your own, not really looking at race – to mention just a few tactics introduced by the authors – can be fruitfully re-conceptualized as modes of children's political agencies (cf. Kallio, 2007; 2008).

These two examples are by no means rare or exceptional pieces of scholarship within childhood studies. Nevertheless, they illustrate well how children's politics are only implicitly discussed in the present scholarly works even though the phenomena they portray are familiar enough to those acquainted with children's lived worlds. Moreover, these works demonstrate how children's geographies can be further 'politicized' through making their politics more explicit. The methodological tools that we have briefly introduced in this article provide some entry points to the study of these politics as grounded, constituted and experienced in childhood(s).

### **Conclusions**

'Politics' is a contested concept. Conventionally politics is paralleled with public issues managed collectively through formal institutions by politicians as representatives of the people. In modern societies politics has thus been greatly associated with the matters of the state. Yet in the now common relational readings politics is understood to extend well beyond public issues and actors to all private and personal matters that can be found politically consequential (e.g. Rancière, 2001; Gomart & Hajer 2002; Staeheli & Kofman, 2004: 6; Isin, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2009: 5; Leitner & Sheppard, 2009).

Reflecting the broad understanding of the political, also children's political roles and positions are acknowledged occasionally in the current research. Yet, on the whole it is the government, the order, the violence, and the top-down processes of socialization practiced and defined by supranational forces, states, communities, institutions, and individual adults that come up when children and politics are discussed within the same frame. Children's political agencies are currently recognized mainly through their involvement in processes and practices led and defined by adults – be these related to policy making, administration, warfare, activism, work, or else.

This article proposes that if we refrain from thinking that we know *a priori* what politics looks like, it is possible to see through the established forms and modes of politics that conceal the fact that the political is not an ontological given even in childhood. In our endeavor to 'politicize' children's lived worlds, we lean on an understanding of the political that seeks to explore *how* things are political. Following Dean (2000: 5-11), we think that politics isn't everything but everything can be (made) political. What counts as political is really an empirical matter: Politics can be found in every issue, matter and event that has been politicized by someone at some point.

Our definition of children's political lives builds on the fact that, regardless of the community and society, young individuals are offered one or another kind of minor positions both individually and collectively by their families, peers, close communities, and institutions. These positions are met by children in a myriad of ways, performed in banal practices, and counter-reflected on by the authorities who participate in the processes of children's subjectification/socialization alongside with the media, peer cultural communities, and the young individuals themselves. To fully explicate children's political roles requires much further scholarship but we are convinced that the recognition of these processes and practices as politics opens new avenues for both socio-culturally oriented childhood studies and critical political research.

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