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**Bray, Daniel, and Nakata, Sana (2020) *The figure of the child in democratic politics*. Contemporary Political Theory, 19 pp. 20-37.**

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<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296%2D019%2D00319%2Dx>

# The Figure of the Child in Democratic Politics

(accepted version)

## Dr Daniel Bray

Department of Politics and Philosophy  
La Trobe University  
Bundoora VIC 3084  
Australia

## Dr Sana Nakata

School of Social and Political Sciences  
The University of Melbourne  
Parkville VIC 3010  
Australia

## Abstract

This article seeks to illuminate the figure of the child in democratic politics. Specifically, it argues that children play a constitutive role as temporary outsiders who present both renewal and risk to the *demos*. Using Hannah Arendt's concept of natality, we begin with an ontological account of children as new individuals that are central to renewing democratic freedom and plurality. In the second section, we explore how children can be conceived in terms of political risk by focussing on Arendt's debate with Ralph Ellison concerning the de-segregation of American schools in the 1960s. Their arguments about whether children should appear in politics underscores the constitutive role that child-adult relationships play in debates about the normative fabric of democratic society. Finally, we use the radical democratic theory of Chantal Mouffe to argue that children can be characterised as an excluded groups of potential adversaries that appear in political contests over claims to represent the *demos*. From this perspective, the article reveals that children are central figures in democratic politics because they are constituents of an unknown future polity.

**Keywords:** children, childhood, natality, representation, Arendt, democracy

# The Figure of the Child in Democratic Politics

## Introduction

This article is an effort to give children and childhood a more prominent place in our thinking about contemporary democracy. It presents a framework for illuminating the figure of the child in democratic politics, and for specifically capturing the constitutive role that children play as temporary outsiders who present both renewal and risk to the *demos*. Our analysis of this politics is intended to sit alongside the extensive contributions scholars have made toward understanding of how children's rights and competencies may better realise child-centered policy and meaningful modes of political participation (Archard 2004; Cohen 2005; Cohen 2009; Cowden 2016; Kulynych 2001; Dixon and Nussbaum 2012; Roche 1999; Rehfeld 2011; Tobin 2014; Wyness 2005). To date, this scholarship is especially concerned with exploring the political capabilities of children that warrant participation in a liberal polity, and ways that this participation might be practiced such as through the lower voting ages, creating alternative participatory mechanisms. In this article, however, we set aside these normatively-driven concerns about children's rights and capabilities, and instead focus on the broader political contestation surrounding the appearance of children in democratic politics. This is of primary interest to us because, despite being formally excluded, children figure prominently across a broad spectrum of political debates ranging from immigration to same-sex marriage. When we are compelled to consider a drowned Syrian toddler washed up on a Turkish shore, for example, or an unarmed African American child shot by police in a playground, or children separated from their parents at a state border, or the wellbeing of an Australian child with same-sex parents, we are being compelled to consider a representation of children made for political purposes, with important constitutive effects on the terrain of political contestation.

Drawing on insights from agonistic approaches to democracy, then, we intend to contribute a new approach to analyzing children *in relation to* politics that focuses on the role that the figure of the child plays in both constituting the political realm and substantively affecting political debates and decision-making. This approach is developed by turning first to Hannah Arendt's account of the radical potential of children. Through an examination of her notion of natality, we ground the study of children in politics in their ontological presence as the source of new beginnings, and as a social group that is essential to the reproduction of a plural *demos*. We argue that because children are politically significant as constituents of an unknown future *demos*, they are represented in a range of public debates where competing idealisations of society are at stake. In the second section, we extend our use of Arendt's concept of natality by exploring her anxiety about the place of children in political conflict. While her concept of natality emphasises the role of children in *renewing* democracy, she also struggles with the *risks* posed for democratic politics when children appear in political life. To understand the political consequences of this indeterminate potential of children, in the final section we harness the radical democratic theory of Chantal Mouffe to examine the constitutive role of representation in generating political power and group identity, focussing specifically on the ways in which the political realm is constituted through exclusion. From this perspective, we argue that children can be characterised as *potential adversaries* that occupy a unique place at the threshold of political life as a permanent, but ever-changing, excluded group that holds both hope and fear for democracy to come. We conclude by suggesting that this approach provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the role that the figure of the child plays in political contestation and the operation of modern democracies more generally.

## **Natality and the radical potential of children**

To begin, we argue that the political significance of the figure of the child becomes apparent when democracy is understood as an unfinished project which is *continually re-made* by new generations in response to changing social conditions. A distinctive virtue of a democratic society is that it authorises citizens to influence how their society reproduces itself (Gutmann 1999: 11) – and this activity of collective renewal has the political socialisation and education of children at its core. As such, our approach is grounded in an ontological account of children as new individuals, focussing on the function they play in sustaining a plural *demos*. To bring this ontology into focus, we begin with Hannah Arendt’s account of natality, a notion of newness she conceives as both a literal and metaphorical condition inherent in birth and political action. Natality, she claims, is not only what ‘inserts’ new life into a pre-given world, but also what ‘daily renews’ this world itself, which would otherwise perish with the death of individuals (Vatter 2006: 152). This starting point is intended to direct our analysis toward the radical potential of children as new and unique individuals, and their constitutive role in the renewal of democratic freedom and plurality. In making this move, we are interested in studying how the figure of the child shapes the public imaginary and why children are so frequently at the centre of political debates about the normative fabric of democratic society.

Hannah Arendt’s concept of natality specifically refers to the human capacity to begin something new in the public realm. She claims that the ‘new beginnings inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting’ (Arendt 1958, 9). Indeed, ‘beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom...This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man. (Arendt 1951, 479). Natality is thus a condition of freedom because ‘a constant influx of newcomers

who are born into the world as strangers' produce an unending stream of 'automatic' and singular interruptions to the world that create new possibilities for action (Arendt 1958: 9). That is, the children that are inserted into the world through birth are singular, completely unique individuals, and these singulars themselves are beginners, that is, origins of spontaneous interruptions of routine and law-like behaviour (Vatter 2006: 154). For Arendt (1958: 247), natality and its singularization of life is the only hope against a totalitarian politics that seeks to eugenically and genocidally make singular individuals superfluous. Natality is what stands in the way of ever finalising one Humanity because it brings forth radically diverse individuals capable of new beginnings no matter the extent of socialisation, or how oppressive the political order. Taken literally as the new beginnings inherent in birth, then, natality articulates the radical potential of children and new generations of citizens for initiating new action, and therefore interrupting and altering routine political behaviour. From the moment of birth, children literally embody new possibilities for politics.

However, in much of her work on natality Arendt was not literally referring to actual children. Indeed, as indicated above, natality is more widely deployed as a central category of political thought: all action as beginning corresponds to birth understood as a metaphor for starting something new, disclosing individuality, and therefore standing apart from normalising power. In beginning something new on our own initiative, 'we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a *second birth*' (Arendt 1958, 176). Political action is thus conceived as an intensive channelling of natality into politics. This means that, for Arendt, collective action requires a context of plurality in which the presence of others, who can judge what is being enacted from their own perspective, contributes to a network of actions and relationships that is complex and unpredictable. Democratic politics is therefore sustained by human individuality; of living as distinct and unique individuals among equals where the paradoxical

quality of our *shared difference* is the condition for action that is born in the public realm. In this context, the ‘frailty of human affairs’ stems from the boundless and unpredictable nature of action that arises from the condition of natality, and its ‘inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries’ (Arendt 1958: 190). Democracy can thus be viewed as a fragile and unending task where the institutions and laws intended to limit and bound politics ‘can never reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself.’ (Arendt 1958: 191).

Yet, despite making natality a central category of politics, Arendt herself did not believe children should take part in the political realm. For Arendt, childhood is a time when one is both a ‘new human being’ and a ‘becoming human being’ and therefore must be protected for the welfare of children and the integrity of the political realm (Arendt 2006, 182). To cast children into the political realm prematurely risks both children and the world itself: ‘the 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 2006, 182). The radical newness of children is thus conceived as the *potential* source of freedom and plurality, but also an internal risk to the established political order. This is consistent with protectionist justifications that uncontroversially exclude children from the political realm; indeed, children are considered, by definition of their incapacity, members of society that have no formal role in politics. They are excluded for their own protection, to provide scope for their own nurturance and wellbeing; but also to ensure that the political realm is not placed in jeopardy by the untamed unpredictability of the child who is *too* new and unprepared for the rigours of political life. Importantly, this childhood state of newness limits how we recognise the politics of children’s lives: so long as one is beginning, one is also becoming; and, so long as one is

*becoming* political, one cannot *be* political (Arneil 2002). Children are thus necessarily positioned beyond the political realm: they stand-in-waiting to take up their future roles, and occupy not just one part of the politically excluded population, but also give shape to the boundary itself. Children stand at the threshold of an adult and properly political life, and at the age of citizenship (whatever arbitrarily determined age in any given jurisdiction that may be) they cross the threshold: they become voters, recognisable political citizens, political equals who are permitted to speak and act in order to represent, negotiate, and give effect to their own interests in the world.

Arendt's children are thus citizens-in-waiting, waiting for their 'second birth', whose temporary exclusion from the political realm serves to both stabilise the present and safeguard the future. Yet this presents a difficult tension. The natality of birth, in its literal form, is too risky, unpredictable and radical for present politics. But at the same time, the very process of becoming is conditioned by the political behaviour of adults, and therefore constrains the radical potential of new generations that she otherwise values so deeply as a bulwark against totalitarian politics. In *The Crisis in Education*, she expresses this difficulty by claiming that:

even the children one wishes to educate to be citizens of a utopian morrow are actually denied their own future role in the body politic, for, from the standpoint of new ones, whatever new the adult world may propose is necessarily older than they themselves. It is in the very nature of the human condition that each new generation grows into an old world, so that to prepare a new generation for a new world can only mean that one wishes to strike from the newcomers' hands their own chance at the new (Arendt 2006, 173).

Here, Arendt points to the normative processes by which the radical newness of children is conditioned, disciplined, and directed toward a future adult-subject of politics; a subject that must be educated to intelligibly operate within a desired political order. As John Dewey puts it: 'Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife' (2008a: 139). For this to occur, the radical potential of children is circumscribed; their natality is



conditioned through exercises of parental, institutional and discursive power, including the transmission of ‘stories’ or narratives where past words and deeds disclose the identities of actors and provide models for action for new generations.

From this perspective, the processes through which the natality of children is conditioned becomes a central facet of democratic politics. Children are at the centre of the unfinished project of democracy as the ever-present source of newness that must remake freedom and plurality. As Dewey (2008b: 299) writes: ‘Every generation has to accomplish democracy over again for itself...its very nature, its essence cannot be handed from one person or one generation to another, but has to be worked out in terms of the needs, problems and conditions of social life’. Democratically conditioned natality must therefore strike a balance between an *openness* to the new required to actualise each child’s potential for originality and initiative in response to changing social conditions, and a *closure* in laws and institutions that sustains communal values and protects the existing democratic order against the constant influx of ‘strangers’. In contemporary democracies, this tends to entail moderating natality to the extent that it either supports, or, at very least, is compatible with national values. Conceiving of democracy in this way allows us to appreciate the ways in which children have political lives because their natality makes them constituents of an unknown future polity.

### **Natality and the risk of children in politics**

While Arendt’s concept of natality helps to illuminate the significance of children in the renewal of democracy, her work also clearly expresses deep anxiety and concern about the appearance of children in political debates: for the sake of the child, as well as for the sake of democracy. This anxiety is especially apparent in her two essays, ‘Reflections on Little Rock’

and ‘The Crisis in Education’. In this section, we analyse these texts in some detail because they reveal how the figure of the child can be conceived in terms of political risk, leading Arendt to favour a de-politicisation of children that sits uneasily alongside her account of natality and its potential for democratic renewal. Moreover, her debate with Ralph Ellison on the appearance of children in politics underscores the importance of thinking about the child-adult relation as a central facet of democratic life.

Hannah Arendt’s essay “Reflections on Little Rock” argued against the legally enforced desegregation of public schools in the United States. She was responding to an event in September 1957, when nine African American high school students were to be the first admitted to classes at Little Rock High School in Arkansas, following the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs Board of Education*. Among the nine was Elizabeth Eckford, whose family happened to be the only one that did not have a telephone installed at their home. As a consequence, she and her family did not receive the phone call that the eight other families received the previous evening: students were to arrive by a side entrance in the morning, to avoid efforts to obstruct their entry at the school’s main doors by protestors and Arkansas state troopers. So, on the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> September 1957, Eckford approached the front entrance of Little Rock High School, alone, and was turned away at the door by state troopers. As she made her way back from the main doors, toward a bench to sit upon, a photographer, Will Counts, captured a series of images that would be splashed across national publications, including Life magazine (self-citation 2008, 20). These images remain among the most iconic of the civil rights movement.

Arendt’s analysis of this event presents two arguments worth taking seriously in trying to deepen our understanding of the concept of natality and its significance for democracy. First,

Arendt argues that school desegregation ought not to be a strategic political pursuit of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) because education is a social activity in which discrimination is legitimate. Second, she argues that Elizabeth Eckford's presence at the heart of such a politically charged and potentially violent moment represented a failure of the adults around her, including the NAACP and her parents. The premature entry of a child into politics, before they are properly educated, presents risk both to the child and to the quality of democracy. These two arguments (and Ralph Ellison's counterarguments) complicate how we understand and are able to deploy Arendt's concept of natality for thinking about the figure of the child in politics.

In the first argument, Arendt posits that education belongs to a social realm of life, in which schools operate as an 'institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all' (Arendt 1961, 9; self-citation 2008, 20). She argued that the strategic concerns of the African American civil rights movement ought to centre on the right to vote and the right to marry as each protect something vital to the political and private life of an individual respectively. To focus upon school desegregation was, in her view, a misstep on the part of the NAACP's strategic objectives. She writes that:

Segregation is discrimination enforced by law, and desegregation can do no more than abolish the laws enforcing discrimination; it cannot abolish discrimination and force equality upon society, but it can, and indeed must, enforce equality within the body politic. For equality not only has its origin in the body politic; its validity is clearly restricted to the political realm. Only there are we all equals' (Arendt 1959, 50).

In short, Arendt views efforts to abolish discrimination in education as second-order concerns that distract energy and effort from realising the first-order concern: equality in the political realm. Her interest is in preventing the trespass of discrimination from the social realm where

it is legitimate, to the political realm where it is not. Arendt is concerned that equality in the social realm risks producing social homogeneity, which in turn undermines the plurality required for democratic politics (Bohman 1996, 60; self-citation 2008, 21). Yet, equality in the political realm must be defended and protected because it is a necessary condition for political debate and action between plural social groups. Importantly, political equality is realised when actors are able to conduct themselves in public life and communicate with one another in ways that produce fair and meaningful contestation of claims. Crucially, for Arendt, *education* is required to produce this equality between political actors – and this education must take place outside of politics.

In her preliminary remarks, Arendt responds to public criticism she received from the African American author, Ralph Ellison, and others for holding these views (Allen 2004). She acknowledges that a friend ‘rightly observed that my criticism... did not take into account the role education plays, and has always played, in the political framework of this country. This criticism is entirely just’ (Arendt 1959, 46). Arendt suggests that despite her views having changed somewhat by the time of publication, she does not amend her essay because she responds to this critique in *The Crisis in Education* (1961) in which she explores the connection between politics and education in some depth. However, while *The Crisis in Education* does explore the relationship between education of children and the future political order, the essay furthers her argument that education should be separated from politics. She writes that this is because ‘in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated. Whoever wants to educate adults really wants to act as their guardian and prevent them from political activity’ (1961, 173). In the essay, Arendt mounts a critique of American educational pedagogy at the time. She believes this pedagogy, profoundly influenced by the work of John Dewey, is misguided because it involves: (1) viewing the school as ‘a society formed among children that

are autonomous' (177); (2) a 'science of teaching in general' void of subject expertise (178); and (3) an approach that substitutes learning for 'doing' (179).

This critical standpoint on education reveals Arendt's tendency, in practice, to think of the natality of children in terms of political risk, justifying the strict separation of children and politics in the name of protecting both. Here, Arendt struggles with the responsibilities that adults and their institutions have in balancing the acts of *openness* and *closure* in preparing new life for an old world; in preparing a child for an established political order. In granting too much autonomy to children, in surrendering the authority of teachers as knowledge holders, and in displacing expert content for the experience of 'doing', she is fearful both for the sanctity of childhood as a de-politicised time of educational preparation, and for the preservation of valuable features of the political order. She writes:

Human parents...have not only summoned their children into life through conception and birth, they have simultaneously introduced them into a world. In education they assume responsibility for both, for the life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world... The responsibility for the development of the child turns in a certain sense against the world: the 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 with each new generation.' (Arendt 1961, 182)

The challenge of balancing openness and closure, of navigating renewal and risk, is not one Arendt fully resolves in her life's work. The tensions this entails in the school segregation case leads her to argue that protecting a social space of plurality and legitimate discrimination where the education of children occurs is necessary to produce values and practices of political equality among adult citizens. Whatever we may think of this view, Arendt's essays on this topic reveal the kinds of risks that children pose to democratic futures, which arise from the diverse and unpredictable possibilities that their existence produces for politics.

The risk associated with natality is also evident in the second key argument presented by Arendt: that Elizabeth Eckford was failed by the adults around her, and wrongly placed at the centre of a political fight in which there was a real possibility for violence. At the time, Elizabeth Eckford was hailed as a civil rights hero, but Arendt (1959, 50) objected:

The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero – that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be... Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in the school yard?

The concern Arendt expresses here about role of children in political change sits somewhat uncomfortably with the concept of natality. Natality is valuable precisely because of the radical potential that each new human life presents in renewing the democratic order. Yet, natality also brings with it the possibility that this newness can be detrimental to, rather than supportive of, existing political norms. Hence, the special challenge of democracy is to simultaneously entrench both *openness* and *closure*: the radical and renewing qualities of natality are our best guarantee against the social homogenisation and totalitarian politics that are ultimately fatal to democracies, yet these qualities must also be channelled and circumscribed to protect the democracy we have. In contrast to the emphasis on openness that is evident in *The Human Condition* and in parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, this aspect of natality is entirely absent in Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock" and "The Crisis in Education". Her argument for not allowing children to appear in politics clearly favours a certain kind of political closure and does not even deploy the term 'natality' despite a clear relevance.

[Author 2] has argued elsewhere that the debate between Arendt and Ralph Ellison about the position of Elizabeth Eckford in the American civil rights movement had the paradoxical effect of obscuring Eckford herself almost entirely from view. Indeed, the debate presents an demonstrative example of how the figure of the child is represented and contested in political

debates where the normative fabric of society is at stake. For Arendt, Eckford's parents and the NAACP had effectively opted out of political action and, in consequence, placed a child in their place (self-citation 2008, 22). Ellison argued that it was the unique experience of violence and oppression in the lives of African Americans that created an exception to the principle that children ought to be kept free from the burdens of injustice. Ellison framed Eckford's political visibility as one of 'sacrifice' made by her parents and the broader African American community (Allen 2001, 862-863). He argued that invisibility is still political; the actions of the parents and the NAACP are still highly significant even though they could not be seen (Allen 20018, 884). In the end, both Arendt and Ellison were really arguing about the political positions of adults in this moment. Indeed, in this exchange of arguments, Elizabeth Eckford herself disappeared entirely from view and what remained was a set of competing representations made by adults about what the figure of a child in politics ought to be (self-citation 2008, 22).

This is such a prominent and normatively important issue in democracies because children often appear in politics involuntarily. Indeed, it has elsewhere been observed that children are 'forced into the political limelight' only as victims: wards of the state, prostitutes, witnesses and soldiers of war (Brocklehurst 2003, 83; self-citation 2008, 23). The political controversy surrounding the separation of children from their migrating parents at the United States border in May and June 2018 is one such an example. Importantly, whether in 1957 or 2018, children who are 'forced' into politically charged moments are most likely to be forced by adults around them. This is what Arendt and Ellison were contesting: the legitimacy of how the child comes to figure in politics. Ellison argued that African American parents had to 'sacrifice' their children for this politically necessary task – desegregating schools – to produce equal education that would foster the equality of future African American adults and their meaningful

participation in political life. Arendt's position was fundamentally different, and informed by a different experience of politics. When faced with anti-Semitic remarks from her adult teachers in her childhood classroom, Arendt heeded her mother's instruction to: 'get up immediately, leave the classroom, come home and report everything exactly' (Arendt 1994, 8). She was, she reflects, only required to defend herself against other children, her equals. This opportunity to leave, to step away from a politically charged moment, is what Arendt saw as being denied to Elizabeth Eckford. By being forced into her position, and denied the opportunity to leave, the risk for Arendt is two-fold: first, the premature political experience is one that risks Eckford's own education and preparedness for a future political life; and, second, the exploitation of children by adults for their own political purposes risks disorder in the political realm and the future quality of democracy.

This Arendt-Ellison debate suggests that the appearance of children in politics is normatively significant, not only because of the risks of violence, abuse and exploitation against the children themselves, but also, crucially, because of the broader formative effects that adult relationships with children have upon democratic politics. Specifically, from the perspective of natality, it allows us to see that the exploitation of children for political purposes as a form of *closure* that protects the power and authority of adults, and forecloses new political possibilities. Children can be exploited for political purposes through direct forms of physical force, emotional abuse, and neglect, which we ought to call *violence* when their intended effect upon children is to hurt, damage or eliminate their life in order to protect the power and authority of adults. The recruitment of children into war is perhaps an extreme example, but also significant in many parts of the world. Such violence damages the future adult that the child might become, either by seeking to eliminate their life absolutely *or* indoctrinating that child into reiterative forms of violent abuse and trauma. Violence against children can thus be viewed as a *problem for*



*democracy* because in either case what is *new* in the child is suppressed and/or prevented from ever becoming political.

## **Representation and the constitutive role of children as potential adversaries**

The preceding sections argue that children are formally *absent* from politics, but also *present* as new individuals and a social group essential to renewing democracy. This simultaneous absence and presence, as well as the importance of representative institutions to contemporary democracies, suggests that an account of *representation* is needed to further unpack the role that the figure of the child plays in democratic politics (Wall 2011). As Hannah Pitkin (1967: 8-9) points out, a fundamental paradox is built into the general meaning of representation as ‘making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless *not* present literally or in fact.’ In this final section, we complete our account of children in politics using radical democratic theory and an approach to political representation that views it as constitutive of democratic politics. Using the work of Chantal Mouffe, we focus on the ways in which the political realm is constituted through boundaries of exclusion, and how children figure as an excluded group of potential adversaries in political contests over claims to represent the *demos*. On this basis, we argue that child-adult relations are a constitutive feature of democratic politics.

To begin, we adopt a ‘constitutive approach’ to representation focussing on the contests over representative authority that serve to generate and shape democratic politics. This approach moves beyond the ‘dyadic approach’ to representation that profoundly shapes liberal democratic theory. The dyadic approach conceives of representation as a paired relationship between citizens (principals) and their representatives (agents) established through an

authorising electoral contract that involves the delegation of legislative powers (cf. self-citation). In this view, debates about democratic representation traditionally centre on whether the representatives that substitute for citizens should be independent *trustees* or instructed *delegates* of the people. This approach is particularly problematic for children who, lacking voting rights, cannot be parties to the electoral contract. In the absence of a direct child-representative relationship, the political representation of children therefore becomes a double act of substitution: parents or concerned adults can at least partially substitute the interests of children for their own in their choice of representative; after which the elected representative substitutes for the adult citizen who represents the child's interests. This dyadic approach thus provides a rather tenuous account of children's political representation. And it struggles to account for the multifaceted ways in which children appear in democratic politics either as self-representatives or in the political representations of adults.

Likewise, Hannah Pitkin's influential account of representation focussed on *substantive activity in the interests of the represented* is also problematic. For Pitkin, 'the substance of the activity of representing seems to consist in promoting the interests of the represented, in a context where the latter is conceived as capable of action and judgment, but in such a way that he does not object to what is done in his name' (Pitkin 1967: 221). This non-objection criterion allows the representative to pursue some degree of independent action in the interests of the represented, while the possibility of objecting makes the represented present in the action taken in their name. This accords with a common sense view that when the actions of representatives provoke widespread and persistent objections we feel that they lose their representativeness, even if our representatives believe they are acting in our best interests (Runciman 2007: 97). But, as David Runciman (2007: 97) points out, it also follows that representation ceases whenever the person being represented lacks the ability to object because of some inherent

incapacity of their own. Children are consequently excluded from political representation because they are understood to be *incapable* of political judgement and action in their own right. That is, children cannot be represented because they do not have the political capabilities and institutional avenues to object to what is being done in their name. For Arendt, this is underscored by the fact that children have not yet received a political education. Indeed, Pitkin (1967: 155) does not believe it makes sense to speak of representing children that cannot make their own views known, even if actions taken on their behalf are in their best interests: ‘If we think of [a child]...as helpless and incapable of action, *as being taken care of*, then we will not speak of representation’ (emphasis added). This leaves one to either accept a view that children have no place in representative politics, or adopt a normative position focussing on the inclusion of older children with a capacity for political judgement and choice who could raise formal objections to their political representation through electoral voting or other forms of participation. In any case, this approach excludes by definition the great majority of children from any representation in democratic politics, while at the same time failing to account for the significant ways in which children appear in politics inside and outside of parliaments.

In contrast, the constitutive approach views democratic representation as a *systemic property* rather than an isolated, dyadic relationship produced by an electoral mechanism. That is, representative democracy is a system of large-scale social relationships and institutionalized norms that legitimize particular kinds of representative claims, and in so doing constitute particular social roles, identities and interests. Consequently, we argue that the workings of democratic representation should not be conceived as the discovery and inclusion of a ‘true’ representation of the essential interests of children and childhood. Instead, democratic representation involves a series of publicly staged contests between representations of children that struggle for hegemonic acceptance within the democratic system. Children may not be able

to formally object to or contest these political representations, but other adults may do so on their behalf, which leads to an ongoing societal process of claim-making in which the ‘true’ reality of children’s identities and interests remains ungraspable. Of course, taking this approach does not imply that children cannot act politically, or participate meaningfully, or object to representations made on their behalf in a range of political settings (the recent actions of Stoneman Douglas High School students following a school shooting in the United States demonstrates this). Rather, this approach merely suggests that children do not have to engage in any such conduct in order to have a constitutive function in politics; and that recognizing this function opens an important avenue for the political analysis of children that centres on the representations made in their name and on their behalf.

Children play a constitutive role because processes of representation inside and outside of formal institutions create the interests, identities and subject-positions of children as political constituencies. As Chantal Mouffe (2013: 126) argues, ‘it is through representation that collective political subjects are created, and they do not exist beforehand. Every assertion of a political identity is thereby interior, not exterior, to the process of representation’. It is through adult representations that children commonly appear in democratic politics *without* being full citizens. For example, the *interests of children* are represented by elected parliamentarians who claim to act as their surrogate voices in political debates; the *rights of children* are represented by Ombudspersons in parliamentary committees considering the impact of new legislation; the *harms to children* are represented by politicians in order to justify intervention in dysfunctional communities; the *plight of refugee children* are represented by international NGOs in order to shift domestic public opinion on asylum seekers; and so on. Taking this approach makes clear that adult representations of children are widely used for political purposes in democratic societies, by elected and nonelected actors, in a host of policy areas. These representations

involve claims about children, childhood, and child-adult relationships that constitute the terrain of political contestation on issues ranging from gun control to climate change.

Using this approach, Chantal Mouffe's work on agonistic democracy helps us to see precisely how children, as a formally excluded group, are nonetheless at the centre of intense political encounters through the competing representations made about them; claims that center on their role as *becomings* and their potential for conflictual relations with the adults that precede them. Mouffe's account of the friend-adversary relationship and the constitutive Outside is central to understanding the political significance of children in this way. Her radical democratic project begins by returning to Carl Schmitt's critique of liberalism and his friend-enemy distinction. Mouffe follows Schmitt's critique of liberalism insofar as it operates against the de-politicising effects of homogeneity, but departs from him by conceiving mutual acceptance as a basis for relations of difference, rather than assuming that those relations must always be premised on a mutual desire for annihilation. She writes:

While antagonism is a *we/they* relation in which two sides are enemy who do not share any common ground, agonism is a *we/they* relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognise the legitimacy of their opponents. They are adversaries not enemies. This means that while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. (Mouffe 2005a, 20)

Mouffe thus rejects Schmitt's violence-based ontology of political relations through her emphasis on agonistic conflict within a common political space. In this political space, a rational universal consensus is impossible: plurality necessarily reproduces difference and an 'undecidable terrain' (Mouffe 2005b: 12).

Moreover, Derrida's idea of a constitutive Outside, and Mouffe's appropriation of it in the context of democratic contestation, gives an insight into how excluded groups are intrinsic to

this political realm. Exposing the inherent flaws of the liberal aspiration for a fully inclusive community, Mouffe (1993: 114) highlights that there is always an excluded dimension in political life: ‘in order to construct a “we” it must be distinguished from a “them” and that means establishing a frontier...There will therefore exist a permanent “constitutive outside”...an exterior to the community that makes its existence possible.’ It is plain enough to see how the exclusion of certain adults such as foreigners, minority groups, and those with particular ethnic, religious or gender identities might shape the boundaries of a political community. But with this account of political community, it is also possible to conceptualise children as a permanent but ever-changing social group at the boundary of the political realm: a constitutive Other. To adopt Mouffe’s terminology, children can be conceived of as a ‘they’ in relation to our adult ‘we’. This demarcation of we/they groupings is important for understanding how the political realm is retained as separate and distinct from social and private life. Under these conditions, children assume the status of an excluded ‘they’, appearing in democratic politics as new individuals and future constituents.

Using this theoretical framework, then, we conceive of children as an excluded group of potential adversaries that appear in political contests over representation of the *demos*. Despite being formally excluded, they are adversaries because they are an ever-present source of newness that could one day stand in radical opposition to the interests, institutions and future plans of previous generations. For adults, natality prefigures new bases of conflict and new risks to the established authorities. As new individuals born into an old world, the interests and experiences of children are unique, and as such they embody possibilities for remaking politics in a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. That is, conceiving of children in terms of a friend-adversary relation emphasises the potential for children’s identities, subjectivities and political interests to differ from the adult generation whom they live alongside, including their

own parents. And it opens up space to identify and analyse possible disconnects between generational interests in the renewal of democratic politics. Indeed, the interests of an individual child, or a whole generation of children, can potentially be at odds with the interests of older generations (as we can see with regard to the long-term problem of climate change). It is this potential for something new that generates both hopes and risks for future society, and places children at the centre of political debates involving different and competing representations of the *demos*, its normative foundations, and the proper relationships between children and adults in charting the future of the political community.

This conceptualisation of the child as a ‘potential adversary’ allows us to capture these dimensions of the politics of children in a way that avoids making love and care on the one hand, or violence on the other hand, the basis of the child-adult political relation. Elevating love and care – central facets of the intimate, familial realm – to relations in the political realm would entail a focus on nurture and protection that tends to obscure the differences and political conflicts between generations that can arise from natality. At the same time, it is necessary to de-violence these conflicts and ensure that abuse and exploitation are never the hallmark of child-adult relations, because this would be directly harmful to individual children, but also collectively produce a form of political closure that is harmful to democracy. The adversarial characterisation of child-adult relations accounts for the reality, and accepts the continued possibility, that both loving and violent relationships between children and adults exist. However, we should view the child-adult *political* relation in adversarial terms because it captures how democratic societies govern childhood in ways that mitigate the risks of an unpredictable future and protect the established democratic order, while also producing a capacity for innovation and change required to renew democratic freedom and plurality in a new social context.

Moreover, conceptualising children as standing at the boundary of the political realm also permits the fluidity and movement that characterises frontiers of political exclusion to be better appreciated. Communities are not demarcated by immutable boundaries of inclusion/exclusion, but are transformable interfaces that are controlled, regulated and challenged in relations between those inside and those outside. In modern democratic politics, these frontiers of exclusion are themselves ongoing subjects of political contestation. The pre-political status of children exemplifies this indeterminacy of the political realm because, for those who live into adulthood, their exclusion is temporary. Reaching a certain age allows them to move across the frontier where they become new citizens with new individualities which must regenerate politics in an old world. That is, children are a part of society that currently has no part in politics, and yet appear as central figures of political representation because they might bring forth new forms of subjectivity and action that challenge and reshape old political frontiers.

## **Conclusion**

This article seeks to capture the ways in which the figure of the child plays a constitutive role in democratic politics. We put aside empirical assessments of children's political competencies and normative questions concerning the rights and entitlements of children in order to pursue a different set of theoretical objectives focussed on understanding how children constitute democratic politics through their appearance as temporary outsiders that are central to imagining and realising democratic futures. Specifically, our theoretical account of children in politics emphasizes: (1) the radical potential of children as new beginnings and their role as a social group in renewing democratic politics; and (2) their constitutive role as a formally excluded group of potential adversaries that present risks to the established political order.



From this perspective, we suggest that when adults invoke children in political debates they are attempting to represent them as a democratic constituency in order to advance a particular idealization of society and warrant a particular course of political action. As such, children are a constitutive part of representative politics even though they are formally excluded from electoral institutions. By establishing this argument, we intend to complicate and enrich our understanding of the place of children in democratic politics, as well as emphasize that balancing the imperatives of openness and closure is the unending task of modern democracy.

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