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## **Between social and political: children as political selves**

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### **Abstract**

In her recent article Sana M. Nakata (2008) engages Hannah Arendt's (1959) separation between social and political realms, pondering on children's potential for political agency. By critically examining the interpretations that Arendt makes in her essay concerning the events of the 'Little Rock' case, Nakata argues that children should be understood as political actors in their own right. Taking up this argument, this article discusses children's role in social and political realms by suggesting that, besides being political agents in public conflicts, children can also be found as *political selves* in more general terms in all of their everyday environments. This claim blurs the line between 'the social' and 'the political', and at the same time disputes the separation of public and private as discussed in Nakata's article. However, it also faces the need to redefine these lines, to avoid inflating the concept of politics as a whole.

**Keywords:** Children's politics, political agency, social agency, politics of everyday life

## **Between social and political: children as political selves**

### **Introduction**

Notions concerning children's right to political participation and the impacts of their political activity have emerged increasingly in recent academic literature. Children's participation in policy-making, development projects, civic activities, violent conflicts, and other politically significant activities are discussed in various contexts, and the effects and reverberations of this action have been considered on diverse scales (e.g. Cheney, 2005; Such & Walker, 2005; Skelton & Valentine, 2003; White & Choudhury, 2007; Moses, 2008). Yet the theoretical and conceptual debate around children's politics and their political agency is still narrow. If compared, for instance, with the massive theorisation that has evolved on children's social agency and their active roles in socio-cultural processes in the past twenty years, the theoretical and conceptual work concerning children and politics is clearly deficient. In particular, cross-disciplinary discussion between political research traditions and childhood studies is nearly nonexistent.

However, some attempts at a better understanding of politics in childhood and children in politics have been made. For instance, politically-oriented youth studies often suggest that their results concerning young people's politics can be adapted to children's politics alike, more or less directly (e.g. Buckingham, 2000; Skelton & Valentine, 2003; Hörschelmann, 2008). These generalisations stem from the fact that 'young people' typically refers to both young adults and teenagers who, by definition, are children. This research stream certainly has plenty to offer the study of children's reflexive politics. But, when considering those children who are not yet able to conceive of themselves as political actors even in the meaning of social citizenship, these generalisations are not always compatible.

More specifically, research concerning international relations and war has paid some attention to children's active roles in political conflicts (e.g. Brocklehurst, 2006; Habashi,

2008). Also, a number of studies concentrating on childhood issues in the Global South have succeeded in bringing children's everyday lives together with large-scale geopolitical and economic phenomena, recognising children as active members of their communities and societies (e.g. Katz, 2004; Kesby *et al.*, 2006; Abebe, 2007; Benwell, 2009). Then again, these studies tend to talk about children as participants or social actors, and do not make a specific effort to outline children's political agency *per se*.

Thus, in general, theoretically oriented approaches to children's active roles, means and places in politics are uncommon. One move toward theorising children in politics is presented by Sana Nakata (2008), who considers children's potential for political agency from a political science point of view. Engaging herself in conversation with Hannah Arendt and, in one sense, with Elizabeth Eckford, too, she argues that, in public, politically charged conflicts, children should be understood as political agents in their own right. Nakata's approach is welcome in two senses: firstly, because it tries to distinguish political aspects from children's mundane action, and secondly, because Arendt's insights into children's role in politics have not gained extensive attention.

Taking up Nakata's argument from the socio-spatial, childhood studies point of view, this paper discusses children's agency in social and political realms. It is suggested that, besides being the objects of politics, political subjects, and political agents in public conflicts, children can be found as *political selves* in their seemingly apolitical everyday environments (Philo & Smith, 2003). This claim further blurs the line between 'the social' and 'the political', developing Nakata's proposition, and disputes the separation of public and private in the sphere of politics. However, it also faces the need for redefining these lines, to avoid inflating the concept of politics as a whole.

### **Eckford, Arendt and Nakata at Little Rock**

In her article *Elizabeth Eckford's Appearance at Little Rock: The Possibility of Children's Political Agency*, Nakata picks up the case of 'Little Rock'. This case first became familiar to academia some fifty years ago when it was widely discussed in the public media, and was reflected upon in Hannah Arendt's (1959) controversial essay

*Reflections on Little Rock.* 'Little Rock' refers to the events that took place in the Little Rock Central High School, Arkansas, US, on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1957, when the school was practically turned from being a white high school into a desegregated one. This transition was not welcomed by all.

On the morning of the first desegregated school day, hundreds of people, both children and adults, opposed the integration process in the school yard, striving to prevent the black children from entering the school. Realising this awkward situation, the school contacted the new students' homes and suggested that, as a quick fix, the children should enter the school from a side door to avoid the mob. All black children, except for one, received this message in time and succeeded in entering the school peacefully. Only Elizabeth Eckford, whose family did not own a telephone, approached the school from the front entrance, making her way through the aggressive crowd. This 'act of entering' and its consequences form the focus of Nakata's article.

Taking place in the late 1950s, the events of Little Rock, and Elizabeth Eckford's case in particular, were adopted as iconic of the struggle of African Americans for civil rights. Her attempt to enter her new school, which was ended by some armed troops who turned her away at the door, was witnessed by a journalist who made the events public. From then on, Eckford's story was used massively by both political activists and researchers to discuss and fight against racism.

Hannah Arendt, already an established scholar, read the news and reacted to it. To many people's surprise, and contrary to many other critical thinkers, she argued that schools and their students should *not* be involved in such political struggles. In Arendt's view, Eckford was unjustly thrust into the public sphere of politics with no competence to act on it, and thus her case ought not to be used or celebrated by activists, media or researchers. Her key argument was that children should have the opportunity to live their lives privately in the social realms of home and school, to gain competence in these 'apolitical spaces' in order to act in the public realm of politics in their later life (cf. Arendt, 1958:22-78).

In her examination of the case, and at the same time as a critique of Arendt, Nakata (2008:19-20) approaches Eckford's role rather differently. She argues that 'it is both necessary, and possible, to recognise the political agency of children, not because children ought to be placed in the position of having to fight difficult battles, but because sometimes they do. If we, as adults, owe our children any responsibility in the political realm, it is at least to be able to recognise their actions when our own have failed [...] Political contests simply do not occur about, and around, children. Children are not only political subjects. Sometimes they are political agents.' Thus Nakata's argument is that children's political agency should not be denied, belittled or disapproved of because of its discomfiting aspects, but should be recognised as equally important as adults' political agency. Contrary to Arendt, to her it seems right that Eckford's act of entering the school was recognised as a political one, and was used and celebrated in the battle for African Americans' civil rights.

In this paper, I would like to bring these two approaches together by suggesting that children do, indeed, act as political agents and should be recognised as such, but that their politics do not necessarily take place in adults' political struggles. Instead, I hypothesise that children act politically mostly in Arendt's private 'social realms', for instance, in the everyday practices of school and home, and that their type of politics is only occasionally developed in or brought into the downright 'political realm' that is defined and occupied mostly by adults. This, anyhow, is not to suggest that 'children's politics' and 'adults' politics' would be detached from each other. Just as adults involve children in their politics as, for instance, child soldiers, ethnic minority representatives and child parliamentarians, children draw adults into theirs as group members, witnesses, advocates and offenders, for instance.

In other words, my argument is that, like adults, children, too, lead their own political geographies within their banal lives, and can hence be appreciated as political selves, i.e. competent political actors in their own right, at least to some extent (cf. Billig, 1995; Philo & Smith, 2003; Haldrup *et al.*, 2006). This appreciation infers identification and

recognition of the political aspects of children's practices, and does not presume any particular action on the part of adults (cf. the ongoing discussion concerning children's empowerment through their involvement in politically significant events). The situation is quite the contrary, in fact. In my view, children's politics, like any politics, should be appreciated and deciphered first and foremost as they occur, in their primary contexts. Thus, children's *political involvement* and their mundane *political engagements* need to be conceptually distinguished from each other to better understand children's political agencies in different contexts. Tools for this conceptual work are explored in the rest of the article.

### **Children's agency in politics**

Children's<sup>1</sup> status and position as active members of their societies are nowadays widely accepted both in research and child policies. It is commonly agreed that children and young people should be approached rather as subjects than objects, and that their views and opinions ought to be taken into account in matters concerning them (e.g. Matthews & Limb, 2003; Skelton, 2007). This starting point, which, in principle, is true to the idea of democracy, does not, however, suggest that children should be considered as political beings *par excellence*.

In the ongoing 'participation debate' the ideal of children and young people's soci(et)al membership(s) is not on a par with the more general understanding about political membership (cf. the breadth of 'the political' in *vita activa*, Arendt, 1958). Children are usually identified and examined as social, not political, actors and agents, regardless of the contexts, effects or influence of their everyday practices (Barker, 2003; Skelton &

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<sup>1</sup> I understand 'child' and 'childhood' as geographically and culturally variant concepts. Therefore I do not propose strict age limits to differentiate children, young people and adults from each other. The theoretical argument that this article wishes to make is a general one, concerning those people's politics who are young in a sense that they are not able to act independently in their societies, and do not conceive of themselves as political agents even if acting as ones. Roughly put, as regards their politics, children can be understood to become adults as they acquire the means to identify and understand political aspects actively, as they gain the potential to act as reflexive political agents, and as they are able to take responsibility for themselves and their lived worlds like other full members of their society. This 'turning period' is, apparently, not a momentary one, but happens piecemeal over the period often referred to as 'youth'. Therefore, as regards their politics, young individuals may be more 'children' in one situation and closer to 'adults' in another situation. In this article I concentrate on theorising the politics that young individuals practise as 'children', regardless of their age.

Valentine, 2003). Their activity is typically recognised as political only when it takes place within or directly concerns existing policies (child, youth and family policies, policies concerning different kinds of minorities, etc.) or politically significant large-scale events (violent conflicts, geopolitical tensions, etc.) – not in relation to them or outside of them. As recognised also by Nakata (2008), children are not considered to be downright political in respect of their lived societies, their local communities or their immediate surroundings, but their political agency is bound to their statutory institutional settings and roles (cf. Kjørholt, 2007).

The current situation can be understood as a continuum of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which forms the basis of the participatory child policy trend adopted by most Western countries. The UN convention, ratified globally by all nation states except for two, advocates three kinds of rights for people below 18 years of age: the right to resources and care, the right to protection from harm, neglect and abuse, and the right to self-determination and the making of informed personal decisions (see e.g. Tomás, 2008). This set of rights only partially matches the civil, political and social rights allowed by democratic citizenship, which, according to T.H. Marshall's classic formulation, entitles citizens to freedom of speech and thought, the right to participate, and the right to welfare.

Yet the UN convention does declare that children and young people are, among other things, entitled to participation and 'voice'; it proclaims above all that 'In all actions concerning children [...] the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' (Article 3), adapting to the basic idea already presented in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1959). These interests, whether they are related to any aspects of childhood or the children and young people's lives, are in the end always assessed and delineated by adults – most importantly by their parents, national legislators, and institutional actors in various fields. Hence, in practice, since underage people's official status is defined by guardianship and their well-being ministered to by childhood professionals, their opinions and views are subordinate to those of adults by definition (Roche, 1999; Stasiulis, 2002; Kallio, 2008).



This, anyhow, is not all there is to children's politics and political agency. As Nakata's (2008) article shows, even young children may act as political agents regardless of, and detached from, participatory policy procedures in their practices of everyday life. They resist, conform and negotiate on their own terms, even if these struggles and conciliations do not, and usually even cannot, be carried out in official political arenas or follow conventional political modes.

Children's intentional mundane action draws on an awareness of the tensions, power relations and ambiguities embedded in their everyday lives – the political geographies of their lived worlds. The daily environments provided by homes, schools, kindergartens, neighbourhoods, local transportation, youth centres, leisure activities, city squares, parks, and so on, form the common contexts of this political action. Yet, since the young individuals are usually not consciously aware of the political aspects of their mundane acts, these politics are left unidentified also by most of the researchers and policy makers interested in children's politics.

Another reason why children's non-official political engagements are ignored is that, more often than not, children employ more diverse operation modes in their politics than adults<sup>2</sup>. For instance, young individuals do not usually try to argue in favour of their causes with adults – and if they do, they typically lose because their counter-part possesses more rational arguments than they do. Instead, children are good at using embodied means to arrive at their objectives and thus prefer to bring their bodies into play when objecting or adapting actively to someone else's will. This kind of intentional action is emphasised by those researchers who are interested in children and young people's everyday lives, yet they are seldom discussed in political terms (e.g. Barker, 2003; Philo & Smith, 2003; Gagen, 2004; James & James, 2004; Goddard et al, 2005;

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<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that adults only practise certain kinds of politics. Rather, I am making the point that children's everyday life politics is not usually interpreted as politics because it does not occur in forms generally recognised as political action (e.g. rational argumentation, direct democracy, opposition in self-evidently political issues). This, surely, is also the case with some everyday life politics practised by adults. Yet adults' political agency is not the topic of this article and hence is not discussed here.

Brocklehurst, 2006; Hemming, 2007; Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2007; Kjørholt, 2007; Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2007; Habashi, 2008; Vanderbeck, 2008).

Children's politics take many forms and head in various directions. In their intentional acts, children and young people may, for instance, be consistent with the prevailing conditions, oppose certain matters concerning them, or just highlight different aspects compared to adults or their coevals (e.g. Korander & Törrönen, 2005; Kallio, 2007; Habashi, 2008). Their political acts and expressions are often intangible, blended and diversiform (Kjørholt, 2007), and can appear as verbal negotiations (Barker, 2003), physical struggle (Hemming, 2007), embodied performances (Hörschelmann & Schäfer, 2007), or mere 'effects' (Thrift, 2000). Hence it is not surprising that these politics are not easily distinguished from children's other social action – in a similar manner as 'the private' and 'the personal' were not recognised as political before the feminist movement and research politicised them (e.g. Cahill, 2007; cf. Buckingham, 2000:219-220; Palonen & Walker, 2003). This difficulty of recognition largely stems from the fact that the concepts of 'the social' and 'the political' are not completely separable.

Hannah Arendt (1958:33), whose work concentrates on understanding and analysing 'the political' in different contexts, emphasises that, in the modern world, social and political realms cannot be clearly distinguished because they 'constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself'. Unlike Ancient Greece and Rome, modern societies do not consist of separate private and public systems of household and polis. Rather, following Arendt's (ibid. 41) thought, as regards the government of modern (Western) societies, all life has become public, and private action can be best understood in terms of behaviour. Hence, also individuals' roles and agencies are rather mixed within this social/political public realm and can be specified only to a certain extent.

As an introductory definition of children's everyday politics, and at the same time as a simplified demarcation between their social and political agencies, I propose that children's own politics comprise intentional social activity which has particular meaning

to its performer. This politics may involve adults or not, and parallel their action or oppose it. But the important point is that it serves its own ends and actualises wherever there is space for it. It is not set in motion by adult-led orientations, nor is it mobilised in adult-led practices. Rather than being within the institutional order informing their everyday environments, children's mundane politics are practised in relation to adult-led policies, politics and practices (as in Eckford's case), or outside of them (e.g. challenging racism or other power relations on a normal school day in peer groups, cf. Van Ingen & Halas, 2004; Thomas, 2009). This is not to say that children could not act politically in official arenas alongside adults (e.g. Matthews & Limb, 1999; Valentine & Skelton, 2007), but rather to note that there is a variety to children's politics, and that their political action reaches beyond the political realm identified and defined by adults.

Thus, the study of children's political agency and the political geographies children play out in their banal practices requires a wider interpretation of 'the political' than is usually employed in exploring child and youth policies and children's participation. Next, I discuss these concepts leaning on political theorist Kari Palonen's conceptualisation of politics, with the aim to develop tools for making the lines between children's' social and political agencies more visible and identifiable.

### **Children in the sphere of politics**

In his conceptualisation, Palonen (2003, 2006:52) divides the political realm in half by making a distinction between politics-as-sphere and politics-as-activity. 'Sphere' refers to the political spaces bordered and regulated by policies and polities and 'activity', respectively, and is used to describe the acts and practices of politicking and politicisation. These four basic concepts are defined in Weberian terms as follows:

'Politicization names a share of power, opens a specific horizon of chances in terms of this share, while politicking means performative operations in the struggle for power with the already existing shares and their redistribution. Polity refers to those power shares that have already been politicized but have also created a kind of vested

interest that tacitly excludes other kinds of shares, while policy means a regulation and coordination of performative operations by specific ends and means.'

In Palonen's view, policy/politicking forms one conceptual pair and polity/politicisation another one. Policy is understood both teleologically as an orientation towards the future, and normatively as a criterion of realisation. Performative politicking, instead, refers to action that, on one hand, is regulated by these policies, but, on the other hand, makes use of them to maintain or rearrange power relations within the existing policy networks. Polity, in turn, is a metaphorical space where 'the political' is recognised and distinguished from 'the apolitical'. This sorting and ranking is constantly reproduced and challenged in the acts of politicisation which seek to give new meanings to what is understood to be political. By so doing, politicisation also makes the existing politics more relative within the political realm.

Figure 1: Politics-as-sphere and politics-as-activity, following Palonen's (2003) conceptualisation.

Palonen defines politics in spatial terms as a sphere of policies and polities, and simultaneously in temporal terms as time-consuming and/or time-playing activity of politicking and politicisation (Figure 1). His conceptualisation arises from political science, which partly explains why the field of policy is emphasised so that the acts of politicking may look as if they refer to simply policy-making. Strictly read, this approach seems to ignore those political struggles that take place outside the official policy fields (identity politics, direct democracy movements, etc.).

However, Palonen's ideas can also be found useful in approaching the complexities of everyday life politics if the concept of policy is understood more broadly. In a more sociological reading, the sphere of politics can be taken to consist of several policies which all bear particular 'regulations and coordinations of performative operations by specific ends and means' (Palonen, 2003; see also Palonen & Walker, 2003). Hence, in

this view 'policy' refers to all those social spaces where distinguished political struggles emerge. This notion claims that politicking can also occur in less official contexts, and thus appears in various forms of everyday life politics (e.g. Bosworth, 1999; Carrabine, 2004; Browne *et al.*, 2007).

Appreciated this way, Palonen's frame allows us to consider different political aspects widely in the same field, yet on different scales, and thus helps to further diversify the distinction between official 'Politics' and unofficial 'politics' (Skelton, 2009). Understood as an aspect that can be potentially found in *all* social spaces and practices but which does not *axiomatically* belong to any, this concept of politics verges on Michel de Certeau's idea of the practice of everyday life and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social fields. These sociologists' works help to bring Palonen's theorisation into the study of children's politics.

Palonen's thinking is not far from Bourdieu's (1996) approach to society as social fields, and most importantly the field of power, where (symbolic) power struggles take place. These fields are constructed and reproduced according to the system of dispositions in which the 'inhabitants' of social fields are considered in terms of 'habitus'. Understanding the sphere of politics more in Bourdieu's terms, as a meta-field which consists of a number of smaller fields, broadens Palonen's conceptualisation of policy/politicking.

De Certeau's (1984) thinking, which endeavours to set the boundaries of the practice of everyday life, accompanies the theory of social fields compatibly (for a broader theoretical context, see Lefebvre's theorisation on social space; Lefebvre, 1991). Compared to Bourdieu, who concentrates on making visible the social order consisting of symbolic violence, and the social shifts of power that occur within this ordering, de Certeau portrays society as a space of control and manipulation. He describes 'social usage' as an interplay between *strategic producers* (the ruling powers) and *tactical users* (the subjects of these powers). Strategic control enforced by the former is more or

less comparable with Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. Tactical manipulation operated by the latter represents the counterpart of this governing.

By imbuing Palonen's conceptualisation with Bourdieu's and de Certeau's thinking, children's and adult's distinct statuses in the sphere of politics can be framed as follows (Figure 2):

1. *Adults are legitimate actors in the sphere of politics by definition.* In their politicking concerning children and childhood, adults, as producers<sup>3</sup>, can lean on the 'proper', which has 'the power to provide oneself with one's own place' (de Certeau, 1984:36). As sovereign institutional actors (parents, teachers, medical personnel, policy-makers, etc.) adults normally do not need to politicise issues they are concerned about as they already appear political in the self-evident policy fields. Moreover, their legitimate knowledges provide the producers with an overriding positioning in the field in question, which reinforces their standing (cf. Foucault, 2003:6-8).
2. *Children's empowerment is based on situationality.* As tactical users children are forced to 'take advantage of "opportunities" and depend on them' because their statuses are 'determined by the absence of power' (de Certeau, 1984:37). This is not to suggest that children are powerless social beings but, as regards their institutional positions (son, daughter, pupil, patient, child citizen, etc.), their status is that of an incompetent and disempowered actor whose practices are not foundationally considered political. The political aspects of children's activities thus come about only momentarily when they succeed in politicising an issue important to them, i.e. opening a horizon of chances in terms of a share of power. These practices are not axiomatically considered relevant as such in any existing policy field. Yet they may be noticed by some actors who hold a position in a

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<sup>3</sup> This conception of 'producer/adult' refers to adults' sovereign social position in general. It is not to say that all adults could employ this empowered role in their lived worlds. For instance, people belonging to different minority groups do not hold as strong a position as those representing the majorities. Other power structures, too, such as those drawing on colonial traditions, shape these statuses.

certain policy field and be made use of in the practices of politicking. However, at the least, children's mundane politics always participate in the ongoing struggle over the meanings of 'the political' in the metaphorical polity space.

In short, this conceptualisation reveals that children nearly always need to politicise their social action for it to have political relevance, regardless of issue and context, whereas adults, who hold a firm position in polity-policy sphere, can lean on the status quo and rarely need to politicise their concerns regarding children and childhood. This categorisation is, surely, far too dualistic a simplification to encompass all situations, and exceptions to both positions exist. Not all adults' opinions concerning children and childhood are considered political in their own right but require politicisation (cf. feminists' fight over personal as political). Children may also act as empowered members with recognised expertise when they are involved in different kinds of political processes and systems (e.g. witnesses in court, child parliamentarians, members of the school council). However, this conceptualisation provides some analytical tools for discussing the borderline between children's social and political agency. Moreover, it helps to distinguish between children's reflexive involvement in adult-led politics and their intentional engagement with the political issues of their everyday lives.

Figure 2: Children's agency in social and political realms.

To sum up, as Figure 2 illustrates, in Palonen's terms we can define children's political involvement as politicking that takes place on the already existing policy fields. Respectively, children's mundane politics is mobilised as politicisation on the border of the polity space. This politicisation, or manipulation of order, can be implemented in many ways and in various contexts. It is intentional but not necessarily interest-driven or reflected upon, in a sense that children would perceive it as an endeavour to achieve something extraordinary. Yet it differs from other social action with regard to its ability to challenge or transform prevailing power relations and negotiate the political anew.

### **Elizabeth Eckford in the sphere of politics**

Going back to Elizabeth Eckford's case, if we outline the events of Little Rock through the prism developed in the previous section we can find that the politicisation of Elizabeth's action did not happen merely in the public field of racial politics. In the first place, she acted apart from being identified or acknowledged as an explicitly political actor. Hence Elizabeth's political agency should be deciphered in various dimensions, or scales (cf. Ansell, 2009).

The two distinct political aspects of Elizabeth's action can be aptly seized on in the terms 'politics/Politics'. From the mundane 'politics' point of view, the political aspect of Elizabeth's social action can be identified as she walks through the crowd towards the door. She does not choose to return home when she finds that her route to school is blockaded by angry white people whose hatred is directed at her, or when she sees that the doors are guarded by soldiers. This proves that, at least to some extent, her action was based on awareness concerning the value conflict, political tensions, power relations, and ambiguity embedded in the situation, i.e. the political geographies of her school environment.

From the official 'Politics' point of view, instead, the Little Rock case gained its political relevance first through the confrontation with the guards and Elizabeth, then via the media publicity initiated by a journalist, and finally in the racial activists' acts. Had Elizabeth turned away once she saw the situation in the school yard, no 'Political' action would have occurred: the state troopers would not have been activated, the journalist would have published a different story, and the activists would have adopted another case to back up their arguments.

To put the two together, Elizabeth was engaged in 'politics' on her way to school, but at the same time was involved with 'Politics' in the large-scale racial conflict. Thus, her mundane 'politics' was separate from, but also formed the condition of, her participation in the more formal 'Politics' which, on its behalf, constituted the over-all context of the



events (cf. non-rational explanations and identity politics in Somers, 1994; Ringmar, 1996:90). In Palonen's terms this intertwined process can be portrayed as follows:

- 1) On her way to school Elizabeth first acted as a *social agent* in the social sphere;
- 2) As she passed through the jeering crowd she *politicised* her case and became a practitioner of everyday life politics in the polity space;
- 3) When she arrived at the front entrance this action was recognised as political by the state troopers who denied her access to school, and the journalist who memorialised the moment and associated it with racial politics in his article. These actors brought Elizabeth's act into a *particular existing policy share* and used it as an argument in *performative politicking*;
- 4) Elizabeth's political agency was acknowledged in a specific policy field as it was adopted by some activists as a tool for politicking in civil rights. Her action was also accepted as a contribution to the struggle over human rights by various policy-makers, researchers and other critical thinkers, and was thus labelled as an act that can be found to be self-evidently political. Hence, through her intentional mundane action she succeeded in *challenging and changing the prevailing 'political'*.

To generalise, the analysis of the Little Rock case suggests that children and young people may act as political agents outside the existing political realms or on their borderland, as presented in Figure 2. Thus, it also applies to children that both public and private issues concerning them may contain political aspects, and initiate political action. Children's politics may take place in self-evidently political contexts, but equally well in environments that are not considered downright political – for instance, at school, at home, or on the way between the two. The issues that they politicise may also be picked up and mobilised through politicking by adults or children who are involved in more official political processes, such as in large-scale conflicts or policy-making. Yet, as an extension to Nakata's theorisation, and for Arendt's delectation, this article proposes that the former does *not* provide that the latter is enforced.

### **Approaching children as political selves**

The fourth chapter of Arendt's (1958:22-78) *Human Condition (orig. Vita Activa)* is entitled '*Man: A Social or a Political Animal*'. Building the conceptual ground for the rest of the book, and much of her later work as well, this section discusses in detail how the meanings of 'the political' and 'the social' have altered and transformed from ancient Greek and Roman societies into modern nation states. One notable account that she makes is that whereas the Greek made a clear distinction between these concepts, the Romans associated, and in a sense misinterpreted, the two. Originally, the concept of the political was reserved for public matters only, while the social referred to private issues, yet the meanings of public and private were understood rather differently than today. Greek society was based on two distinct but tightly connected systems of governing: the private hierarchical system of the household, and the public democratic system of the polis in which only the heads of the households could participate. In these systems two kinds of power relations were formed and recognised: social/private ones and political/public ones.

When the matters of the household as a whole turned into public concerns on the rise of the modern nation state, the concept of the political became blurred. Paraphrasing Arendt's thought, since private action can now only mobilise as behaviour, all action that cannot be reduced to behaving is public and thus basically political in nature. This interpretation, however, inflates the concept of the political and parallels it with that of the social (cf. Buckingham, 2000:34). To maintain their relevance and distinctiveness, ways to decouple social and political action are needed.

One way to categorise human action in terms of social and political is to accept Arendt's division between private behaviour and public action, but to define the latter as being principally social and only potentially political. The political aspects of this social action must, then, be reasoned from one or another direction. This idea, which is also true to Palonen's theorisation, helps us to point out why certain acts, like those of Elizabeth Eckford, are not merely social. To illustrate:

As recognised by Nakata and the political activists of the 1950's, Elizabeth's action can be understood to be political in reference to the prevailing societal situation. Arendt, instead, argues that children should be protected from such (large-scale) participation and ought to be given the chance to gain empowerment in their (micro-scale) everyday environments. Her idea is that, through these practices that are situated in the 'private' spaces of home and school, children learn how to lead *vita activa*, that is, act politically in more 'public' contexts, too. Furthermore, in this article I suggest that Elizabeth was, actually, acting politically in both of these meanings at Little Rock. The school that had turned into a battlefield defined the conflict and her action as 'Political', but at the same time the school was also her everyday environment where she acted 'politically' on her own grounds. Regardless of the different outcomes, by pointing out political aspects in children's social action all these three approaches acknowledge that children can get politically engaged in their banal practices.

Moreover, rather different kinds of readings can be made from a political involvement point of view. Research concerning direct democracy could claim Elizabeth's example as showing that children should be given the chance to participate in peaceful campaigns and demonstrations where they can state their opinions safely, instead of resisting oppressive circumstances in hostile environments on their own (cf. Skelton & Valentine, 2003). In line with these thoughts, those advocating children's participation in policy-making could prove that the case reveals children's awareness of political issues, and that on the basis of their UN rights children should be given the chance to be heard through school councils and children's parliaments in the kinds of topical matters which concern them (cf. Such & Walker, 2005). From a democracy and citizenship education point of view, instead, children's capabilities to handle such issues as racism and violence could be argued as still being insufficient, and hence these and other contemporary matters should be introduced as relevant matters for basic education (cf. Weller, 2007).

All of these approaches, introducing only some rationales that can be employed in pointing out political aspects from social action, benefit from appreciating children as

political selves. This is to say that, besides recognising children as socio-cultural actors who are active members of their societies and communities, children's social action should always be considered potentially political, too. This premiss, embedded in the theorisation presented in the previous sections, provides analytical tools for studying, for instance, the banal political geographies of childhood and youth, the associations between children's mundane political engagements and their reflexive political involvement, and children's empowerment to participation in administration and policy-making on their own grounds.

Moreover, the study of children's politics can also be found significant in defining the borders of 'the political' in more general terms. Combining the ideas presented in this article with, for example, Margaret Somers' (1994) thoughts concerning power relations embedded in the narrative constitution of identity, Eric Ringmar's (1996) work on non-rational explanations of political action, and Susan Hekman's (2000) conceptualisation of the politics of identification, would contribute to the theorisation of politics and political agency in a broader sense. Bringing together work from political science, feminist theory, international relations, cultural studies, political geography, childhood studies, youth research, post-colonial studies, and other related research streams, would be particularly prominent for understanding the transformations of the political in the ongoing processes of globalisation.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this article I stated that my aim was to bring together the approaches presented by Arendt and Nakata, to suggest that children do act as political agents but not necessarily in situations or environments that we perceive as 'political'. This intention agrees with Arendt's notion that children should not be used in the service of adult agendas in political struggles, at least not without acknowledging the risks and strains that are embedded in these engagements. On the other hand, I also want to join with Nakata in her argument that children's political agency should be recognised and appreciated when it occurs.

In the preceding I have suggested that to recognise children's 'politics' without involving them in 'Politics' calls for attention to be paid to those practices of politicisation that take place in children's everyday lives. If we appreciate politics as a part of (children's) 'human condition', children's and young people's practices of everyday life can be discussed both in social and political terms. Conceptual work for distinguishing different kinds of political aspects in children's lives thus needs to be further developed, and children's mundane political geographies explored empirically in distinct socio-spatial contexts.

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