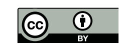

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Childism and the Politics of Social Empowerment

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Abstract: The argument made here is that childism advances a new critical theory for understanding what is involved in social empowerment. Like feminism, decolonialism, and other critical perspectives, its aim is to reimagine human relations not just for one particular group but for all as members of shared social systems. Childism is first examined as a response to the normative problem of historical adultism or patriarchy, the empowerment of adulthood by disempowering childhood. Then it is formulated as a critical theory of its own based on new conceptions of the political subject, public expression, and political empowerment (or, respectively, the ontological, epistemological, and political dimensions of social life). These are illustrated in relation to questions of voting rights, climate activism, free speech, and work. The result is a theory of social empowerment that calls for the active inclusion of all persons in systems of power specifically in their deeply interdependent lived experiences of difference.
Keywords: adultism; childism; difference; empowerment; epistemology; interdependence; politics; power; subjectivity; theory

[ES] El infancismo y la política del empoderamiento social

Resumen: El argumento que se plantea aquí es que el infancismo propone una nueva teoría crítica para comprender lo que implica el empoderamiento social. Al igual que el feminismo, el descolonialismo y otras perspectivas críticas, su objetivo es reimaginar las relaciones humanas no solo para un grupo en particular sino para todos como miembros de sistemas sociales compartidos. El infancismo se examina primero como una respuesta al problema normativo del adultismo histórico o patriarcado, el empoderamiento de la adultez mediante el desempoderamiento de la niñez. Luego se formula como una teoría crítica propia basada en nuevas concepciones del sujeto político, la expresión pública y el empoderamiento político (o, respectivamente, las dimensiones ontológicas, epistemológicas y políticas de la vida social). Estas se ilustran en relación con cuestiones de derecho al voto, activismo climático, libertad de expresión y trabajo. El resultado es una teoría del empoderamiento social que exige la inclusión activa de todas las personas en los sistemas de poder, específicamente en sus experiencias vividas de diferencia profundamente interdependientes.
Palabras clave: adultismo; infancismo; diferencia; empoderamiento; epistemología; interdependencia; política; poder; subjetividad; teoría

[PT] O infancismo e a política de autonomização social

Resumo: O argumento aqui apresentado é que o infancismo apresenta uma nova teoria crítica para a compreensão do que está envolvido no empoderamento social. Tal como o feminismo, o descolonialismo e outras perspectivas críticas, o seu objectivo é reimaginar as relações humanas não apenas para um grupo específico, mas para todos como membros de sistemas sociais partilhados. O infancismo é examinado pela primeira vez como uma resposta ao problema normativo do adultismo histórico ou patriarcado, o empoderamento da idade adulta ao enfraquecer a infância. Depois é formulada como uma teoria crítica própria baseada em novas conceções do sujeito político, da expressão pública e do empoderamento político (ou, respetivamente, das dimensões ontológicas, epistemológicas e políticas da vida social). Estes são ilustrados em relação a questões de direito de voto, activismo climático, liberdade de expressão e de trabalho. O resultado é uma teoria de capacitação social que apela à inclusão activa de todas as pessoas em sistemas de poder, especificamente nas suas experiências vividas de diferença profundamente interdependentes.

Palavras-chave: adultismo; infancismo; diferença; empoderamento; epistemologia; interdependência; política; poder; subjetividade; teoriaTítulo em Português

Summary: 1. Adultism as Normative Disempowerment; 2. The Political Subject; 3. Public Expression; 4. Political Empowerment; 5. Conclusion; 6. Bibliographical references

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It is commonplace to think about societies as riven by multiple forms of marginalization. The poor can be understood as not just economically unfortunate but oppressed by historical systems of class. Women can be seen as facing distinct social hurdles arising from normat. ive constructions of gender. Ethnic minorities frequently have to overcome profoundly engrained societal assumptions about race. These and other structures of marginalization are not just accidental but systemic, built into social relations' histories, presuppositions, and arrangements of power.

Rarely, however, either in society or in the academy, is social marginalization taken up as an issue for the roughly third of humanity who are children. Young people may be thought about as confronting numerous intersectional problems: of class, gender, and race, and of sexuality, disability, coloniality, and more. But far less carefully considered is the question of children's marginalization specifically as children. There are many ways that one could point to children's second-class status, such as their universal lack of voting rights, frequent denial of public freedoms of expression and assembly, disproportionate poverty, lack of protection in the home, and general construction as incompetent pre-adults rather than persons in their own right. Yet far too little public or scholarly attention is paid to children's systemic disempowerment on account of their age.

My argument in this essay is that children's marginalization as children calls for a new critical theory of childism. Childism, as I and others have developed the term, is a social and scholarly lens akin to feminism, decolonialism, critical race theory, and the like. That is, it seeks to deconstruct historically engrained social biases and to reconstruct more radically inclusive social norms and structures. In the case of children, this means challenging adultistic or patriarchal assumptions that render young people lesser or invisible, as well as transforming ideas and practices in such a way as to empower children as children. Of course, such an endeavor fails if it is not intersectional. Children's lives are just as diverse as are adults, both globally and within particular societies and cultures. Nevertheless, I argue, it is equally the case that overcoming children's oppression by gender, race, and other factors cannot succeed fully without addressing children's oppression by age. Indeed, as I show, domination over children lies at the root in many ways of dominance by gender, race, coloniality, and class, insofar as the latter constructs disempowered groups as supposedly childlike.

The following develops this argument in two main ways. First, it examines what it might mean to deconstruct adultism, that is, a systemic binary opposition of children and adults that establishes the centrality and dominance of the latter. And second, it explores several ways in which to then reconstruct critical theory child-inclusively. This part borrows much from other critical theoretical perspectives, but it also insists on placing the lived experiences specifically of children at the center so as to think in new ways. Specifically, it develops what I call an ontology of deep interdependence, an epistemology of lived experience, and a politics of empowered inclusion. These are illustrated with practical examples. But overall they amount to a fresh perspective on societal and academic understanding around the need for not only children's but any dispossessed group's social empowerment.

1. Adultism as Normative Disempowerment

While researchers and activists have developed powerful ideas for confronting sexism, racism, colonialism, and the like, it is relatively less obvious what it might mean to confront adultism, or the marginalization specifically of children. From a certain perspective, adultism is another face of patriarchy, or the rule of the father or *pater*. From another perspective, it is an underlying power structure that more broadly subordinates children's experiences to those of anyone considered adult. What it means to be a "child" or "adult" is of course socially constructed. Both their meanings and their being marked by particular ages (or not) have varied significantly over history and around the world. Nevertheless, it is fairly constant structure of human societies that some kind of binary opposition is established between adults and children that enshrines some kind of adult predominance.

The notion of "adultism" has in fact been in use for over a century, but in a variety of less and more systemic ways. Up until quite recently, the term referred only to occasional and non-systemic instances of adult domination. For example, its earliest known usage is in 1903 when the renowned US education writer Patterson Dubois used the word to refer to the "lust for authority" that teachers sometimes demonstrate in the classroom by their "undue interposition by the adult of ... his adult point of view" (Dubois, 1903, p. 8). Another example is when the French psychiatrist Paul Courbon writes in the 1930s that children can exhibit a kind of "adultism" when they are sexually or criminally precocious (1933). Later examples include the developmental psychologist Jack Flasher adopting the term to refer to the "misuse of power" over children that can be exercised by caregivers (1978); the feminist scholar Elise Boulding using the term "ageism" to refer to "segregation" against children's (and the elderly's) rights such as to family nurturance and political expression (1979);

as well as the educationalist John Holt using “adultism” to refer to any “adult intervention” that suppresses children’s full self-expression (1981, p. 222). And in the same vein, Brian Trainor states that “adultism is simply the willingness exhibited by certain adults to negate the interests of their children in their own, or what they perceive to be their own, interests” (1994, p. 40). What characterizes all these uses of the term, however different in other ways, is that adultism refers to specific occasions of adult domination rather than underlying normative structures.

One finds a partial shift in thinking in the late 1990s and early 2000s which starts to touch on the notion of adultism as structurally normative, that is, expressing engrained historical assumptions. The scholar-activist John Bell, for example, argues that there is a pervasive social attitude of adultistic “disrespect of the young” (1995, p. 1). Adults are able to subject children to physical punishment, ban them from public spaces, and deny them real voices in schools, not just because particular adults wish to do so, but because of an unquestioned cultural acceptance of adult superiority. Similarly, the social work researcher Barry Checkoway explains that “adultism refers to all the behaviors and attitudes that flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people, and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement” (1996, p. 14). Adultism invests adulthood with privileged status. This point can also be described a form of discrimination. Psychologists Jocelyn Gregoire and Christin Jungers argue that adultism fuels a “systematic discrimination against young people” in families and schools (2007, p. 65). And the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (albeit confusing using the word “childism” instead of “adultism”) points out the ways that contemporary societies exhibit anti-child “discrimination” in the form of “prejudice against children” that expresses itself in societies’ tolerance for child abuse and neglect (2011).

However, even this normative conceptualization of adultism leaves unexamined one of the most important pillars of social marginalization: namely, the question of power. It is one thing to see how historical assumptions about children foster social discrimination and abuse, another to deconstruct the power dynamics that establish children’s diminished social standing in the first place. This possibility was first entertained by the feminist theorist Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, who argues that adultism is akin to sexism and racism in representing a systemic power relation. It empowers adults by rendering children “not-yet-citizens” who, because of their supposedly inherent “difference” from adults, must be kept “invisible” in political life (2005). Sociologists Lucien Lombardo and Karen A. Polonko make a similar point: that “similar to sexism, racism and classism, adultism refers to a system of structured inequality or oppression that permeates relationships between children and adults” (2010, p. 94). Or, as I describe it in my own work, adultism is “an expression of ancient patriarchal biases that exclude not only by gender but also by age … [and hence] take significant cultural and political struggle to overcome” (Wall 2016, p. 39). The lesson here is that adultism is not only a system of historical prejudices but one that justifies adult power over children as part of the natural order of human relations. It empowers adulthood by disempowering and marginalizing childhood and anything childlike.

The idea of adultism as a system of normative disempowerment is perhaps most easily illustrated in the fact that no democratic country extends to children the right to vote. Rather, “universal suffrage” is defined worldwide as the right to vote of only adults (typically at age 18 but sometimes older). In the few countries that extend suffrage to 16-year-olds, the justification is also an adultistic one that at this age one has the same voting capacities as adults. Even though the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) both explicitly require “universal and equal suffrage” without exception, neither the international nor national policymakers have ever considered that this right should then include children. There have been academics and child and adult campaigners for many years fighting for ageless suffrage: some arguing that children are just as competent as adults to vote (KRÄTZÄ 1997; Olsson, 2008; López-Guerra, 2014; Munn, 2022), others that children’s suffrage would greatly benefit not only children themselves but also adults, societies, and democracies (Modi, 2018; Cummings, 2020; Wall, 2022). Nevertheless, even the question of children’s suffrage remains largely unthinkable in both societies and academia. Here one finds a profound kind of adultism that, much like in previous suffrage movements for other groups, enshrines the power of one group over another by condemning talk of the disempowered group to society’s invisible margins.

It is important to understand adultism properly as a form, not just of occasional adult dominance over children or even widespread adult prejudice, but instead, more profoundly, of normative disempowerment. Just like, for example, racism, adultism certainly permits abuse and warrants bias; but it also underwrites the continued historical power of one group over another. It is a complex phenomenon that mobilizes unquestioned societal assumptions to normalize unequal power dynamics. As such, adultism is basic to the worldviews of not only by adults but also children themselves, who as members of contemporary societies are also likely, for example, to find children’s voting rights absurd. Adultism is not an isolated experience but a system of social disempowerment that for millennia has helped to construct the foundations of social and political life around children’s disempowerment.

2. The Political Subject

If the problems faced by children are ultimately normative, that is, based on a deep-seated historical adultism, then a childist response must tackle the issue on an equally basic level. It will not suffice only to include children’s agency, voices, and participation in systems of power that are adultistic to begin with. Third-wave feminism taught that women’s equality is not just about having the same rights as men, but also, underlying this, changing the whole system of the patriarchal power of men over women. Likewise, childism needs to pursue, not just children’s equal agency to adults, important though this is, but also the transformation of

underlying social systems to make them equally responsive to children. In terms of politics, this shift in perspective involves at least three elements that I will address in turn: an ontology of the political subject, an epistemology of public expression, and a resulting politics of interdependent empowerment.

The first of these, an ontology of the political subject, concerns widespread normative assumptions about the adult as the primary political *ontos* or being. That is, how does a society conceive of political subjectivity? It is obvious that children are political beings in some sense, given that they both participate in and are impacted by the making of societal relations, policies, and laws. Children are "subjects" of politics in both classical meanings: subjectivities who act in shaping political life and subjects of the decisions that political life makes. But the question for childism is why, nevertheless, political being or subjectivity is normatively constructed in a way that marginalizes childhood and renders adulthood more authoritative and central? What is the justification for this implicit binary opposition of adult and child subjects? And how could a new understanding of political subjectivity empower adults and children equally?

Perhaps the central problem here is the long-held association of political being or subjectivity with independence. This notion arises in part from modernity's conception of nations' emergence from various types of "independence" movements from pre-modern monarchies, linking politics and independence intimately. This association has often been transferred from the historical realm to that of the political subject, so that a modern political subject is thought to be one with their own individual independence. From John Locke to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, the political subject has long been associated in European modernity with the autonomous individual, that is, with beings who can apply their own independent capacities for reason to informed and responsible political choices. As I have shown elsewhere (Wall, 2010), for these and other architects of Enlightenment politics, the political subject is therefore not only assumed but explicitly proclaimed to be the responsible (male, white, European) adult.

While there have been many feminist, decolonial, queer, and other critiques of this modernistic view of the political subject, arguably the most profound critique needed is that of childism. For modern political life marginalizes children almost without question, not only in voting rights but across the public sphere. Children are today typically the private property of others (their parents or guardians), social objects of adult protection, and political objects of adult beneficence. Such a constricted political reality would be unthinkable, or an obviously grave harm, for any other group. What is more, childhood functions as a social metaphor for an undesirable political status. For example, it helps to structure the colonialistic mentality of European control in the notion of "the infantilization of all Indigenous people as children of the colonial state who can never grow up" (Nakata and Bray, 2019, p. 30). To code a group as childlike is to code it as deficient in political independence. And so it is also to code a group, whether children or the childlike, as merely dependent objects of political protection and beneficence.

Childhood studies scholars have made some headway in combatting this set of normative assumptions. Jeremy Roche some time ago argued that "the languages of participation and empowerment are cosy but we need to be more critical of the circumstances of inclusion and the kinds of adult support (e.g. advocacy and representation) that children might need" (1999, p. 489). Others have proposed that a "child-sized citizenship" would replace assumptions about political independence with the notion of "a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent" (Jans, 2004, p. 40; see also Woodhouse, 2008). Dympna Devine and Tom Cockburn likewise seek to interpret political action "through inter-generational relations of care and solidarity that are generally invisible in adult-centered frameworks" (2018, p. 154). It is evident that a purely independence-based notion of the political subject fails to account for children's (and other groups') real political experiences. In so doing, it fails to empower children as children.

There is a need, however, to analyze more precisely what is really involved in this notion of "interdependent" and not just "independent" political being. For the notion of political interdependence is not new. And it is a complex concept with various possible meanings. The queer feminist theorist Judith Butler, for example, interprets political interdependence as the notion that individual agency is bound up with an embodied vulnerability, precarity, and dependence on wider communities: "our persistence as living organisms depends on that matrix of sustaining interdependent relations" (Butler, 2015, p. 86). In a different way, the postcolonial philosopher Néstor García Canclini defines political interdependence as the reliance of marginalized groups on other marginalized groups for gaining transformative power, or, as he puts it, diverse group's "intermediation" in the process of the "interruption" of power (2014). Differently again, the critical theorist Axel Honneth argues as part of his "recognition theory" that political relations are a process, not of independent agency, but of "interdependent dialogue" aimed at new political relations (Honneth, 1995).Alternatively, one could point to African and indigenous concepts of "ubuntu" and "community" as grounding political relations in a sense of the dependence of all upon all: "I am because you are" (Imoh, 2022; Mtata, 2021; Mugadza, et al., 2019; Ndofirepi, 2011). In each of these quite distinct ways, theorists have shown that European modernity's model of the political subject falls short of the interdependent complexities of actual political life.

Childism must not shy away from adding its voice to this mix, even if this means a critique of the hidden adultism that may be contained within similar ideas. What childism adds, I propose, is a sense of depth, of political subjectivity's "deep interdependence" (Wall, 2019a; Biswas, 2023). That is, political interdependence is not just horizontal but also vertical. Political subjects participate in three-dimensional spaces of simultaneous interconnection and inter-reliance. They horizontally construct communities of mutual recognition, but also vertically construct systems of mutual support. In other words, political beings, both child and adult, take part in political life only to the extent that they are empowered both with and by others. The power to act as a political subject is the power all at once to speak for oneself, stand in relation to others, and belong to an empowering environment.

Take, for example, young people's climate activism. What the research shows is that children and youth have transformed much of the conversation around this vital issue facing all of humanity (Council on Environmental Health, 2015; Currie and Deschênes, 2016; Olson, 2016). Their successes on the political stage have resulted in part from forming horizontal alliances with adults to join together in fighting for their voices to be heard. But they have called for shifts in vertical exercises of power as well. As Greta Thunberg puts it, "But they've now had 30 years of blah, blah, blah and where has this led us? … Our leaders' intentional lack of action is a betrayal toward all present and future generations" (Thunberg, 2021). The solution to climate warming is not a simple deconstruction of adult power domination. Rather, it lies in transforming how power is used, from its domination by the forces of economic capitalistic growth to its domination instead by the forces of long-term health and well-being. What it means to hear the voices of children, in other words, is not just to change the minds of adults; it is also, in the very same process, to change the way adults exercise the power they have over children's and future generations' lives. At the same time, the failures of the youth climate movement often lie in dominant groups like the UN and COP organizers to empower children's perspectives, as for example when they block children from opportunities to participate (Corona and Alvarez, 2020).

Childism complicates existing understandings of political subjectivity by showing how, for children and adults alike, political being is not just relationally but deeply interdependent. When political interdependence is understood only from an adult point of view, it can miss its dimension of structural inter-reliance. The reality, however, for us all is that no one is politically empowered without political spaces that are actively empowering. Without questioning adultistic assumptions, it is too easy to view the political subject as a supposedly independent being, one who may exercise power in relation to other independent beings, but not one who might be politically dependent on others. A childist lens makes clear that political reliance on others is not a mark of weakness but a component of strength. Political participation involves at once both actively taking part in and passively being part of a deeply interdependent political world. Everyone is part of multiple networks of power which they are subjects of and subject to at once. Being reliant on others should not make one a lesser political being, whether a two-year-old or a ninety-two-year-old. All political beings are both self- and other-empowered. Another way to say this is that political being is fully systemic. Political subjects are not somehow independent of their surrounding environments but instead stand within political systems that they both impact and rely upon.

3. Public Expression

A second dimension of political life that childism helps us think differently about is public expression. This element touches on questions of political epistemology, that is, how to understand what it means to think, have knowledge, and express one's views in publicly meaningful ways. The feminist theorist Amanda Fricker points to the problem of "epistemic injustice": how women's voices are undermined by putting into question women's "capacities as knowers" (2007). In more classic terms, women and other minorities can be said to find themselves in a political "double bind" of not only having to explain their suppressed perspectives but also to do so under conditions of patriarchy that discount their voices in the first place (Anderson, 1998; Butler, 2000). Or, as the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks, "Can the subaltern speak?" in a colonialistic context that defines the languages and norms of speech as such (1988; 2004). The point of this question is to highlight to epistemology bind faced by any suppressed group, the fact of not being heard as well as not being considered worthy of being heard.

Children's rationality, knowledge, and expression raise such epistemological questions but in an arguably even more problematic way. Childhood often functions as a trope for lack of political reason as such. And children's voices are all too easily dismissed on supposedly developmental and neurological grounds. It is certainly possible to apply Fricker's analysis to the ways that children's concerns are routinely rendered "silent" by how discourses about them imperceptibly "obstruct their voices and expressions" (Hanna, 2023: 43). Indeed, a chief complaint of young people fighting for their rights is that even when they are given a voice, this voice is rarely taken seriously in actual policymaking (Wyness, 2005). But the question for childism is whether there are particular ways that children's public expressions are disadvantaged specifically as children's?

For children's public expressions to be taken seriously, it is important to think more carefully about public expression in relation to human lived experience. What exactly is public expression the expression of? Postmodernists have long been critical of the widely accepted notion from European modernity that it is the expression of an underlying capacity for reason, as if people are disembodied minds gazing out upon their world. According to critics from Wilhelm Dilthey (1907) to Martin Heidegger (1927) and Paul Ricoeur (2007), public expression is the articulation in language of human "lived experience," meaning people's first-hand engagement with the particularities of their lives. What we express when we speak in public, according to this phenomenological view, is not an abstract rationality. Rather, it is an always historically and normatively particular interpretation of one's lived experience as a participant in one's world. And this means, furthermore, that everyone's lived experience is "different": different from that of others and different from any reduction of it to generalization.

This notion of public expression as of lived experience has been taken up in childhood studies in a number of helpful ways. Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, for example, argues that children's "lived experiences" should be understood as "interrogation[s] of hegemony," that is, explorations of children's (or anyone's) "right to participate differently" in their worlds (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 375). From this perspective, epistemic injustice is any violation of a marginalized group's right to larger societal recognition for their own particular experiences of normative difference. Others like Edward van Daalen, Karl Hanson, and Olga Nieuwenhuys argue that

children's rights need to be understood as "living rights," rights that are not abstract or fixed but arising from "the daily lives and struggles of people confronting the challenges of everyday life" (Van Daalen et al. 2016, p. 818). While children and adults live under local, national, and international laws, these laws themselves are living embodiments of the people's experiences and so in need of constant critique and transformation in response to their diverse and different lives. Because children's expressions of their interests are "non-essentialist" claims about their lives, they must be understood as "embedded … in real-life contexts traversed by struggles for social justice" (Niewenhuys and Hanson, 2024, p. 171 and pp. 176-77).

Such efforts to understand the specific epistemological issues faced by children lead to the notion that public expression, particularly for children but also for other groups, actually involves not only a double but a "triple bind" (Wall, 2019b). Marginalized groups like children find themselves not only (1) not heard equally and (2) considered incapable of making themselves understood, but also (3) actively excluded from the power structures that control public expression. Public expression faces the triple hurdle of inequality, non-authority, and disempowerment. While adults can often assume that in principle they are permitted to enter the public sphere, children cannot take such political systems for granted. And, as they show, neither can adults. As the examples of voting and climate activism show, children are frequently denied the right to speak by law. It is assumed that lacking public expression is in children's best interests, or at least something their developing bodies and minds need protecting from. But the result is to compound children's already difficult path to making known their lived experiences by the active use of adult power to curtail it.

Take for example Article 12 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As many studies point out (Daly, 2018; Fitzgerald, et al., 2010; Lundy, 2007), Article 12's guarantees of children's rights to free expression in fact severely constrain it. For one thing, children ought to enjoy equal rights to freedom of expression under larger international treaties, especially the ICCPR's Article 19 that states clearly that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression," and indeed that this freedom may be restricted "only" to protect the rights of others and national security and public order. By laying out specific free expression rights just for children, the CRC arguable violates the ICCPR by discriminating against children for no legitimate public expression reason. But the text itself of CRC Article 12 makes this problem even clearer, as it protects children's "right to express [their] views freely," but only insofar as a child is "capable of forming his or her own views," only "in all matters affecting the child" and not matters affecting others, and only "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." Such restrictions would be unheard of for adults. But they are built into the guiding principles for children's international rights to public expression.

The triple bind here is clear: not only do children already enjoy less than equal rights to freedom of expression compared to adults in all societies; and not only, like other subaltern groups, are children generally considered to lack authority when they do speak; but children finally also find that even their rights to speak are already severely curtailed by the active imposition of limits by adults in power. The childist point here is not that this situation is faced by children alone. Rather, it is that children illuminate the fuller complexity of what equal public expression really confronts. Indeed, adults frequently face the same active disempowerment on this front as well: such as hurdles to voting imposed in the United States on minorities, the control of the free press by wealthy interests, the denial of legal standing to asylum seekers, and the distortion of free expression by social media algorithms. It may not be a stretch to say that those with power over public expression generally end up suppressing public expression for those without.

The solution is to formulate a more complex and critical understanding of public expression itself. Childism makes the epistemological claim that marginalized groups contribute to knowledge, not simply by giving voice to their lived experiences of difference, but in addition by their lived experiences transforming larger interdependent structures of power. Making suppressed knowledge visible involves in the end changing normative assumptions about what is empowered to count as meaningful knowledge. And this deeply systemic problem makes demands on the powerless and the powerful alike to actively reimagine social rationality and knowledge in different and more inclusive ways. It is not just children to whom this understanding of public expression applies. Any group lacking epistemological power must not only speak up for its own differences of experience but also be able to transform the underlying power dynamics that structure speech in the first place. Public expression is not just a fight for one's voice to be heard but a fight for one's voice to be empowered.

4. Political Empowerment

These reflections on ontology and epistemology suggest finally a third childist argument for a new kind of politics of empowerment. By "politics" I refer in the broad sense to all the formal and the informal, as well as visible and the invisible, ways that societies handle and distribute power. As issues of children's social being and public expression have made clear, the underlying problem for children is how to become normatively empowered. From a childist perspective, this problem is not simply how children can gain the same power as currently enjoyed by adults. Rather, the problem is how power itself can be reconstructed to respond not only to adult life but also, and equally, to the often marginalized differences of experience of children. In other words, childism calls for a new understanding of power itself. Such a view suggests, I now argue, that politics concerns not just a struggle to gain power but rather a struggle to empower the disempowered.

Political philosophers define power in different ways. One helpful approach that has been taken up in childhood studies is that of Iris Marion Young, the influential poststructuralist feminist political philosopher. Young defines empowerment as "encourag[ing] the particular perspectives of relatively marginalized social groups to receive specific representation" (Young 2002, p. 8). Young's point is that, as women and other

groups have found, gaining power in the face of hegemonic dominance means finding inclusion in one's particular and distinct lived experiences of difference from the prevailing norm. Structures of power must become "different" in the sense of newly responsive to those whose empowerment they have historically blocked.

Young's concept of "specific representation" helps explain what it would take for dominating power structures to respond to children as children. Nicola Ansell has used Young to argue that understanding child poverty in Africa depends on "adopt[ing] a social justice lens to examine the contextually situated processes through which poor southern African children are systematically oppressed" (2016, pp. 173–174). Similarly, Sarada Balagopalan demonstrates, using a similar perspective, that by "historicizing [children's] rights-subjectivities" it is possible to "gauge whether marginal populations' 'access to lines of social mobility' ... is substantively altered as compared to their past histories of exclusion" (2019, p. 317). What children need is not just power itself but also new lines of mobility to access it. Likewise, Matias Cordero Arce has shown that, because adults are "the measure of all human beings," children must fight "emancipation ... from below" (2015, p. 31). Children need empowerment, not on the same terms as adults, but in their non-normative specificity as children. Marginalized groups like children must struggle for power from beyond historically normative power systems, that is, by demanding specific recognition for their non-normative lived experiences.

Children themselves have also contributed to understanding what could be meant by their empowerment as children. One example is Latin American child workers who have rallied around the politics of what the Peruvian neo-Marxist political philosopher Alejandro Cussianovich calls "protagonismo." As Jessica Taft describes it, protagonismo means "claiming space as protagonists, or central actors, in the national political scene" (2024, p. 183). It "refers to a social group, especially a marginalized social group, coming to see its own significance and claiming space in the political field" (ibid., p. 183). Keenly aware that their participation in political protest is easily reduced to tokenism and adult-controlled outcomes, children use protagonismo to ask, "Are children able to shape the story? Can they further their political goals? And, if not, how can we support them to build and deploy different forms of collective power so that they *can* accomplish their goals?" (ibid., p. 190). Child workers are demanding, in effect, not merely to be treated as adult workers, but rather to be recognized as a particular group with their own stories to tell. They can be empowered only insofar as they become protagonists who contribute to their societies' stories from their own specific points of view.

These various ways of theorizing what Young calls specific representation can be taken, however, one step further via a childist analysis based on the above notions of deep interdependence and empowered expression. Young herself sees the solution to specific representation in marginalized groups' "inclusion" (2002). What she means is that "the normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes" (2002, pp. 5-6). This concept of inclusion, however, itself assumes that those to be included can participate in decision-making processes and influencing outcomes on an independent basis. It presupposes that once the obstacles to power are removed, those disempowered can more or less directly empower themselves. Young does recognize that inclusion is relational, that is, that it depends on horizontal relations of power sharing and construction. But it is less clear that her theory accounts for vertical relations of power, that is, the ways that power is structured in a deeply rather than shallowly interdependent way: in other words, that power involves systems of inter-reliance.

Childism calls in the end for a rethinking of power as a means not only for decision-making inclusion but what I and others have called "empowered inclusion" (Josefsson and Wall, 2020). The idea is that inclusion in political life involves not just the removal of obstacles to power but also marginalized groups' active empowerment, their inclusion in power in deliberate and purposeful ways. Power is shared in a deeply interdependent way insofar as "marginalized groups' experiences and concerns [are] specifically and critically empowered to make an impact on global systems and norms" (Josefsson and Wall, 2020, p. 1052). Power becomes equal not only by being opened up to all equally, but also by being restructured by specific political efforts to empower the disempowered. In other words, power ought to be exercised three-dimensionally: by persons and groups in their concrete specificity; across horizontal relations and alliances; and through vertical structures that empower differences actively. Empowered inclusion involves all three dimensions. It is the grounds on which normatively disempowered groups like children may gain the ability to restructure power fundamentally, to bring their specific experiences of difference to the way power is systemically used.

Take the example of asylum-seeking children, one of the least empowered groups in most societies. Not only are such children lacking in basic citizenship rights, vulnerable to exploitation, and constructed as undesirable by large segments of hosting populations, but also, specifically as children, lack even much of the basic legal standing enjoyed by asylum seeking adults. Children under 18 make up 50% of all persons forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations (UNHCR, 2021). But they frequently lack access to basic human rights such as education and vital health resources (Bhabha, 2019). Indeed, the application of "best interests" principles often backfire as migration authorities and courts use them to legitimize children's deportation against their will in the name of protection and family reunification (Sedmak et al., 2018). Even if they bravely speak up, asylum-seeking children are still denied basic human rights mechanisms to assert their wishes.

What asylum-seeking children call for is not only visibility or concern for their best interests but also, more importantly, their own specific empowered inclusion. Their lives are caught up in wider structures of power that place their interests and experiences in a secondary position to those of taxpayers, business leaders, right-wing extremists, and even adult migrants. Merely including their voices in democratic debates will not overcome the power dynamics suppressing their concerns systemically. Rather, the power imbalance can be transformed only by their otherwise disempowered perspectives being actively empowered by their larger

surrounding society. This could mean, for example, pro-migrant groups campaigning for their recognition (Rosenberger et al., 2018), classmates speaking up in local media (Josefsson, 2017), and states taking active measures to revise policies (Eastmond and Ascher, 2011). All such measures surpass the mere removal of blocks to inclusion and involve, as well, active and positive efforts to empower otherwise marginalized perspectives to change normative power structures. They actively empower the disempowered.

Childism suggests, then, that politics, broadly understood as human power relations, needs to be reconceptualized in a more just way as the means by which societies interdependently empower the inclusion of social groups in their specific lived experiences of difference. This politics of empowered inclusion applies not just to children but to everyone else as well. For the problem of normative disempowerment is widespread. Existing political theory tends to obscure the need for empowered inclusion because of its hidden adultistic biases, which perpetuate the assumption that the main problem of power is how to remove barriers to inclusive access. But the reality is that an inclusive system of power would be both self-empowering and other-empowered, in other words, socially empowering. It would empower differences of experience to transform deeply interdependent power-sharing networks. It would actively set out as its central mission the empowerment of the disempowered. Justice would be measured by the extent to which marginalized groups gain the power to have their particular perspectives impact shared power systems. Since all lives are ultimately different, and lived experiences are never reducible to a accepted normative assumptions about them, the empowerment of difference is a necessarily endless task. Power in this case is inherently dynamic, a process of the continual social empowerment of difference actually to make a difference to life in common.

5. Conclusion

Childism is a critical theory that is needed in both the academy and society to understand and respond to the full human experience. Without a childist lens, scholars and practitioners will continue to view the world with adultistic blinders, perpetuating all manner of narrow historical assumptions that invisibly marginalize the specific perspectives of an entire third of the world's population. In a similar way to feminism and decolonialism, childism insists that responding to suppressed experiences is not an issue only for those suppressed. Rather, it is vital to understanding human relations and societies as such. It demands the rethinking of basic questions of ontology, epistemology, politics, and the like. Just as there are many types of feminism, there are many ways that childism too could and should be imagined. In addition, it cannot be imagined robustly without being developed intersectionally with other critical perspectives. But since childism is relatively new in the history of critical theories, it is first important to assert and explore what it could mean as an approach to thinking differently in its own right.

What the above reflections bring us to in the end is as a childist theory of social empowerment. At bottom, childism insists that marginalized groups can have their experiences and voices included not only through their own empowerment but in a more complex way through their interdependent empowerment in relation to others and larger societies. The political subject is not just an autonomous individual or even constructed in social relationships, but rather a three-dimensionally social being who is deeply interdependent in relation to others in their world. Public expression is not just the voicing of individuality or even the assertion of normative differences, but the empowerment of differences of lived experience to transform social understanding. And politics is not just a competition of interests or a struggle for power, but a struggle, rather, to empower the disempowered to be included in social systems. In one way or another, childism calls for the deconstruction of normative adultism and the reconstruction of more humanly empowered societies.

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