Subject, action and polis: Theorizing political agency

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Abstract

In this paper we develop tools for understanding political agency and political events as they unfold contextually in everyday life. We discuss alternative understandings of the subject so as to grasp the scope of the subject's autonomy as the ground for political subjectivity. We conceive of political agency in terms of subjectivity related to subject positions offered in the flux of everyday life. To bring together political subject and action we conceptualize the topological settings of political agency in terms of polis. To illustrate the analytical potential of our approach we analyze a sequence in a movie by Ingmar Bergman.

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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. 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; Hobson, 2007; Barnett, 2008; Oosterlynck, 2010; Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Lestrelin, 2011). 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".

There is now a burgeoning literature discussing 'the political' or political subjectivity in general, or assessing political agency in the context of particular political struggles. This scholarship has shown political agency to be a highly contested and multifaceted concept (e.g. Featherstone, 2003; Popke, 2004; Staeheli and Kofman, 2004; Thomas, 2009; Wright, 2010; Sharp, 2011). 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 paper is an outgrowth of a nearly decade-long interest in the political agency of human beings whose agency is often seen to fall

outside the realm of politics, or whose political roles and actions are considered when prompted by contingencies such as the war or social unrest (see Kallio 2007; Kallio and Häkli, 2010, 2011a). Our interest was initially set in motion by what then seemed a simple and innocent question. Why, indeed, are children typically excluded from the concerns of political theory, to the point that the mere idea of introducing children into political theory makes both children and politics appear outlandish? We came to realize that even when seen as partisans to political events, children are often apprehended in ways that tend to rob them of any spontaneous political 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).

Given the title of this paper, and the vast tradition of political philosophy and theory devoted to making sense of what is politics, children's agency may seem a rather marginal concern. Childhood is, after all, but a passing stage 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). However, as suggested by Chris Philo and Fiona Smith (2003), there are some grounds for arguing that precisely the opposite is the case, and that childhood is a particularly opportune condition through which to approach the question of political agency in general (see also Kallio, 2007; Elwood and Mitchell, 2012; Bartos, 2012). 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. As a matter of fact, when political theories are brought to bear on children, 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, that is, politics as it unfolds in the world around us. It is for this task that we seek to develop conceptual tools in this paper.

We are aware of the magnitude of the theoretical challenge that our title poses and therefore feel compelled to justify and limit the scope of our effort and thereby indicate where we consider our conceptual tools to be most valid. At the outset we must point out that what follows is not intended as a contribution to political philosophy. Our competence would not allow this even if we had such aspirations, and currently there are several important strands of scholarship in human geography devoted to philosophical approaches to politics (e.g. Massey, 1999; Elden, 2003; Thrift, 2004, 2008; Popke, 2006; Marston et al., 2007; Dewsbury, 2007; Barnett, 2008, 2012a; Woodward et al., 2012; Dikeç, 2012). This said, in teasing out the meanings of the political we will utilize the thought of (political) philosophers such as Hannah Arendt (1958), Axel Honneth (1995, 2007) and Georg Herbert Mead (1934). Our ambition, nevertheless, lies in developing tools that facilitate the analysis of contextual political events, and for this purpose political philosophy debate is an instrument, not a goal.

Secondly, we do not propose our work as a contribution to political theory in abstract. While this would be a tempting goal in itself, we are too aware of the many fundamental lines of division in the existing political thought to attempt a synthesis or an overarching theoretical treatment of the political in all its aspects (see for example Taylor, 1982; Howell, 1993; Barnett, 2004; Bassett, 2008; Anderson, 2012). Such an effort, we contend, would by necessity remain too detached from the flux of everyday life to serve as a starting point for concrete political analysis. In Clive Barnett's (2012b: 679) words, rather than developing "more and more elaborate *ontologies* of the political" we want to focus "attention on the *phenomenologies* of political action". Hence, while we remain highly sympathetic towards efforts to radically rethink, reform, and even "politicize" political theory by authors such as Jacques Rancière (1995), Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) and Adriana Cavarero (2002), we

nevertheless consider political theory valuable only to the point that it can serve as a tool for understanding events and circumstances in their particularity (see Castree, 2004; Sparke, 2006; Gökarıksel and Secor, 2009; Staeheli, 2010; Agnew 2011).

To meet the challenge of bridging conceptual work on political agency with the phenomenology of political events, we consider it important to bring in the question of context both socially and spatially. Sensitivity to the contextual open-endedness of everyday political agency means that we do not necessarily know what issues, experiences, events or actions are, or become, political in a given situation. Yet, while this expands the notion of politics, we do not propose that everything is, or should be seen as, politics (Dean, 2000). 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 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, 2012b: 679).

We understand politics as a relational phenomenon, so that what makes things politically significant in each case depends on the situation and context at hand. For us politics is about matters of *importance*, whether these be in the context of the state policy or a person's everyday life. In the former case political issues are publically discussed and thus broadly acknowledged, whereas in the latter case only people involved may know what the stakes are. Either way, political agency is prompted when matters of importance are challenged or called into question because then those involved have something *at stake* in them. Hence, to really apprehend what is political in a given issue, event or action we must be attentive to the following question: In relation to which situation or site, for what group,

community or assemblage, this or that question begins to matter? In other words, in which *polis* a given agency is constituted as political?

We realize that in outlining the relevant socio-spatial contexts of everyday political agency in terms of polis we are mobilizing a concept that may seem parochial and burdened by its uses to discuss ancient political life, and thus incapable of addressing contemporary matters (cf. Marshall, 2010). 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. We find particularly appealing 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 (Ely, 1996; Elden, 2005; Dikeç, 2005; Marshall, 2010). 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 political agency (see also Cavarero, 2002; Todd, 2011). For us the phenomenology of politics springs from matters of importance in polis, however composed.

The paper 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 (see also Dikeç, 2005; Wright, 2010; Vacchelli, 2011). 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 the subject's 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 briefly sketch out a scene from the partly autobiographical movie *Fanny and Alexander* written and directed by Ingmar Bergman (1982). With this illustration and some examples from our ongoing school ethnography, 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 (e.g. Kallio and Häkli 2011b). We conclude by discussing the limitations and benefits of our conceptual tools in efforts to capture politics as experienced and practiced in everyday life by children and adults alike.

II The subject's autonomy and subjectivity

The question concerning the ontological status of the subject is a conundrum all human sciences have had to contend with. Unsurprisingly, it is also 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 but there are some interrelated issues concerning the status of the subject that are highly consequential for the purposes of this paper 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.

We may begin mapping the terrain of the subject by sketching out a continuum between two extremes. At one end stands the subject as 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, of course, are unsatisfactory in the light of contemporary philosophies of the subject. 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. Before this it is necessary to examine more closely the two opposite ways of relating the subject with identity.

There are two major strands of scholarship that have explicitly theorized the relationship between subject and identity in a way that is illuminative for our purposes. Within both it is broadly accepted that identities are constituted intersubjectively 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 science disciplines. To account for subjectivity she explores the forces of domination that operate 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 in general. As Amy Allen (2006) points out, 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 (Allen, 2006). Kathy Magnus 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" (Magnus, 2006: 87).

Lois McNay (2008) sums up much recent criticism of the undue precedence given to the role of categories and discourse in subject formation in 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, 2006; Vasterling, 2010). One reason to 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, 2006: 217). It is with this concept of the subject in mind that we now turn to theories of recognition in quest for an expanded notion of the subject's autonomy, subjectivity and agency.

Contemporary theories of recognition are inspired by the idea of the 'struggle for recognition' that 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 that the struggle in itself is 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 contemporary 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 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" (Taylor, 1994: 25). Recognition, then, is not just a matter of due respect or courtesy but a vital human need which, unfulfilled, leads to serious grieving and may result in identity political conflicts.

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. Ethical life, in this regard, 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 individuals' and groups' well-being. For Taylor's point about a person's need to have her or his identity rightly recognized by others, there has to be a locus for experience that can not be ontologically collapsed into identity, 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 & 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 identity through subjectivity. To further understand how this faculty may feed into relational politics (things at stake in matters of importance) we now turn to Mead's thought on human agency.

III Subjectivity as the condition of possibility of political agency

In developing his theory of recognition Honneth appropriates George Herbert Mead's (1934) thought 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 that, importantly, also functions 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" (Honneth, 1995: 81). For Honneth 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.

While we endorse Honneth's reading of Mead's classic *Mind, Self and Society* to the extent that it provides an account of the subject's relative autonomy, we find ourselves in agreement with Patchen Markell (2007) who detects a source of problem in Honneth's interpretation of Mead. The problem is partly related to Honneth's theoretical project which contains two aspirations that are difficult to reconcile in a single framework. The *analytical*

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aspect of Honneth's theory of recognition strives to theorize processes of identity formation and recognition as they unfold in the world, while the *normative* aspect seeks to develop ethics of recognition as a regulative ideal for an egalitarian society (Deranty and Renault, 2007; McNay, 2008). This dual mission instills into Honneth's theory a contradiction between the idea of genuine *open-endedness* and non-directionality of social change (recognition as a creative act), and the idea of social change as progress toward ever more *correct* recognition (of some pre-existing traits) (Markell, 2007; see also Rogers 2009).

Honneth's attempt to reconcile this contradiction is reflected in his reading of Mead's account of 'I' in a way that, as Markell (2007) points out, leads him to map the subject's 'I' and 'me' directly onto the relationship between an individual and society. Markell (2007) traces the roots of this interpretation back to Mead's own ambiguity regarding the concept of 'I'. 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, and 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 can not 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 can not 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.

We adopt this insight as the basis of our conception of the subject because it paves way for an understanding of political agency 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. Thus we suggest that with a restored Meadian conception of subjectivity we can develop an understanding of political agency from the perspective of the lived reality of embodied social relations. To this end we now move to discussing how we conceive of political agency and its spatiality in terms of polis.

IV Political agency in polis

We understand 'the political' phenomenologically as activity related to problems of living together in and through the spaces that this sharing constitutes. Furthermore, we see political subjectivity as vested in the dialogue between the subject's 'I' and 'me', neither of which can exist without the other. Here the '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 (Arendt, 1958; Cavarero, 2002). For human beings, 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. Simply put, 'I' refers to seeing itself, *not* to the objectified subject that does the looking, as expressed in the sentence "I see".

The idea of subjectivity as a dialogue between 'I' and 'me' implies that without the 'I' there would not be agency and without the 'me' there would not be human agency. We subscribe to the view according to which non-human actors represent a politically relevant form of agency but maintain that non-human agency is markedly different from human agency precisely because non-humans (or more-than-humans) do not constitute a dialogue between 'I' and 'me'. In Arendt's (1958) terms, this dialogue refers to human subjectivity, or the subject as *who,* whereas the negotiation concerning the subject's identity denotes the subject as *what*. We are always both who we are and what we are. This marks human agency apart from other forms of politically relevant action (cf. Hinchliffe et al., 2007; Hobson, 2007; Panelli, 2010).

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 itself, 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

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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. 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; Dewsbury, 2007; Woodward et al., 2012). 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 (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012). 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 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. Hence, 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 political agency.

For outlining the complex contextuality of 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 space in terms of territories, regions, locations and metric distances that can, in principle, be represented cartographically. Disrupting this conventional

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. This said, it is reasonable to assume that different forms of political agency depend on and enact different spatialities so that for some processes topographic or regional spaces are more pertinent whereas others are better understood topologically.

A topographic polis, such as a voting district, is the result of practices held together in relatively stable associations by the social and material networks of the institutional political system. A topological polis, instead, is formed by the bundle of significant others, communicative relations and material objects that make up the discontinuous ecology of one's concerns. The latter configuration owes some of its endurance to the conventions provided by the topographic 'world as we know it', and conversely, the territorially constituted political communities are certainly enmeshed with the topological relations of polis. But these intersections notwithstanding, there are important differences in the kinds of political agencies that unfold topographically and topologically.

Whether understood as an ancient city-state, a modern nation-state or any other territorial frame for politics, the topographic polis represents the more conventional understanding of political space. It keeps informing most institutional political practices, including policies that seek to promote children's political agency, and also many studies that assess these processes (e.g. Such and Walker, 2005; Whitty and Wisby 2007; Evans and Spicer, 2008). 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), supporting a specific group or

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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 so on (Kallio and Häkli, 2011b). All these intersecting identities are part of their constellation of 'me', negotiated in the course of their life histories and reflecting their prevailing and changing socio-cultural environments and relationships with others. Beginning from childhood and continuing throughout youth, adulthood and old age, many facets of our 'me' gain significance in the various institutionalized polises of representative democracy we are involved in.

However, while 'I' partakes in our becoming members of such polises, keeping our agencies open-ended, 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. Kyttä, 2002; Murtagh and Murphy, 2011; Said, 2012). However, there is a growing literature emphasizing the multiple spatial frames and scales of children's political agency (e.g. Bosco, 2010; Bartos, 2012; Elwood and Mitchell, 2012). These studies have made it abundantly clear that the geographies of children's concerns – their polises – are much more complex and malleable than we may have 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. While doing this we

accept that there are a multitude of topographic settings that continue to be relevant arenas for certain forms of political agency. Yet our interest is directed toward the largely unidentified political agencies that unfold in topologically constituted polises, politics practiced by their least experienced and acknowledgeable members – children. Moreover, 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 (see also Featherstone, 2008; Barnett, 2012b; Secor, 2012).

To grasp the polis as a non-Euclidean space, it is necessary to begin from the question of what constitutes membership in such a polis and how this membership 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 a scene from the movie *Fanny and Alexander* with which we seek to show how everyday political agency may unfold in a topological polis. To broaden the illustration we discuss some experiences based on our ongoing ethnographic work focusing on children's political agency practiced in relation to particular subject positions they encounter in their everyday lives.

V Political struggle over subjectivity

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". We find this an important move towards understanding the phenomenology of political action with two major consequences. First, political agency, and along with it the formation of the first polis in which an individual partakes, begins at child birth (see Arendt 1958: 9). 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 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, 1996, 2005; Simonsen, 2007; JT Allen, 2008; Gökarıksel 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 political agency. For the sake of clarity, 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 we consider the distinction analytical, not empirical, and thus do not expect to be able to pinpoint 'I' 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.

Let us consider the relationship between Alexander and his stepfather Bishop Vergérus as portrayed in a scene from the film *Fanny and Alexander* (1982). The film is partly autobiographical and based on the childhood memories of its writer and director Ingmar Bergman. As this is not a documentary film we can not analyze the scene as a depiction of real events. However, we consider it a realistic portrayal of a situation that might unfold as part of people's everyday life nearly anywhere and anytime, assuming different forms and producing diverse outcomes depending on the polis in question.

The film is set in Uppsala, Sweden, in the beginning of the 20th century. The story deals with the ups and downs of a well-to-do Ekdahl family involved in running a theatre. In the center of the story are a 10-year-old Alexander and his little sister Fanny whose parents are happily married until things change dramatically with the father Oscar's sudden death during a rehearsal of a theatre play. Shortly thereafter their mother, Emilie, marries Bishop Vergérus and takes Fanny and Alexander to live with her in the Bishop's house. It soon turns out that the Bishop is a strict parent and the children end up under his severe rule. He is particularly hard on Alexander, trying to teach him his manners in various ways. The episode that follows is an example of such encounters between Alexander and the Bishop (Bergman, 1982).

The scene starts with the stepfather Bishop Vergérus questioning Alexander, accompanied by Fanny, in his chambers about an offence toward his person. The Bishop has heard from his housekeeper that Alexander keeps telling ghastly stories about him and the

circumstances in which his late wife and children had died some years ago. The Bishop asks Alexander repeatedly to confess and apologize but Alexander denies systematically any wrong doing. He goes as far as to lie about the matter with his hand on the bible even though the Bishop explicitly warns him about the consequences of false oath.

While one might view Alexander's behavior as naïve and thoughtless, it is clear from the episode that he is acting quite intentionally and advisedly to defy the Bishop. For instance, he pretends to forget what the Bishop wants him to confess and why he should be punished, and instead of trying to get off lightly by falling in with the Bishop's will, he escalates the conflict as well as the punishment that he eventually receives. Yet, until the very end, Alexander's appearance remains polite and well-mannered.

As the episode proceeds, it becomes ever more apparent that what Alexander and the Bishop are struggling over is not the case *per se,* but something much more profound. At stake is nothing less than 'who' and 'what' Alexander is in this new stepfamily, and who gets to define his social self. The Bishop is proposing Alexander a very particular subject position as his new son with all the obligations and expectations that follow from a father-son relationship. Alexander, again, is clearly indicating that he is uncomfortable with this position even though he really can not reject it *tout court*. The political agency related to this struggle can be teased out by focusing on the ways in which Alexander and the Bishop refer to themselves and to each other during the episode.

Appropriately by the standards of the time, Alexander addresses his stepfather consistently as the "Bishop", and he references Alexander either in second person or by name.[1] The episode begins with the opening line "Alexander, my son", whereby the Bishop sets up the tensioned scene concerning Alexander's identity. During the Bishop's questioning Alexander first gives only laconic replies denying all accusations but, intimidated by the Bishop, he begins to engage in the dialogue, albeit reluctantly. Aggravated by the situation,

which only served to underline Alexander's rejection of his fatherly authority, the Bishop reminds him about a conversation concerning morality they had some weeks ago. Again the Bishop addresses him as "Alexander, my son", thus re-proposing him the subject position as his son.

What is ear-catching in the way Alexander responds is how he now talks about himself selectively in first and third person. To the Bishop's surprise, instead of complying with his move Alexander denies ever having adopted his moral values by stating that these were not agreed in a conversation because "the Bishop spoke and Alexander said nothing". The dialogue continues as follows:

> The Bishop: "Said nothing and felt ashamed, perhaps, on account of his lies"
>
> Alexander: "I've grown wiser since then"
>
> The Bishop: "You mean you lie better"
>
> Alexander: "More or less".

Still addressing Alexander as "my son", but rather agitatedly, the Bishop asks whether Alexander really thinks he can besmirch the Bishop's honor without being punished for it. Alexander replies in both first and third persons: "I think the Bishop hates Alexander. That's what I think". In his final attempt to push Alexander from his stance, the Bishop attests his fatherly love toward Alexander, Fanny and their mother while stroking Alexander's cheek with seeming affection. As Alexander keeps quiet, the Bishop gives in to his severity and the episode ends with Alexander's forced confession, punishment by beating and detention in the attic.

We read this scene as an example of political agency related to a struggle between Alexander and the Bishop concerning their familial relationship. At the minimum, there are

two subjects directly involved in the struggle that, seen topographically, is embedded in and conditioned by the Bishop's house where Alexander and his sister have to live. This clearly is a pertinent understanding of their polis but the social and spatial context of their politics can hardly be reduced to a household. Thus, in topological terms the polis of their struggle involves all the members of both the Bishop's and Alexander's extended families, their significant others, the symbolic and material settings of their daily lives, the prevailing moral values concerning parenthood, the discursively constituted truths about life and authority in stepfamilies, and so on. Polis thus understood is both people, places and objects involved, here and there, now, before and in the future, brought together by what is at stake in this politics – it is an inalienable part of the constitution of their politics.

From Alexander's side the struggle is about being uncomfortable with the proposed subject position as the Bishop's son ('what' Alexander is). This is what animates his subjectivity ('who' Alexander is) that translates into political action. From the Bishop's perspective at stake is his authority ('what' the Bishop is) that Alexander refuses to admit, leaving him ('who' the Biship is) with no recourse other than violent coercion devoid of true authority. That this is a struggle with history is evident from the dialogue between Alexander and the Bishop recalling their earlier conversation whereby Alexander had seemingly submitted under the Bishop's will and accepted his moral guidance as legitimate. However, this time Alexander explicitly rejects the proposed familial relationship with the Bishop even though this comes at the cost of being punished for disobedience. Unlike the earlier occasion, this sequence can be seen as an instance of *successful* political agency by Alexander. Escaping from the position as the Bishop's son provides Alexander, as well as his sister Fanny, with more freedom to develop and act as political subjects on grounds that extend beyond the topographic setting of the Bishop's home.

Alexander's successful political action, unfolding in the topological polis of the struggle, resulted from his agency as a political subject. In line with what we argue above, the condition of possibility of political agency is the subject's relative autonomy vis-à-vis the social self that is at stake in the struggle. Here we read Alexander's ways of referencing himself as an indication of the relative autonomy that allows Alexander to critically distance himself from the position of son that the dominant stepfather offers him.

Ostensibly, what Alexander does is simple. By referencing himself in third person Alexander talks about his social self as it appears to the Bishop, thus taking subjectively distance from the object of the struggle. This allows him to underline that while he can, he doesn't have to be "Alexander". In referring to himself in first person Alexander talks about his social self as it appears to himself as the subject of this struggle. He further stresses the distinction in stating that "I have grown wiser since then", thus indicating that he is now better equipped and ready for the struggle. In a similar vein he presents "Alexander" as the distanced object of the Bishop's hatred but refers to "I" when talking about himself as the thinking subject. Alexander keeps to this two-fold referencing until it becomes evident that the discussion about their relationship is over. At this point Alexander starts to refer to himself only in the first person, thus indicating that he will not be confessing or receiving the punishment as the Bishop's son "Alexander".

The struggle between Alexander and the Bishop may be particular in its harshness but we argue that the issues at stake are rather common. In our everyday lives we constantly encounter subject positions that we, adults and children alike, have to relate to, adopting, averting or molding them in particular circumstances. From Alexander's case we learn that children, too, have potential to influence their subjectification even in very hierarchical and subordinating environments. In his mundane politics Alexander employs his relative autonomy to take distance from the Bishop's conception of his social self, performing what

Couze Venn (2009: 5) calls "critical distancing … integral to the process of disidentification". With this political action he challenges the Bishop whose authority appears nearly incontestable to most other members of the family and the wider community.

As relating to subject positions takes different forms in diverse settings, political subjectivity is contextual and multiform. This is to say that 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 ongoing school ethnographic study with eleven- to twelve-year-old kids. Children are typically given nicknames by their family members, school mates and other peer groups. Often these names 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 studied 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.

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 another girl in our study. Toward the end of our field work with her, it turned out that she was called 'hag' by some of her classmates, but in a way not easily noticed in the polis. The subtle nicknaming occurs through a particular way of pronouncing her surname initial, making it sound like 'hag' (in Finnish 'ämmä'). The nicknaming is easy to conceal because her surname initial is commonly used to distinguish her from another girl in the class with the same first name. Consequently, the teachers end up unknowingly using this nickname in a legitimate way and thus upholding the repressive subject position with which

the girl is constantly struggling at school. Yet, as we learned to our relief, she has means to cope with this harmful positioning through recourse to a nickname negotiated with those she is involved in her circus art hobby. By affiliating strongly with a polis she feels close to, she gains self-esteem as well as a rescue from the subject position offered to her at school every day. This subjective negotiation may not affect 'what' she is at school, but it certainly has a profound influence on 'who' she is, shaping her political subjectivity both presently and for the future.

Struggle over such positioning is evident also in Alexander's case. His own Ekdahl family and the Bishop's stepfamily offer him different subject positions as a family member. In the episode analyzed, Alexander resorts to his experiences as the "Ekdahl subject" when practicing politics and struggling for who he is in the Bishop's house. Yet, his 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). Precisely how Alexander, or the girls discussed above, act as political subjects in their respective polises is neither a triumph of voluntary action nor a fully predetermined social process, but a relational struggle on intersubjectively negotiated matters of importance.

VI Conclusion

In this paper we set out to develop tools for understanding political agency and political events as they unfold in the world. 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 isolated intersubjectivism characteristic to theories of recognition. 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. Finally, to bring together political subject and action we conceptualized the topological settings of political agency in terms of polis. To illustrate the analytical potential of our approach we proposed a close reading of a scene from the movie *Fanny and Alexander*, partly based on the childhood memories of its director Ingmar Bergman, and extended the illustration with a brief reflection on our ongoing ethnographic work.

Through the case of Alexander and the Bishop we have demonstrated some ways in which political agency may unfold 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. 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 2012b).

To theoretically grasp 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

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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' can not 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 kind of political action. This, we suggest, will provide tools for understanding human political agency in many different kinds of settings and circumstances.

The case of Alexander and the Bishop that we used as an illustration of our conception of political agency has its restrictions but also benefits. The scene focuses on a simplified struggle between two actors, making the power relations between the players apparent and the relevant polis easy to imagine. However, as the excerpts from our field work show, everyday political events are usually more complex and entangled, making it harder to explicate how things are political in the given case. 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).

The approach we have developed facilitates the study of many different kinds of everyday 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 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 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.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

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[1] The direct quotations from the episode are from the English subtitles as available in a DVD released by the FS Film Ab. The original spoken language in the film is Swedish. The original lines in the order of quoting in the text are as follows: "Biskopen", "Alexander, min gosse", "Biskopen talade och Alexander teg", "Teg och skämdes, kanske, för sina lögner?", "Jag har blivit klokare sedan dess", "Du menar att du ljuger better", "Ungefär so, ja", "Jag tror att biskopen hatar Alexander. Det är vad jag tror". The episode analysed here begins at 01:54:58 and ends at 02:04:28 in the DVD copy of the film.