

# **Children, politics and Rancière's "method of equality": It's about time**

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## **Introduction**

For most people, inequality between children and adults, coupled with the exclusion of children from politics, appears natural and self-evident. This article challenges conventional political imagination by exploring the possibility of a politics where children are equal to adults.

In recent decades, various thinkers have challenged the naturalness and necessity of the relations between children and adults (Ariès, 1962; Stone, 1977; Kincaid, 1992). Building on developments in childhood studies that argue that these relations constitute a form of political domination (Cordero Arce, 2015; Rollo, 2016, 2018; Sundhall, 2017; Barajas, 2021; Demiral, 2021), the stance known as childism seeks to provide “the needed critical lens for deconstructing adultism across research and societies and reconstructing more age-inclusive scholarly and social imaginations” (Wall, 2022a, p. 257). Childist studies draw on children’s experiences to reshape political common sense and challenge adult-dominated social norms and structures (Burman, 2023). Proposals such as abolishing the age restriction on voting rights (Wall, 2022b), or allowing children to (also) educate adults (Biswas, 2023), are seen as both empowering and inclusive measures benefitting the children, and as contributing to transforming society and politics as a whole.

However, the radical potential of childist politics, which advocates for complete age equality and seeks to revitalize politics, remains largely unexplored. How can we think of children as full political subjects, on par with adults? What presuppositions must be revised to enable this reconceptualization, and how may it affect politics?

Childist scholars devote significant attention to children’s political engagement, particularly in the context of the fight against the climate crisis. They celebrate the recent global trend, where children do not only participate actively in calling on governments, corporations, and fellow citizens to take action, but often also lead the struggle (O’Brien, Selboe and Hayward, 2018; Biswas and Mattheis, 2022; Hilder, Collin and Collin, 2022). However, engagement with the climate crisis – which seems to be driven by young people’s unique stake, as those who will

suffer from its long-term consequences – is not an isolated example. Another prominent instance is the wave of protests that swept large parts of the world in 2011, which included multiple events in which children and youth of all ages played a key role – from “stroller marches” in Israel, through Occupy Wall Street, to the Arab Spring. In all these cases, as Michal Givoni writes (2012, p. 211), “children starred at the frontline of political activity, usually with the full support of their parents rather than against their instructions”.

Furthermore, a look at history reveals that the imperative of separating children from politics – which seems self-evident to many in the present – is in fact a product of modernity. Historian Holly Brewer (2005) demonstrated that prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, social status, rather than age, determined one's authorities and responsibilities in Western Europe. While children of lower social standing worked and suffered severe physical punishments from a very young age, their high-born counterparts were property owners, made economic decisions, and could even be members of parliament. The boundary that young 21<sup>st</sup>-century activists such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai had to cross to engage in politics was not always there. Children were part of politics throughout history, not only as victims but also as active and influential agents. They participated in crusades, ruled as kings, regents, and Dalai Lamas, and led revolutions – Joan of Arc being a prime example. At least in some cases, young age was not a constraint but rather what motivated or enabled their political engagement.

Nevertheless, since unequal relations of power between children and adults are baked into the cake of our very “form of life” (Even Tzur, 2018), it is difficult to even imagine living without them, and even childist scholars hesitate to fully explore this path by outlining an age-inclusive politics. My aim in this article is to take some initial steps along this uncharted path by identifying the root cause of children's political exclusion and proposing a way to overcome it. I argue that this exclusion stems from a particular temporal structure – a teleological conception of progress that, while applied not only to children, makes them a paradigmatic case of political exclusion. Consequently, children's equality must not be posed as a goal to be achieved in the future but as a reality whose impact on politics lies in liberating it from being subordinated to concrete future visions, thereby making it more playful and imaginative.

In the first section of the article, I analyze the relationship between children and time, indicating that the logic of progress and development underpins both children's political exclusion and

European colonialism. By appealing to Lee Edelman (2004) and Faisal Devji (2021) – two thinkers who have keenly understood the central role of children in the temporal structure of modern politics – I highlight the paradoxical nature of such politics, which sacrifices children and adults alike. In the second section, I connect this temporal issue to what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls “the method of inequality” (2016), namely the infinite cycle generated by a promise of future equality that never materializes. Following Rancière, I argue that the only way to break this cycle is to take equality as a starting point to be verified and realized in the present, rather than as a goal to be achieved in the future. Next, I examine the changes that the inclusion of children may bring to politics, arguing that the activity most associated with them – playing – can offer a new way of engaging in politics, free from the oppressive paradoxes of progressive temporality. In the fourth and final section, I assert that such politics does not come at the expense of the children’s well-being, emphasizing that political equality does not entail ignoring differences or disregarding vulnerabilities.

## **1. Children and time**

Consider the following statements, which are the author’s own phrasings of sentences we frequently hear and read all the time:

*They are irrational, unreasonable, irresponsible. They use excessive imagination instead of thinking rationally. They are naïve, inexperienced, and hence dangerous to themselves and others. They cannot look after their own interests, so we must do so for them. This is only temporary, of course. In due time, they will be just like us – rational, reasonable, responsible. We rule over them because we care for them, and we do it today so that we won’t have to do it tomorrow.*

These statements express the logic through which we usually speak of children, but they might just as well have been applied to other groups, such as “savages”, “natives” or “the lower classes”. This logic legitimizes domination by claiming the dominated currently lack something crucial for an autonomy they will only attain in the future. Despite the obvious difference in timescale – years in the former case, generations or even centuries in the latter – the rationale is the same, as is the relation between inequality and temporality. It is a temporal conception of future-oriented development: unlike the static political logic, where a fixed natural distinction pertains between rulers and ruled (Aristotle, 1998, pp. 23–25), it governs according to a logic

that promises a horizon of change – a future equality that will materialize given the right conditions.

This meta-narrative of progress, which positions some people as more advanced than others and deems one's position on a vertical continuum politically relevant, is used to exclude and oppress many groups, and is inherent to European colonialism. As Amy Allen (2016, p. 1) writes, following Edward Said (1993), the idea of progress is “a philosophical and cultural imaginary that justifies the political subjugation of distant territories and their native populations through claims that such peoples are less advanced, cognitively inferior, and therefore naturally subordinate” (see also Tully, 2008). This imaginary, the overcoming of which is the primary task of postcolonial discourse, applies *mutatis mutandis* also to children, whose distant territories are the nursery, the playground and the classroom – places deemed suitable for those “less advanced, cognitively inferior, and therefore naturally subordinate”. Children are seen as not-yet adults, not-yet fully themselves, “not finished but in a state of becoming”, as Hannah Arendt (1961, p. 185) put it, making them inferior and in need of protection. Just like savage natives in colonialist eyes, they are seen in adult eyes as not (yet) capable of taking care of themselves and therefore unable to be equal political subjects.

The connection drawn by the logic of progress between ageism and other inequalities highlights how difficult it is to imagine a society where children are considered equal to adults – and underscores its importance. Arguably, what renders this oppressive logic so effective is its application to children: “wait, child, your time will come, but first you must learn, experience, develop”. Progress proves reliable, effective and natural in this context because in this particular case it usually works: as children grow into adulthood, they indeed become equal to other adults (at least those of the same class, gender, or ethnic origin). But those who used to be at the bottom of the developmental ladder and have now matured are replaced by new children, “newcomers” as Hannah Arendt calls them (1961, p. 176). From an individual's perspective, waiting for growth and development pays off, and the promise is fulfilled: for the adult who does not necessarily remember what it was like to be a child, the logic of progress makes perfect sense. The catch is that applying this logic to children enables its application to other subordinated groups, making the false promises given to these groups ring true. Age equality, therefore, necessitates a reconceptualization of time and politics that can extend far beyond intergenerational relations.

Furthermore, there is an intrinsic link between the conceptualization of the political subject and the nature of political action. Just as children are structured through the developmental-teleological lens, so too is the politics from which they are excluded. This connection is evident in the writings of contemporary thinkers who have examined the complexities of children's relation to politics and time. In *No Future*, Lee Edelman (2004, p. 3) argues that the image of the child stands at the heart of the logic through which we think of politics: the child symbolizes the future, horizon or *telos* of the social order as “the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (Edelman, 2004, p. 3; see also Rosen and Suissa, 2020). This logic, which Edelman calls “reproductive futurism”, is common to all political camps, uniting them in a politics that is “conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child” (Edelman, 2004, p. 3, emphasis and capitalization in the original). Unlike the queer drive for anti-reproductive and unproductive pleasure in the present, politics operates under the heteronormative imperative to push the social order forward, to a presumably better future for our children, while at the same time preserving that order, working “to secure the survival of the social in the Imaginary form of the Child” (2004, p. 14).

The child at the end of politics is “imaginary”, because real children are supposed to be left out of politics. The child, as historian Faisal Devji (2021) writes, is a specter that haunts politics, speaking to the present from a different time, from the future they represent against their will. Politics is therefore inherently paradoxical, for children, in whose name it presumes to speak, remain voiceless in it: adults are supposed to speak in their name without actually listening to them. Yet children are not the only ones sacrificed in this future-oriented politics: adults too are called to sacrifice themselves to leave a better world to their children, in contrast to the modern political logic of self-interest. Thus, while Edelman posits the death drive as a queer alternative to the politics of reproductive futurism, Devji's analysis reveals that this drive lies at the heart of a politics where the ghosts of future children demand the blood of present adults. The future-oriented logic of progress, applied to both politics and its subjects, ultimately returns to devour its own children.

## **2. Children and the circle of inequality**

Can we think of a society in which children are equal to adults as a solution to the paradoxical nature of conventional politics? Is it possible to conceive of politics and of political subjects outside the framework of progress?

I find a better understanding of the trap of progress as well as a potential way out in what Jacques Rancière (2016) calls “the method of equality”. This method characterizes all political theories that claim to promote social justice, from liberalism to Marxism and critical theory. It addresses inequality by applying systematic knowledge of its causes and the appropriate means to achieve equality. However, the problem is that those who suffer from inequality, *because* they suffer from inequality, lack precisely that knowledge and need others to guide them. A vicious cycle ensues, because their inferior social position deprives them of knowledge, while their lack of knowledge perpetuates their social inferiority. This method creates the very problem it seeks to solve by constituting the oppressed and unequal as incapable, thereby perpetuating the existing power hierarchy. As Rancière aptly puts it, “They are where they are because they don’t know why they are where they are. And they don’t know why they are where they are because they are where they are” (2016, p. 134). Those who possess relevant knowledge may very well teach the oppressed and unequal how to escape their inferior position, but in doing so, they only confirm the gap and reproduce the power hierarchy. The movement intended to lead from inequality to equality remains ensnared in inequality.

The crucial element of this vicious cycle, which makes it both effective and paradigmatic, is once again time. The logic of progress manifests itself here in the form of deferment. “Of course”, they say, “equality is good, but to achieve political equality you must first grow, acquire skills and knowledge”. Then again, this logic is never-ending, as there is always more to learn and grow. In the words of Rancière: “The method for reaching equality in an indeterminate future [is] in fact a method for postponing it indefinitely” (2016, p. 135).

The logic of deferment inherent to the method of inequality entraps numerous oppressed groups such as women, the poor, and Indigenous people in a cycle of inequality. But although Rancière never explicitly refers to children as a distinct political group (Author, 2023), it is clearly applicable to them as well. As argued earlier regarding progress, children can even be viewed as a *paradigmatic* example of its application. In his influential work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) Rancière demonstrates how the logic of deferment operates at school, as the master

“always keeps a piece of learning... up his sleeve” (p. 21), to maintain the gap from the students. Thus, the gap is continually reproduced – to more students, more social classes – but is never completely closed. Equality is never fulfilled, regardless of the efforts by those who lag behind.

Accordingly, the challenge with advocating for age equality in politics is not only due to the fact that the hierarchical relations between children and adults are inherent to the current social structure. Following Rancière, it can be seen as a manifestation of a vicious cycle: without children, we are unable to imagine a society in which they are equal partners, and they will not take part in shaping our political imagination until they are equal. Children must play an active role in the effort to liberate the collective imagination from ageist prejudices. Any attempt to imagine a society that is more egalitarian for them without them is bound to fail. The demand “nothing about us without us” is extremely relevant here. But the point is not only that adults cannot spearhead political movements aimed at child equality, although it underscores an inherent limitation of this article, having been written by an adult. The crux of the matter is that framing age equality as a future political goal is doomed to fail, as equality will be deferred indefinitely.

We must therefore reject the logic of deferment, first and foremost with regard to children. This cannot be done gradually. We cannot defer the rejection of deferment – that is the whole point. In place of the “method of inequality” that assumes children are inferior and asks how and when they become equal, a “method of equality” is necessary, in which equality is not the goal but the starting point (Rancière, 2016, p. 139). A decision is needed, a categorical resolution to view children as equals now, in the present – an unconditional equality independent of any future accomplishments, but grounded in the simple fact that they are thinking, speaking, and acting human beings.

Viewing children as our political equals does not mean, of course, ignoring the various ways in which they are denied equality, oppressed and discriminated against. Rather, it means actively rejecting the common assumption that the social positions of children and adults reflect a natural hierarchy of intellectual abilities that will only disappear in the future. In other words, applying the method of equality to children means that instead of attempting to reach an absent equality, political activity is aimed at presenting and demonstrating existing equality, the equal intellectual ability to understand and interpret the world: “The scientist constructing hypotheses and the

young child listening and looking around proceed in the same basic way” (Rancière, 1991, 2016, p. 139). Such politics, according to Rancière, is emancipatory because it shakes off the belief that some people are intellectually superior to others, or that some are more capable or suitable for certain social roles than others.

The emancipation resulting from the realization of equality is not a progressive process; it is out of time and can happen anytime. However, it is by no means easy. It challenges what Rancière refers to as the "distribution of the sensible" (1999, pp. 24–27, 2016, p. 136), which is the way we perceive and think about the world, including how we distinguish between what we see and what we overlook, what we hear and what we ignore. The distribution of the sensible makes the distribution of people into roles and ranks seem self-evident, as the social places they occupy are seen as reflecting “natural” differences in abilities: between those capable of planning and those only capable of executing, as in the examples Rancière analyzes, or between adults and children in our case. Emancipation, on the other hand, involves a *redistribution* of the sensible, a new way of perceiving and experiencing the world that sees equality where hierarchy has once been seen, and hearing meaningful speech where others only hear babies (or “barbarians”) babbling.

Rancière provides an example for an emancipatory moment of redistribution of the sensible in a description published in an 1848 revolutionary workers' newspaper. The description portrays the working day of a construction worker laying the floor of a rich house, but instead of focusing on the difficult labor, long working hours, or oppressive employer, it recounts how the worker lies on the floor of the unfinished house, imagining he is its owner: “Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room [...]. If the window opens out on a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms and glides in imagination toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighbouring residences” (Rancière, 2016, p. 141).

Emancipation, in this case, does not involve knowledge of some hidden truth, but rather its opposite – an illusion. The worker is emancipated through his *imagination*, his capacity to envision what is not present. This use of imagination highlights the equality between the worker and owner – a shared ability to step away from immediate reality, to take time for aesthetic contemplation and creative expression, and to indulge in reverie (Räber, 2023). The worker discovers and expresses his ability to be not only a "speaking animal" (Rancière, 2016, p. 143) capable of understanding language and obeying orders, but also a "literary animal" capable of making poetic, creative, and imaginative use of thought and language.



This, of course, is not the end of the political struggle, but only its beginning. Such exercise of the imagination does not “really” liberate the worker because, in itself, it does not change anything in his social status and living conditions. However, it is the only possible starting point for political action that does not defer equality indefinitely but relies on the assumption that equality already exists – an equality of political thought, speech, and action.

### **3. Child’s play**

As mentioned, Rancière does not specifically address children’s emancipation or their equality to adults. However, there is no reason the method of equality cannot be extended to them. They too are thinking and imagining human beings, and they too can decide that rather than wait for equality to come in the distant future, they had better let their imagination run free and see themselves as equal to adults right now. Yet their situation is more complex than that of other oppressed groups – not only because they do eventually become adults, but also because the very imaginative faculty used by the 19<sup>th</sup> century worker to emancipate himself is used to marginalize them to the playful realm of fantasy, deemed as diametrically opposed to the real political world. Unlike the construction worker, whose reveries are a manifestation of equality since they demonstrate aesthetic and contemplative abilities that are on par with those of his employer, when children start imagining this is often perceived as a confirmation of their inferiority. Hence, to be emancipated they must use their imagination against itself, so to speak – imagine themselves not only imagining, dreaming themselves as being involved in various ways in real-life politics – and realizing it is not just a dream (Author, 2023).

The role of imagination in children’s politics is complex, as it pertains to the fundamental nature of political action. Michal Givoni (2012, p. 220) observes that children – who “preserve the happiness of playing and provide constant reminder that imaginative playing is an inseparable part of human life” – may breathe new life into politics, dependent as it is upon the construction of imaginary worlds of cooperation and commonality between people who do not know each other personally (Sennet, 1977).

This is why it is not the case that the introduction of children into politics “represents nothing more than the logical extension of politics itself as a practice in whose name universal claims have been made in modern times” (Devji, 2021, p. 221). Political equality for children is in fact more than an extension of an already ongoing process of expanding the political sphere to

include more hitherto disenfranchised groups. Children are not one more link in a chain of emancipatory political subjects because their oppression is paradigmatic: it touches upon an issue fundamental to conventional politics – the logic of progress that oppresses countless social groups. Due to the inherent connection between the temporal structure of the political subject and politics itself, when the former is no longer framed through the notion of progress, the latter changes as well.

Givoni's appeal to imaginative playing touches upon the heart of the matter, for children's play – unlike games focused on winning – involves an alternative relationship with time: when playing with dolls or passing the ball “just for fun”, the pleasure lies in the activity itself, independent of any external goal or reward. It allows the player to be immersed in the fullness of a continuous present. Rather than focusing on future achievements, the player moves forward in time according to the inner logic of the game, coming up with new ideas and adapting to unfolding events without imposing any predetermined future vision. For this reason, playing harbors the most radical political potential: it offers politics an alternative temporality, much different from the future-oriented one.

The radical political potential of playing was recognized over two centuries ago by Friedrich Schiller (2016). For the Romantic poet, playing challenged modernity's oppressive imperatives of efficiency, professionalization and rational division of labor, which reduced the human to monotonous activities. Drawing on Kant's (1987) conceptualization of aesthetic experience as the “free play” of the human faculties, Schiller sought to bridge the gap between playing and politics by means of “aesthetic education”. However, this led to a vicious cycle (Tauber, 2006), reminiscent of the one found in Rancière's “method of inequality”, as a free society is a precondition for emancipatory education, and such education is a precondition for free society. Rather than attempting to teach children how to play and experience freedom, then, we can learn from them, invite them to play with us on “our” ground, namely in politics.

This does not mean that playing is inherently political or that there is no distinction between playing and politics. However, in addition to offering an alternative temporal logic, playing can be political by demonstrating the players' abilities to think rationally and creatively. Likewise, politics can undoubtedly be playful when it explores new possibilities and experiments with unfamiliar forms of life. Blurring the line between playing and politics does not necessarily

imply that politics is unserious, but rather that playing too is significant in human life, even if its most devoted participants are quite young. It offers an alternative form of existence that undermines the logic of progress, efficiency and profit, and embraces a more open and creative approach to politics.

Therefore, children's play can emancipate politics from what Edelman (2004) refers to as reproductive futurism, as well as from the paradox of speaking on behalf of children while simultaneously silencing their voices, as described by Devji (2021). We may even go as far as to say that play embodies the unproductive queer *jouissance* that according to Edelman "at once defines and negates us" (2004, p. 5) – defines us as humans while negating us as future-oriented political subjects with fixed identities. Thus, while the imaginary of the child is at the heart of conventional, heteronormative politics, the real, playing child is a queer figure – fluid, unproductive, of openly undetermined identity.

This queerness is not lost when children enter the political sphere. Even when their struggles have a concrete goal, even when this goal is their own emancipation, child activists need not surrender to the teleological logic of reproductive futurism. As we have learnt from Rancière, politics operates by demonstrating equality in the present, transforming the distribution of the sensible, including the way time itself is experienced and engaged with. The manifestation of children's political equality and their presence as playing and imagining actors in the political arena can change the way even adults perceive the world and experience time. It may compel them to give room to playing, *jouissance*, and unproductivity – to an emancipatory politics that challenges the very distinction between present and future. The queer dimension of politics permeates the political sphere, as young activists like Greta Thunberg and many others blur the distinction between child and adult, playing in the grownups' ballpark while changing the rules of the game. In Devji's words (2021, p. 233), child political activists "turn the old categories of political life into roles that can be occupied by people of any age or gender".

Following Gandhi, who argued that children (along with slaves) are the ideal moral subjects, Devji writes:

It was precisely because children and slaves depended on others, whether masters, parents, or teachers, that they could and indeed had to live in the present without any thought of making the future. This allowed them to grasp the present far more concretely

than was possible for adults, for whom the present was always being sacrificed for some vision of the future, in acts of instrumental violence that nevertheless failed to achieve their aim with any certainty (2021, p. 235).

Rather than use children's dependence as a reason for political oppression, children can turn the ideal of adult (and masculine) independence on its head, and pave the way for a new politics based on people's mutual dependence and reliance. This politics would focus on commonality and care, without sacrificing the present for the future or the interests of the contemporary world for some future vision. At the same time, it would not be indifferent to the future or destroy it for the sake of short-term profits. Rather, it would “let the future emerge without trying to predetermine it in a violent idealism” (Devji, 2021, p. 235), namely refuse to impose on the present a preconceived image of the future that will merely reproduce power relations. Unlike conventional politics, where children are seen as representatives of the future but have no voice in the present, in this new politics, children would be acknowledged as constantly developing human beings, carrying others with them towards an open-ended future.

To imagine a politics where children participate as equals, we therefore do not have to preconceive a specific image of such an equal society, out of which a working program can be drawn. This would be the complete opposite of the unique contribution children may bring to politics – emancipation from the need to force a definite future onto the present, limiting countless alternative possibilities we cannot even imagine. That is to say, children speak in politics in the voice of the present.

#### **4. “The child’s own good”**

Before concluding, we may ask whether the political hierarchy between children and adults is not for their own good. Is the exclusion of the young from many aspects of the adult world – politics not least among them – not a necessary precaution? Is it not an advancement – indeed, progress – compared to the past? While it is true that the modern concept of childhood is a social construct, it has also led to significant improvements in recognition of children's special needs. In previous eras, there has been little awareness of children's vulnerabilities and the need to protect them. It seems that adult domination is justified by their need to be protected. Will child equality not literally throw the baby out with the bathwater? Will it not legitimize child conscription, child labor, or child abuse?

Not necessarily. Political equality does not require the disregarding of differences, just as acknowledging differences does not necessitate political inequality. Children require certain protections that most adults do not, but just as with other disabilities – temporary or permanent – we must do everything to prevent them from being disenfranchised wholesale. Advocating for political equality for children does not mean denying their physical and emotional limitations or their need for assistance. It simply rejects the notion that these needs justify political inferiority, and instead emphasizes equality as a political challenge rather than a social danger. The natural, undeniable differences between children and adults are no justification for ageist politics.

As this paper has demonstrated, age inequality does not arise from the need to protect vulnerable children, but from the tyranny of the logic of progress, of which children are the paradigmatic, but by no means only case. The attempt to reimagine children as politically equal to adults is an effort to break free from a conception fundamental to modern politics – an act of antipolitical imagination. Emancipating children is not a mere continuation of progressive processes, but rather a rejection of all forms of progress-oriented politics. As the preceding discussion has shown, the end of progress does not mark the end of emancipatory politics, but rather its inception: through the child, emancipatory politics can be born.

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