Child as Method as an Intersectional Frame for Conceptualising the Geopolitics of Child Rights

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Received: 23 June 2022 | Accepted: 10 May 2023 |
Published online: 12 September 2023

Abstract

In this paper I discuss an approach I have termed, “Child as method”, which I suggest provides some useful perspectives on child rights debates and concerns, specifically in connecting these with the realm of the geopolitical and, beyond that, insisting on how such connections deepens understanding of their significance. Building on previous work examining the relations and “translation” processes between global and local in the (re)formulation and implementation of child rights instruments, a conceptualisation of geopolitical context is presented as constitutive of the range of theories and practices surrounding child rights, and vice versa. The feminist and postcolonial conceptual resources informing Child as method are outlined, with examples offered of specific projects that have used this in child rights-related work. It is suggested that, far from diminishing the relevance and utility of Child as method, the non-child-centred assumptions underlying this approach might helpfully promote ways of working with and for children and young people, based on solidarity rather than, for example, the discretionary humanism structured within prevailing notions of recognition or identification.

Keywords

postcolonial studies – intersectionality – Asia as method – CRC

This article explores the relevance and contribution of Child as method, an approach informed by postcolonial and migration studies and intersectionality
theory, to child rights debates. While geopolitical analyses of child rights are not new, specifically in relation to how the United Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and related instruments were formulated and have been applied, it is suggested that Child as method can extend existing debates on this and also amplify the reach of child rights arguments into other relevant disciplines and practices.

I first outline Child as method as an approach and then consider some ways it has been and could be relevant to the formulation and evaluation of child rights theories and practices. From this the status of Child as method as a non-child-centred analysis is evaluated, finishing with some suggestions about how this may work to strengthen, rather than undermine, child-focused and Majority-world solidarities and alliances.

1 Child as Method

Child as method is a postcolonial-informed approach that takes mutual relationality and co-constitution as its starting point, rather than assuming either a top down, Western hegemony or, alternatively, treating East-West relations as binary. It draws on key texts within postcolonial studies and migration studies, specifically Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as method* (2010) and Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's *Border as method* (2013). It uses these to formulate as an analytical framework – and in that sense a “method” – ways of elaborating conceptual and empirical research questions that go beyond prevailing binaries and impasses (such as North-South, and in the case of childhood studies, adult-child) to attend instead to transnational relational co-constructions of categories and the enactment of processes. Child as method also intervenes in those debates to assert the necessary presence and participation of children and childhoods within these wider debates in cultural studies and labour/migration studies. Significantly, neither Chen nor Mezzadra and Neilson say anything about children and childhoods, even though the analysis elaborated in *Border as method* focusing on the multiplication, rather than (or as well as) division, of labour, has key relevance for understanding children's multiple/ambiguous subjective and political economic positionings, including how children generate considerable forms of labour and industry precisely via their regulation, and often exclusion. In this paper, I explore why and how Child as method might be a useful resource for children's rights debates and activism.

Child as method is an intersectional approach, grounded in debates in and contributions from Black feminist theorising (e.g. Crenshaw, 1990; Collins and Bilge, 2020), with indicative antecedents in the work of Lorde (2012),...
Alexander and Mohanty (2013) and Nayak (2013). These provide further resources to attend to and formulate key relational dynamics and axes, including crucially how the adult-child generational order intersects with other key axes and power dynamics organised around age, class, race, gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, geographical location and more. As such, the complexity, heterogeneity and Global North-South dynamics informing theories and practices of children’s rights both engage with and perhaps may gain further analytical purchase from intersectional approaches. While there remains extensive discussion on the status and application of intersectionality approaches (for an indicative interpretation, see Winker and Degele, 2011), what such perspectives also invite is a focus on bordering as a shifting and contextual process, with distinct associated relations and dynamics (Yuval-Davis et al., 2017, 2018, 2019), not unlike analyses highlighting the contested and contextual understandings of children’s rights (Reynaert et al., 2015). This article can perhaps be understood as a response to Raynaert et al’s (2012) call for critical proponents (as opposed to either what they term uncritical proponents or critical opponents) of children’s rights approaches. Such analyses arise in the light of cultural critiques of the resources informing the CRC, including its drafting process as well as its text and subsequent interpretations (e.g. Cantwell, 1989; Johnson 1992; Wringe 1992; Hochzcheiter 2010, 2011). 

In his influential text, Asia as method, Chen (2010) usefully identified three moments or processes integral to decolonising processes. These are, firstly, decolonisation as a political process (i.e. the transfer of power and territories from the colonisers to the formerly colonised), secondly, de-imperialisation, that is undoing subjective (imperial) investments structured by colonisation (significantly understood to affect both colonisers and the colonised). These can also be applied to positions around children and child rights, with decolonisation here concerned with measures redressing the disempowerment of children, and de-imperialisation concerned with the subjective transformations required from adults, and all of us who have been children (including children too), to distinguish personal histories and responses to this history from the actual positions and contexts of current chronological children (Burman 2022a). Chen also discusses a third key angle, that he terms De-Cold War, which usefully focuses attention on how the geopolitical dynamics of the Cold War continue to reverberate and operate in powerful ways, both transnationally and subjectively (as current events in Ukraine highlight). It is worth recalling how central child and childhood is to colonialism, both as a privileged site of elaboration of, and protection for, colonial subjectivity (as in the analyses put forward by Levander, 2006, Bernstein, 2011 and Rollo, 2018), and as a political site of intervention for colonial policies and practices (Beinart,
1992). Clearly the double nuances of the child as colonised (by adult cultural and political domains) (as, for example, discussed by Cannella and Viruru, 2004), and as a mechanism or device of colonisation (as in early intervention strategies managing and regulating colonised and marginalised populations Stoler, 2010), render childhood in social theory a core – if typically underacknowledged – analytical focus. As discussed below, the analytical strategies identified by Chen may usefully add to recent discussions attending to the diversity of interpretations of children’s rights (e.g. Lundy, 2012), and of practices surrounding children’s rights, especially as (re)formulated by subaltern contexts or Majority World contexts (Hanson, 2012).

The range and remit of Child as method has yet to be fully elaborated, considering its versatility and what it brings to different methodological and practical, as well as conceptual, arenas. I principally first elaborated Child as method in relation to a specific corpus of texts, the writings of the revolutionary anticolonial psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (Burman, 2017a; 2019a). These were seen as offering a useful, nonnormative range of models of children and childhood to consider in relation to the geopolitical commitments of Child as method, which also speaks powerfully to all three aspects of decolonisation, de-imperialisation and the de-Cold War dynamics identified by Chen (2010).

In a subsequent project, Found Childhood (Burman, 2019b), Child as method is developed as an empirical approach documenting the presence and participation of artifacts of childhood in public space – at least in the urban, Minority world contexts such as my own. This enables specific, situated and reflexive analysis of how childhood and related material objects appear and configure public (rather than only domestic) environments, including their psychoaffective resonances as well as socio-economic imbrications. This work both extends the de-imperialisation dynamics identified by Chen and also thereby topicalises the normative, ideological components of conceptions of childhood identified by Hanson (2012).

The approach is also being taken up as an analytical tool for an interdisciplinary research project documenting post-socialist childhoods (Millei 2019; Millei and Imre, 2016; Silova et al., 2017, 2018), so taking forward the De-Cold War agendas, with a specific focus on children and childhood. This project generated and analyses an an-archive (i.e. transgressive, nonnormative histories) of memories of living as children and growing up under state socialist conditions of formerly “communist” countries. Formulated from children’s studies and child rights understandings that presume and topicalise children and young people’s protagonism (Larkins et al. 2015) but also bringing these to the liminal space of children and childhoods in former soviet states (Tlostanova, 2015, 2019), the aim is to challenge prevailing narratives of the Cold War, both
of childhoods and children’s lives, as neither dismally compliant to state socialist economic and subjective constraints, nor as somehow fully formed or “authentic” resistant subjects.

Mobilising Child as method has worked to highlight the dynamic interplays of the “political” within the personal and biographical “memorystories” (the term the research team use to describe the memorial narratives), in three ways. First, the project gives the lie to attempts to see the political and the personal as absolutely independent of each other. Secondly, it explores received notions of childhood and their varieties across diverse cultural-political contexts. Third, it highlights the historical-temporal shifts of narrative positioning on the part of the narrator between the “then” and “now” under discussion, and so considers the ideological traces of the “now” in the “then” (Burman and Millei, 2022, Burman, 2021a). As a critical reflexive approach, then, such work helps to frame more nuanced political analyses of the role of children and childhood within nationalist policies (whether of capitalist or communist countries), as well as attending to the complex relational and narrative temporalities at play in research where adult memories of childhood come into play as explicit (and are perhaps always present as implicit) resources. Given the ways that children’s rights are both defined by the CRC but then, once the Convention was ratified, they are necessarily (re)interpreted and ‘translated’ into national policies and practices (Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012), social theorising of the (colonial or culturally imperialist risks of) transnational dynamics at play (Johnson 1992; Goodhart 2003; Burman 1996) is vital, as well as navigating questions of cultural and intercultural dynamics without subscribing either to methodological nationalism (Chernilo 2011) or cultural essentialism. By such means, the CRC and associated (re-)formulations of child rights instruments within specific national contexts can be investigated in their political complexities and distributions, rather then as a monolithic or static entity.

This brief outline of attempts empirically to ground or mobilise Child as method highlights, therefore, that it is not a “method” in a narrow or technical sense (as others also have argued, Zhang et al., 2015). Rather, it is an analytical framework to help generate better (i.e. conceptually-politically more interesting and important) research questions and projects (Park, 2017). It follows that this involves crossing disciplines as well as methodological approaches.

2 Child as Method and Child Rights

Much previous work has attended to the complex local, global and globalised relations at play within children’s rights discourses and how these permeate
concepts of development that simultaneously work to inform notions of individual, national, international and transnational development, and in relation to which claims about “child” and “childhood” function powerfully (see also, for example, Boyden, 1993; Burman, 1996; Daiute, 2008; Henderson and Denny, 2015). From her discourse analysis of the process of formulating the UNCRC, Holzscheiter (2011) highlighted, ‘both the influence of historically dominating childhood-perspectives on the drafting process and the multiple ways in which state- and non-state actors within the drafting group have disrupted and transformed these meaning-conventions’ (8–9). Moreover, many commentators on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child have highlighted the circularity of best interests “trumping” rights, in the sense of the powerful adult- (and professional-) centred agendas at play in determining a child’s “best interests”. This functions alongside the slipperiness of the notion of “needs”, as well as the power relations at play in who decides what counts as a “need” rather than a more dispensable, dismissible, or less legitimate “want” or “wish”. Previous work has also traced how legal and psychological discourses surrounding children and childhood rely upon each other for mutual legitimacy, so confirming each other, with particular consequences for the evaluation of the received reliability of children’s memorial accounts in court, as well as for the status and practice of psychotherapy with children and adults (Burman, 1997a,b, 1998). The cycle of mutual reference and legitimation between popular culture and professional understandings of children and childhoods (whether in “high” literature, Shuttleworth 2013; or everyday cultural practices, Steedman, 1995) has long been established, as also reflected in the interplay of legal and psychological definitions and practices (Cordero Arce, 2015, 2012; Motzkau and Clinch, 2017; Motzkau, 2009).

Earlier (in Burman, 1996), I argued that conceptual slippages between legal-moral claims to child rights and models of child development are in part made possible because accounts subscribe to generalised descriptions that then acquire naturalised status. There are limits to understanding rights as purely local (since the norms at play are also informed by wider translational discussions). Yet claims to generality or universality also disguise partial or more specifically shaped commitments (Barsh, 1989), whether as shaped through colonial histories or their current enactments through forms cultural or epistemic imperialism. Beyond such discussions, Child as method could be viewed as offering some additional purchase on this slippery terrain for child rights analysts. Five possibilities are outlined below.

First, from a child as method perspective, liberal models of rights, as a reflection of possessive individualism (Wringe 1992), are clearly untenable. Like other subordinated or oppressed groups, efforts to promote children’s
greater participation in social and political life have moved beyond discretionary notions of inclusion to rights-based approaches that recognise the historical and current inequalities structuring access to cultural, social and legal rights (Gready and Ensor, 2005). However, critiques of the so-called “humanitarian turn” in development programming offer some useful perspectives. Notably, within the move to rights-based approaches evident from the 1990s, children figure in significant ways – and for significant reasons, as the fodder for economic, social and national development. These wider instrumentalisations of focusing on child rights and child development rarely work in favour of improving children’s lives in their immediate contexts. Further, debates in this field highlighted how claims to increase the participation of marginalised groups can work to further their surveillance (Cooke and Kothari, 2007) and also to individualise and so psychologise available explanatory frameworks for people’s (including children’s) miserable circumstances (De Vos, 2011). In addition, such tropes play into the wider project of normalising the militarisation of humanitarian aid (Duffield, 2014).

Secondly, Child as method goes beyond relational models of rights, to align with transformational approaches (so addressing and interpellating rights bearers as also their advocates/enforcers). By “relational”, I draw on models of subjectivity and therapy generated from psychotherapeutic approaches, specifically psychoanalysis, that aim to shift models of the psyche from a “one body” (individualist) model, to attend to the relational co-constitution of interpersonal subjective thinking and feeling states (Mitchell, 1988; see also Botticelli, 2004; Cushman, 2015). Clearly there are disciplinary differences (between psychotherapy and legal contexts, in this case) in terms of how these terms and frameworks work. However, there is some alignment between the limitations of relational approaches in legal as also psychotherapeutic arenas, in the sense that individuals in politically marginalised positions (both historical and current) may turn out to be actually disadvantaged and even further oppressed, rather than empowered, by calls for more culturally or relationally-situated practices (Ludsin, 2008).

The next suggestions for the relevance of Child as method are presented more briefly, as they may be more familiar. Third, as an approach informed by postcolonial and poststructuralist frameworks, Child as method is focused on resisting the atomisation and abstraction structured into liberal bourgeois models of rights that are sometimes reinforced and performed by dominant notions of childhood – including the class and gender assumptions structured into them, as well as globalised representations of Minority World contexts. Fourth, this prompts an insistence on the presence and interrogation of wider geopolitical agendas enacted by and in the name of children, childhood and
children’s rights. This makes Child as method an intervention from Childhood Studies into other disciplines as well as bringing wider sociopolitical issues into Childhood Studies. Fifth, such focus could perhaps promote better evaluation of whether particular rights issues understood to be at play in a given situation actually best serve the child/children at issue, or not (Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2018).

Geopolitical agendas have long been noted as having been at work within child rights discourse – as also structuring North-South relations in the CRC, as in the formulation of the much-neglected 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Mbise, 2017; Twum-Danso Imoh, 2012) as well as how colonial-imperialist interests are played out in the shifting focus and agendas of concern around children (especially girls) (Holzscheiter 2010; 2011). Like other critical approaches, Child as method resists playing off one set of rights against another (including child vs. cultural rights, as well as women’s vs. children’s rights etc.), focusing instead on what is at stake in such deployments (as befits an intersectional approach). Viterbo’s (2021) work on the mobilisation of child rights discourses deployed as a tactic to limit and undermine Palestinian resistance is indicative, as well as recent work on southern childhoods (Rabello de Castro, 2020; Rollo, 2020).

Having outlined some of the key analytical features and assumptions informing Child as method, some (other) examples of how this approach might be applied to child rights will now be considered.

2.1 The Right to Play

Recognised as a “right” in Article 31 (‘the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts’), claims about the “right to play” have been taken up and applied in a number of ways (Lester and Russell, 2010; Clements and Fiorentino, 2004). From a critical psychology perspective, however, these could be viewed as an expression of the increasing power and circulation of psychological cultures that emphasise childhood as a site of development, or developmentality, aligned with capitalist and especially neoliberal notions of maximisation and optimisation (Fendler, 2001), in ways that overlook or else instrumentalise actual, embodied chronological children. Such arguments should be read alongside discussions of the shifting and contested role and nature of play in relation to work in different historical and cultural contexts (Katz, 2004; Bolton et al., 2002), as also the alignment of child-centred pedagogies with the emergence of European Enlightenment individualism (Taylor, 2013; Burman, 2012; Burman, 2017b). Also relevant is the role of the rhetoric of play within the discourse of democracy (Walkerdine and
Lucy, 1989) aligning with Foucauldian analyses of the rise of the liberal bourgeois self-regulating and apparently freely-choosing subject (Henriques et al., 1998).

Thus, as has been well documented, policies about learning through play threaten to subordinate (voluntary, unstructured) play to the “work” of learning. Moreover, policies that fail to promote so-called free play within childcare or educational contexts are tainted with authoritarianism in ways that reiterate colonialist civilisational discourses. Yet Child as method, drawing on Asia as method, can offer some ways out of these political binaries and interpretive impasses. For example, the recent study by Zhou (2021) reworked the traditional paradigm of crossnational educational research (which in any case risks methodological nationalism, Chernilo, 2011) through the postcolonial geopolitical lens offered by Asia as method. Zhou took up Chen’s notion of inter-referencing to design a study interrogating the cultural-political agendas, and specific national and transnational politics, enacted by policies around “learning through play” in three regionally adjacent states in Asia (Singapore, Hong Kong and – two sites in – mainland China). Inter-referencing is a postcolonial enactment of the call to provincialise Europe (Chakrabarty, 2009) and other colonial centres, in favour of focusing on regional relationships (many of which are also historically or currently colonial). Inter-referencing therefore can be mobilised as a strategy to understand tensions and obstacles to regional cooperation so as to invite more sustainable politics of alliance rather than colonial-structured competition (Zhou et al., 2021).

It is worth noting here that inter-referencing is not necessarily about promoting specific parties in different state contexts, or from different cultural backgrounds, into conversation or dialogue with each other. This may be one way that Chen’s (2010) discussion (which is a cultural studies analysis) has been interpreted or even taken up in childhood and educational research, but it is certainly not – or even the best – way to apply or interpret it. What Chen’s geopolitical discussion of how the complex current configuration of inter-Asian state relations invites is, instead, a reading of inter-referencing that draws on that history to attend to structural tensions and dynamics that lie beyond individual actors, albeit that these enter into how these actors may construct or understand their relationships with each other. Chen’s and other geomaterialist analyses envisage a level of address and analysis that goes beyond such kinds of humanist or even Habermasian models of communication in ways that both chime with and may extend current discussions of the material practices of national and regional reporting on children’s rights to CRC committees. It is not about smoothing away historical and current geopolitical tensions, but rather about recognising how these produce particular conditions for current
relations and so prompt consideration of how better to address these legacies. This last point is important as it has previously been a site of some misunderstanding about this approach, and one that marks it as very different from (say) the widely cited strand of childhood or educational research that empirically investigates how parents or childcare professionals from diverse cultural contexts view each other’s practices (Tobin et al., 1989; Bjork, 2009) and, even beyond this, noting how local and global(ised) ethnotheories of child development and education coexist (Ben-Ari, 2008).

This geopolitically-informed design works alongside Chen’s other (development of the wider postcolonial) analytical strategy of cultural syncretism. This can be used to enrich empirical analysis to offer some new insights – and even ways out of – problematic interpretive conundrums. For example, instead of reading the recent resurgence of interest in play-centred pedagogies championed by the Anji play movement in China as a colonial import or cypher from the West, close attention – prompted by Asia as method’s commitment to the specific geomaterial context – to its local and specific practices highlights how seemingly Anglo-Eurocentric policies are in fact being reworked and enacted in ways that both reflect particular material-political contexts, but also intervene within these in specific and deliberate ways. So, for example, while acknowledging the powerful presence of claims to deploy or apply Confucian approaches to educational practice, in fact new hybrids of “traditional” and “modern” pedagogies are generated (Zhou, 2020). Analytically, what this close attention to critical syncretism performs is a deconstruction of the binary between indigenous and imposed/western/colonial knowledges in ways that avoid ahistorical essentialisation of each in favour of acknowledging their longstanding and mutual relationality, as also their performative powers within current sociopolitical arenas. This indicative study untangles such complex performative claims to arrive at a better appreciation of how they work and what work they do, for children and young people, for their families and communities, and trans/nationally as an exemplification of how child rights enactments are inevitably both locally defined and practised and transnationally-informed.

2.2 Trans Rights
Taking up a different reading of trans, a second project on transrights starts from the queer theory suspicion around the conflation of child with futurity (Cassal, 2022, forthcoming), a futurity that conflates reproductive heteronormativity with the social investment state structured into dominant discourse around children and childhoods, as an effect of the sociopolitical investments at play (Edelman 2004; Gill-Peterson 2015; Gill-Peterson et al. 2015). Such
debates align with childhood studies’ critiques of the sociopolitical rendering of child as a becoming, rather than being, without essentialising what that “being” might be. Cassal’s focus is on the UK Gender Recognition Act (2004), with proposals for its revision put forward in 2016 and 2020, with substantial further revisions in favour of lowering the age for application for recognition proposed by the Scottish Assembly in 2022. The form and function of this controversial and rather limited piece of legislation has to be understood in relation to the current context and (relatively speaking) local history around claims to regulate (or alternatively “promote”) nonnormative sexualities and investments. Arguably, both ideological and directly financial interests are at stake, including both pharmaceutical companies and professional and other political interests in maintaining psychological and psychiatric models based on rigid gender binaries. Trans rights have come to usher in major controversies that illustrate the wider agendas at play within discussions of children and childhood. For example, the discussion around “safe spaces” for cisgendered women has rekindled some of the strange alliances between some feminists and rightwing ideologues (Pearce et al., 2020), reminiscent of the feminist debates between activists opposing pornography and those against censorship in the 1980s (e.g. Rich, 1987), as well as the ways women’s rights can mistakenly be presumed to align with children’s rights in ways that perpetuate the oppression of both groups (see e.g. Sylvester, 1998; Burman, 2008). On top of this, the question of the status of the child, including capacities for decision-making and attributed age thresholds thereof, remains a major social, political and media preoccupation as well as posing significant ethical and legal issues. This is even as discourses of LGBT+ rights function globally as a marker of civilisational status (which is acknowledged to sometimes work as “pinkwashing” – the term coined in relation to how state presentation as being LGBT+ friendly is deployed to distract from the oppression of Palestinians and occupation by the Israeli state) while the reignition of Cold War dynamics indicated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was also marked by contestations around sexual politics, notably LGBT+ issues. Indeed, the rolling back of LGBT+ rights in many countries is correspondingly promoted by some right-wing movements as a reassertion of national autonomy and the “return” of tradition/normality (Suchland, 2018). The overdetermined figure of the child that is at stake remains elusive while as various authors have elsewhere suggested (Burman, 2019a, 2019b; Meiners, 2016), culturally widespread claims to protect children

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typically have little to do with the specific children involved but rather concern adult and more general cultural norms and unexamined assumptions. Interrogating such assumptions not only discloses discretionary stakes in mandating an exclusionary model of childhood (in the sense that its privileges are not extended to all children, notably those of the Global South), but also highlights the political and personal stakes in maintaining this (Mannoni, 2003).

In terms of connecting and commenting on conceptualisations of rights, rather than being directly concerned with questions of healthcare, medical transition or psychotherapeutic support, for instance, what Cassal’s project highlights instead is the assumptions at play around the stability of the categorisations, and in particular the forms of temporality that prevailing legislation mobilises and relies upon. Current UK law recognises changing gender as something that can only happen once, so that the rights wielder must make a declaration for life. It also requires a period of living as the “other” gender, and so reinstates a gender binary. Further, via the requirement of a minimum age threshold for transitioning, the law demands a certain degree of maturity for making this decision which is seen as protecting children from making a decision that they might later regret or want to reverse. As such, normative notions of childhood inhabit and even drive the discussion of gender recognition, even though children are not included as subjects in this.

Yet age is, of course, no barrier or protection from changing one’s mind, nor of regret, so (notwithstanding the legally driven character of this discussion²) the pinning of this – surely key – human characteristic onto chronological age surely works as some kind of cultural fantasy seeking to confine human malleability or fallibility to children and childhood. Hence a key contribution of this work is the exploration of how models of time, generational status, gender and sexuality regulate each other in UK law, in particular via the requirement to make a lifelong declaration of one’s “acquired” gender identity. Other key aspects highlighted by this study include how such is the porousness and variability of the law that it fails to live up to its own demands for consistency and coherence. This is because some features of a trans person’s life may legally be considered continuous, rather than subject to change (notably those with Peerage titles, so showing how class position and inheritance “trump” other

positions). While the discretionary and variable conditions of attribution of stability vs. change make this topic a key case for childhood scholars, in terms of Child as method the main contribution here is the exposure of the work of naturalisation and stabilisation done by the core chronological claims concerning age and childhood status (Cassal, 2022; forthcoming).

2.3 **Participatory Action Research**

A third recent set of studies by Mandy Pierlejewski illustrates how these theoretical commitments connecting educational, cultural/language and child rights translate into action research. As a participatory action research study conducted with teachers in a primary school, this project had flexible and shifting goals as befits a consultative, participatory approach, but arrived at its key focus on Roma children's cultural and educational rights. Pierlejewski's original interest was in datafication (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017) and in particular the shadow “double” of the child that is produced by and through technologies of state and school testing, assessment and record keeping practices. She developed innovative readings of this doubling process of the child (Pierlejewski, 2021, 2020a, 2020b). Yet alongside the various (Foucauldian, psychoanalytic, phenomenological and posthuman) conceptual frameworks mobilised, this work also exemplifies a Child as method perspective. Building from Foucauldian analyses of the child as the nodal point of intervention through which governmentality (of families as well as schools) occurs, analysis attends closely to those children and the cultural, political, relational questions they both pose and are, in turn, themselves posed by their presence in culturally-alien educational settings. This focus works not only to disclose significant exclusions, marginalisations and alienations but also promoted the forging of new practices of engagement that directly expose inequalities and promote children's educational – including social, cultural and political – rights. These engagements have been literal (including employment of Roma staff in the school) as well as relational (in terms of promoting a more receptive and culturally and interculturally-attuned schooling context). The young Roma child attending school involves wider geopolitical as well as cultural

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3 Section 16, para. 85 of Chapter 7 of the Gender Recognition Act (2004) has a heading “Peerages” with text as follows:

This provides an exception to the proposition stated in section 9(1). The descent of any peerage or dignity or title of honour will take place as if a person recognised in the acquired gender were still of the birth gender. The same rule applies to any property that passes with it, unless the will or other instrument governing the property departs from this rule by express provision

understandings, that also concern the vicissitudes of Roma people's status in former Eastern Bloc states, and the unacknowledged legacies of the Nazi genocide (which remain without any formal reparation). These are in addition to the fallout from Britain's exiting from the EU, giving rise to their perceived and sometimes actual immigration unsettled status, such that Roma communities in the UK have recently been documented as experiencing the worst health outcomes and poorest living conditions (Finney et al., 2023). All these considerations occur alongside norms of family organisation and meanings and responsibilities for and of children that frequently diverge from mainstream British assumptions (Pierlejewski and Vamosi, 2021). Cultural and political rights of communities, including their geopolitical histories and current dynamics, in other words, cannot be separated from the practice of specific children's educational, social or cultural rights.

Having now outlined some applications of Child as method that inform considerations of child rights, in the next section I will explore how this approach might align with other discussions around political action and, in particular, solidarity with children.

3 Child as Method as Non-Child Centred and Solidarity with Children: Implications for Child Rights

A key starting point for consideration is the significance of a feature that is shared by Child as method and current notions of solidarity: neither rely on a child-centred (or human-centred) frame. Since it might seem counter-intuitive to caution against child-centred approaches in the name of promoting child rights, it is worth briefly rehearsing the problems with child-centred approaches.

To set the context, child-centred pedagogies and practices were generated from European philosophical approaches from the 18th century onwards but became inscribed in international child development and education policies, and international development policies more generally, in the post-World War II period (Walkerdine, 1984). This moment was significant as the ideas were taken up as an explicit socio-political strategy to ward off authoritarianism via the installation of appropriate, rational parenting and construction of liberal democratic subjects (Walkerdine and Lucy, 1989). This period clearly marked the transition of western states from their preoccupation with fighting fascism to an equivalent concern with the Cold War authoritarianism. Attending to this moment highlights a central tenet of Child as method: how the geopolitical becomes structured into child-related agendas, as a miniaturisation,
individualisation and psychologisation of politics. Indicative is how the topic of the fourth White House Conference on Children of 1940 was concerned with the needs of children in a democracy, focussing on children and community life (Children's Bureau, 1967), while the fifth in 1950 was more wide-ranging, both in terms of including young people themselves as participants and ‘dealt with the manner in which children could be helped to develop the mental, emotional and spiritual qualities essential for individual happiness and responsible citizenship’ (Merritt, 1951: 188). The focus was primarily on the role of family and healthy personality development. It also included key contemporary figures in child, cultural and social development – including Jean Piaget, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead – with the aim to focus on these features. Hence “progressive” or “child-centred” approaches to parenting and pedagogy became inscribed in national and international policies worldwide that – notwithstanding occasional “back to basics” revivals – have largely remained there ever since (Burman, 2017b; Taylor, 2013; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989; Henriques et al., 1998).

Beyond the political context that both gave rise to, and also warranted, the inscription of this approach into national and international policies, there are other, widely acknowledged problems with child-centred approaches. In brief, these include: the construction of an inadequate, asocial model of the child that is abstracted from social, cultural and political contexts; thereby, second, this covertly structures into child development norms particular (white, middle class, heteropatriarchal, Euro-US) assumptions that naturalise and normalise those children “fitting” such models and pathologise those who deviate from them (Rabello De Castro and Baraldi, 2020). Thus, beyond actually being unimplementable in practice (see Walkerdine, 1993; Sharp et al., 2017), the approach risks reinstating as norm what is an exclusionary and largely fictional representation of child, evident also in programmes to address the situation of child soldiers and children whose lives have been caught up in military conflict (Tabak, 2020). That is, the child at the “centre” of child-centred approaches largely does not exist, except in relation to the deficiency and pathologisation of those that it marginalises. This bourgeois, supposedly democratic, child subject draws on but further elaborates the western European historical and current alignment of “child” with “self”, whether seen as a biographical or more metaphysical entity, of which the focus on the “inner child” can be seen as mere bowdlerisation (Steedman, 1995; Burman, 2012).

Such critiques, that also inform the rationale for Child as method, underscore the need to resist the trap of humanist sentimentalisation of children/childhood. As is now widely acknowledged, humanism and its alignment with the child/self is complicit in colonialis and heteropatriarchal practices
of exclusion of the childhoods (and adulthoods) lived in the majority world (Burman, 2021b; Taylor, 2013). Such sentimentalisations can still be discerned within some accounts of working in supposedly participatory ways with children and young people, as especially evident in claims to document or “hear” children’s “voice(s)”, claims to know or understand a child’s perspective, or speak for the child (Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011). These claims are, typically, as close as many professionals get to mobilising child rights in their work with children, which often becomes reduced to “getting the child’s voice” (Goodfellow and Burman, 2020). Significantly, this critique does not only rely upon a Foucauldian frame, since it also arises from wider poststructuralist and postfoundationalist resources – notably postcolonial and feminist frameworks.

The key question for Child as method is not whether what children say, or what people say about children, is an effect of dominant regimes of truth, or rather is an authentic expression of their wants, needs, or desires (or indeed if it is possible to distinguish these). Doubtless it is these, but that is not the key concern here. Hence, while questions of subjectivity and subjectification are clearly important, the focus for Child as method is on how and with what effects wider geopolitical dynamics enter into and inflect these, rather than a concern with explicating children’s subjectivities per se (Burman 2022). Indeed, the concern to distinguish or separate child-related from other sets of perspectives or interests can itself be seen to reinstall the very binary that is in need of deconstruction. In this sense, specific child attributes or characteristics are ‘bracketed out’ (Tufford and Newman, 2012) in favour of sustaining a relational, dynamic attention to flows of power.

Hence it is proposed that, notwithstanding its apparently paradoxical character, departing from, or avoiding, a child-centred approach has some political advantages for child rights activists (Burman 2022b). It invites a way out of worrying about the exclusionary or, alternatively, privileged features of the particular "variety" of child that is “centred” (especially in normative models), as well as the static, asocial features long noted about the rational unitary psychological subject that inscribes dominant Euro-US models of child/childhood through developmental psychology (Henriques et al., 1998).

Instead, claims to children’s or child rights could align with discussions of solidarity, which has been defined as ‘an experience of willed affiliation’ (Hollinger, 2006: 24). In the context of increasingly complex transnational relations, notwithstanding (the dangers of) identity politics, Hollinger hails solidarity as perhaps the key concept of and for the 21st century. While solidarity presupposes some notion of agency on the part of those exercising or enacting it, it also concerns some kind of ‘special claim’ that individuals have on ‘each other’s energies, compassion and resources’ (ibid.) which goes beyond...
notions of community or collectives, as entities limited by blurring whether such collectivities are self-organised or recognised, or not.

Crucially, such versions of solidarity avoid claims of identity, mutual knowledge, or even intelligibility. In this sense, they go beyond even Dean’s (1996) influential account of reflective solidarity. In common with long-standing feminist proposals for organising on the basis of coalition of diverse interests, or affinity of shared goals (e.g. Haraway, 1987; Lorde, 1984), the notion of solidarity commits to supporting and upholding the expressed demands of a particular individual or group, without demanding that these goals or demands coincide with “ours”, or even meet with “our” approval (whoever “we” are). Rather, from the starting point of alterity (rather than recognition), commonality is built from the interdependency of shared action, rather than presumptions of – or claims to – shared experience, identity or perspective. That is, unlike dominant Christian-informed forms of humanitarian compassion or aid (Gronemeyer, 1992), solidarity does not rely on a metaphysics of either presence or recognition. Such conceptualisations may well be useful for thinking about children and childhood.

The UN discusses international solidarity as central to human dignity and human rights, a model that is extended to so-called “preventive solidarity” in anticipating and preventing adverse catastrophic events (such as those associated with climate change). Notably, here too, solidarity is understood as transcending notions of commonality, but forging a sense of common or joint cause on the basis of heterogeneity (which of course must also include acknowledgement of differential access to power and privilege). As is noted on the UN website (quoting their independent expert):

Solidarity is a persuasion that combines differences and opposites, holds them together into one heterogeneous whole, and nurtures it with the universal values of human rights. International solidarity therefore does not seek to homogenize but rather, to be the bridge across those differences and opposites, connecting to each other diverse peoples and countries with their heterogeneous interests, in mutually respectful, beneficial and reciprocal relations, imbued with the principles of human rights, equity and justice.


Hence, unlike notions of support, which can be discretionary or conditional, solidarity is a more complicated and enduring commitment. bell hooks’ (1984) formulation is influential. She notes:
Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment (64).

These sentiments have been amplified by various commentators, including activists, to distinguish various forms of solidarity (for example, expressive, reactionary, transactional, manifest and transformational) (101 On Solidarity: What Does It Even Mean? | Feminism in India, 2017) (see also, Bhardwaj 2021). Tazzioli’s (2018) discussion of “crimes of solidarity” in the context of saving people from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, regardless of whether they are configured as (illegitimate) migrants or (legitimate, deserving) refugees, would be an example of transformational solidarity.

Various other typologies of solidarity have been put forward. Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) draws on Bayertz (1999) to note both factual and normative prescriptions underlying calls to solidarity, as well as its different uses or domains of application – human, social, political and civic. His description of ingredients for a decolonising pedagogy of solidarity, as an approach that challenges current social arrangements, can usefully be extended to the consideration of work with/for children/childhood:

... solidarity in relationship to decolonization is about challenging the very idea of what it means to be human, and by extension, the logics of inclusion and exclusion that enforce social boundaries, including notions of social, political, and civic solidarity. It is about imagining human relations that are premised on the relationship between difference and interdependency, rather than similarity and a rational calculation of self-interests.

GAZTAMBIDE-FERNÁNDEZ, 2012: 49

Clearly such comments about the logics of inclusion and exclusion are relevant to children/childhood. Moreover, through this “pedagogy of solidarity”, Gaztambide-Fernández identifies conditions for ethical encounters with others in ways that challenge current conditions of colonisation and inequality. These include relational, transitive and creative forms, outlining relational solidarity as concerned with “being-with” without essentialising or reifying the notion of being, but rather reflexively analysing the axes of power and other conditions that produce such beings – ‘a relational solidarity committed to decolonization takes the experience of colonization and the racialized other...
as a point of departure’ (53). (Significantly, in relation to the resources earlier outlined as informing Child as method, Gaztambide-Fernández explicitly mobilises Fanon’s psychoaffective, embodied politics here, as well as various phenomenological and transnational feminist accounts.) While overall the project of a pedagogy of solidarity is to elaborate ‘the conditions of possibility for ethical encounters that rearrange structural conditions, including both the symbolic and material dimensions that produce the encounter’ (57), the key issue is that such a pedagogy cannot specify in advance which claims are relevant as these are defined and produced by the desires and needs of that particular moment and relational context.

Literature is now emerging that applies solidarity to children and childhoods. In a discussion of children’s experiences of benefit sanctions, Benson and Rosen (2017) propose four key points for the elaboration of (what they call) intergenerational solidarity. First, is the recognition of children’s political subjectivity and (potential if not actual) participation in political struggle; second, (drawing on Alcoff, 2009), they emphasise the importance of dialogic engagement to solidarity; that is, the ‘effort of speaking with rather than for others’ (310, emphasis original). While this might appear a rather reduced form of solidarity, it certainly goes a lot further than many current professional practices of “representing”, “consulting with”, or “working with” children. Their third point echoes previous points made above, that solidarity can challenge essentialist representations. As they put it: ‘A person is not a “poor child” but is made into one both through processes of generationing and those of dispossession, indebtedness and private appropriation … Collective agency, we argue, can emerge out of this intergenerational dialogue’ (311). Finally, in common with many intersectionally-informed researchers, they propose as an analytical strategy attending to impoverished and marginalised childhoods to avoid reproducing relations of domination, pointing out that, ‘Given their traditional exclusion from “the political”, children, like other “outsiders” (Scholz, 2015: 395), may have much to offer to efforts of imagining new ways of being and living’ (ibid.).

4 Making Solidarity Count

A key further issue is not only whose subjectivity or perspective is privileged within dominant accounts of rights and solidarity, but also how the individual and collective are thought about, and from this comes a reconfiguration of understandings of the relations between objectivity and subjectivity. The question of whether or how the subject(s) of solidarity are individual or collective
turns out, crucially, to rely on the notion of count-ability (see also Burman, 2021c). For any adequate politics, including a politics of solidarity, what is needed is not only a subject who understands and acts on their felt responsibilities or commitments, as well as interdependence and intersubjectivity, but also an adequate model of the relationship between individual and collective.

Balibar (2012) makes a similar point in distinguishing various concepts presupposed by the activation of political actors:

In my view we need here several concepts or practical notions – perhaps at least three: a notion of the bearers of the political (social groups and individuals), a notion of the actors (or more generally the types of political agency), and a notion of the subjects (or the becoming subjects). For that reason we must think of the invention of democracy and try to contribute to its re-creation through what I would call transitional unities formed by the bearers when they use certain forms of subjectivation to become actors, or active, in politics (447).

This invites further reflection on the concept of solidarity, which is typically defined in two ways according to whether it is countable or uncountable. The countable version is ‘a unifying bond between individuals with common goal or enemy’; the uncountable, a more abstract ‘psychological or material support’ (ibid.). The term “solidarity” derives from the Latin solidum (whole sum). What is posed, therefore, is the relation between part and whole as both a qualitative and qualitative matter; and – outside conditions of vision – those distinctions become difficult to maintain and, as such (under dominant discursive conditions), threaten to reinstall an individualist model. Abebe (2019) makes a related point about the notion of agency in childhood studies, when he comments: ‘agency cannot be measured quantitatively; instead, it is a qualitative notion, and its manifestation can be described only contextually’ (87).

To strengthen analysis of that contextual constitution of the notion of solidarity, it is useful to consider Lacan’s “logical time” sophism (Lacan, 2006). This provides a temporal model of objectively constituted subjectivity to offer an understanding of how embodied, relational action produces the subject and identity. The sophism relies on the individual subject being able visually to encompass the entire scene and the other protagonists in a “glance”, or single view. This is what links the notions of the countable and uncountable that are both central to the notion of solidarity (the solid unitary which is also multiple).

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What emerges (perhaps unsurprisingly) from such analysis is that action is key. It is through embodied action enacted in specific spatiotemporal contexts that objectivity consolidates, or renders solid (note the link with solidarity), the subjective shifts of doubts, hesitations and deliberations that Lacan proposes as structured into the social constitution of individual subjectivity. Further, he argues that these are logical, rather than specifically temporal “moments” that might appear synchronic to the observer, and in this sense Lacan suggests the ‘assertion of certitude is desubjectified to the utmost’ (14). So whilst irreducibly subjective in origin, the subject becomes objective (in the sense of knowable and recognised by others) because it is logically produced through relational, embodied interaction. This happens through what Lacan calls subjective assertion, which – via this logical sophism – he depicts as constructed as an anticipated certainty via embodied relational action; that is, action conducted in relation to others. This anticipated certainty invites a model of shared social subjectivity composed of specific, distinguishable individuals who are heterogeneous rather than identical. It not only offers a model that is not only consistent with Child as method but may also help inform a geopolitics of intergenerational and ecosystemic solidarity. As Rabello de Castro (2020) has recently put it:

The logic of development has not only emptied children as it negativises what children are at present, by comparing them to adults, but also, most intriguingly, has also emptied adults of other/alternative modes of being an adult in modern western culture. Instrumental rationality has torn away and discredited the bodily, affective, intuitive and imaginative endowments of human subjectivity and was geared to come into being by distancing humans from the animal and natural world and by narrowing human agentive capabilities to self-interest and autonomy.

RABELLO DE CASTRO, 2020, 12

5 Conclusion: Conceptualising or Reconceptualising?

In this paper I have discussed key assumptions and resources informing Child as method and how this approach might relevantly engage with some key challenges in child rights discussions. In particular, I have highlighted ways to engage with intergenerational solidarity, as a relevant intersectional axis engaged with by Child as method. Clearly there are other aligned perspectives that address the ‘more than human’ affiliations of children and childhood
through new materialist approaches (Otterstad, 2019), as well as the expanding literature mobilising queer theory to challenge the reproductive futurism installed via the child (Gill-Peterson et al., 2016).

In addition to topicalising how local and global relations are intertwined within conceptualisations and approaches to children and childhoods as key sites of geomaterial practice, one key point that Child as method attempts to foreground is the dialectical, co-constitutive relationship between adults and children, such that every claim about children and childhood actually configures equivalent claims about adults, and vice versa. This could be seen as challenging the linear developmental logic that treats children and fodder for national and international economic, cultural and political development. It also brings resources from recent discussions in postcolonial studies to help foster more nuanced and context-sensitive analyses of complexities, contestations and dilemmas arising at the interface of local, regional and global dynamics.

Rather than claiming that the analyses put forward here, notably via Child as method, offer “new” or reconceptualization of the domain, the account here indicates most clearly the fruitfulness of deepening engagement with a wider range of available concepts and theories. Child as method approaches claims to “know” and “understand” children, to give children “voice”, or “represent” them with suspicion. This is not because the aim to do this is wrong, although this article has suggested the need to look deeply into adult motivations for “helping” or “saving” or “protecting” children (as part of the project of De-imperialisation). This is because such measures presume to know more about children – both children in general and particular children – than is likely known. To take a final example: in June 2021 in an interview for the *Royal Society of Arts Journal*, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Rachel de Souza, was published as saying: ‘My job is to truly understand and represent the voices of children’ (20). This impressive claim can be interpreted as less as a statement of fact (for surely it is impossible) than as a rhetorical assertion of her own authority, her commitment to her work. Nevertheless, such familiar tropes risk promoting an adult’s legitimacy rather than that of children. Child as method has been discussed here as one of various current critical strands currently circulating in childhood and postcolonial (among other) studies, which might usefully inform child rights debates. What such approaches foreground, in particular, are the specific geopolitical agendas enacted by and through claims around children, childhood and child rights.
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