

Irrational, unprofessional, radical?

Towards a differentiated perspective on age in international law and politics scholarship

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2019 has marked the year in which the climate crisis has entered broader public debate. The main trigger were young people protesting around the globe and demanding that their governments finally take the threat seriously and significantly increase the efforts in limiting greenhouse gas emissions. The “Arab Spring” movement is yet another recent example in which young people demonstrate their political potential. Transnational movements such as #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and #FridaysforFuture show how quickly and effectively young people can organise and make themselves heard across national and regional borders. But activism by young people is of course not a new phenomenon – it has a long history, with the demonstrations against the Vietnam war or the Black Panther movement being but two examples.

Despite these recurring waves of young people’s activism in different parts of the world and the often-expressed commitment to their right of participation in international law and politics, the problems and interests of young people under the age of 18 are still hardly taken into account in scientific analysis. With this post, we aim to draw attention to this blind spot in scholarship and offer some thoughts and possible guidelines for a future research agenda on the role of age in international law and politics.

A blindspot in scholarship

Despite the fact that the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) enshrines political participation rights of children and young people (Art. 12) and has thus a certain [emancipatory potential](#), the role of young people in international law and politics remains one-sided. Children and people of young age are the subject of numerous international treaties, but the common denominator is that they are treated as a group of the population needing particular care and protection rather than being active agents. Examples include the already mentioned CRC or international conventions on child labour such as the 1999 [Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention](#). The [Rome Statute](#) establishing the International Criminal Court or the [Ottawa Convention](#) banning land-mines among other things were motivated by the international community’s sense of responsibility for children and young people as helpless and innocent victims of war and violence. In human rights law, young age can be a ground for discrimination (cf. the explicit mention in Art. 21(1) of the [EU Charter on Fundamental Rights](#)), and international courts such as the European Court of Human Rights classify young people and children as particularly vulnerable group, leading to enhanced protection in certain circumstances (see e.g. [here](#)).

When it comes to the question of who makes international politics, concludes international agreements and writes international law, academic discourse paints a picture of international relations as the exclusive realm of adult professional politicians, diplomats and experts. Ways to actively participate in international law-making hardly exist. Needless to say that young people are underrepresented in international organizations, with the average age in the UN being at 45,9 years and at the World Meteorological Organization even at 48,9 years (see [here](#)). Most international courts foresee minimum-age requirements or require that judges fulfil the qualifications in their respective countries for the highest judicial offices, like the [ICJ statute](#). Naturally, this excludes young people. And even though over the past two decades, international organisations have increased their permeability for children and young people as representatives of their age group, thus fulfilling the right to political participation enshrined in the CRC, all too often this right to political participation is then realised in institutional niches created specifically for children and young people, which are detached from the actual day-to-day business of international organisations (see on the rather indirect and informal participation of UN Youth Delegates the [contribution by Antonia Kuhn](#) to this symposium).

Despite the undeniable influence of young people on international politics, one can thus still ask oneself today: Would Malala Yousafzai, who was 17 years old at the time, have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize 2014 even without an adult – Kailash Satyarthi – at her side? Is a Greta Thunberg conceivable as the winner of the real Nobel Peace Prize and not just the ‘alternative’ one? Despite the current massive public interest in the political activism of young people in the light of the Friday climate protests, such an appreciation of the influence of young people on national and international politics would be historically unique. The social and political commitment of young people, their presence in political discourse and especially their participation in the context of international conference diplomacy are again perceived as an extraordinary moment, as an escape from the supposed basic state of political apathy.

Cracks within and between generations

It is therefore not so surprising that the role of young people in international law and politics is highly underexplored in the disciplines of International Politics and International Law. Most likely, the invisibility of children and young people in academia and their very limited possibilities of political representation in the structures of global governance mutually reinforce each other. A consequence is that for the analysis of the participation of young people, and especially children, in international politics, the necessary data is quickly lacking. Beyond the frequent practice of inviting children and young people to international events merely as extras or in the form of folkloric contributions, only a few cases are known to date in which children and young people have actively participated in international negotiations. A prominent example is the debate in the context of the International Labour Organization on international standards in the field of child labour from the late 1990s.

The few examples of the active and actual political participation of children and young people vis-à-vis official state delegates in international politics show how

controversial their right to participation is and what kind of controversial political demands children make. What becomes especially evident is the existence of intra- and intergenerational conflicts. At least in public discourse, we have for some time been observing a polarization between the generations, which often goes hand in hand with discrediting and delegitimizing the other. The open antagonism between old and young becomes even more striking if we also take political attitudes (conservative, right-wing, liberal, left-wing) into account. It becomes quickly clear that our perception of the role of youth in international politics tends to be limited to progressive, liberal positions (climate protection, social justice, gay marriage, open borders, pro-Europe, etc.). On the other hand, the participation of young people nationally and internationally has a strongly polarising effect even within generations – between those who consider it necessary, legitimate and progressive and those who consider it superfluous, impudent and rebellious.

Thus, at least two cracks appear with regard to youth – between generations and within generations. The picture becomes even more complex when we take into account other identities, especially gender, race, and social and geographical origin (“intersectionality”). This raises the question: Can identification with a (marginalized) age group overlay other differences? What role does it play that young age, compared to other identities, is only a transitional identity, and that the young and marginalized of today maybe become those in power tomorrow?

The way forward: towards a differentiated perspective on age

In conclusion, we would like to argue that not so much young age, but intra- and intergenerational relations should be the object of research. We are convinced that they have explanatory power when it comes to current conflicts over normative and institutional orders and power constellations in international politics (contestation of liberal value systems, North-South conflicts, reform of international organisations). If the debates of the past year in particular have shown one thing, it is that a consideration of the “politics of age” is necessary in order to understand the transformation of international order and institutions.

Classifications as “old, white, privileged, misogynous, bourgeois, conservative” on the one hand, and “rebellious, adolescent, immature, irrational, unprofessional” on the other hand, must therefore be examined not only as polemics but also as an instrument for questioning existing institutional, political and normative orders and power structures, and their effects both on a broader public discourse and on processes of deliberation and transformation within international organizations must be explored. For example, what is the relationship between the institutional design of international organizations (i.e. polity) on the one hand and the access, status and performance of young people on the other? What are the implications of digital discourse forms and networking practices, such as the phenomenon of digital activism as a means of producing social differences and forming alternative and especially youthful (counter)publics? We believe that there are many open questions that deserve more scholarly attention and hope that this post contributes to spark further debate.

This post is based on the two Key Notes held at the Conference “Jugend im Völkerrecht” which took place in January at the Freie Universität Berlin. For further readings on this topic see [here](#) and [here](#).

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