

The Childhood of Politics

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Children, along with the mentally ill and prisoners in countries like the United States, are the only category of citizens disallowed from having a say in their own futures. That is to say, they are denied access to politics as a practice devoted by definition to making the future. But children are only the last of a number of such groups that had in the past been formally excluded from participation in political life. Not so long ago they had kept company with slaves, women, the poor, the illiterate, the colonized, and religious or ethnic minorities of many kinds. And the reasons why children cannot be political actors remain the same as those that had prevented all these others from doing so. It is because they are not responsible for themselves that children cannot have a say in deciding both their own future and that of others.

Such tautological arguments, once deployed against women, slaves, and others, are still used to keep children out of political life. These include their congenital immaturity, ignorance, dependence on others, vulnerability to outside influence, and inability to own or control property. Yet children are also at the center of politics insofar as it claims to make a future for them and even does so in their names. They stand in for all the others who have been denied politics by reason of their racial, civilizational, or gendered childishness. And in this way, they differ from prisoners or the mentally ill, whose temporary status is otherwise so similar to that of children without being conceptually central to political thought. Children pose a unique problem for politics, since they cannot consent to making the very future they are meant to represent.

The global visibility of children in contemporary public life, from the Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg (2019a) to the Pakistani advocate for girls' education Malala Yousafzai (2013), may have been made possible by the Internet and social media; more importantly, though, it throws into relief the paradox of politics as an enterprise oriented toward the future. The emergence of children into public life represents nothing more than the logical extension of politics itself as a practice in whose name universal claims have been made in modern times. Such claims were once and are still today made by women, slaves, or the colonized. But what does it

mean for the future to speak for itself in the voices of children? How does their presence expose the limits of politics as a way of making this future?

Ghosts in the Machine

Childhood is not a natural, to say nothing of a biological, category, one that can decisively be contrasted with adulthood. To reprise Jean-Jacques Rousseau's argument denying any difference between the physically weak and the physically strong significant enough to justify the latter's political domination, we know that there will always be children more intelligent and responsible than some adults. And as demonstrated by how the age required for sexual consent, voting, driving, or criminal responsibility varies the world over and changes over time, childhood is also a notional and culturally defined category. It was invented in eighteenth-century Europe as a distinct ontological and phenomenological state for the first time (Ariès 1962). It was in this Age of Reason that children were defined by their inability to exercise reason and so consent. It was therefore the child who served as a model for depriving others of political agency on the basis of their emotional or civilizational immaturity (Brewer 2005).

For the purposes of my argument, then, *childhood* does not refer to any biological or even legal category but serves as a rhetorical device to separate one world of action, responsibility, or experience from another. My particular concern is with the consequences of defining childhood by its inability to make a future. It is a subject that has received literary treatment in novels like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, which, in a retelling of *Robinson Crusoe*, deals with how children shipwrecked on a desert island end up reinventing the brutal politics of adults, as if to suggest adults' own childishness (Golding 1954). I shall return to the mirror that children offer up to adults but want to note here how different the question of children in politics is from the huge literature on "youth," whose focus tends to be on the culture of adolescent rebelliousness or unemployment, funneled into political radicalism in both positive and negative ways. If children pose a problem for politics because they are deprived of and exist outside it, youth do so from within its realm by representing political excess.

If children cannot participate in politics or speak for their future, adults must do so in their name and for a future they cannot share. This is why they represent children in political life as trustees, their acts meant to become altruistic, disinterested, and sacrificial, at least in this respect. It is this appeal to act against their own self-interest that characterizes the familiar invocations for adults to leave a better world for their children. Departing from the conventional logic that would attribute all politics to the promotion of one's own interest, such an imperative diverts

modern visions of political behavior into an older narrative of pastoral care. This had also characterized the trusteeship that free adult males once exercised on behalf of women and slaves as well as the poor and colonized, thus showing how children not only represent the remnants of this past but repeatedly bring it to the fore again.

If adults are asked to sacrifice their own future for that of children, this both reinforces and in fact expands the future-oriented nature of politics, while at the same time depriving it of meaning as a form of self-interest (interest being the fundamental unit of liberal and indeed modern politics). Of course, there can and will be attempts to reconcile these two kinds of futurity, but my point is that the child's very presence as a voiceless representative of the future compels the emergence of sacrificial politics as a trope, no matter how sincere or hypocritical it may otherwise be. Normally it is only exceptional events like wars that provide the grounds for such a sacrifice; thus children are excluded from the exceptional by reason of their quotidian presence. Here, too, the child poses a significant limit to normative and liberal conceptions of political action.

By entering politics as representatives of the future and thus occupying its conceptual center, children represent an adult status they have not yet achieved. They cannot, in other words, speak in their own name but only in that of their future selves, something that globally prominent activists like Thunberg and Yousafzai routinely and deliberately do. Like the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in Charles Dickens's ([1843] 2016) famous children's story, *A Christmas Carol*, the child in public life can only speak prospectively or spectrally from another time. There is always something of the occult about such figures, who often serve as mediums for other people and other worlds. They do not and indeed cannot speak for themselves but manifest some truth of which they may not themselves be aware, as familiarly expressed in the biblical idiom "out of the mouths of babes."

In the astute and amusing diary of her travels in the United States and Canada in 2019, Thunberg (2020) describes how important her childhood is for adults who seek a kind of oracular wisdom and moral chastisement from her:

That same day I'm called to testify in the U.S. Congress. But it just feels wrong. What am I supposed to do or say there? I want the people in power to listen to the science, not to me. . . . And the fact that the responsibility to communicate [the science] falls on me and other children should be seen for exactly what it is—a failure beyond all imagination.

Back in Europe, she is interviewed by a journalist who also expects a child's wisdom from her:

When I then start talking about carbon budgets he gives up and interrupts. He knows very well he won't be able to use anything of what I'm now saying in his article. People want something simple and concrete, and they want me to be naive, angry, childish and emotional. That is the story that sells and creates the most clicks.

"But uh," he continues, "how are we going to solve this climate issue?"

Just the fact that this question is asked to me—a teenager—over and over is absurd. But not as absurd as the fact that the climate and ecological emergency is being reduced to a "problem" that needs to be "fixed." (Thunberg 2020)

There is another way in which children in public life become mediums, this time not for their future selves but instead for their parents or other adults and so the past. Child stars, among the earliest minors to lead extensive public lives without being either royal or divine personages, have become the stereotypical figures of such vampiric mediation. The desire of parents to fulfill themselves through children is one way in which the profound political suspicion of illicit influence and exploitation manifests itself, one that has been used in the past to disqualify women, the illiterate, and the unpropertied from exercising agency in politics. It is no surprise, therefore, that all children in public life are inevitably seen by their critics as speaking in the voices of adults, as either victims or willing accomplices.

Mediation is an ambiguous phenomenon that calls up ghosts from the past as much as the future. But gods and monarchs surely perform the same function, their ghostly legitimacy deriving from the past but meant to be perpetuated into a future in which they will have themselves become spirits. Like children, such divine and royal figures are held hostage by these absent temporalities, such that their role in the present becomes a kind of interlude or threshold, one that calls for some great deed if it is not to crush its subject between past and future. And this provides yet another example of the way in which the child in its very political deprivation nevertheless continues to possess a certain connection to power and so to pose an undefined threat to the very politics in which it apparently plays no part.

Unlike women or slaves, whose politics is defined by the struggle to escape their status, children depend on and even emphasize their lack of voice to become public figures. It is because children have no political status or voice in the present that they can serve as mediums in this way, alongside the equally voiceless animals who have traditionally functioned as occult familiars. The relationship between children and animals is based on their shared lack of language, which is one of the classical requirements defining humanity as much as politics. Of course, animals do not have

a future in the sense that children are meant to, the animals' status being permanent. And it is as purely present beings that they represent the conceptual limits of politics even better than children.

More than children, to say nothing of women, slaves, outcaste minorities, or those who have been colonized, the animals with which all these categories of people have traditionally been associated in their very silence embody the blind spot of political thinking more generally. They are eternal mediums who have conventionally been understood by varied and generally occult kinds of anthropomorphism and are thus forever being recovered for humanity in the moment of their expulsion, as its constitutive exterior. Politics, too, cannot do without the animal whose alleged relations or similarities with certain groups of people provide the grounds for their political exclusion, while at the same time constituting a threshold figure whose surpassing if not violent suppression comes to define both human and political maturity.

Jacques Derrida is the theorist of "spectrality" as a way of thinking about the time of politics. His book *Specters of Marx* begins with the famous invocation in *The Communist Manifesto* of a specter haunting Europe (Derrida 1994: 2). Like the child who might become its medium in politics, communism for Marx and Engels was a ghost from the future. But as Derrida reminds us in his subsequent discussion of the ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, such specters and their demands emerge in fact from a time that is "out of joint." Ghosts, in other words, represent not the past or future so much as the disruption of temporality itself conceived as a linear progression, one whose fracturing allows different temporalities to seep into one another. And it is precisely this spectral role that children play in politics, their presence there always untimely and indicating a state of disruption.

But what would it mean to set this time right, which Hamlet sees as being his cursed fate? Is the child meant to retreat to its speechless and so animal-like present by resigning the role of medium for a future self? Insofar as the visibility of children in political life signals a state of exception in some way, it by the same token ties them to the founding moments of all political regimes, which can be understood as the establishment of new ways of grasping the future. In this sense they foretell if not make possible the exercise of sovereign power, whether revolutionary or reactionary, that Carl Schmitt (1985) famously described as a state of exception. And yet, as I have pointed out, children represent not simply exceptionality in politics but also its permanent limit, if not contradiction. Their public presence thus indicates continuity as much as change.

It is one thing for children to become the mediums of specters from the past or future, but how are we to describe the figure of the child itself as a ghost? For it is

this possibility that children repeatedly raise in politics. They appear in public life to warn of the future's annihilation, as Greta Thunberg does so frequently when speaking about the destructive potential of climate change. And in doing so they not only foretell the destruction of their future selves but become their prospective ghosts in the process. This is the role child ghosts play in literature, folklore, and film, defined as they are by the loss of their own futures. The child in politics is therefore haunted by the future in one way and by the past in another, while at the same time haunting the present by depriving it of meaning.

This is clear in Thunberg's famous speech before the UN General Assembly in 2019, in which she speaks from and for different times as a witness to the future and its judgment upon the present:

This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is. You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. (Thunberg 2019b)

Without a future, can the present possess political meaning, or must it only have moral import of the sacrificial kind I described for adults, who are asked to act on behalf of a future they will not share? Another way in which the deprivation of a future ends up depoliticizing the present has to do with the heedless, or more properly *nihilistic*, concern with momentary pleasure or convenience that Thunberg inveighs against. Our refusal to act against global warming, like the possibility of nuclear annihilation, whose apocalypse had preceded it in the popular imagination, suggests that we have accepted our doom or at least that of our children at some level. And yet, apart from the ever-increasing tribe of billionaires who benefit from this crisis, our pleasures are too insubstantial to justify abandoning the future in this way.

Thunberg's argument is that the politics we engage in is sacrificial in the wrong way, renouncing politics itself along with the future by refusing to take it seriously. Driven by habit, convenience, and sheer incapacity while being shoved into the

maw of the global economy, our politics has become a meaningless set of superstitions about the future, or gambles on it that are defined in purely economic terms. Against this Thunberg suggests, we have seen, another kind of sacrifice for adults to engage in, yet it is one that is contradicted by her simultaneous reliance on a political rationality motivated by the future. Her struggle is meant to rescue politics and so the future, though she can only do this by speaking as a child from outside its domain, while at the same time asking adults to sacrifice their own future and so politics.

Changing Places

The problem that the child as medium or ghost poses for politics is therefore two-fold. On the one hand, children emerge in public life to speak for a threatened future that they would restore by the temporary suspension of a politics based on self-interest in the short term. In this way they represent the exceptional moment of sovereignty and political founding. On the other hand, their advocacy of sacrifice presents a permanent and as it were structural threat to such a politics of the future. And this means that children stand in the way of the very sacrifice they encourage by representing the future. This is why they must suffer or sacrifice not in their own right, since they represent another time and stand outside politics, but by enacting the role that adults are expected to play in a vicarious or pedagogical performance.

If it is not to become pure victimization, the suffering of children always entails their performance or rather ghosting of a politics that adults are otherwise meant to conduct. The Palestinian teenager Ahed Tamimi, for example, became a worldwide sensation when a video of her punching and slapping heavily armed Israeli soldiers went viral on social media in 2018 (Tamimi et al. 2018). No doubt encouraged by her luxuriant blond hair and other “European” features including skin tone, eye color, and clothing, Tamimi’s celebrity nevertheless derived from the fact that she quickly came to represent fearless and unarmed civilian resistance against military rule. That she was treated like an adult by the Israelis simply accentuated the dissonance between the two statuses Tamimi occupied, neither of which could trump the other and each of which was seen as an impersonation by one side in the conflict.

Malala Yousafzai not only endured an attempt on her life but did so by taking upon herself the adult task of teaching girls as she herself would have liked to be taught. And in doing so she short-circuited any linear relationship between past, present, and future. Greta Thunberg endures attacks from powerful adults like the American president while suffering the inconveniences of doing without luxuries like air travel, sacrifices that themselves run the risk of being seen as extravagant.

This particular example is also ironic, because arriving in New York to address the United Nations about the short time we have to address climate change involved Thunberg taking a long time by contemporary standards to sail there from Europe. But then the present is the only arena in which children can act in the name of the future, which in Thunberg's case is one that she wants to forestall as long as possible.

If a Thunberg or a Yousafzai wants to reclaim the future and so politics itself in a time that is out of joint, their contemporaries among the teenage "jihadi brides" who left Europe to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria appeared to be intent on risking if not forsaking theirs. Like their globally admired counterparts, these young women occupied two times and roles simultaneously, impersonating adults by embracing sexuality and violence while yet remaining children in their apparently voluntary renunciation of political agency in the Islamic State. Like all children in public life, they were also suspected of being seduced or groomed by adults, or at least of consenting to their inveiglement in a way that put their status as victims into question.

Can their actions also be associated with the sacrificial ones described above, which depend not on renouncing the present for the future, in the way of ordinary politics but rather on doing so in the latter's absence? In their own view these jihadi brides, to use the European media's salacious name for them, might well have been rushing into adulthood by sacrificing their own present for Islam's future, which seems to be the view taken by their countries of citizenship. Shamima Begum, for example, one of three young women from London who in 2015 left to join ISIS in Syria, was stripped of her citizenship though she had been a minor when departing and is not known to have broken any British law (Grierson 2020). Yet it remains her childhood and her sacrifice of the future it is meant to represent that give Begum both her media allure and a genealogy going back to the Children's Crusade.

Inspired as it might have been by vague notions of glamour, romance, and adventure, their voluntary renunciation might be what differentiates jihadi brides from the so-called child soldiers pressed into service in the African civil wars of the 1990s. Yet Ahmadou Kourouma's critically acclaimed novel, *Allah n'est pas obligé* (2000), about child soldiers in West Africa that is also narrated in the voice of one, refuses to sentimentalize them as victims. He shows us instead how the adults involved in the fighting are equally if not more "childish" in their superstitions and fantasies, thus illustrating the now familiar process by which the child in political life switches places with adults. Or as we might say with Wordsworth, the child here is truly father of the man.

By their sexualization, jihadi brides raise the issue of gender more clearly than some of the other children in politics. This was especially true of Shamima Begum, who had three children by the militant she was married off to, each one dying as

she endured the rigors of war and imprisonment. The last died while she was fighting the British government's refusal to let her return to London even if only to face trial. Her story also reminds us of the fact that women and children are bound together more closely than they are to slaves, prisoners, the poor, and others who had once been excluded from political life. As a child who became a woman to produce children for Islam, Begum literally embodied the gendered work that remains crucial to the making of childhood. But what other work does the coming together of the child and the woman do?

Greta Thunberg speaks of herself as a child in a generic and indeed conceptual fashion. Malala Yousafzai, on the other hand, was attacked by the Taliban because of her gender and apparent transvestism in wanting to obtain a formal education. But whatever its cause, the large numbers of girls or young women to achieve visibility in public life merits attention. Does their gender allow such figures to double down on and dramatize the contrast between those who can and those who cannot act politically? Or does it display the child's link to an older world of associations? I suspect that gender here works to emphasize not the child's status as victim so much as the surprising power it exerts from outside politics and its typically masculine representatives. And in this way, women are pulled back into the world of children rather than allowed to represent their future adulthood and reproduction.

One of the earliest children to receive global attention as an activist was Iqbal Masih, who like Yousafzai was also from Pakistan (Crofts 2006). Surprisingly absent from the narrative of Yousafzai's life, given his similar fight for children to be in school rather than working long hours under duress, Masih had been put to work in a carpet-weaving workshop at the age of four during the mid-1980s, in order to pay off a loan by his impoverished parents. In 1993, at the age of ten, he managed to escape, at the second attempt, the brutal treatment meted out to him, and was helped by an organization dedicated to ending bonded labor. Masih then went to school and campaigned worldwide for the rights and education of children until he was shot dead, at the age of twelve, very likely by an assassin from the carpet-weaving industry, which depended on child labor.

The fact that Masih was killed while visiting his parents on Easter Sunday is no coincidence, since they were Christians converted from a low caste and so doubly or triply minoritized and discriminated against. He represented, therefore, a medium for several categories of people simultaneously, not least the slaves who, like women, had been associated with children in the past. Masih spoke from a future he had already suffered, having been deprived of a childhood and so forced into adulthood before his time. As with Tamimi or Yousafzai, but not Thunberg, it was this experience that constituted what was adult about him. Like other children in politics, he

had to play the role of child as well as that of adult, while fighting to separate them in the lives of others. But unlike most of his peers, Masih invoked not the adult future of politics so much as the lost past of the child deprived of it and turned into a ghost.

It should be clear by now that children from outside European and American societies, or at least from minority or non-White backgrounds, dominate the ranks of their peers in politics. Is this because non-Western societies are seen as being more violent in making victims and so also untimely adults out of children? Or might it be the case that Greta Thunberg and others, including the children who followed her in striking for the cause of climate change at school, have inherited their curious role in politics from the erstwhile Third World, in theory if not experience? The prospective politics of children in the West was on display in September 2020, when four Portuguese minors and two young adults took thirty-three countries to the European Court of Human Rights for their carbon emissions as well as the climate impact their consumers and companies have on peoples elsewhere (Watts 2020).

The only situation that comes to mind of children in the West speaking from a notionally adult experience as activists rather than as actual or potential victims was during 2018, in the aftermath of a series of school shootings in the United States. These included protests, lie-ins, and a movement to have companies divest from the gun lobby (represented by the National Rifle Association) that mobilized hundreds of students and many schools under the sign of “March for Our Lives” and the “National School Walkout.” As with all American responses to school shootings, however, these could not be sustained. Yet it is only very recently that children in the West have been able to take on a public role of this kind, being confined previously to playing that of victims, entertainers, or, with a longer genealogy, monarchs or fighting and martyred saints like Joan of Arc.

In a familiar move, however, it is the European Thunberg who represents a universal and global cause for whose prosecution she must address politicians and people in the West. For as she makes clear in her speeches, it is they who are responsible for the climate crisis in both senses, as its primary perpetrators and, by reason of the wealth and power they possess, its potential opponents. Her Asian peers, by way of contrast, speak to issues seen as being particular to the world beyond the West. And it is our inability to fit someone like Shamima Begum into either of these worlds that, apart from her association with the violence of the Islamic State, make her such a difficult subject to deal with. For the threat of militant Islam is that it cannot be confined to specific groups of people or parts of the world, and so puts into question the division of the globe and its politics into universal and particular types.

If the future and so politics speaks more urgently through children in the world outside the West, this may be due to the fact that since colonial times such places have represented the sites of child marriage, child labor, and the loss of childhood more generally. Yet these children had in the past rarely escaped the status of victims, and seldom played any role in politics apart from as an issue to be debated by adults. Something seems to have changed globally on this front in recent decades, so that the experience of Iqbal Masih no longer served to define him only as a victim but allowed him access to a knowledge otherwise reserved for adults. Such experience now produces a knowledge that politics is meant to prevent children from possessing, and so speaking from and for their future as adults. Perhaps it is the inability or unwillingness of many non-Western societies to demarcate separate realms for children and adults that has made this innovation possible, even if their recognition of the child's adult experience is premised upon the desire to finally produce such a demarcation.

The child activist, in other words, desires to put down or transfer the burden of politics to others, and is in this way a self-canceling figure. And yet such children also encourage one another to take on such roles, not least because, as their present-day representatives seem to understand, they cannot play these parts as adults, and require successors to do so. In an essay contemplating her graduation from college and so looking back upon a childhood she can no longer claim, Malala Yousafzai describes this past as a time spent observing and judging the political failures of adults from the vantage point of someone unable to engage in politics. Yet this failure also resulted in the untimely experiences that fitted out her contemporaries and successors to take up adult burdens more effectively:

Yet we have long understood that a lot of work will fall on our shoulders. We watched while those in power failed to protect refugees and religious minorities, stop attacks on schools, ensure justice for Black and brown people, or even acknowledge that climate change exists. We have grown up knowing that the world we inherit will be broken. In many ways, we are more prepared for the current crisis because we've had a lot of practice fighting for change. I was 11 years old when I started advocating for girls' education in Pakistan—and 15 when the Taliban tried to kill me for speaking out. (Yousafzai 2020)

The novel emergence of children in politics is not due to the loss of childhood in a compression of temporality made possible by some emergency, whether a civil war or natural disaster. Neither is it simply the consequence of social media and the making of a global audience with the triumph of neoliberalism after the Cold War. Crucial instead is the point I began this essay with, the fact that children are the last

remaining category of citizen barred from engaging in political life. This singularity has resulted from the universalization of modern politics, which is compelled to include more and more people in its logic, however hierarchically they may be situated within it. The instrumentality of such a politics based on making the future has also marginalized all other ways of claiming freedom, a role once played by religion as much as philosophy, to assume a near-hegemonic power in social life.

It is only in this situation that childhood assumes a new and negative power as the chief if not only form of life and citizenship that lies outside the logic of politics. On the one hand, then, children threaten to join their former partners among women, slaves, or the conquered and colonized when they take on public roles that entail significant political consequences. On the other hand, though, they can only join them by reinforcing their own status as political outsiders, in so doing putting into question the very logic they would like to direct in support of some cause. The public lives of children, I have suggested, are given meaning by a kind of temporal refraction, in which they serve as occult mediums or even speak as ghosts in their own right. But the split and spectral subjects this produces for politics also present it with an impasse.

We have seen that one consequence of children speaking in the name of their adult selves is to stretch the future whose making defines politics, so that it is no longer determined by the short-term projections of electoral cycles and even self-interest. This results in a sacrificial mode of “parental” action whose trusteeship repudiates self-interest as a category, because its sacrifice is a permanent and structural condition rather than some temporary or emergency measure. Another consequence of the child’s public life is the reversal of roles it makes possible. If it is children who must now represent the spirit of adulthood, then adults themselves have been turned into children in the process, there to take instruction on their true selves. Apart from fragmenting the political subject in this way, such a situation dispenses with its generational reality to make it a concept freed from biology.

Thunberg (2020) describes a number of such reversals in the diary of her trip to the United States and back to Europe in 2019. She appears to be struck by the self-infantilizing character of American citizenship, whose insouciance about health and environmental concerns comes directly from corporate marketing and the image it sells of quotidian life in a democracy:

Who is the adult in the room? That question has been asked over and over again during the last year. But this question reaches a whole new level when I end up standing in front of the food court in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, D.C. Fast food chains. Hamburgers, candy and ice cream

stores. Dunkin Donuts. Baskin Robbins. Here you find the most powerful policymakers in the world sitting in their suits, while drinking pink milkshake, eating junk food and candy.

It is as if the spectral characters released onto the political stage by children without voices of their own make for a play of impersonations. Or better still, they turn the old categories of political life into roles that can be occupied by people of any age or gender. In itself, this is not a new phenomenon, since political representation, with its theatrical origins, also involves role playing. But more apposite is the theater of devotion in which a divine being not only takes human form but is celebrated by believers who in turn take on the roles of those who had known such sacred figures. The *imitatio Christi* is one example of this, where it is not only Jesus himself but all those around him who become models for Christian emulation or identification. It is not accidental that the first such models are Mary, Joseph, and other adults who witnessed his birth and childhood.

The same can be said for the commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom with the Shia, a tragedy that is foreshadowed even in his childhood and includes children among its eventual victims. And then there is the story of Krishna, who not only "plays" at being a child, lover, and warrior but encourages his devotees to perform the roles and feel the wonderment, passion, or joy of his foster mother, childhood friends, lovers, or disciples in a *lila*, or blissful playing, of the kind children are chiefly meant to enjoy. In other words, children are crucial in all these practices of impersonation, which involve the switching of gender, generation, and other biographical characteristics. By enabling this form of impersonation, children in public life liberate political roles from biology in a way that the freedom or political inclusion of women, slaves, and others has never managed to do.

Much more than mere empathy and far removed from political representation, such a play of roles involves not just temporary and ritualized forms of identification but, importantly, a disruption of temporality itself. Allowing for time travel, it takes the present into the past while projecting the latter into the future. And it is this shake-up of linear time that robs adults of the biological distinction on which their political status is based, allowing women, children, and slaves to haunt the roles whose loss of biographical integrity has turned them into concepts or categories more faithful to political thought than the kind of citizenship that is still defined by free and adult males who belong to specific social groups. It is in such ways as these that children, along with all those who continue to lack political voice, nevertheless make a ghostly appearance in public life.

In her reflections on graduating from Oxford in the midst of a pandemic, and

therefore of being robbed like all her peers of a generational milestone different from the childhood she had lost, Malala Yousafzai (2020) goes on to list the names of young women like herself who had as children also become activists in public life. Refusing their exceptionality by sheer dint of listing their growing numbers, Yousafzai is able to detach children and therefore adults, too, from any biological fixity and even reverse their accepted roles, in chiding the latter for their scant participation in political life:

Licipriya Kangujam was only seven when she challenged politicians in India for their failure to enact climate change laws. Eleven-year-old Naomi Wadler quieted a crowd of thousands at the 2018 March for Our Lives in Washington, D.C., when she urged them to remember Black girls and women affected by gun violence. After her family fled Somalia's civil war, Hamdia Ahmed spent the first seven years of her life in a refugee camp; by the time she was a teenager, she was campaigning for displaced people everywhere. And, of course, there's my friend Greta Thunberg. . . . I'm often asked to give advice to children and I tell them, "You don't have to wait to be an adult to be a leader." Young people are leading, but our world has too many problems for one generation to solve. So today my advice is for our elders: It's not too late for you to change.

Instead of children having to wait to enter politics and behave like adults, then, it is now adults who are told they still have the time to do so by imitating their own children. As with Hamlet, the ghost has taken precedence over the flesh-and-blood man who must now do his bidding by following the course of justice, morality, and sacrifice rather than self-interest. And in doing so, of course, adults are asked to conduct a politics that departs from itself and turns into its opposite.

Conclusion

To my knowledge, M. K. Gandhi is the only modern thinker to have foregrounded the role of children in moral and, as a consequence, political life. And he did so precisely by attending to the child as a figure, much like the animal in this respect, that possesses no future in its own right. In his 1928 commentary on an ancient Sanskrit text called the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Gandhi (1980: 49) argued that children and slaves represented ideal moral subjects. In doing so, of course, he overturned conventional notions of moral perfection, in which free and adult males were understood as subjects of this kind because of their independence, knowledge, and serious investment in shaping the future. But for Gandhi these very characteristics were what disquali-

fied men from exercising moral and even political agency, while admirably suiting children for it.

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. And even if the future being planned in this way did end up coming about, Gandhi thought, it could never escape the violence of its birth and, in addition, brought along with it any number of unforeseen consequences that gave rise to new problems and so invariably undermined the moral and political foundation it was intended to provide.

By pressing so assiduously to achieve only very specific ends, the violent instrumentality of politics was idealistic and therefore eventually self-destructive. Children and slaves, however, by inhabiting the present more fully than others and giving their acts moral meaning in its terms, were unwilling to sacrifice the present for the future, and instead were able to do the reverse, prizing virtuous means over desired ends. And this meant that they left the future open to a number of possible ends, whose goodness was guaranteed by the very virtue of their means. This, Gandhi thought, was a far more realistic and even pragmatic way of behaving, one that made space for the incalculable in political life, if only so as not to be destroyed by it.

While he did not approve of slavery, of course, Gandhi paired slaves with children not only in a reference to their historical association but very deliberately in order to turn the traditional ideal of masculine independence on its head. His understanding of slavery as a form of experience leading to freedom also bears comparison to Hegel's (1977: 111–18) famous passage on the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There, too, it was the slave's laborious grappling with an obdurate world in the present that eventually allowed him to surpass what had become the master's purely ideal domination of it. But where Hegel's dialectic was nothing if not historical, seeking to push history into the future, for Gandhi the present remained the site of moral action overshadowing politics.

By focusing on the present in actions deprived of instrumentality, children and slaves were able to let the future emerge without trying to predetermine it in a violent idealism. And without this urge to make the future, violence exercised in the present would not be perpetuated in it. This made every moment of the future another present, as if an instantiation of Bishop Berkeley's (1988) theory about the nonexistence of the external world in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human*

Knowledge. Yet in a history made up of an innumerable series of presents, politics necessarily took second place to morality, if it did not entirely wither away. Gandhi tied the future-making of politics to what he called modern civilization, by which he meant a world defined by the addiction to consumption that characterized industrial capitalism. And he seemed to think that it could be halted by social relations organized along other lines.

Let us take a closer look at Gandhi's ideal child, whom he most frequently described in the mythological figure of Prahlad. The son of a demon king who unsuccessfully subjected him to a variety of tortures because of his virtue, Prahlad eventually brought about his father's death by praying to Vishnu for deliverance. The king had received a boon that prevented him from being killed by man or beast, indoors or out, by day or night, or by anyone born of a woman. One dusk, while boasting of his invulnerability to Prahlad, the king kicked one of the pillars of his palace walls, daring Vishnu to appear. The pillar split open and out of it emerged Vishnu as half-man, half-lion and proceeded to tear the demon apart. Why would Gandhi choose this graphically violent story of a parricide, as much as of a deliverance, to illustrate his ideal of childhood?

The story of Prahlad is one of sacrifice, but unlike biblical and other monotheistic narratives in which it is the child who must be sacrificed by a parent, as in the story of Abraham and Isaac, here the situation is reversed. This makes the child into the primary moral agent rather than a potential, even if consenting, victim. Yet Prahlad doesn't actually perform the sacrifice himself or take any part in it. All he does is endure his father's torments and pray to Vishnu. In this way, he focuses entirely on virtuous deeds in the present and does not even consider the future that generally gives sacrifice its meaning. The fact that Vishnu appears at a moment of timelessness, while occupying no particular place or species, sets aside all the regular coordinates of human action. And this plays into Gandhi's vision of salvation as the incalculable element in moral and political life, one he often described as the incarnation of Vishnu on Earth.

Gandhi's ideas may well owe something to the cultural logic manifested in stories like that of Prahlad, which was well known to his Indian audience. But the emergence of children in contemporary politics, albeit outside its logic, also presents us with the kind of possibility that Gandhi had already espied in their name. For while an Iqbal Masih, Ahed Tamimi, Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, and even Shamima Begum might push for a certain kind of adult future in old-fashioned political terms, they can do so only from a time and place beyond its instrumentality. And it has been their more or less inadvertent questioning of such a politics that, I have tried to show, has made them into global figures. Perhaps the Mahatma

was right after all, and we can inherit the future primarily in moral terms for which children are the prophets.

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