



# Childish Citizenship

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The left's pivot over the last thirty years towards a politics of identity has been blamed by some commentators for driving people apart and contributing to the recent rise of an extremist, racist, sexist, homophobic far right. But, whether that's true or not, the politics of identity has not provided the tools to create a movement with enough mass to provide alternatives to the current economic order. Judith Butler, a leading figure in challenging the gender binary in both academic and popular contexts, also has doubts about the efficacy of identity politics. She believes it 'fails to furnish a broader conception of what it means, politically, to live together across differences' (Butler 2015), and she turns to the idea of precarity, or precariousness—living with no stable, reliable and consistent employment—as a concept to rally around, a site of alliance.

If we're looking for a population with nearly infinite identities expressed by the individuals within it, all of whom share the condition of precarity, we don't have to look much further than children, even the richest of whom are denied many basic rights, including the right to work for money. Children are everywhere, all identity groups have them, and all of us, no matter our identity or our politics, have been a child and experienced the acute powerlessness that is the child's condition. Can the child—and

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P. Hildebrandt et al. (eds.), *Performing Citizenship*, Performance  
Philosophy, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97502-3\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97502-3_19)

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efforts to infiltrate much of the world with the presence of children—provide a strategy for destabilizing the status quo? And if so, can this strategy attract the critical mass currently missing from the many fractured movements that wrestle with the question of fairness? Our understanding of what it means to be a child and what children are capable of contributing is rapidly evolving. I believe we do have the possibility of both subverting business as usual and finding a common cause to organize around, a stealthy little cause that, at first, seems naive and innocuous—sure, let the kids in—but that might radically revolutionize the world.

But it is adults—not children—who are the universal legal subject. As full citizens, adults can legitimately stake their claim as members of civil society, with the possibility of political citizenship being central to the contemporary understanding of citizenship. Children are denied this in law, they are not full citizens.

What defines children and what constitutes the place and domain of childhood is not static across time or space. There is huge variation in what it means to be a child, what their capacities are understood to be, and how they are expected to behave. Currently, our society largely views children as *becoming* and not as being. Children are on their way towards a destination: adulthood. They are constituted as children in opposition to adulthood and considered to be in a state of preparation for taking on life's 'real' responsibilities once they are old enough—an age that is locked in law. They are *on-their-way-towards* being finished.

Or,

Is it possible to conceive of young people as not headed towards this more perfected state, but considered for who they are now? This approach prioritizes the young person's being over their eventual becoming. This is the recognition that their being is as legitimate as anyone else's and that, ultimately, they not only have a stake in all discussions affecting them, but that most issues affect them.

This shift away from the psychology of development recognizes that adults themselves hardly resemble the complete and fully formed entities that are popularly understood as adults. There is vague definition, let alone consensus, on what it means to be adult. To be an adult is to be many things that are regarded as being childlike: vulnerable, mistaken, confused, petulant, afraid, irrational, despairing (Pedraza-Gomez 2007). Making mistakes, learning and growing up never stop—so how can we ever mark where adulthood begins? Incorporating vulnerability does not preclude competence.

Adulthood produces the subcategory of childhood; the idea of the autonomy of adults makes absolutely no sense without the lack of autonomy implied in the idea of children. As we have witnessed the disintegration of the gender binary, so too can we anticipate, if not actively work towards, the dissolution of the binary that is adult and child. An obvious first step—as in the approach to gender or race—is to stop associating essential and unchanging qualities to either of the binaries, adult or child. When we think of children, we tend to think they are vulnerable and in need of care, while adults are understood to be able to take care of themselves. But, in reality, each adult and each child have innate capacities and abilities: Some adults are more childlike than others, some require the same care that a baby requires for their entire lives, and some children are, at quite a young age, completely resilient, rational and independent—qualities more often associated with adults. Again, like gender and race, any generalizations or assumptions we make about the ‘typical’ behaviours of children and adults inevitably fall into question in the face of a multitude of exceptions.

In order to re-evaluate and define entitlement to full citizenship, it requires that the notion of adults—as commonly understood—simply does not exist. We all can be viewed as remaining as children, we are all vulnerable and continue to figure out how to cope with complex situations. Ultimately, the existing notions of childhood and adulthood are stereotypes, with all the coercion that being a stereotype entails (Watson 2009). But beyond a stereotype, childhood is a way to relegate a big chunk of the population into being an ‘eternal other.’ Political economist Alison M. Watson claims that:

the implications of children’s ‘otherness’ have not been tackled in a sustained way within the social sciences generally or geography in particular, because of the genuine difficulty of doing so. The otherness of childhood is profound, as many of the symbolic orders which routinely but deeply structure adult life, such as time, money, property, sex, mortality, and Euclidean space melt away as one tries to see the smoother, or perhaps differently striated spaces of childhood. (p. 33)

As a way to address this otherness, feminist legal scholar Martha Albertson Fineman argues that we need to look at a vulnerability, which is ‘universal and constant, inherent in the human condition’ and that the vulnerable subject should be ‘at the centre of our political and theoretical

endeavours' (Fineman 2008, p. 1). Fineman contrasts this idea of vulnerability with the liberal theory of the autonomous and independent subject, the 'competent social actor capable of playing multiple and concurrent societal roles: the employee, the employer, the spouse, the parent, the consumer, the manufacturer, the citizen, the taxpayer, and so on' (p. 10).

This idea of the liberal, autonomous, subject is 'indispensable to the prevailing ideologies of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility, through which society is conceived as constituted by self-interested individuals with the capacity to manipulate and manage their independently acquired and overlapping resources' (p. 10). As Fineman points out, this liberal subject does not account for everybody, and it certainly does not account for the trajectory of a life which has constant variation in degrees of autonomy, self-sufficiency and personal responsibility, with the ever-present threat that that autonomy, self-sufficiency and personal responsibility will be wiped out entirely. It is just an accident away, after all.

And, of course for our purposes here, another problem with the liberal subject is that 's/he can only be presented as an adult' (p. 11). Instead, Fineman points to the idea of the vulnerable subject as a 'more accurate and complete universal figure to place at the heart of social policy' (p. 11). In addition to social policy, the very idea of citizenship itself needs to be retooled to include the vulnerable subject as an active political subject, even as their actions may be quite circumscribed or need the help of others to be fully expressed. As such, the vulnerable citizen should be the citizen around which political participation is conceived, designed and implemented.

Vulnerability, being the idea around which state and other institutions intervene into the social sphere, opens things up to consider children in the same moment that we consider adults. Within this framework, children and adults are exactly the same, in that that which is understood to be universal is now tweaked to include aspects central to the experience of children—which are also increasingly certain to be aspects of the adult experience towards the end of life. The liberal universal of autonomous, self-sufficient and personally responsible individuals means that children are excluded and become just another 'Other' but, within a vulnerability framework, children are *included* and, as such, have a right to participate in the world like any one of us.

Article 12 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (The United Nations 1989), which provides the basis for a way to consider the participation of young people, states:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

While ‘expressing views’ is a narrow way to describe participation, Article 12 has been taken up and commonly understood as protecting children’s participation rights (Pare 2015). The realm of these rights is extensive, outlined therein as: ‘all matters affecting the child.’ It is hard to think of any important social or political institution, process or system that does not, to some degree, affect young people: the market, the education system, the judicial system, the electoral system, the entertainment industry, the medical industry, almost all technology, and so on. The list is endless and, perhaps, is best summed up with one word: everything. *Everything* affects children.

Increased participation rights for children are essential—as reasoned extensively by scholars—for young people to develop a sense of control, increased ability to handle stressful situations, enhanced trust in others, self-esteem, the sense of being respected, contribution to education and development, to learn how to respect the views of others, and so forth. All admirable reasons, most of which are at the level of the individual child. But more importantly, the participation of children has the potential to completely renovate the way in which we think of citizenship, as the inclusion of young people within the political process is very likely to decisively alter that process.

Advantages emerge for all of us when children are amongst us, ways of being with each other that are oriented towards efforts at a calm civility. Adult behaviour is often modified around children, for example, as seen in the common endeavour to shield young children from aggressive conflict. In addition to guiding us towards better behaviours, children are also experts at small joys and masters of play; attributes we can all enjoy and learn from. So, in these senses, the participation of children as citizens not only benefits the young, but all of society.

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