Post-print

EDITORIAL: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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Introduction

This issue presents a decennial follow-up to the *Space and Polity* 2003 special issue 'Political geographies of children and young people', edited by Chris Philo and Fiona M. Smith. The following papers were first presented in two sessions at the 2012 *Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers* in New York. In a sense also the session celebrated scholarship in this research area after the 2001 New York AAG meeting which included a panel 'Politicising Child Life'. Both the 2001 panel and the 2003 special issue have significantly inspired spatially oriented discussion on children, young people and politics. We can only hope that the AAG 2012 sessions and the present special issue succeed in bringing forward and widening the scope of this research field with an equal impact.

The 2003 special issue comprises of six original articles, including the editorial (for details see Skelton in this issue). The papers discuss children and young people's place and role in different kinds of formal, semi-formal and informal settings, covering a wide range of politico-geographically pertinent issues. Together they form a particular collection of research articles for many reasons. First, they introduce children and young people as *actors* and politics as that which is enacted *by* them, thus providing a rare exception to the then prevailing discussion. In the early 2000s almost any argumentation on children's political agency was typically met with disbelief that rendered the whole idea dubious – unless at issue were political formalities such as lowering the voting age. Second, in one way or another, all articles take up the question of what *is* political in children and young people's everyday environments, and how they participate in

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the political way of living as differently conditioned and positioned agents. The contributions thus revealed that the concepts of the political and the child do not have established or generalizable meanings.

These questions have grown into eminent themes in the subsequent research that has sought to pinpoint, on the one hand, the specificity of children and young people's political agencies, roles and action, and on the other hand, politics as an unquestionable element of all human life including childhood and youth. Besides producing new knowledge on children and young people's lived worlds, this reflection on the meanings of 'the political' in different contexts of childhood and youth provides an important gateway between the sub-disciplinary discussion and the more generic study of spatial politics. Needless to say, the 2003 collection has served as one of the corner-stones from which critically-minded research interested in children and young people's politics within diverse geographical settings has pushed forward.

In the past ten years, general interest toward children and young people's political worlds and agencies has grown notably in various fields of research, as well as in policy making and public administration. The major inspiration for this engagement, providing a clear connective between diverse disciplines and policy quarters, has been the 'child's right to participation' discourse, grounded in the United Nations' (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Since the world-wide ratification of what has become the most widely accepted human rights treaty to date, the significance of this right has continuously expanded so that it now 'establishes not only a right in itself, but should also be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights' (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) justifies this by stating that 'children, including the very youngest children, [are to] be respected as persons in their own right.' This means that, ideally, children and young

people's experiences, understandings and views inform all practice, decision-making and planning concerning childhood and youth in general, and individual children and young people's lives in particular, on all scales of policy making and in every corner of the world.

Children's right to be heard and take actively part in matters concerning them has thus been elevated into an all-encompassing principle that determines also how their rights to protection and provision – the two aspects traditionally considered as the core and basis of children's rights (e.g. UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1959) – are interpreted. This discursive turn has gained firm ground not only in the field of human rights but also in policy making, public administration and the pertinent fields of research, thus raising timely questions on children and young people's roles, agencies and positions in their politico-geographical realities. Subsequently, the debate on the predominant, ideal and 'good enough' conditions of childhood has flourished in the context of legal procedures (Ruddick, 2007; Archard and Skivenes, 2009), armed conflicts (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn, 1994; Brocklehurst, 2006), social work and child care (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006; Forsberg and Strandell, 2007), school (Bragg, 2007; Thomas, 2009; Lazar, 2010), community development and planning (Percy-Smith, 2006; Murtagh and Murphy, 2011), cultural politics and work (Stephens, 1995; Shepher-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Katz, 2004), civil activity and activism (Bosco, 2010; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012), and beyond. Also the 2003 special issue engages strongly with these themes.

Thus far, this expanded and enriched research has successfully shown that, just as is the case with adults, the politics involving children and young people are heterogeneous, complex and unpredictable. This diversity is evident in attempts to capture and analyze 'the political' in contexts where children and young people lead their lives, like school backyards, sweatshops, court houses, battlefields, nurseries, streets, youth forums and shopping malls. The study of such

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diverse places and forms of politics has given rise to three partly overlapping strands of scholarly discussion. First, children and young people's *active roles* in political events and matters have been acknowledged and empirically explored in various contexts, ranging from official 'Politics' to contested and even apoliticized 'politics'. Second, the *identity construction* and *subjectivity development* in childhood and youth has been studied as embedded in the political worlds of peer groups, families, formal institutions, local communities and the wider society. Third, the changing *geo-economic and socio-cultural conditions* that influence the communities where children and young people lead their lives have been intensely researched and debated.

While important conceptual inroads have been made in this research, it is notable that what is meant by such basic concepts as agency, action, participation, empowerment, involvement, engagement, struggle, subjectivity, identity, socialization, power relations, and the overall 'political' vocabulary, varies a great deal from study to study. This pertains also to the geographical discussion. Robert Vanderbeck (2008a), among others, has noticed that alongside with multifaceted research outcomes and new approaches, this heterogeneity has produced certain ambiguity where conceptual gaps lead to contradictions lead to misunderstandings lead to juxtapositions, thus hindering methodological and theoretical advancement. Any improvement in this regard enhances the visibility, appeal and impact of the research area within human geography, childhood and youth studies, political research, and beyond.

Ten years ago Chris Philo and Fiona M. Smith posited in their editorial that 'a central challenge for political geographies of children and young people is to work precisely between […] the micro-politics of personal experience and the macro-politics of the public sphere' (p.110). As an extension of this claim we present the challenge of bridging between the three dominant research streams where children and young people's active P/political roles, processes

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of subjectification, socialization and identity construction, and the geo-economic and socio-cultural diversity of childhood and youth are studied. Without renouncing the positive aspects of multiplicity that certainly is a valuable premise for critical discussion, we suggest that the study of children and young people's political geographies would benefit from enhanced conceptual and theoretical transparency and consistency. The present special issue is one step toward developing more transparent conceptual grounds for the study of children and young people's political worlds.

Current trends, future orientations

By and large, the political aspects of children's lives have been considered most frequently in the context of state institutions. The politics of childhood institutions – and especially the school – have intrigued such major critical theorists and political philosophers as Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Lefebvre. Concentrating on the macro-political and constitutive aspects of childhood and youth, they have displayed how children are made members of their communities and societies through institutional emplacements, and how these technologies and practices direct the overall societal change (see e.g. Philo, 2011). Also children's 'place' in the political sphere has caught certain attention in this theorization. Arendt (1959) has argued that children should be sheltered from political life so as to develop safely in the private sphere before entering the public (see also Nakata, 2008; Kallio, 2009), and Lefebvre (1991, p.362) portrays childhood as the origin of lived space where "the 'private' realm asserts itself, albeit more or less vigorously, and always in a conflictual way, against the public one." Also in these accounts childhood appears as a maturation process that precedes and grounds the political adult life.

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Leaning on these philosophical premises, the subsequent research has been interested in how children and youth are enmeshed with societal power relations in the politics of culture, educational politics, geo-economic developments, transnational conflicts, etc. (e.g. Ploszajska, 1994; Mitchell, 2006; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006; Popkewitz, 2008). Young individuals are typically seen as dominated by institutions that subject and direct them through distinct techniques (e.g. conduct of conduct) and practices of power (e.g. symbolic violence), whereas their competence to act self-sufficiently receives less attention. On these grounds, it is often claimed that supra-national organizations, states, non-governmental organizations and individual adults ought to attend to children and young people by considering them as particular but equal members of the society and, moreover, discern that some of them are less privileged than others. This is deemed important for the well-being of children and youth in the present, their development as future citizens, and the overall societal change.

Approaching children and young people's lived worlds from a different direction, the subfields of children's geographies and geographies of youth accentuate the recognition of children as active 'beings' rather than policy objects, institutional recruits or future 'becomings'. The research stresses children's competence as social and cultural beings who may act as full members of their communities and societies alongside with adults. In the politically oriented studies, also the potential of this action to promote social change is emphasized (e.g. Arneil, 2002; Such and Walker, 2005). Following feminist and post-colonial theories, and the socio-cultural childhood studies approaches, this research typically parallels children's social positions with those of women before the feminist revolution (Cohen, 2005, p.236; Skelton, 2007, p.178). It is argued that like other marginalized publics, also young individuals and groups can be empowered to participate in matters concerning them and thus gain firmer grounds as members

of their communities and societies – if they are given the opportunity. Accordingly, children's access to politics is connected with growing awareness in public matters, the emancipation of the subject, and more inclusive policy making.

In the past years, some scholars working on children and young people's spatially grounded politics have started to bring these rather differently oriented lines of research together (e.g. Kulynych, 2001; Katz, 2004; Gallacher, 2005; Brocklehurst, 2006; Abebe, 2007; Bragg, 2007; Kallio, 2007; Kjørholt, 2007; Ruddick, 2007; Gallagher, 2008; Habashi, 2008; Thomas, 2009; Benwell, 2009; Bosco, 2010; Kallio and Häkli, 2010; Skelton, 2010; Strandell, 2010; Bartos, 2012; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012; Wood 2012). Based on relational readings of the political, these studies acknowledge children simultaneously as policy objects or political 'becomings' whose matters are largely managed by their adult societies, and as political subjects or 'beings' who actively participate in their communities and societies alongside with other people, in various ways. In this scholarship the explicitly politicized events and matters – such as war, (post)-conflict societies, geo-economic instability, child work – have gained plenty of attention due to their known political significance (e.g. Katz, 2004; Brocklehurst, 2006; Abebe, 2007; Habashi, 2008; Benwell, 2009). However, there is also a growing awareness that while 'politics isn't everything […] everything can be (made) political' (Dean 2000:.5–8), so that even in childhood the places of the political are unforeseeable and cannot be known or defined out of context (Kallio and Häkli 2011). This aspect has been highlighted in studies where some less politicized everyday environments like the school, streets, local services, and home are noticed and analyzed as arenas of children's politics (e.g. Thomas, 2009; Bosco, 2010; Bartos, 2012; Mitchell and Elwood, 2012).

Picking up the challenge proposed by Philo and Smith (2003, p.110), this work has started to shed light on children and young people's engagements with the multi-scalar political worlds where their everyday lives are embedded, thus informing the study of politics with children and young people's view points, the study of childhood and youth with political perspectives, and geographical research with the intertwinement of the two. Even if multifaceted and patchy, this scholarship has already shown that whichever way politics is understood, children and young people are enmeshed in their political worlds as situated agents involved in what unfolds presently, as well as active partisans in their own political formation.

Some general starting points for future research follow from this. First, human life is always socially conditioned, culturally based and embedded in multi-scalar power relations: there are no 'normal' conditions to childhood and youth. Every childhood must therefore be understood as situated. Second, the processes of subject formation and identity construction can not be considered politically 'neutral' since each way of being and becoming in the world is inter-subjectively constituted and oriented in one or another way (Häkli & Kallio, forthcoming). Third, normative arguments concerning these processes are also always political, be they presented by researchers, professionals, policy-makers, or the children and youth themselves. Together these starting points point to the fact that all practices that seek to promote children and young people's participation, and the participatory action in itself, are fundamentally linked with situated processes of socialization and subject formation. Spatial situatedness, the processes of subject formation and identity construction, and different forms of participation and political action are thus inseparable aspects in the complex political geographies engaging and involving children and young people.

Tackling this complexity is challenging in itself, and all the more so when coupled with difficulties that arise from the lack of conceptual transparency that has been evident in much of the work in the field. With the notion of transparency we refer simply to explicitness regarding how theoretical key concepts are understood in the context of a particular study. This is important because it guarantees the possibility for readers to connect with the theoretical propositions and analytical interpretations across diverse (sub)disciplinary and theoretical traditions. Without transparency the research field risks becoming both internally enclaved and disciplinarily exclaved, with much reduced impact in wider debates (see Vanderbeck 2008a).

To this end, we suggest three key concepts for enhancing communication across studies with different orientations, theoretical backgrounds and empirical foci, namely *agent*, *action* and *politics*. While we think that heightened transparency on these concepts is urgently needed, we do not think they exhaust the communication gaps in the spatially oriented study of children and young people's politics. We therefore anticipate other approaches from the subsequent research to accompany our suggestions. In the following sections we discuss these terms with the aim of providing some tentative tools for conceptual explication, and then bring the three concepts together under the label of 'contextual youthful political agency'.

What is the youthful agent?

Since the outburst of the so called 'new social studies of childhood' in the late 1980's, it has been commonplace in social scientific papers on children or childhood to employ the phrase 'children and childhood are contested concepts'. Geographers and other scholars sensitive to cultural contextuality have insisted that childhood is a spatially diverse phenomenon that is conceived, perceived and practiced in a variety of ways, and hence cannot be compressed into a single

definition (Alanen, 1988, p.16; Kesby *et al.*, 2006; Vanderbeck, 2008b; Strandell, 2010). What follows from this is that children and young people appear as unique individuals who are situated and positioned in particular ways in their societies and communities. Thus approached, a singular definition for the youthful agent seems unfeasible. Yet, for the study of childhood and youth to make any sense at all there has to be some common vocabulary with which to refer to this particular group of human beings. Consequently, a two-fold strategy has become popular: The notion 'children and young people' is used when referring to young individuals and groups *in general* and the empirical case is used to specify which young individuals and groups *in particular* the research concerns and discusses (e.g. Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Ansell, 2008).

Not all studies, however, can employ such case-specific characterizations. When more generally applicable criteria are sought, legislative definitions are often taken as a starting point for distinguishing between children and other people, and childhood, youth and other phases of life. Most importantly, the United Nations' (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* that defines the child in general as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' is often employed to limit childhood to the first eighteen years of life (e.g. Wyness, 2006; Evans and Spicer, 2008). This definition is, however, not followed through consistently even in the treaty itself. The beginning and the end of childhood were endlessly debated in the drafting of the Convention and, as consensus was never reached, the treaty leaves room for differing interpretations (Legislative History I, 2007). A number of signatory states have also made reservations in their ratification as comes to the definition of the child (see the UN Treaty Collection).

This ambiguity takes us back to the fact that childhood *is* a geographically diverse phenomenon: In the real world, universal childhood or youth do not exist. Young individuals lead

very different kinds of lives depending on their socio-cultural context, geo-economic position, the politico-legal system of their society, and other determinants that render them particular. So, given the situatedness of all childhoods, what common attributes might characterize the youthful agent?

There are two generally established premises for the definition of the child. Despite the context, 'children' and 'young people' refer to young individuals, and 'childhood' and 'youth' to early stages of life. Hence, regardless of when childhood begins and ends, all children and young people are socially *age-wise*[1] positioned. Another significant constituent is *minority*. It is commonly agreed on that children are not fully responsible for themselves or others and cannot be provided with analogous rights to adults. As the UN Convention posits, in good childhood children are provided for, taken care of, protected from harm and empowered to participate by their adult authorities. Any deviations from this minority position are duly recognized in research, so that the children who fall into liable positions are discussed as *child* soldiers, *child* workers, *child* brides and street *children*, and not as early-matured young adults (Utas, 2011; Kallio, 2012).

Together with the appreciation of spatial situatedness, these two aspects propose a definition of youthful agent as a young individual who occupies a more or less minor position in her/his specific geo-economic and socio-cultural community and society. Thus conceptualized, the group includes persons of all ages up to late youth but excludes the legally come-of-age or youth whose lives otherwise are autonomous in a manner akin to adulthood. Hence, it insists on the centrality

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[1] The most notable exception is the generational approach where all people can be seen as the children of their forebears.

of age in defining youthful agents, but accepts that legal definitions of maturity may overlook essential aspects of what it means to be a minor agent in particular social and cultural contexts.

This relational definition of the youthful agent suggests that there are some matters common to children and young people but even these may be subject to negotiation, depending on the research context. Therefore, to secure conceptual transparency it is important that for example the grounds for including persons aged 25 in the group of youthful agents are made explicit. In practice this may be accomplished by discussing the sense in which persons of such age are considered to be in a position that renders them minors in their communities, socially or culturally (see Azmi et al. and Staeheli et al. in this issue). This kind of rigor is crucial if we wish to develop shared grounds for discussing the particularity of *youthful* political agency. But what kind of political action do these youthful agents practice? In which politics are they partisans in their everyday lives?

Ambivalent political agency

Political agency is a much wielded notion in the social sciences. Depending on how its constituents 'the political' and 'agency' are understood, it denotes a variety of meanings. Two basic approaches inform current political geography research. The traditional way to distinguish between social and political life sets from the public/private divide where the social, private life constitutes around the home and the family, and the political, public life situates at the community and the state. Based on a conventional reading of Arendt (1958, p.24), this view parallels political agency with rational intentional action concerning collective matters known to have political relevance, practiced by actors who are capable of understanding and acting on the issues at stake through official or semi-official channels (e.g. Glassman, 1999; Johnston *et al.*,

2005; Gizelis and Wooden, 2010). These politics are customarily exercised in particular places that are reserved for political action and debate. When politics stands for policy making and high politics, this definition continues to serve well.

The other line of research starts off from the politicization of the private, the personal and the mundane, thus disputing much of the relevance of the above distinction. In this view, politics is often portrayed as constitutive and contested, and agency is defined in proportion to the effects and dynamics that spark off, advance, alter, or oppose certain politicized or politicizing processes (e.g. Dean, 2000; Staeheli and Kofman, 2004; Cahill, 2007; Leitner and Sheppard, 2009; Kuus, 2010). In this sense politics can be practiced by anyone, or even any*thing*, which allows for the politicization of new issues and the recognition of a variety of agencies (Gomart and Hajer, 2002; Smith, 2003; Brown *et al.*, 2007; Hobson, 2007). Spatially it means that the political has the potential to actualize practically anywhere, and that the power relations generating and upholding political struggles may work through various types of channels and connections.

Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. The former delimits politics to particular matters, places, actors and modes of action, making it rather easy to distinguish what is and is not political agency in a given case. The downside is that 'the political' becomes fixed and 'agency' equals particular kinds of actors exercising certain kinds of action. As comes to youthful agents, this approach does not leave much space for recognizing or acknowledging their political agencies as grounded in their everyday lives (see Bartos, Cele and Marshall in this issue). The latter approach, again, sets out to find politics in people's experienced and practiced worlds. This enables the recognition of political agency that unfolds in the practice of everyday life and the politicization of new matters, actions, actors and places. Here the drawback is that political agency is easily rendered over-relational which makes it very hard to define what should and

what should not be considered politics. This vagueness carries the risk of depoliticization as the significance of 'the political' diminishes when everything becomes more or less political.

So the question that arises is, how can human agency be understood as political beyond the traditional public/private divide, without falling prey to the trap of 'political everything'? Bent Flyvbjerg's (2001, p.79) methodological idea of critical case provides a starting point for tackling this dilemma. Critical case refers to a strategy in case selection that employs the following logical deduction: If the studied phenomenon can be found in the least likely case, then it can be found in all cases. To us it seems obvious that youthful agents, who are still often identified as the least likely political agents, provide a prime candidate for such an assessment. However, as a critical case the politics of youthful agents may still lead to political everything: If certain agency can be understood as political in the case of youthful agents, then it can be seen as political in any case.

Hence, in the interest of increasing transparency, this framing compels us to ask which aspects in youthful agency can be identified as political, and why. Are children and young people political when they participate with adult assistance in governmental decision making? Should we appreciate their antagonistic everyday acts as political if they succeed to undermine the prevalent order? Does competence play an important part in youthful political agency? Or is the context of action the determining factor? Are the effects of children and young people's doings, or the scalar dimensions of these effects, pertinent to their political relevance? The current research studying children and young people's politics from a variety of perspectives gives rise to these and a myriad of other questions that clearly show the need for more explicitness regarding the relational readings of political agency. In the next section we propose some tools for such explication.

Contextual youthful political agency as a conceptual interface

Having provided conceptual tools for the explication of some key components pertinent to the spatially oriented study of children and young people's politics, we propose contextual youthful political agency as a potential interface between the three major strands of research identified above. Figure 1 presents a tentative outline for a scheme where children and young people's active political roles, their processes of subjectivity and identity development, and the spatial situatedness of childhood and youth are brought together.
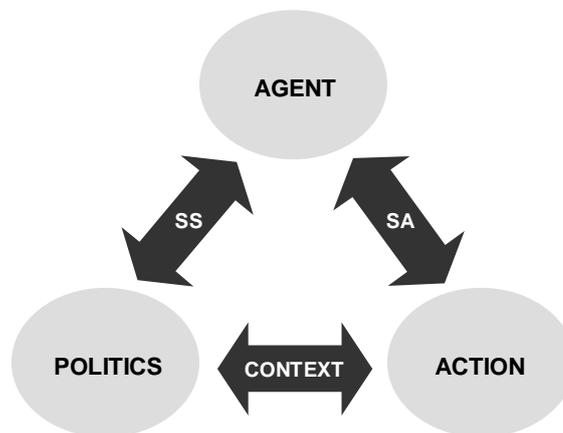

Figure 1: Contextual youthful political agency

In this conceptual scheme the 'agent' refers to children and young people as youthful subjects who occupy minor positions in their political communities, social environments and institutions. In their political worlds they are constantly in the state of becoming as *subjected subjects* (SS), but simultaneously they are *subjects of action* (SA) who dwell and participate in the activities of their lived environments. The left-side arrow thus indicates that political formation is strongly

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influenced by spatial situatedness, yet noticing that in these processes also children and young people come to shape their political worlds. This entails that while becoming certain kinds of political agents, youthful subjects simultaneously mold their lived worlds in the present and in the future, with reference to the past (see Mitchell and Elwood in this issue). For instance Annie Bartos' (2012, see also this issue) study on the politics of care shows how children's non-reflexive engagements with their social and natural environments work to maintain, continue and repair the political worlds that condition their lives. The right-side arrow, again, emphasizes 'being' that refers to youthful agency in action. To relate subject formation with immediate political presence and involvement, youthful political agents are to be identified also with reference to their present acts and practices. As the socio-cultural childhood studies tradition has emphasized for more than twenty years – and like all papers in this collection further reveal – children are active members of their communities and societies here and now (see e.g. James & Prout 1990; Kjørholt, 2007; Strandell, 2010).

Children and young people take many kinds of active political roles ranging from mere 'effecs' (Harker, 2005) to 'active engagement' (Matthews *et al.*, 1999), 'visual representations' (Elwood and Mitchell, 2012), 'informal participation' (Skelton and Valentine, 2003) and 'participation initiatives' (Percy-Smith, 2010). These acts may be performed individually and collectively, within peer groups and amongst siblings, through mundane child–adult relations, in more and less formal institutional settings – that is, where ever there are youthful agents. Youthful political action may thus take all kinds of forms and mobilize gradually anywhere. Yet not all children and young people act politically in all kinds of ways, and there is notable variation to their politics vis-à-vis the situation. This fact compels us to pay attention to how their acts are conditioned. Following the idea of relational political thought, limits to youthful political

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agency are context-specific and socially constituted. The limitations and potentials to their agency are transmitted through the implicit processes of *subjectification* as well as their *contexts* of action, as indicated in Figure 1. The former refers to conditioning that the youthful agents do themselves, 'conduct of conduct' in Foucault's (1991, p.102–103) terms, and the latter to the more perceptible forms of discipline that condition youthful agency 'from outside' (see Staeheli et al. in this issue).

Youthful agents' potential to action therefore varies a great deal from place to place (in micro- and macro-scales) and is always contextual. Depending on where and how children and young people are situated, they face different opportunities and hindrances to their political action. Yet another aspect that we should bare in mind when looking into youthful political action is its direct and indirect influence. Depending on the scale and the context of action, the effects of their acts vary from outcomes of mundane social interaction to concrete changes in their physical environments to impacts on official decision-making (see Azmi et al. in this issue). Moreover, this action is simultaneously constitutive of their political subjectivity and positioning in the political world. By participating and taking action youthful agents gain self-respect and trust, become more aware and knowledgeable, learn new skills and practices that help to express themselves and influence matters important to them, and so on. All these empowering effects of participation have been studied extensively in the past ten years, noticing benefits to both formal and informal action (e.g. Matthews and Limb, 2003; Percy-Smith, 2006; Bosco, 2010).

The third corner-stone in Figure 1, 'politics', stands for the spatial and political dimensions of youthful agency. As discussed in the previous section, the chosen theoretical starting points greatly impinge on what is considered as political agency in each case. The range of potential interpretations in the prevailing research is vast. To give an example of two extremes, the

Arendtian classical notion emphasizes that politics takes place on the public sphere in the form of free speech, whereas the Rancièrian reading of politics renders all action that has to do with social order as *anti*-political, reserving the concept of politics to the ruptures in this order (e.g. Lee, 2009; Dikeç, 2012; see also Marshall in this issue). These readings by no means exhaust what is meant by the political in current research but they serve to underline that the concept of youthful political agency may lie on variable grounds. Therefore, explicating the theoretical approach that informs the employed conception of politics would not only serve better communication and transparency across different studies, but also help comparing the findings from diverse research contexts.

The emphasis given to particular spatial aspects of youthful political agency is similarly a matter of choice. When contextualizing the case under study, the researcher leans on one or another understanding of the constitution of the social relationships through which the given politics takes place and, hence, in relation to which issues it should be deciphered. Human geographers are well aware that such choices are never merely technical but carry strong theoretical underpinnings, as exemplified by the current debate on relational spatial theories (e.g. site ontology, non-representational theory, actor-network theory), challenging topographical ways of conceiving the world (e.g. Thrift, 2004; Featherstone, 2008; Häkli, 2008; Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Allen, 2011; Barnett, 2011). Depending on whether youthful political agency is understood as unfolding in and through scaled spatial contexts or some more topological configuration, rather different things appear relevant and pertinent. Like the understanding of the political, the spatial approaches thus deserve to be discussed in studies seeking to contribute theoretically to the study of children and young people's political geographies.

To conclude, we hope to have shown how a more explicit understanding of contextual youthful political agency could help bring together the current interlinked research streams and provide tools for developing more transparent conceptual and theoretical grounds for the study of children and young people's political geographies. As we now turn to introducing the papers of this special issue, we make use of these conceptual tools to build bridges between them and the agenda presented in this editorial.

Bridging children's political worlds

All papers in this special issue discuss contextual youthful political agency, yet stressing different aspects and emphasizing specific questions as they arise in particular empirical contexts. Differently aged and situated children and young people are appreciated as agents with past, present and future, their political lives are interpreted as spatially grounded, and their development and action is politicized on various theoretical grounds.

The collection begins with Ann Bartos' paper that explicitly takes up the dilemma of political being and becoming, that is, children's political agency here and now and their development as future adults. This theme, largely absent in the prevailing interdisciplinary literature, is considered in the context of environmental ethics and identity where the dynamic between socialization and subject formation unfolds through relationships with friends and nature. By exploring spatially grounded friendships, including kinship, and children's engagements with their human and non-human friends in places accessible, enjoyable and interesting to them, Bartos makes visible how the formation of a sense of place and particular kinds of environmental agencies is intertwined. Her key argument is that environmental ethics is practiced and developed in childhood mainly through social relations, with friends, siblings, the family and pets, in the

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mundane everyday environments. Moreover, she argues that such formative place-attachments are not easily recalled as key to environmental politicization later in life.

The second article by Katharyne Mitchell and Sarah Elwood engages with youthful political development and the concurrent reproduction and reconstruction of the world as political. Their major aim is to display how knowledge and memories are collectively and intergenerationally transmitted, with important ramifications to the processes of identity formation and political socialization in childhood and youth. In stressing the importance of temporality, the authors' are critical of studies that emphasize the present at the expense of the past and the future. Without undermining the importance of children's contemporary agency the authors suggest that children do not act or exist merely as individuals in the present but are situated in their collective and intergenerational relations, which are specific both spatially and temporally. The paper's major contribution to current discussions is a novel perspective on temporality that stresses the importance of the geo-economic context to the development of youthful political agency.

In the third article David Marshall sets out to explore how children's everyday agency may challenge the discourse of trauma in the Palestinian context. Children's political agency is interpreted on the basis of Rancièrian aesthetics, as a force that may disrupt the prevailing conditions and thus participate in the reproduction of everyday life on alternative grounds. Adopting the concept of beauty, Marshall argues for a rupture between the physical space of sensing and the discursive space that orders everyday life practices – a rupture through which traumatized bodies may draw out of pain in seek of more hopeful futures. The paper combines 'immanent' and critical political geographical approaches, connecting children's mundane small-scale feelings, articulations and acts with the prevailing Palestinian discursive climate that directs their political formation. By viewing everyday interpretations and acts of beauty as agential, he

presents a counter-force for the socialization that victimizes and traumatizes people living in conflict societies (cf. Utas, 2011). By opening up multiple spatial and temporal dimensions of agency, the paper beautifully illustrates how subjectivity, politics and action come together.

The fourth article by Sofia Cele introduces youthful political agency as practiced, conceived and developed through mundane performances in Nordic urban space. With this paper we move from childhood and early youth toward teenagers' lived worlds where the entwinement of generally politicized matters and personally experienced politics sets forth. Drawing from an ethnographic project where she has studied teenage girls' everyday encounters in an urban park, Cele shows how politics is constantly present to them in their ways of relating to their urban environment, regardless of whether they are alone in the park when it is quiet or in the company of their friends during the busy hours. This analysis seeks to expand the notion of youthful politics to include matters politicized by adults, children and youth alike.

In their paper Lynn Staeheli, Kafui Attoh and Don Mitchell seek to place 'active' and 'activist' citizenship within the same field, proposing that the institutionally and state-supported forms of good citizenship and the antagonist forms of citizenship created in everyday life are not separate entities. They argue that different forms of citizenship fuse in the lives of youthful political agents capable of transforming information, skills and understandings fluidly. The analytical scheme proposed by the authors acknowledges the youthful agent as central to understanding citizenship as influenced by the institutional socializing forces that seek to further active citizenship, as well as by the mundane socializing forces that call for activist citizenship. In their engaging action young people fill these subject positions in ways sensible to them, within the limits that constrain their action. Yet, importantly, these subjects are not appreciated as neoliberal autonomous and impacting individuals. Rather, the aspects of unexpectedness and

unforeseeability are stressed, noting that all action gets its meanings in the intermingling of differently based interpretations. What politics results from given actions is hence presented as unforeseeable to anyone – to the socializing forces, the activist groups with particular intentions, as well as the actors themselves.

The last original article in this collection is by Fazeeha Azmi, Cathrine Brun and Ragnhild Lund. Their paper sets out to provide a nuanced understanding of young people's political situatedness and agency in Sri Lanka, focusing on Tamil and Muslim population groups that have been structurally marginalized in the post-conflict society where everyday life is highly politicized. Their analysis seeks to discover politics where 'making a difference' is central, and political agency consists of 'being interested' and 'being active'. The contexts and issues of politics are, nevertheless, left open for the youth in question to define. By identifying what kinds of positions they may take and what forms of action they feel comfortable with in their everyday realities, Azmi *et al.* explore the linkage between electoral politics, state policies and everyday life politics. They place their empirical findings on an analytical field of voice–voicelessness and political presence–involvement, arguing that the politically marginalized young people in Sri Lanka make use of and create 'safe space' for themselves in different ways, even if their political engagement is largely restricted.

The six original papers presented above are followed by Tracey Skelton's review article that discusses the development of the spatially oriented study of children and young people's politics since the publication of the 2003 special issue in this journal. This literary review is followed by an afterword by Fiona Smith and Chris Philo, the editors of the preceding thematic special issue. We hope that the readers of *Space and Polity* will enjoy these contributions as much as we have

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as editors, and that this collection will inspire much further theoretical and empirical work on the politics of children and youth.

Acknowledgements

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