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Review of *Children, Politics and Communication: Participation at the margins*

By Nigel Thomas (ed.) Bristol: Policy Press, 2009 ISBN 978184742838, 204 pp, £23.99 (pb)

Based on three extended seminars, *Children, Politics and Communication* reviews 'how children and young people communicate' and 'how they organise themselves and their lives'. Roger Hart traces how children's access to public spaces, their freedoms and interactions with adults generally have all decreased during recent decades. He hopes to see all generations benefiting from renewed community life and so does Vicki Johnson, drawing on her evaluations in the UK and elsewhere. Anne-Marie Smith reports the displaced children of Loxicha Mexico, who protest, march and go on hunger strikes with adults. Jason Hart examines the agency of young soldiers, and calls for more research on how they are affected and oppressed by Western politics. Heaven Crawley reviews how unaccompanied young asylum seekers in Britain have to negotiate systems that require them to seem apolitical and passive in spite of their intense political experiences. Ravi Kohli explores how young refugees and asylum seekers often protect themselves by saying little about their experiences, needing to gain some trust and security before they feel able to speak.

The next chapters concentrate on communication. Li Wei, Zhu Hua and Chao-Jung Wu analyse how third-generation-immigrant British Chinese young people switch codes between English and Chinese to assert their British identities. Amelia Church examines how Australian pre-school children manage their disputes. With their consent, Julia Davies explores how young people with myalgic encephalitis connect on-line to overcome their isolation. Nigel Thomas introduces and closes the book with valuable reflections.

The quality of research and discussion throughout the book is high, and this is a useful book for anyone studying childhood in diverse international contexts and in marginal and disadvantaged social positions. However, I have growing concerns about childhood studies, which this book exemplifies, despite its innovative and emancipatory approaches.

First, I suggest that the average reader would expect a book on 'politics' to address the large public political (as opposed to personal) topics of power and conflict, international policy and law, justice, rights and citizenship, political systems and history, and relations between individuals, markets and states. Readers would also expect authors to be primarily expert in one or more of these areas. Although immensely affected by these areas, children tend to be missing within such 'adult' books. Yet add 'children' to the title and the authors, with most of the works they reference, tend to specialise in childhood and youth but not in the above 'adult' concerns. Does this separation doubly exclude and disadvantage children? Should we expect books on children and politics to include challenging chapters by experts in politics, which is such a large, crucial and neglected topic in childhood studies that it needs whole books-full of analysis? I wonder if devoting so much of this book to small, empirical, personal, micro-communication studies, with fairly brief references to political contexts, is the best way to connect childhood and youth to politics.

Second, childhood studies is still dominated by outdated child development theories, which even in the respectful advocacy chapters in *Children, Politics and Communication* tend to position all children as 'other', as developing, dependent, 'small', needing to be taught and tested about political knowledge and competencies, and having only rhetorical 'adult-bestowed' rights. 'We' are expected to be surprised to see children on political marches – although they do so across the world, regularly in 2009 in London, for example. I hope the next book on children and politics will, firstly, begin with the history of child and youth led political protest, which inspired the American civil rights movement in the early 1960s, advanced the South African anti-apartheid movement in the 1970s, led the Chinese protest in 1989, and continues today, in Iran for instance. Secondly, there would be clearer understanding of the common adult and child heritage of human rights with less misreading of children's rights. Thirdly there would be more account of overlaps between children's and adults' competencies and limitations. Internationally, the disproportionate injustices

endured by children and young people illustrate how the politics of age need to be addressed at least as urgently and critically as those of class, gender and ethnicity. Childhood studies could contribute greatly to new understandings and policies if we question the nature and myths as well as the effects of child-adult relations more seriously and politically.

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