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Performative bodies, tactical agents and political selves: rethinking the political geographies of childhood

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio, University of Tampere

Abstract: Theoretical elaboration and conceptualization of children's political geographies is presently in a state of modification. Since the concepts of childhood and politics are not commonly brought together, there is plenty of work to be done. This article concentrates on revealing some political aspects of childhood and bringing up other focal questions concerning children's political geographies. Special attention is paid to children's agency and tactics to better understand their ways of participating in politics. The theoretical foundations for this paper are in critical social theory. Following the thoughts of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and Nigel Thrift on the potentials of non-representational theory, it explores performativity and body politics in general.

Performative bodies, tactical agents and political selves: rethinking the political geographies of childhood

Preface

A few years ago Chris Philo and Fiona Smith (2003) voiced some concern about political geographies of children and young people. In their novel editorial in *Space and Polity*, they addressed narrow interpretations of politics as one of the main problems in this field of study. According to their understanding, childhood politics and children's political agency are commonly approached *either* from a child-centered *or* an adult-centered point of view, which has proven problematic. In Philo and Smith's view, the combination of these two approaches would provide more fertile grounds for geographical studies of the politics of childhood. Therefore they suggest that the micro-politics of children and young people's personal experiences and the macro-politics of the public sphere should be considered in parallel with each other. This approach would reveal a whole network of scales, territories and spatial power struggles of childhood – the very characteristics of political geographies.

Besides Philo and Smith, other geographers have also expressed their concerns about political childhood studies lately. For instance, Richard Kearns and Damien Collins (Collins & Kearns 2001, Kearns & Collins 2003, Kearns *et al.* 2003) have examined various health related aspects of institutions, power and children's agency in the context of school. Along the same lines, John Barker has taken interest in traffic and cars as contested private places and public spaces of childhood (Smith & Barker 2000ab). Moreover, Gill Valentine, with her colleagues, has approached children and young people's societal positions in terms of otherness, sexuality and disability (Holloway *et al.* 2000; Holloway & Valentine 2001; Valentine 2003; Skelton & Valentine 2003ab). Cindi Katz (1986, 2004), followed by several young geographers, has paid attention to the politics of children living in third world countries (e.g. Punch 2001). Children's involvement in after-school clubs, shopping centers, playgrounds and homes have also been considered from a political point of view (e.g. Sibley 1995, McKendrick *et al.* 2000, Barker & Weller 2003, Gagen 2004, Thomson 2005). But still the conceptualization and

redefinition of childhood politics suggested by Philo and Smith in their editorial has not yet been given the attention it deserves.

The lack of basic, theoretically oriented childhood research can largely be explained in terms of the methodologies and methods commonly used. Different kinds of ethnographic case studies, emphasizing long-term empirical field work, have taken over also the field of geographical childhood studies in the last twenty years. Combining intensive work *with* children and critical research *outside* their worlds sets a fair challenge. As a result, childhood studies often emphasize either one or the other of these approaches.

It is, however, a relief to note that we geographers of childhood are not alone with this methodological difficulty. There is generally recognized dilemma here, referred to as the problem of “bridging the analytical gap” between the individual and the society. In his study of social identities, Richard Jenkins (1996, 26) has aptly framed this as a question: “How can we fruitfully bring into the same analytical space the active lives and consciousnesses of individuals, the abstract impersonality of the institutional order, and the ebb and flow of historical time?” To contextualize this same question, how can children’s experiences and political awareness, institutional child policies and the constantly changing circumstances of childhood be analyzed jointly? This, I argue, could be conceived as a leading question for political childhood geographies in future.

In this paper I wish to consider some underlying questions that I have arisen in my recent studies on children’s politics. First of all, I find it essential to try to clarify the meanings of children’s political agency and, concurrently, find ways of recognizing these politics in relation to child policies. My assertion is that only this preliminary configuration can lead to valid research into the tactics children as “political selves” use in their everyday life practices (Philo & Smith 2003). Along these lines I have pursued to rise to this challenge by adapting some ideas from the critical French social studies (Bourdieu 1985; de Certeau 1984; Foucault 1979).

Furthermore, I suggest that contemplation of this kind requires theoretically cogent concepts which are not yet firmly established in political childhood geographies. As an opening to this I want to introduce some conceptualizations and categorizations that I have made in my study, which attempts to clarify some of the socially produced borders

and boundaries of childhood. Firstly, I seek to unwrap the dualistic division between “normal” and “abnormal” or “different” childhood which is regularly taken for granted in child policies and welfare practices. Secondly, I will redefine children’s politics by enforcing Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concepts of tactical and strategic agency.

In the following I will explore childhood from a body-politics point of view. To start with, I discuss certain problems that underlie feminist oriented childhood geographies. Beyond critically reviewing feminist theory, I intend to bring out some recent approaches that I have found useful in considering children as political actors in everyday life. Next, to put these ideas into practice, I will introduce the major findings of my latest study, which contemplates the politics of children with special needs. In conclusion I will draw these two discussions together by considering children’s own politics from the viewpoint of non-representational theory.

Body politics: a challenge or a source?

Politically oriented studies take place in various geographical sub-disciplines. The actual field of political geographies only partially covers the arena where spatial politics are contemplated. It can be argued whether this is due to the narrowness of the field or to the ambition of engendering alternatives to it from outside. However, e.g. feminist geographies, border studies and identity studies have proved to be respectable contexts for various kinds of investigations into the politics of space, each focusing on specific issues (see, e.g., Haraway 1991, Pile & Keith 1997, Häkli 2001, Nogué & Vicente 2004).

The body was first recognized as a political aspect and scale by feminist geographers (e.g. Haraway 1991, Rose 1993, Duncan 1996). Thereafter it has also gained ground in other social, cultural and political geographies. Even today, however, most of the writings on the issue are influenced by feminist theory (e.g. Rasmussen & Brown 2005, Simonsen 2005, Haldrup *et al.* 2006). Like body politics, political childhood geographies have also acquired many methodological and theoretical aspects from feminist thinking (e.g. Hyams 2000, Skelton & Valentine 2003ab, Holt 2004, Morris-Roberts 2004). Given that feminist studies are nearly without exception critical and regenerative, it is fortunate that

so much attention has been paid to childhood issues in the field. Yet this very fact also entails certain risks.

Feminist geographies have a lot to offer to political childhood studies in so far as certain distinctions are recognized. To start with, some concepts and principles, mostly used in women's studies, have strong connotations and meanings which should not be passed on to childhood studies as such. While children's political, social and societal positions can to some extent be compared with those of women, there are also crucial differences between the two. For example, it often seems natural to consider the role of a woman to be interchangeable with that of a child; and the role of a man with that of an adult. As members of families and communities, women and children have often been regarded as "the other" – the traditionally disempowered and oppressed party.¹ This is especially emblematic of policy-oriented studies, though not without some criticism. At the same it has been emphasized that children should *not* be understood as vulnerable victims of subordination, but rather as social actors in their own right. Putting these two together, researchers and policy makers attempt to "take children's sides" against the world of adults, while at the same as trying to recognize children as autonomous participants (e.g. Chawla & Mallow 2003, Foley *et al.* 2003). While intended to be nothing but benevolent, this course may nevertheless be misleading.

In line with the former, the political aspects that are highlighted in feminist studies do not always best serve the study of childhood, at least not in all cases. The fact that children are not capable of autonomous policy making fundamentally separates them as actors from, e.g., the 19th century women. Young people's autonomous political potential does not lie in reflective contemplations or moral judgments, but in everyday life experiences and practices. Unlike that of women, children's positions cannot be improved by giving them the same sort of political rights which adults have. Reconsidering restrictions and adjusting age limits provides children with *given* rights, not autonomous empowerment. Thus, in studies where children's current societal conditions are found to be inappropriate and in need of improvement, we find strong assumptions about childhood as a socio-spatial phenomenon (cf. Mehmoona 2005). For instance, concern for children and young

¹ See, e.g., Alderson 1994; Mayall 1996, 87; and Zeiher 2001. Regarding general policy orientations see Neale 2004, Christensen 2002, and also the current UNICEF homepage (2006).

people's societal marginalisation and lack of involvement, which is frequently brought out in childhood research, often presupposes this participation and policy making to be beneficial and good by definition (e.g. Matthews *et al.* 1999; Mayall 2006). From a critical perspective these interpretations could even be understood as “biases” which inherently lead research in a certain direction.

On a larger scale there seems to be a risk in feminist-oriented childhood studies of dissolving the specificity of childhood into feminist theory. This tendency may further the current trend according to which children as political actors are approached one-sidedly, *either* on a micro *or* a macro scale. Felicity Callard (1998, 2003, forthcoming), among others, has seriously considered the drawbacks which result from this kind of one-sidedness. She argues that in geographical writing, the different ways of understanding and exploring the body, subjectivity and embodiment rarely intersect or communicate with each other. Callard (1998) states that, where bodies are concerned, most sub-disciplines appear rather fixed and attached to their boundaries. The two approaches to embodiment most commonly taken in the 1990s, for example – queer and Marxist theory – are not usually seen as compatible. They can, however, be connected if the researcher is so motivated, as Callard (2003, forthcoming) demonstrates in her own work. In addition to queer and Marxist theory, she has also explored the potentials of psychoanalytic thought and other interdisciplinary approaches to show that “crossing over” may help to produce novel ways of conceptualizing the spatialities of the body.

Compared to identity studies, where we find another long tradition of examining spatial aspects of embodied politics, the approaches taken in feminist-oriented childhood studies tend to present a rather narrow understanding of political action. According to Nogué & Vicente (2004; cf. Billig 1995, 98), in everyday life situations as well, there are two principle ways of practicing politics. First, *explicitly political acts* appear in intentional and reflected forms, such as demonstrations and bodily representations. Secondly we have *intuitive political acts* – presentations, ways of living, bodily appearances – which can be understood to rest more on *political awareness*. For example dress codes can be followed and reproduced in both meanings – as explicit choices of certain type of clothing or more intuitive ways of dressing up appropriately. In studies which focus primarily on children's political distress, we often find that this latter factor is entirely neglected. Thus, on

the basis of Nogué and Vicente and Callard's thinking, we can ask whether the traditional feminist approaches could and should be combined with some other critical approaches to provide a wider understanding of children's body politics.

To overcome the taken-for-granted nature of childhood, and to rediscover feminist thinking, one should ask what progressive ideas childhood studies could benefit from. In my opinion the fact that children's politics are strongly connected to their own bodies should direct our attention to the study of embodiment. Outside childhood issues, feminist geographers have studied the politics of the body in various contexts. Both theoretical excursions (Butler 1993, Longhurst 2001, Landzelius 2004) and more specific soundings (Butler & Parr 1999, Valentine 2002, Mounz 2004, Koskela & Tani 2005) have been evoked to uncover the socially produced meanings of the body. In these explorations bodies have been understood as sites of resistance, sexed selves, political actors, streetscapes, performative presenters, boundary markers and representations of identity – to mention just a few.

The viewpoints considered in critical feminist studies of embodiment are not rigid or fixed, but rather, in Robin Longhurst's (2001) terminology, more or less "fluid." Nor is this exclusively the domain of women's studies; the conceptualization of embodiment has been used as a tool for considering, e.g., disabled bodies, gay bodies, immigrant bodies, commercialized bodies and bodies at school (see the studies mentioned above). Moreover, in his overview of geographical consideration of the body, Michael Landzelius (2004) brings out the concept of a "nonrepresentational body." In the context of childhood and children's politics this viewpoint seems to be worth taking a closer look at.

Non-representational research styles have been developed to shed light on those meaning making processes which take place solely in terms of bodily action (e.g. Thrift 1997, Rose 1997). Together with Judith Butler's (1993, 1999) theorization on performativity, which dissociates itself from both representative and represented politics, non-representational research views provide powerful tools for exploring political awareness and unreflected expressions. Herein it must be recognized that there are also a number of alternative approaches to performativity, which partly intersect, but also differ from each other.²

² See e.g. Gregson & Rose 2000, Nash 2000, Thrift & Dewsbury 2000.

Perhaps the best known of these traditions is the one derived from Butlerian queer studies. In her works, Butler seeks to reveal ways of “playing differently.” “Play” here refers to “a style of being” (Sartre), “stylistics of existence” (Foucault), or in Butler’s own words (1999, 177) “styles of the flesh.” These impressions, which would seem to be irresistible for critical childhood geographies, have not yet been widely noticed in the field.

In considering performativity as a viewpoint, I do not want to suggest that the political aspects of childhood should be considered merely in terms of play or other such non-representational action (cf. Harker 2005). Instead, I would like to propose that these ideas could be used as starting points for a better understanding of “children’s political identities,” if you will. In this view, performativity can be conceived of as an aspect that may or may not appear within any given subject matter.³ Whatever the case, to be able to critically consider what these new approaches could have to offer to childhood studies, it is necessary to view children’s embodiment more carefully. After taking a deeper look at this subject matter and introducing some results of my own recent study, I will come back to non-representational styles and performative aspects in conclusion.

Unruly, docile, autonomous: bodies in action

The body is a focal site of social meaning making, where childhoods are constantly produced and reproduced. It can be realized as an arena, an actor or a tool, depending on the user of the body and the usage itself.⁴ Approached from outside, the body appears as a target – simultaneously both an object and a subject that can be made to act in an appropriate way. On the other hand, from inside, it proves to be a channel through which different wills and desires are expressed. Hence the body is simultaneously a *focus* of policies that are used for controlling and directing children and the *means* by which children themselves practice politics.

In the case of young children, political aspects of the body are emphasized. First of all, children lack official political rights and positions that adults take for granted. They are

³ cf. Schmitt’s (1976) understanding of politics.

⁴ see e.g. Harvey 1998, Callard 1998, Valentine 2002

neither full citizens nor members of communities in a political sense, but they are rather assumed to be incompetent according to all commonly recognized political scales. On the other hand, there are certain institutional arenas where young people are admitted as members: Student councils at school and municipal children's parliaments have been established to "give every child a voice," in line with the UN (1989) convention on children's rights. These attempts to empower children and young people, which recently have been performed e.g. by the City of Tampere (2006), do indeed involve representatives from almost all age groups (cf. Hallett & Prout 2003). Nevertheless, in these cases as well, children and young people are given *conditional* rights and not empowered in the wider sense. This can be seen when we consider the matters they *cannot* have any influence on – restrictions concerning drinking and smoking, for instance.

Children's politics is based on the autonomy they hold over their bodies. Although young people do not have autonomous positions in other political scales, the right and ability to control and command one's own body belongs to them as well. Moreover, this autonomy cannot be denied without extreme violence. This is to say that children are naturalized participants in everyday life politics. They can run away or hold still, use the toilet or wet their pants, eat or refuse to eat, follow a healthy diet or grow fat or thin. In other words, as de Certeau (1984) says, they can *use* various tactics to promote their own objectives and sometimes they can even *ruse* the prevailing order.

Children's bodies are important political channels for them. At the same though they are a crucial part of institutional practices where they play different roles. This "other direction" cannot be ignored when considering children's politics. To give a few examples, as sons and daughters children are part of the familial institution of the home; as pupils they are bound to the order of the school system; and as patients they come under the discipline of the health care system. While institutional practices are often aimed at contributing to children's minds – their ways of thinking and understanding – children are still raised, educated and nursed by way of their bodies. At home, at school and at the dentist's they are expected to sit quietly, eat nicely, open their mouth on request, walk and talk in a certain way, and play appropriate games. Consequently, by adapting these

“proper” ways of acting, through obedience and correct behavior, they eventually find ways of becoming full members of the society (de Certeau 1984, 36).

The fluid, two-way process of “becoming,” composed of children’s own politics and the policies directed at them (cf. Harrison’s (2000) reading) can be understood as a transformation of individual bodies into socially imposed bodies. Little by little, as a part of everyday life practices, this process turns children into adults. When they are young, children are constantly under direct surveillance, but as they get older they learn to guide themselves. This notion corresponds with Foucault’s concept of “*governmentalité*,” according to which domination turns into self-regulation as power relations grow invisible (Burchell *et al.* 1991, Lemke 2001). In other words, the institutional discipline and its icons are not needed when surveillance is already internalized, taking place inside the body.

To summarize, following Foucault and de Certeau’s thinking, one could say that as sons, daughters, pupils and patients the under-aged are made into *docile bodies*, but as children and youth they may retain their *unruly bodies*, which are free from exterior powers. This, in short, is the core of children’s body politics, which can also be presented as follows (Figure 1: Political tactics, derived from Hirschman’s EVL(N)-model are explicated in the next chapter together with the case study analysis):

EXIT	VOICE	LOYALTY	NEGLECT
e.g. escaping, running away, leaving the room, isolating oneself	e.g. resisting, argumenting, refusing, acting aggressively	e.g. conforming, adapting, following the order, acting faithfully	e.g. acting negligent and apathetic, denying authority by rejecting or withdrawing from social dealings

Figure 1: Children’s politics in relation to child policies.

The political conceptualization of childhood can be appreciated from various angles. My attempt here is to understand it in a wide sense, where *policy* refers to explicit institutionally practiced decision-making, controlled by authorities; and *politics*, to children's political awareness and actorship. From a policy point of view children appear as either unruly or docile bodies (i.e. not-yet-pupils / pupils). The apparent aim of policy-making is to bring children from unruliness into docility. Seen from the perspective of children's politics, these "roles" take on a different appearance. To survive in the "nets of discipline," children and young people need to find ways to *appear* as docile bodies, but still *maintain* their unruly bodies (de Certeau 1984, xiv). Therefore, they need to attain a "political identity" which will allow them to simultaneously act as both (not-yet) children and (already) pupils/patients/daughters/sons.

Politicizing children's bodies provides us with some theoretical and conceptual tools which can be used to better understand childhood in social and spatial senses. Yet bringing this theorization into practice in the "joined analytical space" suggested by Jenkins (1996) still presents certain challenges. In the next chapter I will introduce a case study where this has been attempted through the application of Albert O. Hirschman's (1970) "*Exit, voice, loyalty, neglect*" –model.

Differently normal, normally different: the case of "borderliners"

This paper draws on a four year study examining the cases of some children in special education (Kallio 2005, 2006ab, 2007). The aim of the study was to acquire new perspectives on these children's societal positions and their agencies in everyday life, and in this way to gain a better understanding of childhood spatialities in general. Eight children from 8 to 13 years of age were selected for our study on the basis of a questionnaire, which was distributed anonymously to their parents through a special school. The theoretically orientated questionnaire was detailed to produce a sample of 4 to 10 children which would best serve the intentions of the study. The purpose of this form of selection was to find children whose lives take place "on the border of childhood."

The life histories and present situations of our eight special needs children, concluding in seven cases altogether, form the empirical material for the study. Methodologically the research keeps to the idea of triangulation, in reference to the traditions of critical French social studies. Following Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001) methodological thought, our 'borderliners' have been examined as critical cases through which both institutions' and children's politics are accessible. First, participant observation has been used to generate an understanding of the children's own politics. Second, an acquaintance with several institutional child welfare policies has been built up by examining these children's official documents and some public regulations that outline the prevailing conditions of childhood in Finland. Third, unstructured interviews, or discussions, were carried out in forms of music lessons and other leisure activities.

Theoretically this study was based on the works of Michel Foucault (1979, 1980), Michel de Certeau (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1985; Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). Their thoughts were used and partly merged in the research project to create a multilayered theoretical and methodological basis. Foucault's concepts of power/knowledge, docility and normalization were used to reveal "the net of discipline" that binds children in their institutional settings. Then de Certeau's theory of everyday life was used to conceptualize children's own agency, their ways of coping and dealing with the adult authority. Hirschman's (1970) EVL(N)-model was next adapted and used as means of conceptualizing children's politics. These directions, referred to here as *strategic child policies* and *children's tactical politics*, were considered in the context of Bourdieu's theories of social fields.

The child participants in this study have been varyingly institutionally considered to be "normal" and "different." Consequently, they are not firmly positioned in the fields of public childhood institutions. They are "differently normal children... [living] a normally different childhood" (James 1993, 44). The cases of these "borderliners" were examined by two means. The first part of the study was concerned with the concept of "normal childhood." The classifications imposed on these children by various professionals were taken to reveal some prevailing conceptions of "a normal child." Over the years these children had been seen to deviate from established norms in terms of, e.g., ability to concentrate, motor development, social interaction and linguistic skills. In addition,

official statements from doctors, nurses, psychologists and teachers concerning these children noted such characteristics as insecurity, sensitivity, loudness, arrogance, anger, fear and unusual behavior.

The analysis here showed that the borders between “normal” and “abnormal” childhood are composed of various factors which are socio-spatially produced and reproduced. Hence becoming “different” or remaining “normal” is not purely a question of medical or pedagogic definition, but the outcome of a process where institutional actors, together with the children themselves and their families, negotiate and adjust the child’s position. These struggles took place both in everyday life and on official political scales. From this perspective the boundaries between “normal” and “different” childhoods do not appear as established borders but rather as frontiers where symbolic battles over the meanings of childhood take place.⁵

The second part of this study deals with children’s everyday life politics. In terms of Flyvbjerg’s (2001, 77) methodological approach, seeking to reveal some of the extremes of the social and political conditions of childhood, these “borderliners” constitute a critical case. Their cases were regarded as critical according to earlier findings which suggest that these children’s social positions are weak and unstable. Since politics is always relational and composed in given realms, the position of “borderliners” is understood to be rather politically awkward and “liminal” (Turner 1969, 95). In other words, because they have neither been consistently and generally considered normal nor abnormal, it is not clear to them *what* to resist or conform to, or *how* to be political. Thus, following logical process of deduction, I found that “if the ‘borderliners’ practiced political actorship then all children would appear to be political by definition” (Kallio 2006a, 79). This liminal position, possessed by all of our children, is the key element which binds them together to form a particular and significant case.

In the analysis I found that the power struggles, played out mainly by pedagogic, medical and familial institutions, also formed the context of these children’s own politics. The children demonstrably possessed tactics by which they could contribute to their own institutional conditions or oppose the (strategic) practices they felt uneasy about. If they

⁵ For a treatment of symbolic violence, see Bourdieu 1985.

could not fulfill the expectations of the school, or did not want to obey their care-takers, they would find ways of dealing with the situations on their own grounds. More specifically, they denied, sidestepped, ignored, ceased to communicate, forgot and fought; and on the other hand they conformed, assimilated, accommodated, adjusted and adapted to the order. This actorship can be recognized as everyday life politics, which signifies that these children are “political selves” in Philo & Smith’s (2003) meaning.

The starting hypothesis here was that political agency is an effective part of every child’s life. The “borderliners” make up an extreme test case for this rule: Given their major political disadvantages, if political agency can be shown to be a part of even *their* day-to-day lives, this would support a conclusion that *all* children are capable of everyday life politics. That being the case, the main finding of the study was that children do quite universally practice politics in their own right in terms of bodily action. The empirical material demonstrating how this politics was realized, was analyzed by classifying children’s political agency into four categories (Figure 2, see also Figure 1). This categorization was based on Hirschman’s EVL(N) -model and its applications (Dowding *et al.* 2000), based on consumption studies⁶. The idea of the model is to recognize different ways of responding to unsatisfying situations.

⁶ The prior contexts of EVLN-model do not relate to childhood studies by substance. Therefore the terminology used in the model should not be taken as read, but appreciated through the wider theoretical frame of this study.

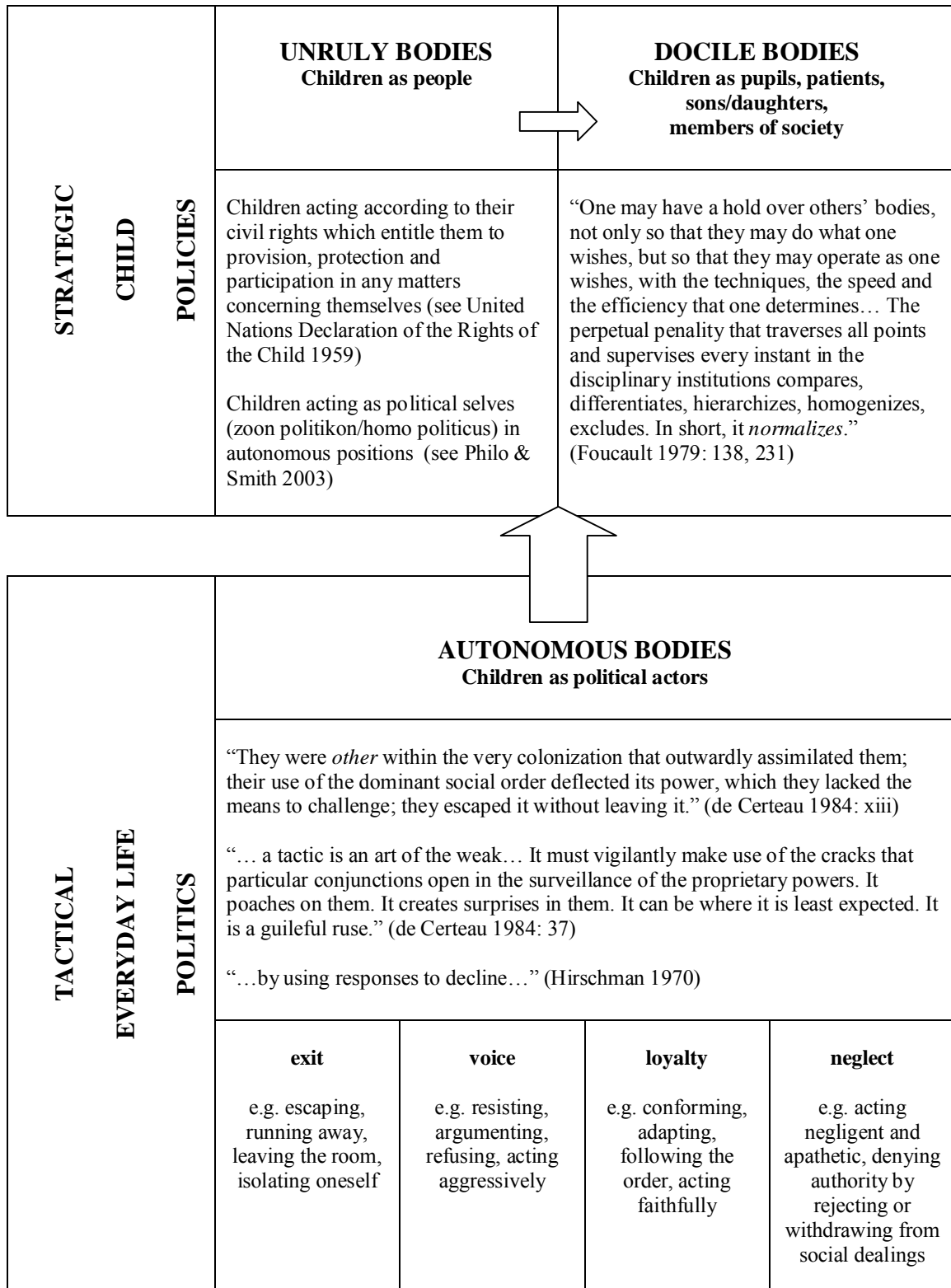


Figure 2: Children’s political tactics.

The children in this particular case study often acted in a way quite similar to what young people usually do when they are put into a difficult position. Some of the children left the room when they were angry (*exit*). Others furiously refused to cooperate when they disagreed (*voice*). Most of the children conformed to the situation which I presented them with, even if it was strange to them (*loyalty*), but sometimes they became silent if they disliked or did not understand my ideas (*neglect*). All in all, though the intensity and the expressions they used could often be considered “odd,” in principle they responded to the situations just as any child would be expected to do. They practiced their own politics in ways that were available and familiar to them. These expressions of political awareness can also be understood in terms of political identity, in reference to Nogué and Vicente’s (2004) thinking.

In children’s case, the concept of “political action” often appears to be an overstatement. For example, an *act* of adaptation is not particularly feasible to point out, although it was clear that some kind of adaptation had taken place. Even resistance, the most obvious form of opposition, does not always come down to direct action. Sometimes only a thorough description of the situation can lead to perceiving political aspects. For this reason the four categories presented above must be understood to portray not only representational and intentional acts, but also the children’s non-representational and non-reflected political agencies.

Following de Certeau’s (1984) terminology I refer to the classes as “tactics,” related to the “strategies” which adults exercise as representatives of certain institutions. This idea somewhat coincides with Nigel Thrift’s (1996, 1997, Thrift 2000) concept of performativity, which leads us to approach children’s embodied politics from a less reserved point of view. This is to say that, although children’s agency cannot always be put into words, they can still be seen to have “political selves” in all of their everyday spatialities. Hence, in conclusion, I will now take the analysis of these “borderliners” to a more general level by exploring the potentials of performative and non-representational aspects.

Political performances

The concept of performativity has been discovered and redefined in various geographical works in recent years (e.g. Thrift 1997, Gregson & Rose 2000, Nash 2000, Hörschelmann & Schäfer 2005). These interpretations have often developed as “by-products” of critical social studies aiming to discover aspects that tend to hide and conceal themselves from the researcher’s eye. In her preface to the second edition of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler insists that when she first wrote this work, in the late 1980s, she was in no way trying to establish a new field of research. Thus she could not have anticipated “the birth of queer studies” that began with that book. Commenting on her own work, Butler (1999, xiv) says that since the release of *Gender Trouble* in 1990 she has been concentrating on clarifying and revising the theory of performativity, but this has proved to be quite problematic, “not only because my own views on what ‘performativity’ might mean have changed over time [...] but because so many others have taken it up and given it new formulations.”

A basic perusal of geographical papers where performativity is referred to clearly supports Butler’s claim. In just the special issue of *Society & Space* (2000) on the subject, we find ways of understanding performativity with regard to the works of Goffman, Deleuze, Lefebvre, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Heidegger, Latour, Benjamin and Derrida, in addition to Butler’s own work. This is to say that the meaning of performativity in geography, and the origins of the concept, is not altogether clear. This can also be noted in non-representational theories, which often make use of performative aspects.

The salient point of non-representationality is that not all human agencies can be put into literary forms; some must be perceived and expressed in other ways. As Thrift (2000) puts it, “nonrepresentational theory is an approach to understanding the world in terms of *effectivity* rather than representation; not the *what* but the *how*.” In other words, the agency in question is composed of performative acts – *presentations*, *showings* and *manifestations* of everyday life (Thrift 1997, 127). Thrift (2000, 216) states that a lot of thinking, and thinking about thinking, is needed to go beyond representations. This “thinking” can be understood as a method and a performance unto itself (Thrift & Dewsbury 2000, Gregson & Rose 2000). Understood in this way, as both methodology

and aspect, performativity could indeed have something to add to critical childhood studies.

Setting aside the complexity involved in certain bodies of knowledge,⁷ some central questions with regard to nonrepresentational research styles need to be dealt with before considering their implications for childhood studies. The agencies and actions that appear as statures, sighs, gazes and movements are, apparently, difficult to put in words. That being the case, it proves problematic to present research results, since most of the academic work can only be released in spoken and written modes. Illustrations, visual presentation and tropes, for example, can be utilized to a certain extent, but there is a limit to their feasibility (Wolff 1995). In other words, we still need to find better ways of *presenting the non-representational*.

Because non-representational material is not expressed in textual forms, the research analysis will require “translation techniques.” One way to approach this problematic is to decide whether the research intends to be descriptive or explanatory. In Latour’s (1988, 158) theorization, the “explanatory scale” which attempts to capture the styles used in social research ranges from descriptions to deductions; the former referring to the sort of weak explanations he himself is in favor of, the latter to strong ones. This range can also be found in some feminist works on performativity (e.g. Longhurst 2000). On the other hand, attempts to use performativity itself as an “explanatory scale” for approaching embodiment have also occurred (Harrison, 2000).

The study of “borderliners” shows that one way of dealing with the problem of (re)presentation is to categorize the findings into certain classifications. Yet this must be done very carefully in order to avoid banalizing the whole of the subject – a risk which occurred to me during the process of my analysis. Especially if the aim of the study is to bring “the non-representational” into political discourse, some extra attention should be paid. The concept of politics is strongly connected to both represented and representative action, and it is not easily recognized outside of these concepts. All in all, the categories need to be “solid” enough to be written down, yet in a way that also enables their “fluidity” to still give way to the “unknown” – the *terrae incognitae* of knowledge.

⁷ See e.g. Thrift 1996, xi and Latour 1988, 169.

The *Exit, voice, loyalty, neglect* –model which I have used in analyzing children's political agencies may prove to be a good tool for revealing both political and performative aspects of childhood. I suggest that by using this kind of methods the political geographies of childhood can be taken to a deeper and wider level. For one thing, children's own politics can be found in everyday situations rather than in organized political scales. And secondly, in children's bodily action it is also possible to recognize some of the effects and reflections that child policies have on them. In this way, children's and adult's political scales can be brought into a common analytical framework.

Conclusions

In this article I have attempted to outline some of the key problematics in political geographies of childhood. I have suggested that more conceptualization and theoretical work needs to be done before we can approach children's micro and macro politics in the same analytical frame. By introducing performativity as an aspect of children's political agency, and by connecting it with previous work in the field of children's geographies, I have shown how crossing disciplinary borders may help discovering new theoretical avenues in childhood research. This kind of work does not necessarily produce strong explanations, but as Bruno Latour has argued, perhaps that should not always be the goal.

Combining the aspects of performativity, non-representationality and politics provides for numerous new approaches in the study of children's geographies. The more traditional fields, such as urban and rural studies and the geographies of home and school, may benefit from recognizing the less explicit ways in which children shape and alter their living environments. Moreover, in policy research it might be useful to operate with two diverse concepts of politics simultaneously; one used for policy-making and processes of empowerment, the other for everyday life dealings. Studies concerned with childhood institutions and the social reproduction taking place in institutional practices may benefit from both of the aforementioned points of view.

I suggest that there are at least two theoretical approaches to space that hold analytical potential for future studies in the political geographies of childhood. First, with the help

of Lefebvre's (1991) and de Certeau's (1985) thinking children may be recognized as political actors in relation to social space as it appears to them in public places: on the streets, in the parks, at railway stations, etc. Lefebvre examines the city as a public space from three directions; as perceived, conceived and lived social space. Put in de Certeau's terms, space is strategically produced as children perceive their living environments, but at the same it is tactically reproduced in the very usage of these places. The aspects of non-representationality and performativity are particularly useful in the analysis of children's lived spaces.

Second, to scrutinize and expose power structures that uphold and regenerate childhood, Foucault's ideas on governmentality can be found helpful (see e.g. Burchell et al. 1991). By paying attention to routines and regimes that do not appear as oppression or domination but, on the contrary, seem benevolent attempts to improve and enhance children's living conditions, we may recognize the political regimes and configurations of knowledge that frame children's lives. The politics embedded in the naturalization of certain conditions of childhood is difficult to read off from children's explicit acts, but may be exposed in children's intuitive acts that arise from their political awareness (cf. Nogué and Vicente 2004).

In all, the concepts of performativity and non-representationality open intriguing prospects for research on the children's politics of space. While there certainly are intricate methodological challenges involved – questions such as how to depict the undepictable, or how to convert observations into empirical material without transferring gestures into acts and feelings into thoughts – these are best overcome and disentangled by explicitly engaging with this demanding research field.

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