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The Children Who Have No Part: A Rancièrian Perspective on Child Politics

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ABSTRACT

Children have always been an essential part of politics. However, the political struggles in which children are involved are rarely, if at all, for the equality of children as such. Struggles for the benefit of children are nearly always led by adults, focusing on children's rights in an adult-dominated world. In this paper, I develop the possibility of Children's political struggle for equality, informed by the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière. I present the educational backdrop for Rancière's claim that all intelligences are equal, and argue that it implies that children are by nature equal to adults, hence also equally capable of political action. By demonstrating that children are a "part of those who have no part" in the existing sociopolitical order, I examine the possibility of a collective political subject of children, and articulate the implications child politics may have.

KEYWORDS

Jacques Rancière; children; child politics; childism; equality

1

Children have always been an essential part of politics. They have fought and suffered in wars, travelled and married for diplomatic purposes, and have been active in various struggles against injustice. In our times as well, young people throughout the world are highly involved political agents.¹

It is no coincidence that nowadays, their presence is especially conspicuous with relation to the climate crisis. Its long-term implications place the young in a position of interested victims, and push them to object to current policies made exclusively by adults – the traditional political subjects who would most likely not be around to pay for the consequences of their short-term policies. Young people such as Swedish teen Greta Thunberg are now at the forefront of the struggle for the planet's future, as rallies, demonstrations and strikes organised by youth movements and student organisations draw the media attention and spur adults to join in.²

Another prominent example for children's involvement in contemporary politics is taken from the Israeli context, in which schoolchildren are highly involved in, and often lead the struggle against the deportation of asylum seekers and migrant workers and their children, many of whom were born in Israel.³ In this case, the unique position of the young activists owes to the fact that the sword of deportation is swung over their

fellow classmates, children their own age whose lives and dreams are abruptly interrupted. In taking active part in the struggle, they seem to ask, are those old enough to be persecuted, arrested and deported too young to take a political stand?

Although their presence in politics is especially prominent when they have a unique relation to the harm or the victims of the issue in question, as in these two examples, children are increasingly visible in a wide array of other political struggles, from fighting for animal rights to protesting against oppressive regimes.⁴ This is not an entirely new phenomenon: there are numerous historical examples of children's political involvement, and a vast literature of youth activism examines their contribution from various perspectives.⁵ The relative immunity of young people to the coronavirus may conceivably further expand their role in the public-political sphere in the near future.

However, the political struggles in which children are involved are rarely, if at all, for the equality of children *as such*. Children remain subordinated to adults, and even after demonstrating their political agency and joining or leading the fight against all kinds of wrongs, the age hierarchy remains relatively intact. The approach sometimes called "childism",⁶ which aims at challenging the inequality between children and adults, is still far from consensual. Consequently, struggles for the benefit of children are nearly always led by adults, focusing on children's rights in an adult-dominated world, that is, on (minor) improvements within a framework that remains essentially unequal.

Is it possible to emancipate child politics from the discourse of children's rights, and focus instead on emancipating them from the adult domination? Are the power relations between children and adults a form of political oppression to be condemned? Can children be active political subjects also in a struggle against their own inferior position *as children*?

In this paper, I offer positive answers to these questions, informed by the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière. Rancière's political writings are not without references to children and their oppression by adults. His seminal book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a university lecturer who taught adults; nevertheless, the book refers explicitly to school education as paradigmatic of traditional, stultifying education. At school, argues Rancière, the child first encounters the claim that she cannot learn without being explained to, and the hierarchical difference between superior and inferior intelligence – on which academic studies also rely – is most evident in the relation between children and adults. The generational undertones of the intellectual hierarchy Rancière critiques are further emphasised when he argues that the role of an ignorant schoolmaster – who imposes his will rather than intelligence on the students, thereby forcing them to use their own intelligence and emancipating them from the hierarchical myth – can be played by every father. Every father can educate and emancipate his children.⁷

Children do not become political subjects in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, however, and by no means challenge the hierarchical relations normally prevailing between children and adults. Although the book reveals the fundamental equality of all intelligences and denounces the hierarchical façade that legitimises social inequalities, the inequality between children and adults as such is not addressed. It is pushed aside by other kinds of sociopolitical hierarchies among adult groups that we have come to accept. Moreover, when a child is emancipated with the help of a father or ignorant teacher, she does not join forces with other youngsters; Rancière stresses, following Jacotot, that only an

individual can emancipate an individual, and emancipatory education (dubbed “universal teaching” by Jacotot) cannot be translated into a political movement.⁸

To be sure, this individualistic stance is not characteristic of Rancière’s entire political oeuvre, but children are not among the numerous collective political subjects he discusses. Although he is well aware of the power adults have over children – as well as of the latter’s ability, as speaking beings, to exert power over the former⁹ – he nowhere ponders the political emancipation of children from adult domination. The vast secondary literature on Rancière also neglects this possibility: even in the rare cases it reflects on Rancière’s figure of the child and insists on children’s political agency,¹⁰ it stops short of considering children as a collective political subject. The present article is dedicated to blazing this neglected path.

The next section discusses children’s inferior political position, addressing some paradigmatic attempts to justify and challenge it. I start with a contemporary version of Kantian political paternalism, and then briefly appeal to attempts by Phillippe Ariès, Pierre Bourdieu and Shulamith Firestone to question the naturalness of adult domination of children. Next, I turn to Rancière to present the educational backdrop for his claim that all intelligences are equal, and argue that it implies that children are by nature equal to adults, hence also equally capable of political action. By demonstrating that children are a “part of those who have no part” in the existing sociopolitical order, I examine the possibility of a collective political subject of children, and articulate the implications child politics may have. Finally, I point to the role schools can play in forming a child political subject, and in the short epilogue, I reflect on this subject in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

2

Ageist bias against children has deep roots in the traditional conception of political life and the image of the political subject in the West.¹¹ Throughout the history of political thought, the young have been excluded from politics in various ways, as political subjectivity has been conceptualised in terms of reasonableness and maturity, understood as naturally developing with age. From Plato¹² to Hannah Arendt,¹³ politics, just like war, is seen as inappropriate for children.

In her article “What is a Child?”, contemporary philosopher Tamar Schapiro refers to the “special status” of children in relation to that of adults as “uncontroversial” and “evident in our everyday practices”.¹⁴ This view, which justifies paternalistic treatment of children and denies them full citizenship, is presented as natural and self-evident, and the opposite is presented as absurd: giving political voice to a child is considered as incongruous as appointing a horse for senator.¹⁵

Despite the seeming obviousness of the need to separate children from politics, however, philosophers have not shunned from attempting to justify it. Kant is a paradigmatic case: his celebrated depiction of liberal politics as a public sphere in which citizens exchange views is conditioned on their being mature (*mündig*), able to use their own reason, unlike those who – due to young age or lack of courage and resilience – rely on the opinions of others.¹⁶ As Schapiro observes, Kant is *prima facie* opposed to paternalism, namely, to treating people as unable to make decisions regarding their own affairs. Yet he does make some exceptions to this rule, among them children. The rational

capacity and moral agency of minors, he argues, are not yet fully developed and they are (temporarily) unable to form an opinion in a reasoned, autonomous way. Hence, they must not be given full political citizenship.

The political status of minors, according to Kant, is that of “passive citizens”, unlike the “active citizenship” of adults.¹⁷ As Schapiro explains, passive citizens are not full members of the civic community, although they are not wholly excluded from it: they must not be harmed without reason, and they do deserve moral treatment, yet they are not entitled to all the rights implied by active citizenship, among them the right to vote.¹⁸ To be sure, children are not the only ones to fall under the status of passive citizens. They are joined in Kant’s world by apprentices, domestic servants, private tutors, tenant farmers and of course women – none of whom is independent enough to be granted full citizenship (In our own world, asylum seekers and migrant workers may also be seen as passive citizens). While Schapiro rejects the passive status of adults, she joins the Kantian effort to justify children’s passivity; she accepts the Kantian characterisation of children as dependent, impulsive and proximate to nature¹⁹ and consequently embraces his claim that political paternalism towards them is necessary.

However, pace Kant and Schapiro, children frequently take active part in politics. The examples given at the opening of this article are not unique. Michal Givoni, writing following the events of the Arab Spring and the social protests that swept large parts of the world in 2011, presents a long list of contemporary cases in which children stand at the front lines of sociopolitical struggle. These range from “Parents for Occupy Wall Street”, helping parents and children protest together to activism in much riskier places in the Middle East, such as Cairo’s Tahrir Square, where many protesters were minors, and even Dara’a, where the arrest of minors for spraying graffiti against the Assad regime sparked the Syrian Civil War.²⁰

Obviously, in many of these cases, we can ask whether it would have been better to prevent children from taking active part, and leave the dangerous if not violent public sphere to adults. Conversely, if children can indeed act politically as they seem able to do, is it also possible for them to take action against their own oppression as children, often rationalised, as in the case of women, in terms of safety? Before turning to look for answers in Rancière, it would be helpful to examine an alternative approach to the political relations of children and adults, which acknowledges its oppressive nature. Let us briefly examine three prominent examples of this approach in the fields of history, sociology and political theory.

Phillippe Ariès’ groundbreaking book *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* introduced childhood into history, challenging the old assumption that it is a “natural” phase in the life of every person. Our conception of childhood, Ariès argues, developed in Europe gradually between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, along with the modern conceptions of the adult and the family. By dissociating childhood from the biological process of growth, Ariès understands it as a *sociohistorical construct*, presenting the social roles and attributes now commonly associated with children – such as innocence and naiveté – as outcomes of contingent historical developments. While various aspects of Ariès’ thesis have been criticised,²¹ and the historical narrative he portrays is far from consensual, there is general agreement today that childhood is no less historical than natural, and that society plays an important part in shaping the way it is experienced and understood.²²

Pierre Bourdieu echoes this perspective in his critical sociology. Claiming that “age is a biological datum, socially manipulated and manipulable”,²³ he acknowledges that young and old age are not only natural givens but also social constructs, stressing that the line separating them is an object of constant struggle. What is at stake in this struggle is political power:

the logical division between young and old is also a question of power, of the division ... of powers. Classification by age (but also by sex and, of course, class ...) always means imposing limits and producing an *order* to which each person must keep ...²⁴

This means that childhood is a label societies attach to the losers in a political struggle, and the inferior position of children in the sociopolitical order inherently involves oppressive aspects.

While radical social and political theorists such as Bourdieu have recognised the oppression of children at least since Friedrich Engels’ “The Origin of the Family”, the path to thinking about child liberation was opened wide by radical feminism. In her 1971 *The Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Shulamith Firestone dedicates an interesting chapter to the oppression of children and calls for a revolutionary struggle to end it. Following Ariès, she analyses the historical development of the “myth of childhood”,²⁵ pointing to the way the young have been transformed from newcomers initiated into adult life through active participation to being an oppressed class segregated in various ways from the adult world. Like Ivan Illich, author of *Deschooling Society*, she points to the role of the school in constructing the modern concept of childhood and “build[ing] it into reality”²⁶: schools discipline children’s bodies and minds, constituting them as different from adults not only in age but also in kind.²⁷

Firestone links the myth of childhood to that of femininity: just as the construction of childhood involves the feminisation of the young – expressed in clothes, games, social roles and location in space – so is women’s oppression tightly connected to their biological reproductive role of bringing children.²⁸ The emancipation of children, she argues, is not only modelled after that of women but is an essential part of it: feminist liberation is impossible without that of children, and vice versa²⁹: she calls for an “alliance of the oppressed” which will eliminate the conditions of femininity as well as of childhood.³⁰

However, radical as Firestone’s call for arms may be, even she does not go as far as viewing children as full political subjects. At the same breath, she claims that children are not given “their due political importance”, but adds that liberating the children

is up to feminist (ex-child and still oppressed child-women) revolutionaries We must include the oppression of children in any program for feminist revolution or we will be subject to the same failing of which we have so often accuse men: ... of having missed an important substratum of oppression merely because it didn’t directly concern *us*.³¹

Although she complains of the growing “underestimation of the abilities of the child”,³² she concludes the chapter by arguing; “There are no children yet able to write their own books, tell their own story. We will have to, one last time, do it for them”.³³ That is to say, even while demanding equality for children and challenging their natural inferiority, Firestone reproduces the very same inferiority. The political struggle for the liberation of children sees them as its objects rather than subjects.³⁴

3

Firestone's call for the liberation of children by adult women is a clear case of what Rancière calls "the method of inequality".³⁵ Such a method, which characterises progressive politics according to Rancière, aims at struggling against existing inequalities, while assuming that winning the struggle requires knowledge of the social mechanisms producing inequality.³⁶ However, as societies are structured along the lines of knowledge possession and exclusion,³⁷ this means that it is also assumed that those who suffer from inequality are deprived of the knowledge needed to fight it. They are condemned to political passivity and must wait for those who know to liberate them – a perfectly circular method that reproduces the inequality it wishes to eliminate: "The method for reaching equality in an indeterminate future was in fact a method for postponing it indefinitely ... It was a method for reproducing indefinitely the separation between those who know and those who ignore".³⁸

Every political "method" or programme, Rancière argues, is inherently tautological: it cannot but reproduce what is implied in its premises.³⁹ For this reason, the only way open for the politics of equality is to take equality as its starting point: to start not from the sociopolitical inequality in need of being remedied, but rather from assuming the equal ability of each and every one to take active part in political action. This "method of equality" does not deny the existence of various social inequalities, but rejects the assumption that they reflect a *politically relevant* difference. Inequality exists and must be fought against; but to do so, we must accept that it conceals an equal natural capacity for understanding the world and acting politically.

Education is where we can clearly see – and tear apart – the artificial veil of inequality. Education as we know it, according to Rancière, rests on the assumption of inequality between teacher and student. This hierarchy does not simply stem from the age difference – the difference between the old and the new generation, as Arendt puts it⁴⁰ – nor from possessing knowledge in need of being communicated. It is supposed to reflect a difference in the ability to learn and understand, namely in *intelligence*.⁴¹ The practice of education assumes that the student cannot learn on her own, and that she needs a teacher who has already learnt and understood – that is, who's intelligence is superior – to *explicate* things for her. In the future, she is told, when she grows up, she would be able to reach the teacher's level. But just like in the political method of inequality, the teacher "always keeps a piece of learning – that is to say, a piece of the student's ignorance – up his sleeve",⁴² reopening the gap separating him from the student, endlessly reproducing the inequality of intelligences.

As Rancière recounts in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the shocking discovery of Jacotot, the French professor who had no common language with his Flemish students, was that when forced to, students *could* learn everything on their own. The students' success in learning by themselves varied subjects such as French or painting, merely repeated their success in learning their mother tongue without the aid of a teacher-explicator. This means that the intelligence of the child or student is not inferior to that of the teacher: all intelligences are equal, and only in school is the child being told that she cannot learn without a teacher, and starts believing that her intelligence is inferior to that of others. A teacher who compels his student to learn by herself can teach anything, even things he does not know; by doing so, he makes her realise that her intelligence is

not inferior to that of anyone else, thereby emancipating her – for oppression, according to Rancière, is founded on accepting one’s inferiority.

While education can be emancipatory, Rancière stresses in his discussion of Jacotot that this emancipation is individual, not political.⁴³ A teacher can emancipate more than one student – as indeed Jacotot has done – but schools and universities cannot emancipate a single student. This is no mere technical problem: the point is that emancipation cannot be mediated by an institution, for every institution necessarily involves division into roles and ranks, and is therefore an incarnation of inequality. Steeped in inequality, school education will never be able to fulfil the promise of emancipating the oppressed and eliminating social inequality.⁴⁴

School is politically interesting because it is where the production of the belief in the inequality of intelligences can be seen. This inequality is the foundation of the *entire sociopolitical order*: for such order to hold firm, people have to believe there is plausible explanation for the various hierarchies it implies; they must assume these hierarchies reflect the actual nature of things, the real inequalities in people’s ability to understand the world and act in it.⁴⁵

Similarly, children’s ability to learn everything by themselves interests Rancière, because it demonstrates the natural intellectual equality required as a starting point for the political method of equality.⁴⁶ This equality is demonstrated in various historical political struggles he analyses in his writings: of workers, plebeians, women and others. However, it clearly holds also between the intelligences of children and adults. In denying the teacher’s superior intelligence and rejecting the very notion of a mature intelligence able to think, learn and understand more efficiently than another, he recognises that children’s intelligence equals that of adults. As we have seen, this means much more than that children and adults have the same academic skills – intellectual equality, for Rancière, implies equal ability for political action.⁴⁷ Children are always already speaking beings, hence always already political.⁴⁸

Still, Rancière does not elaborate on the equality between children and adults. As a historian, he analyses no child liberation struggle, and as a philosopher, he does not articulate the possibility of such struggle. The equality of children is in fact neglected, oppressed in his thought. Thus, although his thought lays the foundations for thinking of children as wholly equal to adults, Rancière remains part of a long chain of adults who do not perceive their relation to children as oppressive, and fail to consider the possibility of a political struggle to end it. The next section attempts to apply Rancière’s political philosophy to this issue.

4

The young are an integral part of society: they live and grow up in it, they are educated by it, and countless practices and conventions regulate what they are allowed and not allowed to do. Yet in an important sense, throughout history they have had no real part in society: they do not occupy positions of power and almost never take active part in decision-making, whether regarding themselves or others.⁴⁹ In politics, they are always “they”, as opposed to “us” adults.⁵⁰ They are being counted for various purposes, but their voices do not count. Their part in society is a clear case of what Rancière calls “the part of those who have no part”.⁵¹

According to Rancière, this paradoxical existence is made possible – even necessary – by an inherent characteristic of the way society divides its members into roles and ranks. Every social order involves hierarchies – some people command and others obey – and since the dawn of political philosophy, with Plato, this division has been imagined and conceptualised as expressing “geometrical equality”, namely proportion: the share of each part of society is supposed to be proportional to its right, to what it brings to the community.⁵² Superiority, as evident from Socrates’ famous reply to Thrasymachus in the opening book of the *Republic*, is for the benefit of the inferiors.⁵³ It involves no wrong or injustice as long as it is proportional to natural differences. A city that counts its parts geometrically – as opposed to mere arithmetical count of profit and loss – is supposed to be a just political community. However, Rancière argues that every count of the parts of the community is necessarily wrong, a “double count”.⁵⁴ It is double because alongside the geometrical equality, there is always another equality, the simple equality of each one to everyone, which makes the geometrical one possible.

The division of the social order into those who command and those who obey necessarily rests on a more fundamental division, between those who have *logos* and those who do not – those able to speak and understand language and those who can only imitate the sounds others make.⁵⁵ While the former’s speech expresses intelligence and understanding, the latter merely make noise. This is therefore an aesthetic division no less than it is cognitive, amounting to what Rancière calls “partition of the perceptible”,⁵⁶ namely the way members of every society organise their sensory perceptions, noticing some and ignoring others. Hence, *logos* is not only the individual’s linguistic ability, but rather the fundamental logic of the social order, standing at the heart of its proportional counts and divisions. There is order because some people command and others obey, and those who obey understand what they are commanded, and at the same time understand they have to obey – they understand they do not understand enough to give commands themselves.⁵⁷

There is a gap, then, between two distinct meanings of understanding and intelligence: one that is needed to command and make decisions, and another needed to obey and execute. However, Rancière argues that this differentiation is a myth, just like the one we have seen in our discussion of the school: there is only one intelligence, only one understanding. Whoever is able to understand language well enough to obey commands, is also able to decide and to give them.⁵⁸ This is a counterintuitive claim, to be sure, but it becomes much more plausible when we realise that we do not address verbal commands to animals. We avoid this precisely because we assume animals are naturally inferior, devoid of *logos*, unable to understand; inequality is necessarily speechless. Addressing verbal commands to humans, on the other hand, implies that they are naturally equal to those supposed to be their superiors; social inequality testifies to the equality making it possible.

As we have seen, children have no part in Rancière’s political writings. But are they not a group whose members are expected to understand enough to obey but not to command? Are they not supposed to understand the orders they are given, and at the same time understand that they do not understand enough to dispute? Do we not hear their voices as noise, merely imitating our voices without expressing genuine understanding? Finally, does not their ability to understand the commands addressed to them

indicate that they have the same *logos* as adults – just as their ability to learn by themselves indicates their equal intelligence?

Children are both within and without *logos*, both equal and unequal, a part of those who have no part. The existence of such group, according to Rancière, makes politics possible.⁵⁹ Politics, for him, is not at all the social distribution into roles and ranks, but rather the challenge to this distribution in the name of something heterogeneous to it, namely the equality of any speaking being with every other speaking being.⁶⁰ Political action undermines the existing order – but not from without, by some excluded “others”,⁶¹ but rather from those who are included in the order yet have no part in it. It happens when they realise that if they understand well enough to obey, then they also understand well enough to command. When these people start to speak and demonstrate their *logos*, to assert their equality, there is politics.

Political demonstrations of equality expose the sheer contingency of the social order, its lack of *archē*, namely the an-archy on which every hier-archy is founded.⁶² This does not amount to pointing at some fallacy or theoretical error, for politics is not a dispute between two opposing views, the one supporting equality, and the other inequality. It is a clash of two utterly heterogeneous understandings of equality. There is no common ground on which these two forms of *logos* can meet, because the social order is necessarily founded on denying natural equality and is inherently blind to its existence. Hence, politics always takes the form of a conflict,⁶³ a struggle, and it’s very occurrence transforms the existing partition of the perceptible. As Rancière puts it, politics

is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined. Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.⁶⁴

Politics, Rancière further explains, occurs through processes of subjectification, in which those who have no part become a political subject:

By *subjectification* I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience.⁶⁵

That is to say, politics transforms a familiar, existing collective identity, which seems to have always been there, into something else.⁶⁶ It seems that everybody knows exactly what “workers” or “women” are – these words and the groups they designate exist long before becoming names of political subjects. But politics “forces them out of such obviousness by questioning the relationship between a *who* and a *what* in the apparent redundancy of the positing of an existence”.⁶⁷ Now these words refer to more than occupation or biological sex. Marking a political subject that expresses equality, they transform what can be seen and heard in the factory and the household. Clearly, even before socialism and feminism no one denied the ability of workers and women to speak – to remain with these two central examples. It was just assumed that they understood enough to obey but not to command, that their speech became noise when they talked about their work at the factory or the household.⁶⁸ Yet from a certain point onward, the words “workers” and “women” became names of political subjects

demonstrating their equality, and the speech of the men and women they designated appeared as an expression of *logos*.

Workers, women, slaves, plebeians, Blacks – these are all examples of groups that became political subjects, transformed from those whose voices were not counted into people able to think and speak like anyone else. Children have yet to do so. They have not yet been transformed into a political subject. They may have been part of other political subjects – just as women, for example, had been part of the proletarian political subject before the feminist one was formed – thereby demonstrating their equality to anyone else. But a political subject of children demonstrating their equality together is yet to be born. Although the way society treats children has undoubtedly changed and their oppression has been significantly mitigated over the last few generations, they are still far from being counted as equals to adults.

Still, is there no good reason to treat at least very young children as incapable of political subjectivity? If the mark of equal intelligence is understanding language, then it may apply to youth and schoolchildren, but not to toddlers. Even if we lower the age limit, is it not necessary to keep it above the reach of the infant struggling with her first words? The Rancièrian answer is a clear “no”. Whereas not all children demonstrate the ability to articulate their thoughts, all are linguistic beings – not potentially, but always already in the present. Thoughts, Rancière argues, are always singular and non-linguistic, and communication requires translating them into common language;⁶⁹ infants may not do that the same way adults do, but their thoughts are intelligent just the same. Toby Rollo has convincingly shown that political agency can be expressed in not only words, but also in deeds, and that even those who refuse or are unable to articulate their thoughts in public should be counted as politically capable.⁷⁰ What applies to the differently abled, he argues, should apply to children as well:⁷¹ although their deeds are rarely comprehended in ordinary linguistic terms, they may still be political. Even if the noise infants make may never be understood as speech, many of their actions are deliberate, non-linguistic expressions of refusal and resistance. However, while Rollo maintains that inferior intelligence is no ground for political exclusion, the Rancièrian perspective holds that non-linguistic actions demonstrate intelligence just as linguistic ones do.

I contend, therefore, that a political distinction between toddlers and older children would merely reproduce the unjustifiable one between children and adults. Every setting of a boundary one must cross to count as intelligent enough for politics, every “not yet ... but in the future!”, already renounces equality and remains within the all-too-familiar game of superiors and inferiors, those who are considered intellectually capable and those who are not. The only path open for a “method of equality” begins with the uncompromising starting point that *everybody* is equal.

5

It is undoubtedly very difficult, perhaps impossible, to imagine children as political agents expressing equality, and harder still to conceive of a society in which children are fully equal. Child inferiority is an essential aspect of our form of life,⁷² and changing that would require altering humanity’s self-understanding.⁷³ But this, of course, is the whole point: the partition of the perceptible in every society makes the hierarchical

order prevailing in it seem natural and inevitable, one it would be absurd to question. Rancièrian politics is world changing precisely because it makes the impossible possible, the invisible visible and the inaudible audible. Even if some differences between children and adults are indeed natural, there may also be natural differences between men and women, as well as between people of different skin colours – yet in some societies these differences entail stark social hierarchies, and in others almost none.

Moreover, we must keep in mind that the formation of a political subject does not imply total elimination of inequality. As the examples of women, Blacks and workers clearly demonstrate, political conflicts often last years and generations, and even when the struggle succeeds to a certain extent, inequality is not completely eradicated. Rancière's claim that every social order is necessarily founded on inequality should be understood also in this light: political subjectivity expresses full equality, but rarely achieves it. People are naturally equal to each other, but citizens never are.⁷⁴ When thinking of a political subject of children, we are not talking, then, of a society in which there are no social differences between young and old, nor of complete eradication of age-based hierarchical relations. However, just as in the case women and Blacks (at least in some parts of today's world), such hierarchies would become a problem, a form of injustice, an inequality between people able to converse and negotiate as equals.⁷⁵

Still, what does it actually mean for children to be equal to adults? The political subjectivity of children may bring about a significant reduction (even elimination) of the age limit to the right to vote and be elected for governmental offices. This change, far-reaching and unrealistic as it may seem, by no means exhausts the equality a political subject of children may herald. Such equality will be expressed first and foremost in that the submission of children to the authority of adults would stop seeming natural. In a sense, this would be the end of childhood as a sociopolitical category entailing rights only as part of a package deal, with fundamental, uncontested inferiority. This category, the historical contingency of which has been elaborated on above, will cease being a sufficient justification for exercising oppression and domination.

Conversely, is not the emergence of childhood as a distinct period in human life a significant historical achievement, the result of long struggles for recognising the special needs and vulnerability of the young? Are children's rights, while bound together with structural inferiority, not an important protection, the renunciation of which would be too high a price for children to pay?

Not necessarily. First, it is possible to acknowledge the special needs of certain groups and meet them *without* presupposing inferiority, and without ceasing to count those in need as fully equal. This is how we usually attempt to treat many disabled people (although, unfortunately, not all), and of course those on the other side of the age scale, namely the elderly. Although we sometimes tend to see the elderly as having completed a full cycle and returned to childhood – vulnerable and unable to make decisions – there is no doubt that their oppressive treatment is utterly unacceptable. The fact that old people are equal human beings is the starting point for any relation to them in our society. This is not the case with children and if it ever is, it will not have to be at the expense of caring for their special needs.

The second, more important rebuttal of the claim that equality would deprive children of their special rights is simply this: it is not for me and for my adult readers to decide. Struggles for the benefit of children have been waged by well-intentioned adults for ages,

but the power of the Rancièrian perspective is precisely that it points to the circularity of such moves, which reproduce the hierarchical relations it attempts to undermine. Freedom cannot be given but must be won and the emancipation of children can only be achieved by children. As adults, we can choose to side with those who have no part,⁷⁶ but we cannot play the children's part for them. They will not be counted as equals until they understand they are already equal, and demonstrate this equality in public. Perhaps the fact that they have not yet done so indicates that they are unwilling to pay the price. Possibly, they are satisfied with waiting for their turn to be adults – unlike many other forms of oppression childhood is not a permanent condition for those who survive it. But new generations are always coming and children would perhaps one day change their mind and decide they are tired of waiting for the future, and would create a collective political subject that would demonstrate their equality in the present.

6

A final point I want to make apropos the possibility of the political subject of children concerns the role of school in the oppressive relations between adults and children. Critics of these relations in recent decades, who follow the footsteps of Firestone and Illich, have often argued that school is a site where domination of children is both exercised and justified.⁷⁷ The emancipation of children, they claim, must start with the elimination of the school (by adults).

Rancière too writes in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* about the role schools play in convincing the children that their intelligence is inferior to that of adults. School may indeed be a site of emancipation in case an ignorant teacher happens to show up; but this, to recall, is an individual, not political emancipation. Rancière stresses that being an institution, school presupposes hierarchies and cannot be an emancipating factor, and emancipated students do not add up to forming a collective political subject.

When thinking of schoolchildren, Rancière considered them as members of oppressed groups that include mostly adults – workers, peasants, etc. However, if we think about a political subject of children, the picture changes. An emancipatory subject cannot be formed from without, by people who are not part of those who have no part; this will only reproduce the hierarchy it seeks to eliminate. Children must emancipate themselves by creating their own political subject. This is a long process, in which one child emancipates the other, adding him or her to the collective subject.⁷⁸ There is no one political recipe for this process, which can assume various forms; emancipation happens in ways that can never be anticipated in advance.⁷⁹ But it undoubtedly requires personal interactions, trans-local acquaintances and a sense of shared fate.

Where can children, as a distinctive group, have all these if not at school? Precisely because it lumps them together, sharply separating them from adults and exercising all kinds of direct domination over them, school is clearly the ultimate place, perhaps the only one in contemporary society, where a child political subject can emerge. In other words, school must not be only a site of oppression, but may also become an arena of emancipation. To be sure, this is not a sufficient defense of the school – an institute of domination cannot be justified merely by forming the conditions for emancipation, and school can certainly be defended from other perspectives.⁸⁰ But raising the possibility

of child liberation sheds interesting light on this institution, allowing us to think of it not only as a site of domination and control but also as one of collective formation of an emancipatory movement.

Epilogue

This text was written prior to the coronavirus outbreak, but the exceptional sociopolitical situation the world found itself in is highly relevant to the above discussion. Although it seems that the global pandemic has removed the climate crisis and the young people struggling against it from the centre of attention, it has also placed ageist issues at the heart of political discourse. In many ways, the pandemic reversed the relations between young and old: in the long weeks the world confronted the dangers of COVID-19, especially dangerous for people of old age, the young transformed from the incarnation of vulnerability to that of immunity. Suddenly it was necessary to protect the old from the young, rather than the other way around. Clichés about the world belonging to the young are obsolete in a reality in which they already own the present, wandering in relative safety in spaces considered dangerous to adults.

Against this backdrop, the unchanging element of politics, namely its taking place above the heads of children, is more conspicuous and troubling than ever. Their political inferiority is maintained even when their physical inferiority is clearly diminished, and they remain the objects rather than subjects of governmental policies. For the time being, even this has not driven children to challenge the old political paternalism, and they still count on adults to make decisions for them. On the one hand, we can say that if under such extreme conditions the child liberation movement has not been born, it most likely never will. Yet on the other hand, it may already be just around the corner.

Notes

1. Cummings, *Children's Voices in Politics*.
2. Hayward, *Children, Citizenship and Environment*; Alderson, *The Politics of Childhoods*; O'Brien, Selboe, and Hayward, "Exploring Youth Activism"; Bray and Nakata, "The Figure of the Child"; Biswas and Matteis, "Strikingly Educational"; Stone, "Youth Power—Youth Movements".
3. Krupkin, "Israel Is Arresting Undocumented Children"; Lachter, "The Children Who Helped Preventing The Deportation of Their Classmates".
4. Sloan and Hern, *Youthquake 2017*.
5. Sherrod, *Youth activism: An international encyclopedia*; Kirshner, *Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality*; Jenkins et al. *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*.
6. Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism".
7. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 30.
8. *Ibid.*, 102.
9. Rancière, *The Intellectual and His People*, 110.
10. Biesta and Bingham, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, 53; Faulkner, "Negotiating Vulnerability through 'Animal' and 'Child'," 81.
11. Givoni, "Child's Play".
12. Plato, "Republic," 1154.
13. Arendt, "The Crisis in Education".
14. Schapiro, "What is a Child?," 716-7; see also Even-Zur, "Childhood".

15. On the political parallel of children and animals, see Faulkner, “Negotiating vulnerability through ‘animal’ and ‘child’”.
16. Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment”.
17. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 126 [314].
18. Shcapiro, “What is a Child?,” 719.
19. Even-Zur, “Childhood,” 46.
20. Givoni, “Child’s Play,” 211-2. For more examples, see Picard and Bessant, *Young People Re-Generating Politics*.
21. Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*; Orme, *Medieval Children*.
22. Cunningham, “Histories of Childhood”; Even-Zur, “Childhood,” 48.
23. Bourdieu, “‘Youth’ is Just a Word,” 95.
24. *Ibid.*, 94.
25. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, 88.
26. *Ibid.*, 81.
27. *Ibid.*, 86.
28. *Ibid.*, 73.
29. *Ibid.*, 72.
30. *Ibid.*, 104.
31. *Ibid.*, 104, emphasis in the original.
32. *Ibid.*, 83.
33. *Ibid.*, 104.
34. Judith Bessant’s argument is also relevant here: she demonstrates that encouraging young people for active political participation is often a new form of government and domination. See Bessant, “Youth Participation”.
35. Rancière, “The Method of Equality,” 135.
36. Pelletier, “Emancipation, Equality and Education: Rancière’s Critique of Bourdieu and the Question of Performativity,” 139.
37. Szkudlarek and Zamojski, “Education and Ignorance: Between the Noun of Knowledge and the Verb of Thinking”.
38. Rancière, “The Method of Equality,” 135.
39. Bingham, “Under the Name of Method”; Szkudlarek, “Postulational Rhetoric and Presumptive Tautologies”.
40. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education”.
41. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 7.
42. *Ibid.*, 21.
43. *Ibid.*, 102.
44. Masschelein and Simons, “The Hatred of Public Schooling”, 150.
45. Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 33-4.
46. Biesta and Bingham, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, 54.
47. May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*, 57.
48. Biesta and Bingham, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, 70.
49. Rollo, “Feral Children”.
50. Bray and Nakata, “The Figure of the Child,” 33.
51. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 11.
52. *Ibid.*, 6.
53. Plato. “Republic,” 987.
54. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 6.
55. *Ibid.*, 22.
56. *Ibid.*, 26.
57. *Ibid.*, 44.
58. *Ibid.*, 16.
59. *Ibid.*, 11.
60. *Ibid.*, 30.

61. Rancière, “Does Democracy Mean Something?,” 60; Biesta, “A New Logic of Emancipation,” 48.
62. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 16.
63. *Ibid.*, 49.
64. *Ibid.*, 30.
65. *Ibid.*, 35.
66. Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 37.
67. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 36, emphasis in the original.
68. *Ibid.*, 51; Mercieca, “Initiating ‘The Methodology of Jacques Rancière,’” 410.
69. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, 63; Snir, *Education and Thinking*, 156.
70. Rollo, “Everyday Deeds”.
71. Rollo, “Separate but Equal”; Rollo, “Democracy, Agency and Radical Children’s Geographies”.
72. Even-Zur, “Childhood”.
73. Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability through ‘Animal’ and ‘Child,’” 79.
74. Rancière, “Does Democracy Mean Something?,” 56.
75. Biesta, “A New Logic of Emancipation,” 52.
76. Faulkner, “Negotiating Vulnerability through ‘Animal’ and ‘Child,’” 82.
77. Zehavi, *The People to Come*.
78. Snir, *Education and Thinking*, 167.
79. Biesta and Bingham, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, 52.
80. Masschelein and Simons, *In Defence of the School*.

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