Editorial: Geographies of Children and Young People’s Politics, Citizenship, and Rights

Kirsi Pauliina Kallio and Sarah Mills

**Introduction**

In 2014, 25% of the global population were aged 0–14, and combined with those up to 29 years, young people comprised half of the world’s people (US Census Bureau 2014). These individuals form a unique global population. As human beings, they are equal with other people – children’s humanity is seldom questioned. In terms of human rights, they are separated from older generations as their needs and capabilities are seen to differ partially from those of adults. As citizens, children are minors who acquire diverse positions in different political systems. In this regard, young people’s engagement in political communities varies notably as a range of interpretations of youthful citizenship exist in different geographic contexts.

Research on children and young people’s geographies therefore does not concern minor groups or issues but quite the opposite. The policies that specifically target young people or have great influence on them, and the politics in the everyday lives of children and youth in all scalar dimensions, are major issues that ought to draw broad interest among geographers and other researchers. This book is dedicated to bringing visibility to this research area and aims to cement the political geographies of children and young people within human geography and beyond. There have been several important calls in relation to this research agenda over the last decade or so, advocating closer conversations between political geographers and those who research the geographies of children, youth, and families (Philo and Smith 2003; Vanderbeck 2008; Kallio and Häkli 2010; Skelton 2010, 2013). While these much-needed requests have championed the need for geographic research that recognizes children and young people’s presence in politics, our hope with this volume is to demonstrate the rich scholarship that has established alongside newer areas of enquiry that are emerging as part of these debates. On the one hand, the collection seeks to portray the specificity of the roles and positions available to children and young people in their societies, to explicate why their political geographies earn special attention; on the other hand, it paves a way to understanding the broad geographic variety of youthful politics, citizenship,
and rights, proposing that the geographies of children and young people are always contextual (for similar attempts, see Hopkins and Alexander 2010; Kallio and Hakki 2013, 2015; Benwell and Hopkins 2016; Hakki and Kallio 2015).

The international dimension to this volume of the Major Reference Work in Geographies of Children and Young People (hereafter MRW) is noteworthy, not least for its geographic breadth represented in the contributions (on Africa, the Middle East, Eastern and Western Europe, South America, North America, Australasia, and Asia) and by authors who are based in 14 different countries. In addition to this international scope, the collection illustrates a wider argument about the importance of recognizing different socio-spatial contexts and geographic arenas in and through which young people are and become “political.” Therefore, this specific research agenda ought to connect with broader discussions in contemporary human geography and its neighboring fields and not just with those that focus on childhood and youth. The whole MRW shares these endeavors – to bring together a variety of perspectives and scholars working on political geographies of children and young people. This volume specifically explicates how issues of youthful citizenship and children’s rights cross disciplinary, methodological, and theoretical boundaries and can thus be used to explore wide-ranging processes of social, economic, and political change that reach beyond “children’s worlds,” which are often misleadingly imagined as separate from the worlds of adults (cf. Vanderbeck 2008; Mitchell et al. 2004). Particular attention falls on children and young people’s active roles in different kinds of political situations, environments, processes, and practices. The discussion also emphasizes that there is scope for future research, not least because of the shifting (geo)political landscapes that can be currently witnessed all around the globe (Benwell and Hopkins 2016; see also Vol. 11 of the MRW).

This volume of the MRW on Politics, Citizenship, and Rights is structured in four sections. As editors, we wish to stress that this division is not intended to be fixed in relation to categories; indeed, major themes of the book overlap and cut across these sections. Cross-references are provided by the authors to connect the chapters that have clear linkages, which inevitably reveal only partially the interesting connections between individual contributions and thematic ensembles. The index at the end of the book is another source that can be utilized to identify further specific themes and approaches. The remainder of this introduction seeks to outline the major ideas of individual chapters and their geographic foci, which we hope offers a useful starting point for entering and exploring Vol. 7 and the multiplicity of children and young people’s political worlds.

**Spatialities of the Rights of the Child**

Children’s human rights are globally acknowledged as a specific concern. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989; hereafter UNCRC) is the most broadly accepted human rights treaty ratified by nearly all
countries in the world, with Somalia as the latest member state (exceptions include the newly established state of South Sudan that is currently preparing the process and the USA, which has signed the treaty). The international rights it proposes are based on the premise that all activities involving and influencing children should take "the best interests of the child" as a starting point. To define what this means more specifically, the UNCRC identifies three types of rights for children, which should be appreciated both publicly and privately, in institutional settings as well as in children's everyday lived environments: (1) rights to protection and prevention from harm, (2) rights to adequate provision, and (3) rights to be heard and participate in matters concerning oneself. For the approaches of this volume, the third principle is perhaps the most pertinent one, resting upon the UNCRC §12:

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

2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

To emphasize the importance of these principles, the Committee on the Rights of the Child gave a General Comment in 2009 that heightens §12 as "one of the fundamental values of the Convention [that] establishes not only a right in itself, but should also be considered in the interpretation and implementation of all other rights," paralleling it with "the right to non-discrimination, the right to life and development, and the primary consideration of the child's best interests" (UN 2009, p. 3). Active youthful agency is hence markedly recognized in child's rights discourses and policies (for an extensive overview, see Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010).

Even if the ratification of the UNCRC requires that the treaty is followed in all national legislation and policymaking and that state institutions and other actors who work with children and young people realize its principles in their activities, children's rights are appreciated very differently in different parts of the world. Indeed, they are inherently geographic. The first section of this volume explores the spatialities of the rights of the child. Overall, it demonstrates that geography matters in how children's rights are protected, enacted, restrained, and denied. Focusing on specific cases, the authors portray how, in practice, these rights are shaped by social difference. They are thus unequally fulfilled, lived, and experienced within the politicized realities where children and young people lead their lives. As Holloway and Valentine argued in their seminal text *Children's Geographies: Playing, Living, Learning*, "Children's identities are classed, racialised, gendered and so on, just as gender, class and racialised identities are cross-cut by adult-child relations" (2000, p. 5).
Noticing these and other political aspects, the first six chapters of this volume explicitly tackle the spatialities of the rights of the child. Ruth Evans and Morten Skowdal discuss the tensions surrounding different perspectives and definitions of child labor, domestic work, and caregiving as part of wider debates on the rights discourse in Sub-Saharan Africa. They suggest how these various frameworks can influence the lived experiences of young people and their access to resources. Nisha Thapliyal takes educational rights as her focus, providing a critical analysis of neoliberal education policy in India. Her chapter outlines the limitations of rights-based policies of education and how inequalities are linked to a wider reproduction of fragmented neoliberal subjectivities. Ian McIntosh, Samantha Punch, and Ruth Bmond consider children’s rights in relation to food, specifically via a case study of food practices in residential care in Scotland. Their chapter highlights how the children’s rights agenda has shaped the experiences of looked-after children and examines how rights are “done” in care spaces through management practices. Aisling Parkes’ chapter outlines the legal framework for how children’s “voice” is conceptualized and understood in the context of the UNCRC. To exemplify this, she draws on the example of schools in Ireland and the possibilities of restorative justice for involving young people in decision-making processes. This theme of educational rights continues with I-Fang Lee’s chapter on the school as one site (as well as the home and community more broadly) where young people are “assembled.” She takes as her focus the cultural politics of “Hong Kong childhood” and how the rights-based struggles around education and immigration shape the lifeworlds of children and young people living in Hong Kong, and to some extent throughout Asia. The final chapter in Section I focuses on youthful political presence. Here, Kirsi Paullina Kallio portrays the multifaceted complexity of children’s rights – how they are set, interpreted, performed, negotiated, practiced, realized, and actualized differently in distinct situations, contexts, and locations. For Kallio, the inherently paradoxical nature of the UNCRC and the rights alone provides an unstable basis for understanding the politics of children and young people’s activities and agencies.

Children and Young People’s Agency in Politics

Childhood and youth have traditionally been considered as stages in the lifecourse that are “outside” of politics. This positioning is based on the idea that politics is something children and young people ought to be protected from, deriving from rather narrow readings of politics as related to geopolitical power relations, matters of the state, and public administration. However, a broader understanding of politics and its everyday articulations and influences is an integral part of the life of any society, covering social, cultural, economic, as well as administrative arenas. In this context, children cannot be “saved” from politics as their lives are embedded in political worlds (Hörschelmann 2008; Kallio and Häkli 2010; Elwood and Mitchell 2012). Furthermore, they can shape those worlds as social actors on
their own right, along with older generations (Skelton 2010; Mills 2011; Bartos 2012; Smith 2013).

The concept of agency is a key tenent of children’s geographies and has been employed by researchers to analyze and understand the everyday practices of children and young people (for wider discussions on theoretical approaches to researching the geographies of children and young people, see Vol. 1 of this MRW). In this volume, 15 chapters in total focus on children and young people’s agency in politics, excluding approaches directly linked with citizenship. The first seven of these, forming Section II, provide distinct perspectives to this theme, whereas the latter eight, placed in Section III, share a focus on resistance. Some of the contributions in Section II focus on the possibilities of agency, making visible the conditions under which children can develop as political subjects. Other chapters are more attuned to agencies as they unfold in the present, through youthful active participation in politics broadly defined. Yet as these aspects of agency – often referred to as “being” and “becoming” – are inseparable in everyday life, all of the following chapters discuss both elements with varying emphasis in their respective contributions.

Section II begins with Ann B. Bartos’ extensive review and critical analysis of children and young people’s participation, considering the normative assumptions around agency and discourses of participation, as well as the implications of these ideas for research with children and young people. In their coauthored chapter, Jessica Pykett and Thomas Disney explore some of the political tensions around agency and governance through their analysis of the biopolitical child. Framing the discussion on neuroscience and neuroeducation in predominantly Western contexts, this chapter reviews the potential limits of agency (see also Kraftl 2013) and emerging political questions on children’s capacity in light of new forms of biopolitical knowledge and intervention. Suncana Laketa focuses on geopolitical contestations around youth identity and the related questions of agency. With an empirical focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, she draws on feminist geopolitics to explore the site of the school as part of a wider discussion on the boundaries between “public” and “private” in the context of young people’s lives as active political agents. This theme of children and young people’s active engagement in shaping their own lifeworlds and the wider relationship between politics and place is pervasive in Section II. Kathryne Mitchell and Sarah Elwood’s chapter on “counter-mapping” for social justice outlines their participatory action research project in Seattle, USA, where children discovered historical sites of inclusion and engaged with issues of social justice. The authors outline how this project created possibilities for political agency, emphasizing the role of place in children’s political formation. Zsuzsa Millet and Robert Imre’s contribution examines the preschool as a political space, making visible the power relations involved in a building project and how these connect to broader debates surrounding authority, political agendas, and cultures of democracy. Finally, in their chapter on embodied politics of exclusion and belonging in public space, Sofia Cele and Danielle van der Burgt examine children and young people’s role as active participants in politics, highlighting the importance of the body to understandings of injustice in their everyday lives.
Youthful Practice as Political Resistance

When children and young people are acknowledged as active members of their communities and, following the UNCRC spirit, heard in matters concerning their own lives and provided opportunities to participate, they are typically invited to take part in communicative processes within existing communities, for example, via youth councils and other representative bodies (Matthews and Limb 1998; Cele and van der Burg 2015). This engagement with democratic processes and politics does, however, tend to assume that their experiences, thoughts, and activities should align with existing structures and can be folded together and merged with adult perspectives. When children or young people voice concerns that differ from this schema, they are often positioned as problematic, which raises the question about whether the democratic mechanisms are meaningful or merely tokenistic. This is especially the case when the “child’s voice” is set against adult perspectives, be it in a mundane situation, an institutional setting, or via forms of social protest (Wyness et al. 2004; Kallio 2012; Taft and Gordon 2013). Their practices of resistance can often be framed as out of place and “wrong,” creating a wider moral landscape of appropriate, and by extension inappropriate, political conduct.

In this volume, eight chapters discuss youthful practice as political resistance. Authors of Section III traverse the dynamic boundaries between different forms of political action across diverse international settings. David Marshall examines the embodied resistant practices of Palestinian refugee children, as part of his argument on play as a form of political resistance. In his wider discussion of the sites and scales of these activities, Marshall highlights how social exclusion, surrounding gender for instance, can be reproduced through performances of resistance. In her contribution to examining possibilities and practices of political resistance, Janette Habashi also draws upon a case study of Palestinian childhoods, to exemplify wider debates in children’s political geography. Specifically, she unpacks the concept of “political morality” and its gendered dimensions within an essay on the intersections of power, community, and decision-making. In their coauthored chapter, Harriet Beazley and Mandie Miller take the lives of street children as their focal point in demonstrating how political resistance can be understood as seeking to counter negative identities attributed to certain youths. Specifically, they examine how street children in Cambodia contest their marginalization and employ a “repertoire of strategies” to survive and create alternative communities. Discussing the resistant practices of young adults, Shanene Ditton provides a critical reflection on “cultures of resistance” that are produced by them, often in response to related “moral panics.” She draws upon the example of youth on Australia’s Gold Coast, to argue that young people imaginatively shape place as part of their engagement with cultural politics. The ways in which children and young people actively resist and challenge stereotypes, evidenced in both Beazley and Miller’s discussion and Ditton’s chapter, is approached more forcefully in relation to protest as resistance by Cristina Araujo, Stephen Sadler, and Lesmes Montecino. Their coauthored chapter takes up the recent Chilean student movement as a lens through which to explore how digital social media can be a “catalyst” for young people’s expressions
of political resistance. For Faheema Azmi, Cathrine Brun, and Ragnhild Lund, the notion of resistance is intimately tied to the wider emotional geographies of “becoming” political. They illustrate this through an example of young people in Sri Lanka, whose political action and opportunities for political engagement have been shaped by the specificities of nation-building and state in/exclusion. The final contribution to this section on youthful practice as political resistance is from Kathrin Horschelmann, who provides a conceptual overview of the notion of “dissent.” She reviews key debates on the challenges that young people are seen to pose to the state, as well as critically analyzing ideas of conflict, protest, and power in relation to young people’s politics.

**Youth Citizenship: Practice, Performance and Experience**

Citizenship is widely understood as the relationship between an individual and a polity (see Yarwood 2013 for an excellent overview). It has been conceptualized as a status (Marshall 1950), a series of acts (Isin and Nielsen 2008), as multilayered (Yuval-Davis 1999), and is closely connected to concepts of belonging, identity, community, participation, and democracy. Children and young people are specific kinds of citizens due to the diverse age-based interpretations of rights and responsibilities outlined earlier in this introduction. The process of young people “learning” to be citizens can be shaped by unique institutional geographies (Mills 2013), and contemporary youth citizenship has been theorized as both relational and transnational (Horschelmann and El Refae 2014; Kallio et al. 2015).

In the last section of this volume, eight chapters focus specifically on youth citizenship. Whereas some concentrate on the formal status and practices, others stress the more mundane forms of citizenship and the acts that children and young people perform in their everyday lives. Yet as these aspects of citizenship – often referred to as “P”olitical and “p”olitical – are intertwined, the following chapters also speak to this wider debate on the political geographies of childhood and youth.

Bronwyn Wood begins Section IV with a fascinating genealogy of the “everyday” within work on youth citizenship. Here, she reviews how the “everyday” has been theorized and utilized within geography and a range of other work on young people’s citizenship. As part of this research field, another growing area of study has concentrated on the relationship between (active) citizenship and participation. Barry Percy-Smith provides a critical discussion of this relationship in his chapter, outlining how participation has been framed and politicized in the context of children and young people. Empirical examples from an action research study in Scotland illuminate this in practice. The performance of everyday citizenship and diverse opportunities for young people to participate are then exemplified in a number of chapters in Section IV. Elen-Maarja Trell and Bettina van Hoven explore the various sites of citizenship from their research in rural Estonia. They examine how home, school, and leisure places provide varied possibilities for young people’s participation through a discussion of citizenship as “practice.” Claudia Wong’s chapter discusses how theatre can be conceived of as a participatory
space using the case study of young people’s “performances” (literally) in theatre productions in Singapore. These alternative sites of citizenship expression are used by Wong to advocate for methodological creativity that draws on theatre techniques. The contribution from Catherine Cottrell Studemeyer provides a useful review of work on multicultural citizenship, before discussing how young people negotiate aspects of belonging within culturally diverse societies. Drawing on her research in the Estonian capital of Tallinn, she examines the ambiguity of multicultural citizenship and its influence on young people’s everyday lives. In their coauthored chapter, Alex Jeffrey and Lynn Staeheli focus on how young people in postconflict societies learn new forms of citizenship, with a particular emphasis on civil society. With an empirical focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and South Africa, the authors examine how relationships are reworked in these settings to make space for learning to be citizens. Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli’s chapter on youth citizenship in Lebanon provides an account of how nonstate actors – specifically NGOs – can shape the discourses of youth citizenship in powerful ways. Here, the aims of citizenship pedagogy are explored before an examination of how young people can negotiate and undermine the “norms” of these types of citizenship productions. In the final chapter of this volume, Sarah Mills and Jonathan Duckett review the “place” of the nation in research on youth citizenship and the political geographies of young people more broadly. They outline how devolution in the UK is currently reconfiguring ideas of the nation-state and shaping youthful politics.

Acknowledgments

Kirsti and Sarah would like to express their thanks to all the authors who contributed to Vol. 7 of this MRW, Tracey Skelton as editor-in-chief, and the whole production team. As volume editors, we would also like to acknowledge the support of our respective departments at the University of Tampere and Loughborough University. Kirsti would like to thank the Academy of Finland [SA258341] for the financial support of her work, and Sarah would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/I009315/1].

References


Smith, S. H. (2013). "In the past, we ate from one plate": Memory and the border in Leh, Ladakh. *Political Geography, 35*(1), 47–59.


