

Children, parents, and non-parents: To whom does “the future” belong?

Rachel Rosen and Judith Suissa

In the 2016 UK Conservative Party leadership contest, Andrea Leadsom asserted her supremacy as a candidate over Theresa May on the basis of her motherhood, claiming this gave her a stake in the future that the childless May did not possess. Regardless of our evaluation of Theresa May’s ideological bent and political performance prior to and as PM, these events raise important issues about the tense relationship between (non)parenthood, childhood and claims to the future, prompting the question: To whom does the future belong?

The idea that certain members of society have more of a “stake in the future” than others has received explicit articulation and defence from political commentators, academics and journalists in the wake of recent political events in Europe. For example, in May 2017, the Gatestone Institute published a widely-cited piece on its website entitled “[Europe's Childless Leaders Sleepwalking Us to Disaster](#)”. The author, right-wing Italian journalist Giulio Meotti, refers to both an EU-funded research project, “[No Kids, No Future](#)” and to the work of German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski in arguing that:

“Being a mother or a father [...] means that you have a very real stake in the future of the country you lead. Europe's most important leaders leave no children behind.”

He goes on to say:

As Europe's leaders have no children, they seem to have no reason to worry about the future of their continent. German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski wrote:

‘For the childless, thinking in terms of the generations to come loses relevance. Therefore, they behave more and more as if they were the last and see themselves as standing at the end of the chain’.

Meotti harnesses this line of reasoning in the service of a familiar anti-immigration rhetoric:

“Angela Merkel made the fatal decision to open the doors of Germany to one million and half migrants to stop the demographic winter of her country. It is not a coincidence that Merkel, who has no children, has been called “the compassionate mother” of migrants. Merkel evidently did not care if the massive influx of these migrants would change German society, probably forever.”

While our focus in the current discussion is not specifically on xenophobic attitudes towards migrants, the themes evoked here are connected to the broader issues we want to explore, specifically the way in which the child, in this popular imagery, is seen as the embodiment of "the future"; with the corresponding understanding of parents as having particular claims to "the future". Our discussion begins first with diagnosis, advancing understandings by analysing the position of parents, non-parents, and children in such narratives, moving beyond previous work which has focused only on one group in the triad. In so doing, we specifically take up the calls of this special issue to work across fields of study (e.g., childhood studies and parenting culture studies) and disciplines (e.g., philosophy and sociology). We continue by interrogating the concept of "the future" embedded in such narratives, situating the problematic in time-space. This enables us to explore how claims about "the future" are exclusionary, not just in terms of privileging particular people and groups, but in terms of assuming particular political and social imaginaries. We end by suggesting the possibility of a more collective notion of futures as a present-day, intergenerational political project for social justice and public good.

Whose future?

Narratives such as those asserted by Leadsom and Meotti have the appearance of positioning parents in an exclusive relationship to the future via their progeny. At the heart of this argument lies a somewhat "fantastical" (Edelman 2004) optimism that parents live on through lineage, transcending even death itself. Parents are also understood to be uniquely positioned to project the consequences of today's actions into the future, through concern for and imaginaries of their descendants' lives. Indeed, implicit in the quoted passage from Meotti, and in similar comments on the suitability of childless women to take on political leadership roles, is the idea that the capacity to *care* about what happens to one's social world and the people in it is somehow linked to one's position as the primary *carer* of a child. Notably, parenthood here is understood in neo-conservative and heteronormative terms of the nuclear family, founded in both biological reproduction and affinal kinship connections such as marriage or adoption.

The saturation and salience of these narratives for both private lives and public debates is noteworthy in the contemporary conjuncture. Notions of parents' claims to and responsibility for the future inhabit people's everyday lives, including relationships between parents and children. This occurs both discursively, as with Leadsom and Meotti cited above, and in the practice of 'doing' parenthood. Faircloth (2013), for example, outlines the public production of idealised parent identities, and their opposite (bad parenthood and non-parenthood), through "militant lactivism" where breast-feeding is treated as the only responsible choice for the future of new generations. Significantly, the conceptual models informing such claims often assume, like the anti-migration rhetoric cited above, a political imaginary of the nation or the nation state. For instance, a 'human capital' model emphasises child development for the sake of familial and national futures (Penn 2010). This has affected both the policy and institutional structures of formal education and popular narratives around parenting and early years care

(Rosen and Newberry 2018). The metaphor of "hothousing children" is one such expression of this discourse.

In the contemporary "risk society" (Beck 1992), "good parenthood" is increasingly understood as both inoculating and preparing one's own children to thrive in the face of uncertain futures. The prominence, in popular and policy literature on early years education and parenting, of the notions of "grit" and "resilience" is just the latest manifestation, suggesting that how parents and caregivers interact with children – especially in the "crucial first 3 years" (Edwards et al 2015, Lee et al 2014, Macvarish 2016) – will protect children against the worst ravages of a precarious future. Such practices require concerted and intensive time, labour, and financial commitment (Hays 1996). However, in this logic, parents – and mothers in particular given gendered divisions of caring labour – are especially motivated to do so precisely because of their unique concerns for ensuring the best possible futures for their children and their children's children.

The claims of parenthood for the future are also a feature of much mainstream work in political philosophy where, to the extent that "the future" features as a theoretical concept, it does so as a space inhabited by individuals to whom people in the present are bound by real or imaginary relationships, to whom they have obligations, and with whom they have to work out a system of fair cooperation. This is particularly apparent in the work of theorists within the liberal tradition where the dominant framework is that of John Rawls' (1971: 128) *Theory of Justice*, which regards the parties charged with working out the principles of a just society as "representing continuing lines of claims".

Although in his later work Rawls abandoned the "motivational assumption" whereby "...we may think of the parties as heads of families, and therefore as having a desire to further the welfare of their nearest descendants," (1971: 128), the point we want to emphasise here is that the conceptual framing of "the future" as defined largely in terms of a set of rights and obligations that extend *existing relationships* in the present, may reinforce an orientation to the future that naturalises, rather than problematising, current assumptions about family, direct descendants, and political arrangements, a point we explore further below.

The association between people's normative claims about - and to - "the future" and their relational positions is even more explicit in work on intergenerational justice that focuses on "care" rather than "justice". Christopher Groves (2014: 157-58), for example, has developed a conception of intergenerational justice based on an expansive account of care and the centrality of attachment that "provides normative justification for an obligation to care for the future, to seek to pass on to future people specific values that endure beyond our own futures".

In centring "attachments", Groves moves away from making an explicit linkage between parenthood and the future. However, although Groves (2014: 159) devotes considerable space to addressing political and moral questions around the relative worth of the "variety of

constitutive values” to which we are attached – of what, in other words, “we happen to care about” - his framing of the whole discussion links the idea of “the future” conceptually to that of attachment, in that humans are, he says “always already constituted as subject within pre-existing webs of attachment, and their responsibility to the future derives from this condition”. In doing so, he emphasises the idea of the future as requiring an extension of the ontological priority of *proximal* relationships in our moral thinking and action. The use of attachment as a concept is telling here, notwithstanding Groves’ broad application of it, given its persistent association with evaluating the strength of parent-child relationships, notably in ways which derive their force from culturally specific notions of good parenting which masquerade as universal. In some ways more importantly for our argument here, using direct experiences of attachment as a model for our relationship to the future effectively limits our imaginaries to a reproduction of the sorts of attachments that are possible, and likely, in the contemporary status quo.

At the same time, while parents are figured as having a clear and direct stake in the future, and through personal lineages and attachments having the ability to adequately consider the consequences of current actions for future generations, parents – in their flesh and blood reality – may find themselves excluded from claims to speak about or for the future. Edelman (2004: 11) suggests that this occurs as a result of the valorisation of the child, as a precious idealised citizen and “universalized subject”, where protecting the future for the children becomes “more highly valued than the actuality of freedom itself, which might, after all, put at risk the Child to whom such a freedom falls due.” While we take exception to the slippage from figural child into historical children in his account,ⁱ here we can stipulate that “doing it for the children” is a powerful invocation that puts enormous, even impossible, pressures on parents. In part this has to do with the ways that “parenting” is increasingly attributed causal primacy for a myriad of social problems (Dermott 2012). Being a “good parent” is a near impossibility with parents censured for over-protecting their children, ideas which manifest in popular culture terms such as “cotton wool kids” and “helicopter parents”, or blamed for neglecting or exposing their children to unhealthy or risky situations. This happens when parents resist pressures to engage in “intensive” parenting as well as when they simply cannot do so, including for emotional, financial or practical reasons (Fox 2006).

This generalised neoliberal self-responsibilisation comes into relief for parents living in liminal, marginalised, or oppressive conditions. For instance, Heidbrink and Statz (2017) document the ways that impoverished central American and Fujinese parents are effectively denied the right to make claims to “the future” through legal, policy, and media discourses which characterise family decisions to have children migrate alone to the USA in the hope of future remittances as “abusive”. Despite the fact children and adults see this migration, and the debt incurred to achieve such mobility, as an important part of children’s social obligations and an example of familial trust imbued in children, these parents are effectively rendered silent, not heard in relation to the types of childhoods they value or the types of futures they wish to live in. They are even held responsible for the problems of the future – whether their children’s or the

American nation-state. In practice, the parent with a unique stake in the future is a coded reference to a middle-class citizen subject and a member of a heteronormative nuclear family, albeit that even these parents can have their claim to the future undermined by the impossible task of “good parenting”. Indeed, in the context of multiple and diffuse sets of power relations, “to protect, save and care for certain forms of life is to potentially abandon dispossess and destroy others” (Ben Anderson 2010: 791).

If parents, at least of this archetypal form, are viewed as holding a special claim to “the future”, where does this leave non-parents? Narratives of parenthood’s uniqueness have as their corollary the assumption put most bluntly in the quote above from Rüdiger Safranski: “For the childless, thinking in terms of the generations to come loses relevance.” In other words, non-parents are viewed as having no socio-political interest or commitment to the future, simply because of having no direct descendants through which they can project their own immortality and imagine, or even desire to imagine, the consequences of their own present-day actions. Such “reproductive futurism” has been profoundly critiqued by Edelman (2004), who argues that heteronormativity and “the child” serve as the constitutive limits of our understandings of the possibilities of communal relations and ways of orienting ourselves to the world.

This rendering of the non-parent is clearly discriminatory, given that people may not be able to have children, and it pathologizes queerness or forms of sexual desire and satisfaction that are not linked to any dream of reproductive futurism. There are sufficient cases of biological parents who have limited or no relationship with their progeny in the present but whom, by virtue of this narrative, would still be granted a claim to the future. What’s more, privileging parenthood’s claims to the future makes little sense in contexts in which raising future generations is considered a shared communal endeavour; and to do so reveals the Western liberal and neo-conservative presumptions upon which such narratives are built.

Here, it is instructive to understand the changing constitution of childhood and parenthood which increasingly sequesters children from the societies they live in (Plumb 1972, Suissa 2006). The separation of the domestic and economic realms through industrialisation, combined with the demand for “quality enhanced” labour power (Rikowski 2003) and removal of impoverished children from the public spaces to “civilise” them through schooling (Hendrick 1997), has meant that the idealised place for children gradually began to be seen as the home or in age-segregated sites such as playgrounds, schools, and nurseries. Likewise, the intensification of parenting has undermined a sense of generalised [adult] responsibility to new generations, effectively shrinking the sphere of those adults and children who have contact with each other and even rendering unknown adults as risky and dangerous strangers, particularly if they are not parents (Bristow 2014). Zeiher (2003) uses the evocative term “islands of dislocation” to describe the ways that children and adults spend the majority of their time having limited interaction with the other, except within what Gillis (2011) terms “child protection institutions”. While an emphasis on the precious child and ideas of intensive parenting have a Western (and historically recent) origin, there is every indication that they are becoming a globalised *ideal*

through the neo-colonial project (in Argentina see Llobet and Milanich 2018, e.g. in Indonesia see Newberry 2017, Penn 2011). While we may question the extent to which children are *actually* sequestered and limited to relationships with intimate adults, this idealisation naturalises the parent-child relationship as the only, or at least the primary, way that adults and children relate to each other.

Our principle point here is to locate neo-conservative discourses about non-parents' lack of concern for children, and future generations more broadly; and thereby de-naturalise the profoundly ahistorical claims that are made on this basis. Indeed, it is this more fundamental problematic that we wish to stress here. Just because some adults may not have children hardly means that they necessarily have a more short-term orientation, or less of a concern for the world, than those who have children. The linking of parenthood to the future individualises our relationship to the societies we live in. It represents a *privatisation of the future* in a geo-historically idealised family form based on the assumption that the only reason we have to care about something is because it affects us or "our own". This discourse also reinforces the very notion of "care" as a private concern; a notion that has been problematised by feminist theorists who have reconceptualised care as a public value (see Fisher and Tronto 1990, Tronto 2006). Anderson (2010) is instructive here, writing about rising "anticipatory action" in the face of views of the future as risky or uncertain. This requires and amplifies technologies of prediction. However, in discourses which prediction is based on personal lineage, non-parents become both unknowable and unpredictable, and thereby excludable from making claims to "the future".

But more, if such discourses bar non-parents from a stake in the future and effectively silence and even blame marginalised parents for future prospects, where does it leave children? The idea that children "are our future" has had much traction. However, it is not so much children's claim to "the future" as their ontological status as "the future" that animates popular imaginaries. This derives its force from a plausible existential reality, in the sense that there is a greater likelihood that younger humans will outlive older humans. But it also neatly dovetails with teleological understandings of child development which continue to have a stranglehold on understandings and explanations of childhood in popular culture and academic work. Children appear as fundamentally mutable, prized for what they will become in the future rather than who they are today.

An anticipatory approach to children has come under sustained critique within childhood studies, an analysis popularised in the phrase "children are not seen as *human beings* but *human becomings*". As Qvortrup (2011) argues, this futurism, and the socialisation efforts by adults which it entails, effectively positions children outside of human societies until the point they reach adulthood: "society", in this popular and academic understanding, is synonymous with "adult society". While more recent work complicates a binary, either-or approach to "being" and "becoming" (Uprichard 2008), and presses against the reluctance to engage with the future in childhood studies (Rosen 2017), this work remains critical of approaches which

empty children of all political agency or minimize their social participation in the here and now. Returning to Leadsom and Meotti, it is evident that present day children may embody the future in their narratives, but they are not seen to have a contribution to make to its formulation. Likewise, to the extent that children feature at all in philosophical work on intergenerational justice, it is always in the sense of yet-to-be adults who will inhabit the future that we, contemporary adults, bequeath them.ⁱⁱ

Furthermore, the conceptual boundaries drawn around “the child” and “the adult”, alongside the physical separation by means of institutionally and geographically bounded spaces described above, may occlude the ways in which adults, and indeed societies, can be thought of as “becomings”. This is a theme that is developed in the work of utopian theorists, who we return to in more detail below, for whom “the world is in a constant state of process, of becoming. The future is 'not yet' and is a realm of possibility” (Ruth Levitas 1990: 14).

Here again, not all young humans are understood as child-cum-future. Some are simply rendered futureless. For instance, despite the fact that separated child migrants often see themselves as the hope for their family’s futures (Vacchiano 2014), their lives once in new countries are experienced as stuck in time. Waiting on asylum claims is experienced as “an arid stretch of time, where the clock ticks, but no movement happens” (Kohli and Kaukko 2017: 2). This produces a precarious and insecure sense of what – if any – future might be available and where. Whether child asylum seekers, children who have missed out on seemingly necessary interventions in the magical “first 1000 days” (Edwards et al 2015), or those from the “waithood generation” (Honwana 2012) whose prospects for secure livelihoods and social adulthood are destroyed in the process of accumulation by dispossession, such children become what Katz (2008) evocatively calls society’s “waste”. Not only are they rendered unable to speak for the future, but they are positioned as having no future at all.

If the child figure, and its real-life representatives, easily slip from being “the future” to being “futureless”, it is hardly surprising that they also slide into being the cause of future problems. A June 2018 [Guardian article](#) asks:

Would you give up having children to save the planet? Meet the couples who have. The environmental toll of having even one child is enormous - 58.6 tonnes of carbon each year. So is going child-free the answer to our climate crisis?

The article profiles organisations such as [Voluntary Human Extinction Movement](#) and [Population Matters](#) which call for adults to be “child-free” as a commitment to saving the environment. These may seem to be fringe movements, but Population Matters claims to reach more than 4 million people on Facebook and has more than doubled its Twitter followers in the past two years.

Here children – in their very being – are held responsible for the uncertain and febrile state of the future of humanity and of the earth, and parenthood is viewed as, in the words of one Population Matters board member, “one of the most selfish things you can do. You’re stealing resources from others in order to perpetuate your genes.” Indeed, non-parents are the ones lauded for their commitment to the future, and thereby feature as its protector. Notable within this version of antinatalism is the decontextualization of claims about the “environmental toll” of children. Arguing that the issue is not one of population growth, figured through the child as the antinatalist movement seems to suggest, but that of the “Capitalocene”, Malm (2016) draws attention to capitalism’s responsibility for world dependency on fossil fuels and the environmental devastation it produces.

Thus far, we have demonstrated that rooting claims to the future in a *particular* social position (parent, non-parent or child) inevitably involves undercutting other subjects’ claims to the future. And, in the slippery realm of family/childhood policy and popular literature in a neoliberal age, one may be held responsible for the state of the future but simultaneously rendered unable to speak for or about the future, or even rendered futureless. Our point is not that parents, for example, should not be allowed to deliberate and imagine futures, but that there is no pre-eminent relationship between parenthood and the future.

In short, our concern is that while popular narratives and philosophical work in this area are often framed as driven by a concern with justice, they are dominated by a type of ideal theory. In the face of the undisputed threat of devastating environmental damage, it may seem that these political questions of justice are precisely the ones we should be addressing most urgently. The issue here, however, is reminiscent of Charles Mills’ (2005: 170) criticism of ideal theory, where he notes how analyses of social institutions and processes modelled on “ideal-as-idealized models” often end up “abstracting away from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice in human interactions and social institutions”. In consequence, the notion of some sort of generalised “we” deliberating from behind a veil of ignorance, about the obligations “we” (whether parents through lineage, non-parents through population control, or children as the embodiment of the future) have to future generations, may occlude the ways in which our experience of the world is constituted by deeply unjust social relations that already shape people’s present and, connectedly, the futures they are able to imagine, desire, and speak for. Similarly, while most political theorists acknowledge that imagining the future necessitates some assumptions about those who will inhabit the future, the focus of the ensuing discussion on “the choices we make, through collective population policies and individual procreative decisions, which determine whether there will be people in the future, and how many of them there will be” (Sanklecha 2017: 233) can obscure the ways in which such choices are not available equally to everyone in the present. By grounding our discussion in empirical examples of migration we have demonstrated that exclusionary relations to the future are embedded in deeply unjust relations in the present. But, as we have implied, they also rely on particular notions of “the future”.

What future?

Building on our arguments that rooting the right to speak for the future in a particular person or group is one that is not just effectively but essentially exclusionary, here we examine the underpinning social and political imaginaries of the future in narratives such as Leadsom's and Meotti's. As Anderson (2010) points out, the ways in which the future is conceptualised fundamentally shapes action. The future depicted here at once represents an *inevitable continuation of the present*, an already existing social and political reality such as Britain or the liberal institution of the family, and thereby reduces the polity to a pre-existing ethno-nationhood. Yet, in the current conjecture, "the future" has also become so abstracted that it almost appears to be endless in possibility, located in *distant horizons with no concrete relation to the present-day actions of contemporary agents*. Despite the somewhat paradoxical nature of these two formulations, they both work to shut down the spaces in which radically different depictions of a future, ones that call present political values, institutions and processes into question, can be imagined and articulated.

We begin by noting the tendency to constrain imaginaries of the future to an inevitable continuation of the present, diagnosing both the characteristics of the historical moment in which such narratives resonate and the political consequences of such concepts of the future. It is important to note that the term "the future" in narratives such as that captured in the above quote from Safranski, and in the popular (right-wing) rhetoric associated with them, is actually shorthand for "the future of Britain" or "the future of Europe" or the future of "capitalist states". What is invoked in this idea, in other words, is an imagined community or nation, often conceived in ethno-racialised terms, that defines itself in terms of, and on the basis of, the exclusion and exploitation of others. In a time of ascendant nationalist-populism and "increasingly shrill populist claims [that] traffic in a number of core nationalist anxieties [and] hinge on certain iconic figures of non-belonging" (Valluvan 2017: 233-34), this is hardly surprising, but it does behoove us to return to understandings of the interplay between exclusion/inclusion and futures – as the examples of migrant families above suggest. The production of the nation, as a "we", is precisely that: a social achievement based on ideational and practice-based constitutions of elastic and exclusionary ideas of us and them. An operation of "simultaneous temporality", this involves nostalgia for an invented past and an imaginary future (B Anderson 1983), often figured in the trope of the child (Cheney 2007, Pells et al 2014) and contrasted with the excluded racialised and gendered other (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Within the narratives typically drawn on to exhort parents to protect their children against "an uncertain future" or to position parents as responsible for "the future" through their progeny, the imaginary of "our future" is based not on a critique of and questioning of contingent political structures such as the nation state and the capitalist political economy, but on already existing political communities and attachments. In a context where dominant accounts of "good parenting" implicitly invoke particular socially and culturally normative ideas and notions of risk, the very phrase "the future" implies a logical connection with an already-defined

political and social imaginary, thereby foreclosing imaginative explorations of radically different futures. This is apparent in mainstream liberal theory as well as popular literature.

Rawls' philosophical argument for liberal forms of intergenerational justice, for instance, reflects just such a view. He writes that "each generation must not only preserve the gains of culture and civilization, and maintain intact those just institutions that have been established, but it must also put aside in each period of time a suitable amount of capital accumulation" (Rawls, 1971, p. 252). Similarly, David Heyd (2009), although critical of Rawls, adopts a terminology of "capital", "debt", and the distribution of goods which invokes the political framework of the liberal capitalist state.

Thus, as David Heyd explains (2009: 171), the central questions regarding future generations are:

"Should we pass on to the next generation the capital which we have inherited from the previous generation? Should we promote the welfare of our descendants (in material goods, in the quality of education and health) as a token of gratitude to our ancestors for what we have inherited from them, or should we rather give to our children independently of what we have received from our parents? May we incur debts which our children and grandchildren will have to pay? Should we accept responsibility for covering the debts accumulated in the past so as to relieve the next generations from that burden?"

In asking questions about the justice of distributive arrangements between one generation and the next, "just institutions" and "capital accumulation" are not themselves understood as contingent constructions of a present social reality that can be questioned and challenged. Rather, they are simply the background context against which our political agency is extended in time. The ethical locus of this discussion seems to be on which individual choices in the present are the most rational response to an extrapolated vision of "the future". In other words, if we think of Malm's analysis of the fossil fuel industry in the context of ideas about "the future", the question posed is not "how can we imagine radically different forms of social and political life in which our relationship to nature and to each other is not one of domination, and in which 'economic growth' is not a marker of a flourishing society?" but, at best, "how can we guarantee a sustainable future within our current social and political structures?"

Concurrent with depictions of the future as an inevitable continuation of the present, "the future" is simultaneously - and perhaps paradoxically - taking shape in popular and policy discourse as overflowing with possibilities and therefore deeply indeterminate and uncertain. Heeding Anderson's (2010) warning not to view this as simply an epiphenomenon, we do note here the dovetailing of the future's demanding and peculiar presence in times of financialised capitalism. For our purposes here, what is crucial is Adkins' (2017: 449) assessment that the contemporary ubiquity of personal and sovereign debt produces "a reworking of the relations of time". However, contra Lazzarato, Adkins insists that time is not taken hostage through the

imposition of pre-set futures. Previously, loans were given based on predictions about assumed educational pathways, career trajectories, and likelihood of repayment. In times of financialised capitalism, accumulation derives from speculation on the unpredictability of default and repayment, where a dynamic schedule of debt servicing, rather than repayment, has taken centre stage. Whereas the preferred indebted subject was previously steady and reliable, the preferred subject is now speculative, innovative, and creative, constantly imagining and orienting towards *potential* futures, which animate everything from the banal to the extraordinary (Adkins 2017). Similar to the logic of Rawlsian liberal theory, however, these futures are animated by a seemingly timeless assumption of capitalism, debt, and class relations as they currently manifest; without such assumptions the speculative market tumbles unceremoniously to the ground. As indebted subjects, we are urged to speculate on the futures that debt can enable for ourselves and our progeny.

The future here is abstract, almost unimaginable, and certainly unevaluable. These are individual futures of *infinite horizons*, as Guyer's (2007) evocative phrase "the evacuation of the near future" nods to. Through interrogation of discourses embedded in both neoliberal macroeconomics and evangelicalism, Guyer traces the way that public imaginaries of the future are no longer concerned with goal setting for the immediate future and consequentialist evaluations of "emerging socialities" (Guyer 2007: 410). Instead, in the last three decades, temporal attention in theoretical work and the popular imagination has vacillated between an unrelenting presentism and a very distant future or past. Such abstraction not only makes the future rife for speculation, but it also leaves a gap that was previously filled by "planning and hoping, ... tracing out mutual influences, ... engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short... the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world" (Guyer 2007: 409). As a result, this is an open future, but one that seems to bear little, if any, *concrete* relation to the present-day actions of contemporary agents.

This reworking of temporality means that the future is ever more present and pressing, including in narratives about Europe's "childless" leaders, and consequentially shaping the present. However, the idealised speculative subject of finance rubs awkwardly against pre-determined notions of attachments and the polity more broadly. Indeed, there is something contradictory in these contemporary trends: finance capital's obsession with the creative, innovative, and wildly open future and the closed polity and romanticising of a homogenous and predictable, if mythological, past suggested by the rise of populist nationalism and neo-conservative views of the family. Both of these conceptions of "the future", however, reflect an abandonment of political agency in the present.

In a similar, and similarly paradoxical way, the very focus on the future in theories of intergenerational justice could be seen to have the odd effect of focusing our attention onto a distant, hypothetical future and, in doing so, distracting us from the political demands of the present; a present in which different people's futures, and different people's ability to articulate the kind of future they want, demand urgent attention. In the ever-receding future inhabiting

theories of intergenerational justice, the question of what kinds of social change are worth fighting for, in the present, so as to ensure that everyone has a future is lost amid the claims of hypothetical future generations on "us". As part of this move, alongside the privileging of the narratives of "good parenting" and risk aversion described above, certain conceptions of the future and the polity are naturalised, effectively silencing those who are not included in the ethno-national and/or middle class "we" from speaking for the future. Thus, either the future is rendered so distant that we can't possibly imagine it or evaluate actions taken to get us there, or our possibilities for imagining, articulating, and enacting radical futures are fundamentally constrained.

Dominant narratives that tie claims to "the future" to individual social positions and proximal attachments reinforce an ideological landscape in which individual choices are valued over collective action, and the very ground on which those choices occur is naturalised. At the same time, they undercut other ways of thinking about futures, in which what is at stake is not "the future" or "our future", but the possibility of positing a variety of different ideas about possible "futures" that can serve as part of a motivating, politically productive and insurgent project for criticising and remaking the present. This point is critical for the wider political implications we will develop below.

Alternative futures

Edelman (2004: 25) offers one way of addressing the problematics of attaching a stake in the future to the social position of parenthood, and more broadly how this is bound up with reproducing the "social order", which we have identified here as a heteronormative ethno-nation and capitalist political economy. He calls for an embrace of queerness and the death drive: a rejection of the "fantasy" of the future and indeed the future itself. Reclaiming "jouissance", the neo-conservative insult lobbed at queerness, rather than reproduction, Edelman's (2004: 30) call is to "resist... enslavement to the future", which will effectively be self-identical to the present, "in the name of having a life." This refusal of the future is required, he argues, to produce a radical rupture in a fundamentally flawed social order.

We appreciate the sentiments behind this suggestive reframing of our relationship to the future, and particularly its refusal of the false promise of linear progress narratives and idealistic utopias, where immortality – of the reproducing self and the social order more broadly – is achieved through procreation and figured in the trope of the child. However, the negation of the future in Edelman's account runs the risk of neoconservative incorporation. If we do not even consider futures, it seems more likely than not that the status quo will continue, not just as an extrapolation but because it may well be the case that it is only a creative act of the imagination such as that involved in the utopian impulse, or method, that can allow us to denaturalise and reimagine the very contours of our social world (Ruth Levitas 2013, 2017). If social and political projects for radical change are necessarily animated by imaginaries of the future, the question is which futures, who can conceptualise these futures, and how might we do so?

An alternative way of thinking about "the future" that we want to suggest is one in which a collective concern for the injustices and sufferings of people in the present can lead us to posit something radically different. To the extent that we can work together, across different social and political divisions, to make such futures possible, we will be perhaps fulfilling Barry's (1997: 43) idea of the duty "to preserve conditions that will make life worth living (or indeed liveable at all)". Our emphasis here, though, is not about speculating into "infinite horizons" which include more of the same, or about "preserving conditions", but about acting, where necessary, to transform the present to make the future. The future, then, is not an empty space in which the recipients of our obligations reside, but the product of our collective and active striving in the present. Indeed, as Ruth Levitas (2017: 7) notes, "There is a sense, then, in which all utopian speculation is about the present rather than the future. It addresses those issues that are of concern in the present, by projecting a different future in which they are resolved."

This point about the relationship to the present is an important element in utopian theory, and a contrast to the logic described above, where "the future" is an extrapolation of present attachments, needs, desires and socially valued goods, or the privatized locus of our moral responsibility towards not-yet-adults. Here, contra Edelman, "the future" can be understood as a creative and motivating imaginary; one which can, as several scholars of utopian thought have theorised, serve to "relativise the present" (Bauman 1976: 13) and re-centre political agency and collective political projects. As Bloch's work has powerfully illustrated:

"Utopia reaches toward that future and anticipates it and in so doing, it helps to effect the future. Human activity plays a central role here in choosing which possible future may become actual: 'the hinge in human history is its producer' (Bloch 1:249)" (Ruth Levitas 1990: 14).

The exercise of questioning of our vocabularies, as Massey (2015) argues, is crucial if we are to challenge the injustices, oppressions and social harm of our current political systems. The vocabulary in debates about "the future" is no exception. It is worth considering the alternative connotations of the phrase "a future" in this utopian scholarship, where the implication is of one of many possible alternative developments, generated by imaginative political projects which posit radical alternatives to the present, motivating people to act here and now in order to bring them closer. Here, our ethical responsibilities are towards those with whom we share a present where our ability to develop a concrete vision of something very different is part of a collective endeavour to address the grave social problems we face.

Utopian theorists have emphasised the point that utopia is essentially about, as Levitas (2010: 209) puts it: "the desire for a better way of being." But, this idea raises important questions about whose "desires" and "ways of being" are valorised and, by extension, how political agents are situated and positioned in ongoing debates about futures. For if utopian thinking involves both a cognitive and an affective element, we need to consider how some agents in the present – such as the migrant children and parents we describe above – may be severely constrained in imagining futures, as well as having their imaginaries denied value (see also

Agamben 1998: , on "bare life"). As Susan Babbitt (1996: 4-5) has explored: "There are some things that cannot be understood, or perhaps even questioned, until existing conditions, including personal states, are disrupted and transformed." Bringing us back to where we began, this suggests not just that political agents in the present, whatever their social position, can be motivated to act to improve the present because of a concern about unjust social structures, but that addressing unjust social structures can itself release possibilities for imagining a different future. Images of alternative futures can help people attend to what is wrong with the present and to the possibilities of very different forms of social organization – regardless of whether they are parent, non-parent, or child. And, to the extent that imagining, articulating and working towards a better future is a collective project, the more voices contribute to the conversation about what "a better future" would look like, the better.

The future, as we are presenting it here, does not belong to any one person or subject position; it is not a private possession (and in this way we challenge what is implied in our own title), extrapolatable from the present or an unevaluable distant horizon. Instead, we are proposing to understand the future as a collective intergenerational endeavour, with future-thinking being primarily about radical reimagining: challenging the injustices of today in order to enact evaluable changes in the "near future".

Conclusion

We began this article with a simple question: to whom does "the future" belong? A review of popular narratives and political theory suggested that a dominant response to this question is "parents". In problematizing the abstraction and privatisation of futures in formulations which base claims to "the future" in particularised subject positions and an extrapolation of ethno-nationalist, capitalist, and neo-conservative/neo-liberal attachments, institutions, and social relations in the present, we proposed an alternate response. Futures, in our view, do not belong to anyone, or any abstracted "we", be this parents, non-parents, or children. Our argument both undermines the right of parents (or non-parents and children) to speak for a future *by virtue of* their subject position, and simultaneously calls on all of us to consider how we might together challenge the injustices of the present. Animated by dialogue and collective imaginings of alternative ways of being and living, this can join parents, non-parents, and children in common political projects to bring about the futures we desire. Doing so requires nothing short of a radical rethinking and remaking of (non)parenthood, childhood, and adult-child relations.

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ⁱ Edelman purports to address the *trope of the child* and centre his critique on the reduction of politics to reproductive futurism. However, his critiques are predicated on a relationship to flesh and blood children, where desiring to have children, and expressing concern for *real* children's well-being, is treated as nothing more or less than participating in the "myth of futurity". To our mind, negating concerns for children in such a manner is adultist and discriminatory, and fundamentally reductive of ethical and political responsibilities to fellow human beings, regardless of their youth.

ⁱⁱ It is apropos to mention that, as we have been writing this article, there have been a wave of children's strikes seeking to force action globally to combat climate change. Although this action has been patronized as "cute" and "unchildlike", or critiqued as "truancy", there are some hopeful indications that children's capacity and right to mobilize politically is achieving recognition and such actions are having an impact (e.g., we are also encouraged by movements such as March for our Lives; Union of Child Workers in Bolivia).

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