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Young people's voiceless politics in the struggle over urban space

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Abstract

This article discusses the particularity of young people's politics as it unfolds in the practice of everyday life. By exploring a conflict concerning the use of a public park in the City of Oulu, Finland, we discuss how young people may participate in struggles over urban space through politics that is not based on voice but voicelessness. This political engagement can be understood as a form of non-participatory politics that is easily left unnoticed – politics that shirks civic involvement, customary participatory practices and articulated resistance. We deem it important to acknowledge such action as political for two reasons. First, voiceless politics is a weapon of the weak: It is used when other political agencies are not feasible. Viewing non-participation as apolitical will only further marginalize those who practice politics in such ways. Second, it is important to find ways of acknowledging non-participatory action because, while not commonly understood as politics, it is not easily bypassed in political struggles either. By distinguishing political aspects from young people's urban behaviors, instead of hearing their presence as mere noise, provides tools for bringing their politics to the public agenda and thus developing more democratic urban spaces.

Keywords

Political agency, urban space, young people, the political, voiceless politics

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In March 2007, the City of Oulu announced that one of its downtown parks will be gated and partially closed from the general public. The official reason for the restrictions was 'to maintain general order and safety, to protect the city property, to improve housing conditions, and to promote equal use of the park'¹. In practice, the intention was to debar young people from using the park for their evening gatherings and thus taking over the area at summer time – a habit that had troubled the City for nearly ten years². The announcement was welcomed by many who found that it served their ends: The local residents, nearby businesses, communal social work, the police, and the townspeople who wished to enjoy the park as a clean and peaceful green area. At the same time, it generated extensive discussions in Internet chat rooms³ and got picked up by the local and the national media. The policy line was disapproved of by civil rights activists, researchers, critical journalists, and a number of city dwellers who found it unacceptable. The reception of the plan was thus rather contradictory.

However, one party clearly involved in the conflict never voiced its concerns or defended its citizenship rights. The youth who used the park to their own ends did not participate in the public debate, nor did they contact the city government to bring out their opinions and views. Instead, regardless of the restrictive measures taken against them the youth kept on gathering at the park like nothing was happening. Two aspects puzzle us particularly in this politically silent agency. First, hearing young people's voices is a major issue today, and their rights to participation are ensured by a number of laws and treaties. Second, these youth were directly affected by the controversial urban policy restricting the use of public space. Hence, it is rather surprising that the youth did not fight back or even express their dissatisfaction publically.

This dilemma beckoned us to look at the case in more detail. As geographers interested in the politics of everyday life, we found it hard to believe that the youth were not practicing any kind of politics in the situation. Hence, we hypothesized that, on the

¹ Proceedings of the City of Oulu Technical Centre, March 21st 2007.

² Proceedings of the City of Oulu Technical Centre, January 1st 2007.

³ In September 2010 Internet search returns still more than 6000 hits to 'Kiikeli', many of which lead to discussions where the use of the Park is hotly debated.

contrary, they were engaged in political action, but one that mobilized in forms, places and arenas not typically recognized as political. With this possibility in mind we began to scrutinize the case of Kiikeli Park so as to assess what official and banal politics it was giving rise to.

In this article we set out to develop means for identifying mundane political action to improve our understanding of children and young people's ways of being political. We begin by outlining briefly how young people's politics are typically considered in political (geography) literature. We then discuss the theoretical starting points of our work, followed by the presentation of the empirical case. On the basis of our analysis we conclude by exploring the potential for recognizing and acknowledging politics in the mundane practices of young city dwellers.

Spatial approaches to young people's politics

Two major strands can be distinguished in studies concerning young people's political agency (Skelton 2010). The first branch concentrates mainly on youth participation and involvement in official politics, policy-making, and recognized political movements – the 'Politics' writ large (e.g. Matthews *et al.* 1999; Skelton & Valentine 2003; Gaskell 2008). The second, more diversified field focuses primarily on the political aspects of young people's everyday life practices, i.e. the 'politics' writ small (e.g. Altay 2007; Cahill 2007; Kjörholt 2007; Habashi 2008; Hörschelmann 2008; Thomas 2009). Importantly, these research streams are intertwined as 'Politics' and 'politics' do not exist apart from each other but are co-constituted in the socio-spatial practices of everyday life and policy-making (Philo & Smith 2003; Percy-Smith 2006; Skelton 2010). As we have argued elsewhere, children and young people play active roles in both public large-scale events as well as more private small-scale matters (Kallio 2007, 2008, 2009; Kallio & Häkli 2010, 2011, forthcoming). As the political aspects of their actions typically pass unnoticed, also the relevance, effects and scope of their politics tend to remain unidentified. It is therefore the intermix of 'Political' and 'political' approaches that best serves to deepen our understanding of young people's roles, positions and action in various political matters.

Following the extensive policy adoption of the United Nations' (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, both policy-makers and researchers have shown an increasing interest in young people's political agency during the past fifteen years. In addition to new legislation and policy programs a rich scholarly literature has evolved on young people's politics and the politics of youth. A multidisciplinary research field has charted the issue from social, cultural and economic viewpoints, and also foregrounded its spatial aspects.

Starting from Aitken's (1988, 1994, 2001) and Sibley's (1991, 1995) path-breaking writings and followed by other geographers, the spatially oriented youth research has gained a firm foothold in both human geography and youth studies. Geographers working on childhood and youth issues during the 1990s in the Anglophone world wrote key texts that have been directing the development of the sub-field. These include Katz's (e.g. 1993) work concerning children's lives in Howa and New York; Winchester and Costello's (e.g. 1995) studies of Australian street-kids' use of urban space; Matthews' and colleagues (e.g. 1999) research on young people's participation and representation in the UK and Europe; and Holloway & Valentine's (e.g. 2000) theoretical writings grounding 'new' spatial childhood and youth studies, all of which have had a great impact on this field of study. Many others could be listed.

The volume *Cool Places* edited by Skelton and Valentine (1998) was one of the first attempts to bring together diverse perspectives concerning young people's geographies. The book provides a good example of the way how political issues have been discussed within the scholarship. Even if young people's political worlds or agencies are rarely considered in explicit terms, many of the chapters are politically oriented, covering issues such as contested identities, matters of scale, sites of resistance, and so on. In a manner typical to youth research young people's agency is named political mainly in the context of high 'Politics', whereas their mundane 'political' life is discussed by means of other vocabularies.

Arguably the first serious attempt to bring young people's spatial politics on the human geographical agenda was made in a special issue of *Space and Polity*, edited by Philo and Smith in 2003. From then on the discussion has expanded and diversified, bringing light on young people's roles and positions in different political settings, sites

and dimensions. Conceptually, the trend has moved toward understanding the political implications of young individuals' and groups' everyday practices, and the development of their 'political selves' within these practices (e.g. Skelton & Valentine 2003; Gagen 2004; Katz 2004; Hörschelmann & Schäfer 2005; Kesby *et al.* 2006; Forsberg & Strandell 2007; Kallio 2007; Kjørholt 2007; Habashi 2008; Ansell 2009; Thomas 2009; Kallio & Häkli 2010; Skelton 2010). As Skelton and Valentine (2003, p.132) point out, young people are not merely "adults in waiting" or "human becomings" but rather are competent social actors making decisions and participating in ways which may have political influence and are certainly important in the formation of their political identities'. In her long-standing work on children and young people's geo-economic positions and agencies, Katz (2004, p.241) also stresses the importance of noticing children and young people's banal lived worlds where resilience, reworking and resistance 'work off of and in response to one another, as much as in reaction to the changes imposed and engendered by "global economic restructuring" and its local manifestations'.

Recent discussions drawing from critical geographical debates have extended the scope of young people's political agency in conceptual terms. This has accentuated questions that are essential to all relational political research (cf. Buckingham 2000, p.34). If practically everything can be considered political, how is the political separated from the apolitical? How to maintain the specificity of 'the political' while keeping it porous and always open to new definitions? These questions are particularly tricky when the politics under discussion are performed by people who do not perceive themselves as political actors, and whose understandings of politics are inchoate or yet to be formed. To better understand this ambiguous terrain we propose further methodological and conceptual work charting young people's political agency. It is to this task that we now turn, with the help of the case of Kiikeli Park conflict.

Starting points for the study

The case of Kiikeli Park caught our attention in the spring 2007 when it was taken up in national media where the planned restrictions to the use of urban space were strongly

criticized.⁴ What we found particularly interesting was that, even though the events were associated with NIMBY conflicts, the *Right to the City* –movement, and urban struggles over public/private space in general, it was not those who were discriminated against that were debating or complaining. In fact, the young people who were being blocked from the park did not appear to be active agents in the struggle at all. This was clearly evident in all kinds of materials we scrutinized for the case.⁵ In the incident that lasted for several years, young people were present only as rebellious youth who behaved badly in a number of ways, offending general regulations and breaking the law. They did not, at any point, voice their concerns about being discriminated against as urban dwellers through official or semi-official channels, contribute to the discussion in chat rooms or the media, or participate in the working groups that were set up to figure out how Kiikeli Park might have best served the townspeople as a ‘public living room’. Hence, rather than active political subjects the youth were presented as members of a particular sub-culture or passive objects of policing.

Due to our long-term interest in the politics of everyday life, this seeming non-participation felt disturbing to us. Simply put, it seemed hard to believe that a conflict over urban space could continue for several years without one of the central parties practicing any politics in it. In fact, could the struggle even have emerged without the youths’ active engagement? These inconsistencies led us to hypothesize that in this case the young people’s politics mobilized in banal forms and were thus largely misrecognized and bypassed as something else (cf. Billig 1995; Haldrup et al. 2006; Katz 2007; Thomas 2008). Such banal forms of participation that O’Toole (2003, p.74) terms ‘political non-participation’, and which we here term ‘voiceless politics’, are not commonly acknowledged by policy makers or administrative actors, but they are often disregarded

⁴ Most importantly *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading national newspaper (e.g. HS 3rd April 2007; HS 15th May 2007).

⁵ The materials used in the study were collected mainly during the winter 2007–2008, except for the newspaper articles and some supplementary interviews. These materials include documents directly concerning the Kiikeli Park case; legal documentary materials regarding the national and municipal crime preventions programs and models, expanded on in interviews; the City of Oulu strategies for youth participation; interviews with the City of Oulu youth and social work personnel; and plans, reports and results of the temperance campaigns that were carried out in Oulu region during the conflict (most importantly BottleAway!, I DON’T!, see Final Report of the BottleAway! Campaign 2004). In addition, we made use of some related statistics provided by the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES) and Statistics Finland.

by the study of 'Politics' as well. Furthermore, we conjectured that the misrecognition of young people's political agency could partly explain the prolongation of the conflict and the rather extreme operations that the City was ready to employ.

To disclose how young people participated in the struggle over urban space in Kiiheli Park, and what political aspects can be identified from this action, we set out to explore it in terms of relational politics (e.g. Rancière 1999; Dean 2000; Mouffe 2000; Staeheli & Kofman 2004; Isin 2005). We start off from the conception that even if it is not reasonable to think that everything is political, no issue, matter, event or action can be defined as foundationally apolitical either. In our empirical analysis this means that instead of considering *what* politics the youth did or did not practice, we seek to assess *how* they acted politically in the given situation. Instead of looking at formal participation or the lack of it, we wish to expose the 'tactics' and the 'weapons of the weak' that the youth used in their practices of everyday life (for similar methodology see Skelton and Valentine 2003).

We seek traces of this action mainly by assessing the events from various existing documents. There are two reasons for this, one practical and the other methodological. In practical terms, while participant observation might have provided adequate materials for this study, we could not carry out such work because the youth were already deported from the park during the summer of 2007 when the case was politicized on the national scale. Alarmed to the conflict by news media, we arrived "too late" to the scene to witness the youth's ongoing political practices. The methodological reason is related to our hypothesis that the young people's actions were not *reflexively* political. This assumption was initially prompted by the very fact that the youth did not voice their concerns on the usage of the park. As shown by White *et al.* (2000), young people are often involved in activities they themselves do not consider political, but which may be defined as political by the researcher (O'Toole 2003, p.74). On these grounds we concluded that inquiring the youth directly about the events would most likely invite them to reflect on the conflict in terms used in public debates. This would have imposed subjectivity and voice upon the youth that never really existed in their political practices. Aware of the challenges, ambiguousness and ethical dilemmas related to field work on the whole, we thus decided not to seek the youth for interviews (for critical discussion see

Katz 1992; England 1994; Rose 1997; Kesby 2007; and the special issue of *Ethics, Place and Environment* 2001). In all, to properly capture the youth's invisible resistance and voiceless politics we chose to use diverse documentary materials depicting their role in the conflict. To this end we also interviewed the police, the concerned parties of the City of Oulu, and a voluntary organization involved. In what follows we wish to further justify these methodological choices.

The case of Kiikeli Park

In March 2007 a working group led by the City of Oulu Technical Centre announced that the Kiikeli City Park would be gated and partially closed from the general public at summer nights and during special events.⁶ In this announcement culminated a long contest between housing cooperatives, building companies and the City Planning Department of Oulu, one that dates back to the establishment of the Kiikeli Park. The area was zoned in the late 1990s and the complaints about youth disturbance began right after the residents moved in to their newly-built luxurious apartments.

When completed at the turn of the century, the Kiikeli Park area was celebrated by local people and international assessors alike as an exceptionally successful city quarter that blurs the line between public and private urban space. The park, including a small island, is situated right in the centre of the city at the sea shore, and it consists of two parts that are seamlessly connected with each other: A public recreation area and a smallish residential area (see map in Fig. 1). Next to these lies a boat harbor that is employed by private boaters but run by the city, and a market place together with an old market hall. It thus provides an inviting living environment particularly to affluent seniors, offering them a central location with the city-maintained green area including beaches, play grounds and access to the sea (Fig. 2). But it was also known from the beginning that the area would be shared by public and private users who enter and exit through the same passages and share the landscape as a whole (Fig. 3).

⁶ The working group also included representatives of the neighborhood residents, the Police Department, and the local businesses (Proceedings of the City of Oulu Technical Centre, March 21st 2007).



Fig. 1 Kiikeli Park is located to northwest of the city center, on a two-block wide area between street Aleksanterinkatu and the isle of Elba



Fig. 2 The luxurious apartment houses by the sea are surrounded by public spaces such as bridges, old marketplace and green areas



Fig. 3 Originally the residential area was not separated from the recreational green area

Prior to zoning, the waterfront was a stretch of unplanned downtown district mostly exploited by those who appreciated it as a peaceful shelter, providing a place to hang out right by the city center – that is, young people, the homeless, and others who typically find little comfortable space at the urban commercial district. The planners of the area, the builders of the apartment houses, and the buyers of the apartments expected that once the area was physically transformed, the users would change as well. Problems emerged as it became apparent that this was not the case. When the park was completed, youth groups returned to the park to hang out. Especially during the summer holidays the park was populated by young people who disturbed the occupants with their lively leisure activities.

The housing cooperatives filed a complaint to the City first in June 15th 2002 when the disturbing situation had been going on for two summers. According to them, the problems resulted from poor planning that did not provide the residents with adequate privacy. The City, instead, did not see the problem as a structural one but blamed the youth for misbehavior and, for the first four years, tried to solve the disturbances by

enhancing the park facilities, waste collection and disposal, surveillance and policing.

The residents, however, kept on complaining:

'At Kiikeli Park, the restlessness has been going on for over five years now, and it is growing worse. Young people of 15–20 years of age have occupied the island in summer evenings with their lively celebrations speeded up by intoxicant use, to the extent that it is not safe for other people to go there. In addition to noisiness, threatening and indecent behavior, and littering, the rioters invade the plots we have rented, enter our yards and even come indoors. Regardless of the cleaning activities, even during the days the area is in such a condition that other people cannot use it to their outdoor activities. These parties have also led to the debasement of the traffic moral at the Kiikeli Island. The traversing of the partygoers and the transportation of drinks generate an exceptionally heavy car, moped and motor bike traffic to the island. Traffic behavior concentrates on performing skills and exhibiting the very noisy vehicles, including tyre squeaking, accelerating, revving up and demonstrating the bass capacities of the music equipment. These traffic events escalate in the evening and normally reach the top level between 22 pm and 1 am. Motor traffic to the island is prohibited between 22 pm and 6 am, excluding the residents. This prohibition is hence not followed. All operations that have been conducted during the past few years have failed to bring essential advancement. Instead, during the summer 2006 the situation has gotten worse. This becomes evident especially in the partygoers aggressive behavior and the growth of their collective action. Even the police and the guards do not dare to enter the park. This summer, they have not appeared outside their vehicles. The police follow the situation from the streets and even there mostly inside their vehicles, taking no action to prevent the crimes.' (The compensation requirement of the Kiikeli housing cooperatives, October 6th 2006, cited in the Proceedings of the City of Oulu Technical Centre, January 9th, 2007. Translation by the author.)

As their repeated attempts to tame or deport the youth from Kiikeli Park failed, the City agreed with the housing cooperatives, nearby businesses, and the police to constraint the use of the park by building gates and setting time limits. Yet, before the plan got realized its implementation was barred by the Ministry of the Interior Police Department who declared it unconstitutional to privatize a public area. In Finland, like in most liberal democracies, municipalities are allowed to regulate public space in many ways but they are not free to choose its users. Hence the working group had to reconsider their proposal and find other ways of controlling the youth in the park.⁷ This turn was marked by the defenders of public space but, at the end, it did not lead to a substantially different result. The park was, after all, partly gated and policed to such an extent that the youth finally moved to further locations to spend their free time. Less controlled hanging out spaces could be found in green areas on the nearby islands connected to the city centre by bridges, as well as in neighborhoods further away from Kiikeli. After this exile the park has functioned as expected by the City Planning and the housing cooperatives in the first place – as a recreation area for the local residents and other 'proper' townspeople.

⁷ Proceedings of the City of Oulu Technical Centre, 7th May 2007.

Identifying voiceless politics

Despite efforts to the contrary, Kiikeli Park failed to function as an urban area without clear boundaries between private and public space. Instead, for the first ten years it served as a segmented private area that was governed by two parties: The residents and the youth. In time, the youth ended up dominating the green area so forcefully that even the apartment interiors were disturbed by their presence at the summer time. Other townspeople were not able to challenge this user group any more than the residents but skirted the area when it was messy or crowded. The residents, for their part, were not willing to give up their seashore backyards by building fences around their houses and thus separating the public from the private. By exploiting the area to their own interests, both user groups privatized the Park, keeping up the problematic situation. The final solution, then, was to separate the private and public areas as clearly as possible and clamp the unwelcome action down by guarding the park intensely.

It is hard not to agree with those who wanted to find a way to get the youth out of the park or tame their action. All parties involved in the working group, as well as the media, made very explicit that the way the area was used was inappropriate and did not allow the park to be in public use. The young people were evidently breaking many laws and offending the general order in a number of ways, which, usually, makes it relatively easy to halt this kind of action by punitive measures. So, why were the public actors – the Technical Centre, the youth work, the social welfare, and the police – not able to take control over the area that, as a whole, was owned by the City? It was certainly in their interests, too, to keep the centrally situated new green area in a good condition so that it could be used by the residents, the townspeople and the visitors. What was the counter force that was able to maintain the troublesome situation year after year, leading the City finally to operations that are against the fundamental principles of public space?

We suggest that the youth practiced powerful and effective politics even though no-one realized it as such. The main reason for this neglect was that their politics was not mobilized through voice but performed in various voiceless forms: They claimed the park as their own through banal embodied practices – by persistently using the park to their own purposes in their own ways, regardless of the punishments they received and the

physical changes that the area went through. This kind of agency differs from voiced politics in many ways.

Using voice requires reflexive understanding of the situation. Voiceless dissidence, instead, can take place also beyond reflection, beginning with ‘giving expression to one’s views and aspirations’ (Kearns & Collins 2003, p.197, see also Buckingham 2000). It is thus not bound to administrative know-how or external support. Whereas voice operates through argumentation, voiceless politics is typically expressed in other forms, for instance as embodied practices, art performances or life choices (Percy-Smith 2006). Such politics may be noticed as political by researchers but not perceived in these terms by the actors themselves (O’Toole 2003, p.74). As Isin (2005) puts it, city dwellers’ ways of being political do not necessarily consist of intentional but *purposive* action. When the city is understood as ‘the battleground through which groups define their identity, stake their claims, wage their battles, and articulate citizenship rights, obligations, and principles’, politics can take any form and be practiced by anyone even beyond rational reflection (Isin 2005, pp.374–375).

As a zoned area the Park was debated on official arenas through argumentation but as a lived space it was contested in the practice of everyday life through its *usage* (Lefebvre 1991, de Certeau 1984). The means that the youth used can be understood as ‘weapons of the weak’ – tactics that require “little help or no coordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (Scott 1985, p.29). As Scott (p.31) portrays it, “on some occasions this resistance [may] become active, even violent. More often, however, it takes the form of passive non compliance, subtle sabotage, evasion, and deception”. In the present case, the young people defended their right to public space in ways that were most easily accessible to them, through practices that the other parties found hard to defeat. Even though they did not get involved in the public argumentation over the park, spending their free-time in Kiikeli Park was of obvious significance to them. Hence, besides practical and administrative, the struggle was also a constitutive one. Staeheli and Kofman (2004, p.3) portray the idea of such politics as follows:

“The constitutive implies an approach to the political as an ongoing process in which societies are made – are constituted – in and through struggle. This is understood to be a complex and multivalent struggle, involving actions and behaviors in both the formal spaces of the state and spaces of home, neighborhood, workplace, community, and media. These struggles have a strong normative element.”

When political attitudes engender beyond reflexivity and mobilize in banal and embodied ‘sensuous geographies’, as conceptualized by Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen (2006), the political aspects of such action are hard to bring forth explicitly. One way to make these politics visible is to seek critical points where voiceless ‘politics’ is turned into voiced ‘Politics’. In her study Skelton (2010, pp.147–150) portrays how young people may present ‘well-rounded, analytically rigorous and critically minded understanding [...] relying upon everyday lived experiences’, and take ‘a *Political* approach to present possibilities of reconciliation across difference’, if only they are provided with appropriate conditions. This presumes that someone or something gives the youth the chance to become aware of the political aspects of their everyday lived experiences, and that the young people in question are interested in and capable of political involvement. In the Kiikeli Park case such a critical point did not emerge. Civil rights activists or action researchers did not walk up to the youth and claim with them that the city belongs to everyone, to provide them with tools for voicing their concerns – or if they did, they failed to mobilize the youth to take action (for an example where this was achieved, see Percy-Smith 2006).

When ‘politics’ does not get voiced as ‘Politics’, it is possible to tease out its political aspects by precluding alternative explanations (cf. Ortner 2005, p.45). In the case of Kiikeli Park the most compelling evidence of the existence of the young people’s political agency is that all other actors involved in the conflict shared one objective: They wanted the youth to stop using the park in summer evenings in disobedient ways. Except for some media comments that appeared at a later stage, nobody made an opposing claim. The only party against the general opinion was the youth – without their persistent usage of the Park the struggle would not have emerged. Moreover, the time frame of the

conflict attests that this politics was also very successful. The awkward situation lasted for nearly ten years, during which a number of quarters worked hard to prevent the youth groups from using the park in rebellious ways. Without taking sides on the matter itself, this can be recognized as an excellent achievement in a struggle over urban space.

Just as revealing of the youth's substantial political agency are the counter measures taken to deport the youth from the park. In the 2000s Kiikeli Park was one of the most intensely guarded public areas in the City of Oulu. Surveillance cameras were placed in the park soon after its completion, which is exceptional in northern Finland. The area was also regularly patrolled by guards, the police, social workers and voluntary organizations that co-operated in a zero-tolerance temperance campaign called *BottleAway! (PulloPois!)* (see the Final report... 2004; cf. Korander & Törrönen 2005). Key measures in the campaign included confiscating alcohol beverages and imposing fines on the young people who possessed these items, taking them home in the patrol car and reporting the events to their parents, and engaging the families in social welfare programs. The patrolling was intensified during special events. Also the physical area was modified in various ways. Traffic signs and signposts were added to remind the Park users about the municipal ordinance. Fences were cut down and others built to make the area seem less natural and to define the public/private divide. Gates were built to hinder access to the Park, classical music was played during the evenings to create an inconvenient atmosphere for young people, and so on. These operations would not have been necessary had no-one been struggling to define the area differently.

To sum up, the Kiikeli Park conflict evolved around two parties, both of which wanted to use the area to their own ends. The residents voiced their concerns into the City government that took action to survey and alter the conditions of the Park and, finally, to deport the youth. The young people, instead, defended their right to use the Park through voiceless politics that mobilized in a comprehensive occupation of the area during the summer time. Through their unintentional but purposive action they expressed what kind of public space they yearned for and which aspects of the Kiikeli area were significant to them. At the same time, they came to reveal a certain politics of urban space that revolved around the question of who was the Kiikeli Park really designed and built for, and how far the City was ready to go to defend the area in those terms.

From identification to acknowledgement

In our analysis of the Kiikeli Park case we have sought to make visible the political aspects of young people's agency. Along with Dean (2000, pp.3–4) we think that one of the major objectives of critical political study is to problematize, pluralize, contextualize and specify matters and issues that are politically relevant. The politicization of new agencies, practices, events and places is a crucial part in this type of relational research. Yet, in doing this we realize that even if 'everything can be (made) political [...] politics isn't everything' (ibid, pp.5–8). To avoid inflating the concept there must always be a good reason for politicization (Buckingham 2000, p.34). So, besides producing new conceptual insights, what is the point of calling the young people's action in Kiikeli Park political?

There are numerous definitions of and orientations in politics, ranging from 'struggle between friends and enemies' to 'continuation of war by other means' to 'dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human relations' to 'mode of acting that is put into practice by a specific kind of subject, deriving from a particular form of reason' (Schmitt 1976, p.26; Mouffe 2000, p.101; Rancière 1999; Foucault 2003, p.15). This being the case, there are also different reasons for politicization. What we had in mind when we embarked on the case was to deliberate the possibility that if young people do practice politics in incidents such as this one, it might be feasible to identify and acknowledge such 'politics' *without* seeking to engage the youth explicitly in 'Politics'. We deem this approach important because in some cases political action is motivated by 'political non-participation' which is inherently 'A-Political' (O'Toole 2003, p.74). Understanding voiceless politics could, then, prove efficient particularly in situations where other ways of hearing fail.

Understanding and hearing voiceless politics is not an easy task. To begin with, it requires the translation of voiceless performance into voiced concerns, and the will to do this on behalf of those who are unwilling or incapable of doing it themselves. Yet such 'translation techniques' have been engendered in several participatory research projects unfolding embodied messages into rational arguments (e.g. Kesby *et al.* 2006; Cope 2008). If these types of techniques were distinguished as one way of officially hearing the

youth and other marginalized groups who have difficulties in voicing their concerns or whose politics are largely based on non-participation, it might provide an important ‘scale jumping ground’ to these people’s politics – ‘access *by* the body to wider spaces’ (Smith 1993, p.103). Instead of trying to make the youth aware of and competent in adults’ ‘Politics’, it would require the *adults* to become aware of the politics that the *youth* practice on their own grounds (cf. Matthews & Limb 2003, p.189).

What could such a hearing process have engendered in the present case? Given that the activities of the youth in Kiiheli Park not only differed from those practiced and appreciated by the residents and other city dwellers, but also centered around alcohol use which is illegal both for youth and in public spaces,⁸ it is reasonable to presume that a community participation project would not have proved very successful. Participatory approaches can be very effective and productive in dealing with urban conflicts when the interests of all parties involved can be appreciated and backed up by the facilitators (cf. Percy-Smith, 2006). In this case, however, the interests of the youth would have been nearly impossible to endorse by anyone. Surely the park could have been modified to become more youth-friendly (for instance by building skate ramps or organizing events that attract the youth as well). This might even have managed to invite the youth to participate in the development work. But on the whole, as we see it, the most notable outcomes from listening to voiceless politics mobilize on broader scales.

To have immediate effects in public decision making, young people’s mundane politics need to be articulated and brought onto official agendas, as argued by Skelton (2010). Yet, it is not necessarily the young people themselves who should do the translation work by getting politically involved. To the extent that young people’s mundane practices are understood as political *per se* they can be articulated into ‘Politics’ by other people, too. In comparison to direct involvement, this strategy has at least two advantages.

First, while it is important to hear the youth’s voiced concerns, the scope of young people who can be heard in planning and decision making is more extensive if also voiceless politics are acknowledged. The latter means that the views and experiences of

⁸ In Finland alcohol may be used in public parks only if it does not disturb the other users of the area (Act of Ordinance, §4).

those who are hardest to reach and least interested in political involvement are taken into account in for example urban planning. This, in itself, is an objective worth striving at. Second, this way of hearing gives voice to the voiceless in a way that does not end up 'recruiting' the youth (Venn 2007). That is, it allows for political influence without demanding obedience to offered forms of participation. The latter's tendency to superimpose particular kinds of voices upon the youth has been recognized as one of the main hindrances to participatory methods (e.g. Kesby 2007). It is therefore important to seek alternative ways of hearing people in situations where traditional participatory techniques tend to support 'good conduct' and thus fail to bring divergent views to the fore.

Conclusions

In this article we have discussed the particularity of young people's politics as it unfolds in the practice of everyday life. In our empirical analysis we found that, contrary to our first impression, the young people did actually fight for their right to public space in Kiikeli Park, and succeeded in participating in the conflict on their own grounds. Yet this did not happen by using voice but through action we call voiceless politics. We suggest that the acts of the youth portray a form of politics that is easily left unnoticed as such because its recognition requires a relational reading of the political and some re-conceptualization of political agency.

Furthermore, we propose that taking voiceless politics into account in policy-making and administrative practice, such as urban planning, requires particular techniques for hearing the voiceless. We deem it important to acknowledge such action as political for two reasons. First, voiceless politics is a weapon of the weak: It is used when other forms of political agency are not achievable. Interpreting these expressions as apolitical only further marginalizes their proponents. Secondly, feasible ways of confronting this kind of action in practice are needed because, while not commonly understood as political, they are not easily bypassed in political struggles either. Dissident actions and perceptions do not vanish when defined as 'naïve, hierarchically inferior, non-scientific, or otherwise not acceptable knowledges' but, rather, may lead to even

more complex imbroglios (Foucault 2003, pp.6–8). In all, the development of social equality in liberal democracies provides that everyone's politics is given due weight.

Political theorist Erik Ringmar (1996) suggests that when rational explanations fail, political dynamics can best be understood through non-rational explanations. In a similar vein we suggest that the identification, acknowledgement and use of voiceless politics can be found particularly helpful in situations where a party involved in a given struggle is not capable or willing to use its voice in a rational manner. Approaching these situations from a 'non-rational' vantage point may work particularly well in engaging those who are hardest to reach, which, as pointed out by Matthews (2001), is one of the greatest challenges in the advancement of children and young people's societal positions.

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