

'Where are the adults?': Troubling child-activism and children's political participation

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Abstract

Children's political participation is a well-established theme in childhood studies. In this article we offer an original account of child activism that takes into account the entangled and emergent aspect of children as activists. We begin with a historical and a conceptual review, noting the importance of mid-20th century developments such as May 1968 but tracing their roots to the earlier community-derived activism of the US civil rights movement—a long episode of activism not normally included in accounts of children's political involvement. We consider the ways in which adults surround children, creating contexts and working for and through them with diverse political and social ends in mind. It has been a dominant focus of adult activity to facilitate children's participation rights. These rights are defined in international legislation as non-contingent, that is, explicitly predicated on an absence of responsibility. Regardless, the relational aspect of responsibility is present in children's lives in families, churches, schools and wherever adults interact with children, whether to protect, instruct, direct or guide them. We conclude by indicating how current historical and conceptual frames do not allow for the complex understanding required to account for children's agency understood as necessarily entangled with adults' prior being in the world. We advocate a radical relational turn in childhood studies to leave behind the lacuna that arise from individualist accounts of child-activism.

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KEYWORDS

political economic and cultural contexts, rights and entitlements, social relationships

Key insights**What Is the Main Issue that this Article Addresses?**

This article addresses the involvement of adults in child-activism. It problematises the notion that children's agency must be understood as somehow independent of adults.

What Are the Main Insights that the Article Provides?

This article argues that a challenge to the individualist understanding of agency/activism is important to understand the phenomenon of child-activism, particularly since children are conspicuously and inevitably entangled in complex relationships with adults.

INTRODUCTION

Children as activists are not new. Localised instances of children and young people organising, withdrawing labour, staging walkouts and protesting against injustices have happened with surprising frequency. We say 'surprising' because children's activism has long been controversial: unnatural, artificial and often dangerous. Child-activism, however, *is* new and one of the distinctive features of the twenty-first-century political scene. Child-activism is a recognised phenomenon involving a widespread mobilisation of children within the political domain. It coincides with the advent of both accessible digital connectivity and the formulation of children's participation rights in domestic and international law. This article will explore some of the ways this political phenomenon has unfolded, how it has been perceived and what problems and challenges it raises in the public sphere in relation to the core ethico-political concepts of accountability and responsibility.

Whereas the sustained focus of childhood studies has been on children's participation, agency and activism since its beginnings in the 1990s, our particular interest is in the responses, attempted facilitation roles, and resistance on the part of adults; with the child-activist *par excellence*, Greta Thunberg, we ask the question 'Where are the adults?' (Thunberg, 2019). What do we see when we turn our attention to the adults around children, behind them and possibly working through them? The adult environment is not a passive one: adults move with great agency in a world where children are taking their first steps. By foregrounding the adults in this article, we explore their significance without detracting from the emerging importance of child-activism.

At the outset, it is worth acknowledging that education, here, is used in its broadest span. We mean by education any intentional activity with respect to another aimed at the development of a person's capacity to live a distinctively human life, and which 'proceeds by the participation of the individual in the social consciousness of the [human] race' (Dewey, 1972, p.84). This expansive understanding allows us to include in our

considerations social spaces that are not schools. School education and teachers are relevant to our discussion, but so too are the other spaces in which adults and children interact. Education and opportunities for learning reach outwith the classroom to the home, places of play and worship, the internet, television and other forms of media with which children engage. Therefore, when we speak of education and adults, we refer not only to schools and the teachers who inhabit them.

BABY BOOMERS AND GENZ: TWO GENERATIONS OF YOUTH-ACTIVISM AND CHILD-ACTIVISM

Youth activism and political protest became an international phenomenon for the first time during 'The Long 68'—the period spanning the late 1960s and early 1970s (Vinen, 2018). Though it is hard to describe this extended period of political radicalism without glossing over some important local differences, nevertheless a constellation of disparate concerns and contexts gave rise to the arrival of a much younger population of political activists in the US and in many European countries. These were mainly children born in the post-war period during a time of increasing comfort and prosperity, a generation known as the baby-boomers. In 1969, the UK became the first country to lower the voting age to 21, with other states following within the next 5 years or so. This means that in 1968 many of the activists were minors, without the political, property or personal rights of the adult citizen, though compulsory military service or conscription started at the age of 18 in many countries. Notoriously, the average age of US combat soldiers in the Vietnam conflict was 19.

Many of the young protesters were students. They had leisure, opportunities for organisation and debate, exposure to ideas and opportunities for travel that were unavailable to other social groups at that time. They shared no single programme of action or ideological position, but they were able to unify around a desire for radical change and gathered round rallying points such as opposition to the vicious US campaign in Vietnam. Young people in affluent Europe travelled more, creating a 'continent-wide, transnational social group' (Jobs, 2009). The association between travel and peace was well established in the early twentieth century under the League of Nations, and this predictably took on new force and urgency after the Second World War. The year 1967 was declared International Tourist Year by the UN General Assembly, under the motto 'Tourism, Passport to Peace' (Pedersen, 2020) and the post-war reconstruction period included the relaxation of passport controls for young people, international work camps and a dramatic expansion of the youth hostel network (Jobs, 2009, 2015; Lesley, 2015). Although some recent scholarship has questioned the notion that 1968 was in any meaningful way a *global* phenomenon (for example, Vinen, 2018), still it seems highly significant that this generation was the first to be exposed to alien cultures and ideas through travel, and to a lesser extent, through television. Internationalist solidarity developed along the lines of a challenge to the nation state itself. This was not anticipated by the likes of Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev when they issued a rare joint statement in 1985 which stated: 'there should be greater understanding among our peoples and to this end we will encourage greater travel' (Pedersen, 2020, p. 391). Whatever the intention, the attempt by the adult international community to forge a better world by encouraging young people's mobility seems to have instead resulted in their unprecedented radicalisation and politicisation during the 'Long 68' as evidenced by the formation of radical left internationalist youth organisations (for example the Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire), founded in 1966 and Students for a Democratic Society, founded in 1960 and growing to 30,000 supporters across the US by 1969, who were highly critical of US foreign policy (Tomasi, 2020). Added to this was renewed interest in Marxism and critical theorists such as Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer, and in Situationism and Anarchism.

Yet 1968 was not the radical departure often imagined: another youth movement preceded it. Unlike what came later, this was highly localised but its sheer scale presses it forward for consideration. In 1964 over 360,000 children—some believe half a million—took part in a school boycott in New York City over the segregation and underfunding of schools in black neighbourhoods. Children and young people had in fact been active in the Civil Rights Movement for decades before that: the City-Wide Young People's Forum began in 1931 in Baltimore; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had Youth Councils across several states from the 1930s onward; in 1936 the Southern Negro Youth Congress was formed; teenagers went door to door in voter registration drives across the US in the late 1930s, and so on (Frankline, 2021). Black children of all ages were active in protests, marches, strikes and boycotts for more than three decades before 1968, sometimes independently and spontaneously, although more often organised and leveraged by adult activists. Children's activism was a natural extension of community political activism, and although many adult civil rights activists, despite adopting what might be described as an educative role in inducting children into such movements, were cautious about children's participation for obvious reasons of safety. Notably their involvement was reluctantly approved by Martin Luther King Jr (Mayer, 2008, pp. 64–66). At times children joined with adults, as in the United Auto Workers strike in 1937; on other occasions adults joined in to support and protect their children, as when mothers arrived at Lanier High School in 1963 to fight off police dogs which, quite incredibly, had been set on their children in the school cafeteria; and occasionally children acted quite independently, as when 16-year-old Barbara Johns organised a school walk-out in 1951, later recalling, 'We knew we had to do it ourselves and that if we had asked for adult help before taking the first step, we would have been turned down' (Frankline, 2021, p. 34). A pivotal moment in the civil rights movement was the 1963 Birmingham Children's March, in which 4000 elementary, middle and high school marched on the city hall (Levinson, 2015; Mayer, 2008). Over several days of protest, thousands were arrested, while others were beaten with batons and attacked with fire hoses and police dogs.

Something qualitatively different marks this early period of children's political activism. These children were already involved, entangled, already participant in the ideological racism that permeated every part of their lives, and the lives of their families and communities. Hannah Arendt, in her essay 'Reflections on Little Rock', condemned the action of Black parents in exposing their children to these dangers, but she failed to understand that, for Black families, the 'idiosyncratic exclusiveness' of the private sphere was not in fact 'strong and secure enough to shield its young from the demands of the social and the responsibilities of the political realm' (Arendt, 2003, p. 211). Protestors could shield neither themselves nor their children under the conditions that pertained in the US at that time as the effects of racism were felt keenly in the material conditions of their private domestic life, in public and in the liminal domain of the school.

Whereas the first 'global' youth movement might be characterised by its mobility, the second is known for its connectivity. GenZ (also known as Postmillennials, Zoomers and, more recently, Zillennials and iGen) comprises those born between 1997 and 2010. Embodying, perhaps, some *fin de siècle* energy, these were children who have never known a world without the internet (although access does remain dependent on family income). Katz et al. (2021) found that they have a keen sense of personal agency but are also markedly more collaborative and community orientated than the generations that precede them. They have inherited what Katz et al., in their wide-ranging and sympathetic study of GenZ, have euphemistically called 'a difficult legacy', that is, the pandemics, wars and climate emergency that have so far defined this century. Although some Baby Boomers passionately desired political, social and economic transformation, they still held to the modernist dogma of progress, buoyed by both economic and technological development. Their vision was one of transformation,

the realisation of better futures: as graffiti at the Sorbonne in 1968 read 'Prenez vos desirs pour des realites' (Take your desires for reality). GenZ, in contrast, face the existential threat of environmental degradation and irreversible climate change and, while their desires for a fairer and more just world resonate with many of the aspirations of the 1968ers, there is a survivalist urgency in much of this generation's activism. Anti-modernism is a special kind of utopianism; rejecting the notion of progress, it looks to a forgotten past rather than the pristine promise of the new. As a response to modernity, anti- or counter- modernism has antecedents in Romanticism and its heirs running up to, and beyond Dada, Surrealism and Situationism—all of which appeared in the intellectual political movements of this decade (Gray, 2007; Löwy, 2022). Diminished confidence in contemporary institutions and in the possibilities opened by technology, manufacturing and consumption are typical among GenZ activists.

The second wave of activists are significantly younger than those in 1968. This is consistent with wider social trends, reflected in legislation from the 1969 UK Representation of the People Act to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The child-liberation movement of the 1970s and the subsequent arrival of childhood studies as an academic domain both pressed for the dismantling of the traditional boundary between childhood and adulthood. Child-advocates from John Holt (1974) through to John Wall (2022) have argued for the extension of voting rights to all children, and participation rights have become of crucial importance in children's services, the criminal justice system and education. Unsurprisingly, this generation of children has developed a voice and expects to be heard. However, something that no child-liberationist, legislator or academic can take credit for is the amplification of children's voices by means of social media.

Social media platforms such as Twitter (now portentously renamed 'X'), Instagram and TikTok are egalitarian in that they give equal opportunities to speak to all users, albeit with the proviso that all users are subject to an algorithmic process that amplifies some content more than others. Excitement about the political importance of social media platforms, particularly Facebook, was hyped in political movements such as the Arab Spring, although the connection is contested (for example, Singh, 2011). Of course, the equal right to speak is not an equal right to be heard or to exercise agency. In terms of the four-fold Lundy model of children's participation, social media aces on Space and Voice, but falls short on Audience and Influence (Lundy, 2007).

In line with the operational characteristics of social media, egalitarianism is a hallmark of GenZ's activism. Katz et al. (2021) found that they strongly favour consensual models of leadership and sometimes even leaderless groups rather than hierarchies. It is postulated that this is modelled on experiences of on-line community moderators whose role is to remind members of the rules of the community, providing protection and support by enforcing agreed norms of behaviour. Social media can be highly problematic—Habermas's public sphere it is not (see Matusitz, 2022b). However, it is cheap, transnational and instant, giving activists unprecedented opportunity to build solidarity and to organise on a global scale.

Lacking any of the resources of adult-led organisations, child-activism perhaps falls by accident rather than design into the pattern of 'leaderless resistance', a form of decentralised grassroots activism historically associated with the extreme right-wing (for example 'Leaderless Resistance' (1992), but now also a defining characteristics of more contemporary protest movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy, Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion (XR) (Fotaki & Froughi, 2022). The exercise of agency outwith the structures of institutions or governments—in other words, a kind of anarchism—is described by the writer and analyst, Joshua Keating (2020) as 'the future of politics' and is extolled by Carne Ross (2011) the former British diplomat and Green Party Activist in his manifesto-style book *The Leaderless Revolution* as 'how ordinary people will take power and change politics in the 21st Century'. Ross offers this summary of the situation: 'In a world where government

influence is in inexorable decline, and other transnational forces exert themselves ... there is little choice but to take on the burden of action ourselves. If we do not, others surely will ...' (p. 22). Furthermore, 'people can be trusted successfully to manage their own affairs, to negotiate with one another, to regulate their own societies from the bottom up—by moral rules rather than coercion' (p. 210). The phenomenon of 'leaderlessness' in decentralised protest movements is well recognised and has attracted significant scholarly attention during the first decades of this century (for example, Castells, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012). Whereas older activists may adopt neo-anarchist organisation as a matter of principle, younger ones may find that they are, in any case, excluded from existing political institutions and their resources. Not only that, the heavy hand of the institutional structure of schooling actively prevents independent and spontaneous agency in children, a situation in which the egalitarianism of digital connectivity is a happy accident—and their only obvious option.

Despite the preference of child-activists for flat organisational structures, the contemporary movement has several figureheads as identified from outside the fold: children who have become famous through intense media coverage and scrutiny of their actions and lives. The most famous, perhaps, is Greta Thunberg, born 2003, whose solitary climate protest started in August 2018. Four months later she was addressing the United Nations and by March 2019 more than a million children internationally walked out of school in the weekly Fridays for Future protests. It is hard to avoid clichés in describing Thunberg's extraordinary career and the way she captured the attention and imaginations of both adults and children, and her activism continues unabated. In the last year she has been arrested three times, twice in her native Sweden and once in England, and a fortnight ago, as we write, she was again forcibly removed from the Swedish parliament by police. The other child-activist who has defined this movement is Malala Yousafzai, born 1997, whose advocacy for girls' education in Taliban-occupied Swat, Pakistan, came to international attention when, at the age of 15, she was seriously injured in a targeted Taliban attack on her school bus. Both girls attracted the sustained attention of the global media. Both activated archetypes of the girl-child in the public imagination and the coverage they received reflected the polarities inherent in that form. As adults struggled to understand the phenomenon of child-activism as it unfolded in this generation, familiar models of leadership structures were superimposed on the real-life situation in front of them.

Who else are we talking about when we consider this generation of child-activists? Although Greta and Malala are the most prominent, there are several other notable figures, such as: Thandiwe Abdullah, b. 2004, BLM organiser; Bana Al-Abed, b. 2009, who documented the siege of Aleppo, Syria; X Gonzáles, b. 1999, US, who survived the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, and co-founded the gun-control advocacy group Never Again MSD; Amanda Gorman, b. 1998, African-American poet, feminist and anti-racism activist and first National Poet Laureate; and Vanessa Nakate, b.1996, Ugandan climate activist, founder of Youth for Future Africa and the Rise Up Movement. The relative obscurity of these other activists must be explained not in relation to what they have done, but rather in the context of the complex web of adult geo-political agendas, gender stereotypes and racism. Malala Yousafzai is a talented, articulate, intelligent and passionate campaigner, but her situation also provided near perfect political optics for anti-Taliban media coverage in the middle of the American War in Afghanistan. Indeed, Greta Thunberg was not the first or the only climate activist, but something about her personal characteristics proved very appealing to the media. The ways in which child activists are portrayed provide a fascinating insight into the prejudicial stereotypes, the fears and the needs and desires of the adult world.

In one view, the adults, rarely seen, are puppeteers, no matter how well-intentioned. Hiding behind the curtain like the Wizard of Oz, they set the scene, pull the levers and open or close the door to participation, sometimes even providing the script, thereby voicing the child actor. In the case of the Russian protests, the children were presented as 'heroes', as 'figures of hope' for those who supported Navalny (Erplyeva, 2023). This messaging was

created and propagated by the adults, who pulled the strings of the message as much as the children by welcoming them into their world, the world that is normally closed to children. These are narratives of moral authority where the child is positioned interestingly, elevated and revered for speaking the truth the puppeteer cannot—or will not—voice. It is purer, clearer, more innocent when coming from the mouth of the child. Such a view presents children as saviours placed on the ‘ideological front line. As signifiers of a specific version of the future, they become child-soldiers for that vision’ (Jessop, 2018, p.453). There are near hagiographic treatments in books for children where they are held up as inspirational role models (for example, Vegara 2020; Paul, 2021). Nässén and Rambaree (2021) describe Greta’s leadership as embodying the ‘five characteristics that are typical of moral authority’. Bergmann and Ossewaarde (2020) note the exaggerated iconicity and sanctification of Greta, describing the coverage as explicitly ‘messianic’. One frequent comparison is with Joan of Arc, the martyr and patron saint of France (for example, Litt et al., 2022). In stark contrast to the rhetoric around Greta and her peers is the extensive criticism, disparagement and dismissal of them in mainstream and social media. Both Greta and Malala were the objects of misogynistic, sexist and ageist criticism (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Cameron, 2023; Park et al., 2021). Greta was additionally subjected to discriminatory remarks about her autism (Konyaeva & Samsonova, 2021; Park et al., 2021), being described as a ‘deeply disturbed teen’.⁴ Malala came under fire for the way in which she became a *cause célèbre* for Western anti-Islamic propaganda (Hayat & Wahab, 2016; Horodenko et al., 2018; Qazi & Shah, 2018; Ullah et al., 2023). The parents of both were criticised for allowing their daughters to take such prominent roles (Garlen & Hembruff, 2023).

When children organise themselves for a cause, adults seem more likely to fret than applaud. Sometimes the concern arises from the desire to protect them: will they be in danger? Will they miss valuable schooling? When children move into the public sphere will they be exposed to violence, exploitation or abuse? Perhaps it is their behaving against stereotype that confuses and disconcerts us. They confound the expectation of irrationality, incapacity and lack of self-regulation. On the other hand, sometimes that protective impulse seems to be focused on society, reacting to what appear to be anarchic forces undermining the status quo. This is the dual urge to protect children from society and at the same time protect society from children as observed by Hannah Arendt in her 1954 essay, ‘The crisis in education’, in which she associates the two protective urges as part of the same whole:

[T]he child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world. But the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation.

(Arendt 1954/2006, p.182)

The perception of danger to ‘the world’ depends on the adults’ perspective, and what they believe is worth preserving and protecting, whether it is property, institutions, customs or laws. For example, the Russian demonstrations in support of Navalny, mentioned above, were represented in the state-controlled media as cynically recruiting ‘our kids’ to create necessary crowds at ‘pro-Western’ protests (Erpyleva, 2023, p. 2) In other words, children were allegedly being used as unwitting accessories to an illegitimate and potentially destabilising alien incursion into domestic politics. Concern about external manipulation is often a fair one, but, in any case, there is no evidence of revolution that threatens societal structures when child activists have rallied or missed school.

An interesting sidenote to contemporary youth activism is the apparent absence of boys.¹ Of course, there are boys and young men involved—as a look at any photojournalism will reveal. However, there is a conspicuous imbalance between male and female

children and young people in prominent roles, in stark contrast to the wider society where most leadership roles are still occupied by men. It is not yet clear what is happening but there are strong indications that this may be consistent with an emerging socio-political phenomenon: the gender–age gap, a new and sudden separation between males and females as the latter swing towards a progressive, left-liberal political position while males stand still. Differences in men's and women's voting behaviour was noted by Inglehart and Norris (2000) with recent work noting stronger generational divergence (Campbell & Shorrocks, 2023; Shorrocks, 2018). A recent article in the *Financial Times* describes GenZ as two generations, not one (Burn-Murdoch, 2024). The divergence in countries as diverse as the US, UK, Germany, Poland, South Korea, China and Tunisia is measured at between 30 and 50 points—and this is most marked in the young. Burn-Murdoch (2024) points to two explanatory hypotheses: the #MeToo movement and differential social media exposure. Alice Evans (2024) has suggested several factors that may be at work: feminised public culture, for example in publishing; economic resentment caused by rising unemployment; social media filter bubbles; and cultural entrepreneurs, like Andrew Tate. The second two possibilities seem to be most directly relevant to GenZ since it is the most immersed in social media and is often the prime audience for 'cultural entrepreneurs' or influencers. A disturbing escalation of this marketing approach can be seen in the 2024 US presidential election campaigns, where having lost a substantial number of female voters, Trump targeted young male voters in a campaign that was marked by machismo and misogynistic tropes (Maitlis et al., 2024). Early analysis of exit polls suggests a 10-point gap between men and women. The 'white male anger' that has become a familiar feature of populist politics appears to be more accurately just 'male anger' as more Black, Hispanic and Asian men are drawn to the reassertion of strict traditional gender roles (Cohn, 2024; Pew Research, 2024). The intentional targeting and manipulation of young males by older political actors is a disturbing feature of the political landscape—and not just in the US. Again, our understanding of the young activist population is something that needs to be set alongside sometimes malign adult agency and instrumentality.

It would be wrong simply to assume that young people whose views are not socially liberal, progressive or leftist are more manipulated than their leftist counterparts: they are also activists. The academic literature has tended to prefer child-activists who share what could broadly be described as liberal and progressive values. Hartung (2023) calls this 'selective advocacy', that is, a bias towards the 'performance of agency' which matches the fundamental values of humanities and social science educated writers both in academe and in the media (pp. 210–211). Children have been, and are, active in terrorist organisations from the Tamil Tigers to the IRA, in white supremacist, anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi organisations such as the Ku Klux Klan and Stormfront (Matusitz, 2022a). Any internal resistance we experience in including these in our understanding of child-activism belies the claim that this is all about children's agency and voice and reveals an idealised notion of children's voice. The same grounds on which we might be tempted to dismiss this activism as the authentic 'voice of the child' must be applied with the same rigour to child-activism that is orientated to egalitarian, inclusive and fair principles. This is not to say that the ends pursued are in any way comparable, only that the quantity and quality of adult agency in the situation is important. The alternative is to risk confusing manipulation and tokenism for genuine agentic participation.

What this account reveals is that children as activists are deep-rooted, not confined to one set of political values, and heavily filtered through traditional and social media. Adults are instrumentally and inextricably involved at every level, from the family, through schools, churches and other community organisations, to online political agitators and influencers. Meanwhile parallel development is unfolding in national and international policy and legislation, and in academic discourse. We turn our attention now to the understandings that lie

beneath the participation, agency and activism of children and how these can be conceptualised in relation to their human rights and the ethics of responsibility.

ENACTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION RIGHTS

Throughout the period spanning from 1968 to GenZ, while children and young people have been active on the streets, adults have been busy thinking about children, and what has come to be known as children's 'participation rights'. In 1978, Poland proposed that there should be a United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to mark the International Year of the Child in 1979. It took a decade of discussion and compromise to reach the final text adopted on 20 November 1989. One strand of the UNCRC, children's agency and participation, has come to dominate both policy and academic discourse in childhood studies and, increasingly, in education. Adults have taken it upon themselves to foster children's 'voice' in the classroom, social work, the criminal justice system and the community through legislation, professional standards, notions of 'best practice' in initial teacher education, and so on. More recently, as the meaning, limits and consequences of participation rights are debated, attention is increasingly on children's participation in the public sphere. Attention is paid to what children do in the public sphere in so much as they should behave as adults require. With respect to what happens in state-funded schools, school-based activism is firmly controlled within the traditional confines of pupil councils or fora where the pupils can talk about school uniforms, school toilets and eco-committees that focus on litter-picking in the playground, what Tisdall and Punch (2012) would describe as 'thin agency'. The most recent concluding observations from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child for the UK and Northern Ireland (United Nations, 2023), make clear a concern that children's views are still not, as a matter of course, taken into account with respect to decisions that affect them, a General Principle, framed as Article 12, of the UNCRC. The 'report card' goes further to note that the UK needs to attend to the promotion of children's 'meaningful participation ... including on so-called reserved matters' (United Nations, 2023, p.7). What is evident from the UNCRC and from the subsequent concluding observations is that children's participation is tantamount to democratic proceduralism.

Despite this, much of the literature pertaining to children's participation focuses on children's right—or not—to vote (see, for example: Lau, 2012; Ribeiro et al., 2023). The general argument, depending on one's convictions, drives towards children's capacity, or lack thereof. The arguments are well rehearsed. Children are irrational, incapable and incompetent, they lack maturity (Cassidy & Mohr Lone, 2020; Kennedy, 2010; Matthews, 1994; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Children even think this of themselves (Ribeiro et al., 2023). The arbitrariness of applying competency criteria to children but not to adults is obvious although commentary on this sometimes lacks nuance in pursuit of impact. Clearly children do not, *en masse*, acquire competency at the age of majority, nor is the disenfranchisement of the elderly comparable with withholding the franchise from children since, inter alia, cognitive decline is by no means inevitable nor is it uniform. Selective citation of medical publications to support the cognitive decline thesis is fraught with the danger of misinterpretation since it relies on findings from knowledge domains that philosophers and social scientists are ill-equipped to understand and evaluate. Nonetheless, the competency test is inherently dangerous where fairness and justice are inextricably bound together in the political sphere.

Access to the ballot box has long stood as both a symbolic and practical apotheosis of political participation, and it has been at the core of every liberation movement; nevertheless, participation in the public sphere is not limited to voting. Indeed, in Ribeiro et al.'s (2023) study, the young people with whom they spoke discussed various ways in which they may participate, including organising community events, joining associations or engaging in

projects that enable them to make decisions that impact on their communities, such as those described by Sundhall (2017). Adults have concentrated attention on whether children *can* participate in the public sphere, while finding that they are indeed doing this—therefore the answer is yes, they can. The question remains, then, whether this description is linked to prescription: can the recognition of children as competent actors lead to a normative position on whether children *ought* to act in the public sphere? This moves the debate from the developmental to the moral and raises the important question of responsibility.

The UNCRC affords children a series of rights which are not contingent upon an associated set of responsibilities. Emphasising or instituting a series of responsibilities to accompany children's rights places an unwelcome burden on children because it makes them liable to shoulder particular duties (Howe & Covell, 2010). However, it is also true that adults encourage in children responsible engagement with the world: taking care of their personal and common resources (toys, clothes, classrooms and playgrounds); being accountable for the consequences of their actions (apologising, making amends); being kind, gentle and friendly towards others around them; owning their mistakes and enjoying the rewards of friendship. In language redolent of the idea of responsibility, UNCRC Article 28 states that education should be directed to 'develop children's respect for their own rights and those of others, for their parents, for their own culture and the cultures of others, and for the natural environment', bearing in mind, of course, that children are educated outwith the school contexts, including in families, religious organisations, friendships, clubs, societies and the general social environment in which they find themselves. Considering the non-contingent nature of rights, it is helpful to explore a possible distinction between 'responsibility' as a relation to the world and 'accountability' which carries a juridical sense of liability or even culpability. It is misleading to use accountability and responsibility interchangeably in the case of children, who, as what Arendt (2006), calls 'newcomers by birth' did not cause the world to be as it is: they cannot be accountable for climate change, for example. Tibaldeo (2023) in his genealogical study of responsibility, asserts that the term is primarily a juridical concept and only secondarily an ethical one. While this may be true of human history, ontogeny does not necessarily recapitulate phylogeny—in other words, the first experiences of responsibility in an individual life are ethical, not juridical. The significance of this for children is that they may be considered responsible for an ever-widening domain, but they cannot be considered accountable for much more than how they treat their friends or how tidy their bedrooms are.

The notion of 'domain' may be helpful in thinking about the participation of children in the polity. For example, Lau (2012) proposes 'inter-domain consistency' as an argument for the enfranchisement of children. This logical-analytical approach to the issue leads to the conclusion that if children are held to be criminally responsible at a particular age, they should likewise be able to engage politically. The age at which criminal responsibility begins reflects each jurisdiction's ruling on the age at which a child can be expected to understand the consequences of her actions and so, when they are not permitted to participate politically, they should not be considered to be legally accountable for their actions. Lau's 'argument of domains' seems eminently reasonable, and we note that, congruent with this position, the trend has been for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised (for example, in Scotland the threshold was changed from 8 to 12 years old in 2019). However, we also need to remember the distinction between the age of criminal responsibility and the age of penal majority. Between these two points children are subject to youth justice law and do not attain full criminal responsibility until they are 16 or 18 in most countries, in line with the age of political majority. Doubtless there is still more to do in achieving this 'inter-domain consistency' but it seems that the direction is set, and movement is well underway.

Jettisoning for the moment the notion of accountability and returning to the basic notion of responsibility, then, as a matter of principle, human rights are uncoupled from responsibility. From the earliest statements of natural rights, it has been made clear that the concept

was one of birthright: 'all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights' (US Declaration of Independence, 1776). As we have seen from Howe and Covell (2010) above, children should not be expected to bear the burden of responsibility with respect to enjoying their rights, which, arguably, includes their right to participation and activism. Accountability then lies only at the door of adults, specifically in the form of the state, so those who hold power 'answer for their own deeds and decisions' (Tibaldeo, 2023, p.4). It should be said that not all activism requires rule or law breaking, but it is often accompanied by rule breaking at least, and if children's capacity for participation is called into question, then so too is their capacity to be held to account.

The question of power in relation to responsibility draws our attention to a significant aspect of how responsibility is understood. Tibaldeo (2023) recovers a history of the concept which he claims is more future-orientated and relational than the dominant modern, juridical, status-orientated sense, and draws attention to the work of Jonas, Gilligan and Benhabib in reviving its ethical usage. Accountability, as Tibaldeo explains, shifts from accountability or sanctions pertaining to one's past actions to those actions one promises in the future. This is interesting in the case of children as much of their lives is preparation, a promise for the future. Their activism, indeed, is forward-looking, directed towards a future they, not we, will likely inhabit. The challenge for them, though, is that in accepting—or taking—responsibility as a guarantee or promise, they will have to live with the consequences of their child actions when they are adults, thereby living with the two temporal senses of responsibility. In the future, the adult who was an activist child may be held to account, may have to defend or answer for some past action, if they wish to assert their capacity, or we (adults) wish to assert it for them. We suggest the need to exercise caution lest in rushing children down the path of activism we store up problems for them in later life, akin to the indelible social media profiles of children curated by some parents. Ironically, there is a distinct possibility that we will no longer be around to be held accountable for this drive to activism. Tibaldeo (2023) reminds us that within the original understanding of responsibility lies the element of vulnerability. He states, 'to care for the vulnerable entails guaranteeing for and being committed to the preservation of the future of what is vulnerable, which is the very meaning of the Latin *respondere*' (p. 11). If children are seen as vulnerable, as innocent, as naive, as they often are, then this offers pause with respect to our responsibility for them when encouraging their activism.

Temporal notions of accountability form one part of the concept of responsibility according to Tibaldeo's account. What then of the second part: relationality? Emirbayer's (1997) 'Manifesto for Relational Sociology' marked the beginning of what is known as the 'relational turn' in the discipline. He laid out the terms of the debate in this way:

Sociologists today are faced with a fundamental dilemma: whether to conceive of the social world as consisting primarily in substances or in processes, in static 'things' or in dynamic, unfolding relations ... increasingly, researchers are searching for viable analytic alternatives, approaches that reverse these basic assumptions and depict social reality instead in dynamic, continuous, and processual terms.
(p. 281)

Early attempts were made to introduce this relational turn to childhood studies, for example, Alanen and Mayall's (2001) *Conceptualising Child-Adult Relations*, but there was limited uptake as debate about capacities, power and oppression trundled on in the literature. More recently, John Wall (2010) has introduced notions such as reciprocity and mutuality into the discourse on ethics and childhood. Child-activism is imbricated with adult agency as we have seen from the unintended consequences of adults encouraging the young to travel, the creation of algorithms by adults to recruit children to political causes and the

extraordinary mobilisation of law, policy and resources in respect of children's rights. Such inter-relatedness is inescapable: the very concept of child is relational as it includes the aspect of being 'the offspring of parents', although what this signifies varies historically and culturally. Stables (2008) defines this aspect in terms of filial piety, being indebted to parents and following elders' instruction, and here again, we find a structural account of children and their agency as it is either directed or suppressed by their relations with adults. All these approaches are evidence of an interest in relationships: we can map them out and better understand who is doing what and why. This challenges the place of developmental psychology in education and its ascendancy in childhood studies, evident in debates around capacity, which continue to eclipse a relational understanding of childhood.

A more radical attempt to achieve such a change has come from Spyrou et al. (2019), who exhort us to consider 'children's relational encounters with the world' (p. 7) rather than remaining hooked on the essence of child/childhood that grounded the rise of childhood studies. This move, they argue, requires us to stop thinking of children as bounded, but to view them as independent actors in the world. Such a view, where children are recognised as being in-relation, as acting, as interacting with the world and those in it, leads us to consider 'how childhood is done' (Spyrou et al., 2019, p. 8). Given the tensions inherent in child activism, the vitriol poured on the likes of Malala and Greta for daring to speak what many (adults) think, how childhood is done by such children is not as it is done for others.

The attention required—and tension—when considering children and their activism is to see each as 'among others' (Splitter, 2022a). Children are not atomistic, individual entities. They are not separate from the world around them; they find themselves in-relation with the world and others (Cassidy, 2023). It is important that we reflect on our positionality within the range of economic, social, cultural and political networks. Such reflection may enable us to move from the binary child/adult, us/them, position to one where we are in-relation, to see ourselves, as Splitter (2022a) has it, as 'one among others'. Indeed, citing the likes of race, gender, class or sexuality, Splitter (2022b) is cautious of us aligning our identity too closely to any of these elements, noting that:

If our very identities were given by these collectives and institutions with which we identify, then we are affected by—indeed, infected with—all the fragmentation, impermanence, conflict and bitterness ... that are part and parcel of our shifting and unstable relationships with these collectives.

(p. 27)

Here, he appears to write about adults, but children's identities are generally formed for them *qua* children because they belong to that set or tribe. In acknowledging children's connectedness, that they are better networked than ever before, a different relationship may emerge.

This intra-action rather than interaction is key for Spyrou et al. (2019) in seeing children as networked. Drawing on Barad's (2003, 2007) notion of intra-action allows an understanding of agency that is formed as a result of relationships as opposed to seeing it as something possessed by individuals. And it is this sharing of power, of acknowledging that we are somehow 'in it together' that may provoke fear in some adults that they may be over-run by children. They need not fear. While there are some child activists, such as those noted above, they remain constrained by adult-imposed authority. They may make some noise, but it appears that they need not be taken seriously, no matter how sensible their message. Beyond this, it is important to remember that in the same way that not all adults are activists in the revolutionary political sense that some may fear, not all children wish to engage in activism. Indeed, for Magill et al. (2022), the children with whom they spoke were clear that the thought of 'perpetual civic acting' (p. 15) was overwhelming.

While Magill and colleagues' participants suffered from decision fatigue or were wearied by the prospect of bearing the responsibility usually borne by adults, Erpyleva's (2023) participants, who saw themselves as activists, recognised themselves as 'exceptional children' (p. 13). These children considered themselves as no different to adult protesters, unlike their counterparts in previous Russian protests. While the children thought that their political agency was different to that of adults, being 'imperfect' in comparison, they highlighted the need for adults to facilitate elements of their activism, creating a relational and interdependent approach. At the same time, the children did not 'see adults contributing to the development of their agentic roles' (p. 14).

CONCLUSION

A deeper challenge to the individualist understanding of agency/activism is possible. The disruptive notion of the 'agential cut' proposed by Karen Barad, whose 'agential realism' has profoundly called into question the most taken-for-granted premises of the concept of agency, redescribes a complex phenomenon such as child-activism as an entanglement of intra-acting 'agencies' (Barad, 2007, p. 139). 'Entanglement' does not just mean that the relationships between different elements (say adults and children, parents, politicians, social media, and so on) are complex and difficult to separate. Rather, the term indicates 'ontological inseparability'; the terms 'adult' and 'child' only take on meaning in the agential cut we perform on this phenomenon. Being wedded to this cut becomes a problem for our understanding if it is taken as self-evident, fixed and based on a real ontological separation. Post-qualitative approaches to agency open important and exciting ways of stepping around the present lacunae of child agency. What difference would it make if we were to refuse to see someone like Greta Thunberg in isolation, 'independent' as she asserts ('there is no one behind me ... I am absolutely independent' (Facebook 2 February 2019) or manipulated by her parents as claimed by some, and instead see her as a bright flare in the intra-agency of the climate emergency? How can the young conservatives 'on board the Trump Train to 24' be comprehended without disrespect or barb from a largely liberal democratic academic community, and understood instead as part of the complex entanglement of late capitalism? We return here to the children and young people of the Civil Rights Movement, whose activism was a complex interplay of personal, interpersonal, historical, social and political elements leading, following and growing out of a movement started by the enslavement of their ancestors at the birth of a nation, their ongoing material deprivation and their political exclusion: all of this, all together. Attempting to disentangle one child in isolation to study their activism is to do violence to the truth by telling too simple a story.

In whatever way we approach the phenomenon of child-activism we find adults: enablers, educators, cynical manipulators and bad actors, attentive parents, community or religious leaders, and the emergent adults whose childhoods have been shaped by activism. The idea that child-activism is somehow less valid because of the presence of these adults is to mistake what it is to act. Nonetheless, there are still significant issues of power in the form of economic, cultural and social capital, epistemic advantage and physical strength, and these considerations oblige us to protect children from harm and to ensure their survival, growth and development. This is part of the challenge in schooling, where children are nurtured and, at the same time, controlled. When children come together as activists, they must do so within the structures in which they find themselves, but they are not strangers: like all of us, they inherit rather than originate. Activists of any chronological age move within the world we make together, which in turn makes us. Certainly, the relational turn in childhood studies, something that is somewhat neglected in the field of school education, has potential to

resolve certain of the puzzles presented by child-activists but without a more radical reconceptualisation of agency itself, a ‘thick agency’ (Tisdall & Punch, 2012) that seeks to ensure meaningful participation in what children encounter in the formal structures of schooling and the associated curricula and beyond, and we may find ourselves continually fretting over the relative contributions of discrete actors and failing to comprehend the bigger picture of their entangled ontology.

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Endnote

¹We acknowledge that some of the young people identify as non-binary.

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