

**Raising Queer Children and Children of Queer parents:
Children's Political Agency, Human Rights and Hannah
Arendt's concept of 'Parental Responsibility'**

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16 adults' political fights. Whilst pertinent to the school de-segregation movement for black
17 children in the US in 1950s, Arendt's provocations are applied here to navigate the tensions
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20 identity. The article suggests that a new radical engagement with the notion of 'children's
21 political agency, and a re-articulation of the concept of 'the best interest of the child' are
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37 **Keywords:** queer children, queer parenting, children's rights, children's political agency,
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Introduction

Where does parental responsibility towards children end? Where does children's political and personal agency begin? How these two questions intertwine with issues relating to sexual orientation and gender identity? In light of ever growing debates on parents' acknowledgement (or lack thereof) of their queer and trans and intersex children, as well as the evergreen dispute on whether queer or trans parents are good parents in different national and supranational settings, it is necessary to confront questions of parental responsibility and children's self-determination. This exponential focus on the sexuality and gender of children (and of parents) calls for a close and critical reflection on the various sites in which children's interests are mobilised, predicated and contested through the prism of sexuality and gender.

This article attempts to address these questions resorting to Hannah Arendt's problematic concept of 'parental responsibility' discussed in her 1959 text 'Reflections on Little Rock'. In addressing the Black Civil Rights Movement's request for school de-segregation for black children in the US, Arendt problematically argued that children should not bear the responsibility of being involved in adults' political fights and should be left free to develop their own political engagement. Arendt's words caused infuriating responses at the time. Given their polemical potential, however, they can act as a dialectical device to reflect on the balance between parental responsibility towards children and children's right to self-determination when parents raise *queer children* or when *queer parents* raise children (be them queer or not). This is ever more relevant considering that the 'best interest' of these two groups of children are often heavily scrutinised, especially by conservative segments of society (Robson 2000, 916).

In the first section of the article, the author lays out the theoretical foundations of the analysis, by critically appraising Arendt's concept of 'parental responsibility'. Grounded into the history of the movement for school de-segregation for black children in the U.S. in the 1950s,

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3 the article carries out a reflection on the legacy of such problematic concept almost sixty years
4 after its first appearance. The article seeks as much as possible to refrain from 'whitewashing'
5 (or, for that sake, from 'queerwashing') the crucial historical significance of this episode in the
6 economy of the fight for racial de-segregation and human rights of African-American in the US.
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8 Simultaneously, the section discusses the notion of children's political agency arising out of
9
10 Arendt's analysis and it connects it with current debates on children's right to self-
11
12 determination. The second section considers how the two intertwined concepts of parental
13
14 responsibility and children's right to self-determination play out in the literature concerning
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16 parenting practices for queer children. The sections seeks to highlight the extent queer
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18 children's political agency is often mediated by parents' own understanding of their 'best
19
20 interest'. In the third section, the attention diametrically shifts from children's onto parents'
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22 sexuality, gender and gender identity. Here, it is considered how children's welfare is framed and
23
24 assessed in the case of *non-heterosexual* or *non-cisgender parents*, particularly in relation to the
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26 questioning, by 'anti-gender movements' of queer individuals' fitness to become parents. In the
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28 fourth section of the article, it will be suggested that both the process of raising queer children,
29
30 as well as parenting practices by queer individuals, require a radical (and often uncomfortable)
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32 engagement with the notion of 'children's political agency', and a re-articulation of the concepts
33
34 of 'the best interest of the child'. This engagement will lead to the articulation of an
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36 emancipatory political framework for children, regardless of their sexual orientation and/or
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38 gender identity or the characteristics of their parent(s).
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50 **Children's Political Agency and Arendt's Concept of "Parental Responsibility":**
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52 **Limitations and Critical Engagements**
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3 'Reflections on Little Rock' is one of Arendt's most controversial interventions.
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5 Published in 1959, two years after Arendt originally wrote it, this short essay was vehemently
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7 criticised by liberals and by civil rights movements in the US. In 'Reflections on Little Rock', the
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9 German philosopher controversially analysed the scandalous issue of racial segregation in
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11 American schools, in the aftermath of 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of*
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13 *Education*. Arendt focused on the events of September 4th 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, when
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15 the 15 years old African-American student Elizabeth Eckford went to the Little Rock Central
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17 High School to attend her classes and was prevented from both the Arkansas National Guard
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19 and an angry mob to enter the building. The pictures of that shameful episode soon became
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21 public domain and Arendt, at the time living in the US, decided to write a critical comment on
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23 the event.
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28 In the text, Arendt argued that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored
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30 People (NAACP) and the allies for the rights of African-Americans in the US, were wrong in
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32 leading their political battles on school grounds. Whilst African-American children and
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34 adolescents were called to defy school segregation by virtue of their mere presence in the
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36 school buildings, parents, activists and allies were positioned in the background. Arendt was
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38 convinced that this parents' and adults' retreat was unacceptable. A passage illustrates clearly
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40 the author's position in this regard:
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44 The picture looked to me like a fantastic caricature of progressive education which, by
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46 abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world in
47
48 which they have borne their children and refuses the duty of guiding them into it. Have
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50 we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or
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52 improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in the
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54 school yards? (Arendt 1959, 50).
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3 This excerpt puts into focus Arendt's controversial idea that African-American children and
4 adolescents were forced into the heart of the political arena by timid parents and adults.
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8 This article does not have the pretence to compare the fight for the rights of African-
9 Americans in the US with issues relating to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Whilst
10 this analysis seeks to be intersectional in its intentions, an abrupt comparison would vilify the
11 fight against racial segregation and racism, comparing two phenomena that are
12 incommensurable. Similarly, there is no space here to assess the claim that Arendt was unable
13 to understand in depth the question of racial discrimination in the US (Burroughs 2015). If
14 correctly transposed, however, some of the ideas expressed in 'Reflections on Little Rock', offer
15 hints for reflection on the thin line of demarcation between the responsibility of parents, and
16 the agency of children.
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28 Numerous commentators (Elshtain 1996; Nakata 2008; Topolski 2008; Kallio and Häkli
29 2011; Morey 2012) nearly sixty years after the appearance of this text, have engaged in
30 symbolic conversations with Arendt on issues relating to education, the politicisation of
31 childhood, as well as on children's rights and citizenship. These conversations take place in an
32 international context in which trans children's lives and experiences are routinely trivialised
33 and politicised in media outlets (think about the coverage of these issues from tabloids such as
34 *the Daily Mail* or *the Sun* in the UK¹) and the lives of intersex children closely scrutinised from
35 medical practitioners and social and legal institutions (Ammaturo 2016). Furthermore, in
36 several countries (Italy, France, Spain to cite a few), movements such as "La Manif pour tous"
37 virulently protest against the parenting rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBT)
38 persons, using the 'best interest of the child' almost as an ideological device.
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53 In light of these phenomena and Arendt's provocation, we need to ask two questions.
54 Firstly, does this increasing attention paid to issues relating to the sexual orientation and
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3 gender identity of children and adolescents truly correspond to a genuine interest for the
4 promotion of children's rights? Simultaneously, one would have to question whether this
5 interest could, instead, be the result of the imprecise transposition of the broader fights for
6 LGBT rights onto the terrain of childhood for strategic purposes. Secondly, how it is possible to
7 safeguard and promote the rights of queer children and adolescents and children of queer
8 parents without calling them to sustain the weight of adults' human rights campaigns for LGBT
9 rights whilst, simultaneously, nurturing their social, political and juridical subjectivity?
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19 Here, it is important to consider the real extent to which, in the context of human rights
20 promotion, these children and adolescents can concretely acquire and exercise agency in the
21 determination and expression of their interests. Similarly, these questions help to ask what the
22 extent to which children and adolescents remain imbricated in the representations of their
23 presumed interests identified by adults. Ultimately, these two questions can be traced back to
24 Topolski's (2008, 275) observation for whom the issue is '(...) whether our battle for the 'rights'
25 of children truly stems from altruism or rather, it is our refusal to accept our responsibility for
26 their futures?'. Two preliminary clarifications are useful at this point: firstly, a reflection on the
27 concept of 'political participation' referred to children and adolescents; secondly, an exploration
28 of how subjectivity of these children and adolescents is recognised in the political and social
29 sphere, where the notion of the 'political' encompasses the everyday experiences of children
30 and adolescents.
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46 Arendt's problematic vehemence in discussing the events in Little Rock derived from her
47 intimate conviction that, in order to offer to children the possibility to acquire independence
48 and freedom, as well as being agents of social change, they should not be prematurely exposed
49 to the political problems proper of adults' world. In this regard, she insisted on the necessity of
50 maintaining a neat separation between the *public* and the *private* sphere, in order to allow
51 children to develop a marked and autonomous sense of self (Morey 2012, 102). As a classical
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3 theme of feminism (Pateman 1983, Long 1998), the *public/private* distinction has been
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5 considered by many as being based on ideological distinction (Rose 1987, 66) and an idealised
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7 vision of the *family* (Okin 1989). Arendt's position, more explicit in *The Human Condition*
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9 (1958), strictly separates the public from the private, where the *private* is a space of personal
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11 nurturance and retreat from worldly affairs and the *public* is the sphere of action. This
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13 approach has been heavily criticised by feminist authors (Benhabib 1993; Prokhovnik 1998;
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15 Honig 2010; Butler 2015), insofar as it participates to the reproduction of a dichotomy based
16
17 on biological essentialism (Benhabib 1993) and disregards the extent to which, in real life,
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19 children are never completely sheltered from politics, as Elshtain (1996, 23) has aptly
20
21 commented. So how to distinguish between the political action of the child and adolescent as a
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23 genuine response to environmental stimuli, from the 'politicisation of childhood' as a process
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25 initiated by adults who intend to act in the interest of the child in question?
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30 As Oswell (2013, 7) has observed, the child does not always express *hir*'s role of agent
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32 in an entirely unitary, reflexive and aware fashion. The child does not necessarily possess a
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34 constant awareness of the fact that *hir* actions may have an inherent political or social
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36 character and that they might be instrumental in the articulation of *hir* needs or rights.
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38 Although children are able to create and maintain power relations in the context of their social
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40 interactions (Kallio and Häkli 2011, 2), children's possibility for political action is almost
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42 entirely articulated on the subjective positions assigned to them by adults (Kallio and Häkli
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44 2011, 2) and follows rules and schemes proper of the adults' world. These rules require a
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46 hierarchical organisation of the various subjects based on the concept of political, social
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48 and/or juridical 'maturity'.
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53 This presumed 'immaturity' of the child as a social and political agent overlooks the fact
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55 that the acquisition of the child's political maturity is a gradual process that needs to be
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57 accompanied by the equally gradual and parallel recognition of the child's citizenship rights
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3 (Rehfeld 2011, 150). An approach of constant inclusion of children into decisional and
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5 participatory processes, can help to see children as 'social beings' rather than 'in continuous
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7 becoming' (Oswell 2013, 40). This approach, furthermore, allows to discern more neatly the
8
9 extent to which the identification and definition of children's interests is influenced by pre-
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11 conceived ideas on childhood and adolescence in general and by adults' memories of their own
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13 childhood and adolescence (Bridgeman 2007, 9). A useful illustration is represented by debates
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15 around the 'sexual agency' of children and adolescents, often based on the premise of
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17 'enlightened innocence' (Egan and Hawkes 2009, 390). Research conducted in various settings
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19 has highlighted that children actively participate to the process of gender construction of
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21 themselves and other children and adults (Robinson 2012, 267); as well as being able of
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23 expressing sexual agency during adolescence (Överlien 2003), navigate and problematise
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25 sexual dangers in difficult contexts (Oduro 2012), as well as expressing engagement when
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27 empowered to express their gender, and frustration when they are prevented from doing so
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29 (Ehrensaft 2012, 338).
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35 The political role of children can be clarified by two distinct models. The first model sees
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37 the child as being fully capable to be involved in all sorts of decisions that concern *hir* (Kallio
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39 and Häkli 2011, 3). The second model, considers the political role of the child as being exercised
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41 in the daily activities of *hir* life in which broader social questions become relevant (Kallio and
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43 Häkli 2011, 3). The former contains an explicit conceptualisation of 'children's rights', and
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45 children are called to play decisional or participatory roles that are entirely different from those
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47 they are required to play in their daily life (Kallio and Häkli, 2011). Adults, guided by the
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49 intention of safeguarding children's rights, may hence project onto children categories and
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51 dynamics that are proper of their own world. These may possibly be removed from the
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53 children's daily experiences relating to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
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3 This disparity between children's and adults' perception of daily experiences relating to
4 sexuality and gender may be also illustrated by the evidence for children' and adolescents' strong
5 politicisation of their own corporeality. The body becomes the main site of resistance for the
6 child and the adolescent who does not possess other resources in order to resist to '(...) most
7 attempts to control, manipulate and rule their lives' (Kallio 2008, 294). Whilst this supports the
8 fact that the majority of the policies concerning children have as their focus the very body of
9 the child (Kallio 2008, 294), it also sheds light on the nexus between sexual orientation, gender
10 identity and children's rights. The rise of 'anti-gender movements'³ throughout Europe whereby
11 various secular and religious actors (mostly Catholic) become actively opposed to socially
12 constructed conceptions of gender and sexuality (Korolczuk 2017, 293), particularly when
13 children are concerned, illustrates this critical point. This case exemplifies transfiguration of
14 the concept of the 'fear of the queer child' (Valentine 2009; Rosky 2013), whereby the child is
15 considered heterosexual by default (and deprived of a sexuality in the first place) and, therefore,
16 actions are taken to preserve the purity and innocence of the child, as well as the
17 heteronormative order. There are, however, undeniable dangers that this battle for 'compulsory
18 heterosexuality', in Rich's (1980) terms, bears for children and for their political agency.
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41 **Raising Queer Children: whose 'Best Interest'?**

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47 In everyday life, parents routinely make decisions according to their children's 'best
48 interest'. Some decisions go unnoticed, whereas others are heavily scrutinised, acquiring social
49 and political, and juridical significance. Whilst the notion of the 'best interest of the child' is
50 enshrined in Art. 3.1 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), its meaning,
51 as well as its usefulness to safeguard children's rights, are problematic. Some commentators
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3 have argued that the notion of 'the best interest of the child' is indeterminate (Bird 2005),
4 subjective (Giordano 2013) and paternalistic (Schuz 2014). Moreover, the simultaneous
5 inclusion in the CRC of Art 12.1 that prescribes that children should be heard on matters
6 affecting them according to their level of maturity and their capacity to form an opinion,
7 complicates the picture even further. Are parents always able to discern the child's best interest
8 when the child in object is not able to make *hir* opinion on a given matter?
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16 The notion of 'best interest of the child' intersects with the above-mentioned 'fear of the
17 queer child' (Valentine 2009; Rosky 2013). In this regard, it is relevant to ask to which extent
18 parents' understanding of the notion of the 'best interest of the child' may be already inherently
19 attuned to a conception of children's sexual orientation and gender identity as being
20 *heterosexual* and *cisgender* by default. Several authors (Valentine 2009; Stockton 2009;
21 MacDougall 2004; Rosky 2013) have argued that the child is always considered to be
22 inherently heterosexual. Moreover, this presumably inherent heterosexuality is accompanied
23 by a value judgment that prescribes it as preferable to homosexuality. Moreover, the child is
24 usually seen as being inherently *cisgender*, thus completely obliterating the existence of the
25 trans child. Additionally, the child is desirably seen as *fitting the anatomical criteria of the female*
26 *or the male biological sex*, clearly denying the existence of intersex children. A corollary to this, is
27 the 'compulsory able-bodiedness'⁴ (McRuer 2010) through which children and adults are seen
28 as normal/deviant. Hence, through the lenses of 'standard' parenthood, the child can be neither
29 *homosexual*, nor *transgender*, nor *intersex*, nor *(dis)abled* unless these categories are
30 conceptualised as *transgression* from the social, biological and legal norm. These observations
31 suggest that parents may resort to the compound of *heterosexuality/cisgenderism*⁵/*biological*
32 *sex/ableism* when thinking about their children's 'best interest'.
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54 Against this background, Arendt's claim that children should be free to develop their own
55 political agency is problematic. On the one hand, Arendt's suggestion would imply that sexual
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3 politics should not be done at the expense of the (bodies of) children. In practice, this would
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5 require re-configuring her distinction of the private/public within the context of the family
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7 itself, where the child's body and sexuality would be *private* as opposed to the other
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9 interactions within the family itself that could be deemed to be *public*. Arendt's conception of
10
11 the public/private distinction is based on a strong relegation of corporeality in the sphere of
12
13 the private (Benhabib 1993, 89; Butler 2015, 86-87) and tends to associate the body with an
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15 impossibility for *freedom* because of its immediate ties with the notion of *necessity* (Butler
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17 2015, 47).
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21 In light of Arendt's limited articulation of the inherent political (public) character of the
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23 body, it is possible to ask how the queer child can politicise *hir* own life without it being
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25 politicised by others. Brighouse's (cited in Rehfeld 2011, 151) has aptly captured the tension
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27 between the child's exercise of *hir* sexual political agency and the danger of becoming the pawn
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29 of sexual politics proper of the world of the adults:
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32 Children cannot come to be competent agents without some experience of agency. They
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34 must have the experience of choice before it makes sense for them to be seen as having
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36 the right to choice (...).
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40 Brighouse's claim shows the existence of a productive – and potentially subversive – interstice
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42 that would allow the child to exercise sexual (and gender) agency without being subjected to
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44 the same requirements of adults' sexual politics. The ideal site for children's expression of their
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46 corporeal and emotional agency would be that of daily practices and experiences given the
47
48 inherent political character of children's daily lives (Kallio and Häkli 2011).
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51 One interesting illustration of the way in which children's political agency in relation to
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53 their identity and corporeality maybe said to 'organically' develop in daily life practices, is
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55 illustrated by Kennedy and Hellen's (2010) observation on trans children:
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3 Although transgender children are subjected to considerable and sustained pressure to
4 conform to gender roles assigned at birth, what is most remarkable is that in defiance of
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6 this they still develop a transgender identity.
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10 Kennedy and Hellen's point illustrates that, regardless of prescriptions and foreclosure to trans
11 children of official venues of expression of their gender, these children nonetheless *politically*
12 defy social norms on gender by *doing* the gender they assign to themselves in a sort of Butlerian
13 way. These observations can be coupled with Valentine's (2008, 1076) reflections on the fact
14 that children learn throughout their development to '(...) manage stigma, (...) and cope with
15 social, education and community environments where victimisation and harassment are
16 normative'. Thus, in partial opposition to Arendt's claim for the need of a sort of 'sanitised'
17 schoolyard, it can be argued that (queer) children already confront themselves with embryonal
18 political decisions in the playground where they might be stigmatised or marginalised. **Current**
19 **debates on 'bathroom bills' across the United States on which facilities gender-nonconforming**
20 **children and young people should be using (Lee 2016), as well as rising debates on**
21 **homo/transphobic bullying in schools (O'Donoghue and Guerin 2017) show how politicisation**
22 **becomes a sort of 'micro-politics' in children's daily lives.**
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39 Furthermore, Arendt's opinion on the need of sheltering children from political battles
40 was guided by the underlying idea of childhood as a time of innocence and radical detachment
41 from the contamination of adult life. The equation childhood with innocence is a well-
42 rehearsed notion (MacDougall 2004, 1065) and contiguous to the characterisation of the child
43 as a 'victim' (Nakata 2008, 22). Ultimately, these characterisations of *victimhood* and *innocence*
44 of children contribute to the political disempowerment of children, particularly when the 'fear
45 of the queer child' is the predominant prism through which children's sexual and gender
46 identities are read and constructed by parents and society more at large. In these cases, the
47 'best interest of the child' may seek to protect the 'perceived community and societal interests'
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3 as Eekelar (cited in Oswell 2013, 190), rather than putting at the forefront the genuine interest
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5 of the (queer) child in question.
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8 Children's political practices of corporeality, sexuality and gender should be considered
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10 by adults as being legitimate expressions of their needs. Simultaneously, these practices should
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12 do not become the outpost of political battles on gender and sexuality fought by adults. Hence,
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14 there should be recognition of the commonality and continuity between the sexual politics of
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16 children and adults, whilst considering them as distinct subjects (children or adults). Here, the
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18 difficulty resides in rightly balancing 'the micro-politics of personal experience and the macro-
19
20 politics of the public sphere' (Philo in Kallio and Häkli 2011, 3). The child, however, becomes
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22 the object/subject of (adults) sexual politics even when *hir* is not 'queer' but lives in a
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24 household with queer parents, as the next section will discuss.
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31 **Raising Children of Queer Parents: the Family as an Ideological Battleground**

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37 Arendt argued that children should be free to develop in the *private* sphere of the home,
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39 as opposed to the *public* sphere of politics. As has been discussed already, Arendt
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41 underestimates the extent to which the family can truly be said to be a *private* space in which
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43 the child to develop freely its political consciousness. Arendt seems to imagine the family as this
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45 idyllic place of rest and sheltering (Benhabib 1993, 107) where parents can freely choose how
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47 to raise their children as they wish. However, the emergence of families with queer parents
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49 shows that individuals can be subjected to high degree of scrutiny regarding their fitness as
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51 parents and children become the hostages of such scrutinising endeavours.
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55 Opponents of same-sex marriage and/or adoption by queer parents, have traditionally
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57 argued that children living in these families grow up being either lesbian or gay and/or
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3 'confused' about their gender identity (Bernstein 2015, 325). Gender and sexuality figure very
4 prominently in discourses concerning the parenting of children (Averett 2016, 191). Hence, the
5 gender identity and sexuality of the parents may be deemed 'influence' the gender and sexuality
6 of the children, thus resuscitating the above-mentioned notion of the 'fear of the queer child'.
7 Here there is an important tension at play between children's presumed 'best interest' of being
8 raised as being 'heterosexual' and parents' interests to raise their children as they wish in the
9 *private* setting of their homes. Both these principles are mediated by normative introjections
10 on admissible forms of sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
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21 Research has explored widely possible differences between parenting by heterosexual
22 and homosexual parents, and traditionally depicts a positive picture of family relationships
23 (Tasker and Patterson 2007). Nonetheless, the concept of the 'fitness of queer parents' is
24 particularly ubiquitous in most studies. Studies have shown that queer parents are very self-
25 aware of the scrutiny to which they are subjected (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001). Here it is
26 important to acknowledge that queer parents can themselves use the language of 'the best
27 interest of the child' in order to justify their family arrangements vis-à-vis opponents. Research
28 by Kane (2006) and Berkowitz and Ryan (2011), however, suggests that queer parents express
29 anxiety over how to correctly 'socialise' their children in terms of sexuality/gender, for fear of
30 being subjected to principles of *accountability* and *assessment* (Berkowitz and Ryan 2011,
31 332). Sometimes, these parents tend to socialise their children (whether consciously or
32 unconsciously) as close as possible to heteronormative, cisgender societal expectations (Kane
33 in Berkowitz and Ryan 2011, 339). Furthermore, studies have also shown that children raised
34 in queer households possess tools to navigate the disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation
35 (or gender identity) in different settings (Tasker and Patterson 2007, 19-20), but do not
36 generally appear to be more bullied than other groups of children raised in heterosexual
37 households (Wainright and Patterson cited in Tasker and Patterson 2007).
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3 In recent times, this moral panics over whether queer individuals are fit for raising
4 children, has been transfigured in the recent rise of so-called 'anti-gender movements'. In the
5 last two decades, these movements across Europe have catalysed the development of arguments
6 against same-sex parenting. Originally conceptualised in the 1990's by O'Leary (Garbagnoli
7 2016), the 'anti-gender' rhetoric has found wide resonance in the Catholic Church throughout
8 the years 2000s. These 'anti-gender' movements reaffirm biological determinism of sex and
9 gender and insist on the promotion of traditional male/female gender roles. Whilst pursuing
10 different agendas in different countries across Europe (Kováts 2016, 175), these movements'
11 questioning of queer individuals' fitness as parents has been quite potent. The cases of the
12 mobilisation against marriage equality in France and Italy (Garbagnoli 2016, 194) well
13 illustrates this point.

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28 One *Leitmotiv* of anti-gender movements has been that of 'protecting children' from the
29 incursions of non-traditional conceptualisations of 'gender', with successful results in the
30 context of debates on marriage equality in France and Italy. In France, in particular, anti-gender
31 movements have refrained from casting LGBT parents have insisted on the naturalness of the
32 heterosexual family (Garbagnoli 2016, 197). In these accounts the child has been depicted as
33 the '(...) innocent victim of the hedonism and egoism of LGBT parents' (Garbagnoli 2016, 197).
34 During the various protests against same-sex marriage in France in 2013, children featured
35 quite prominently in slogans, depictions and other forms (Garbagnoli 2016, 197). This
36 relentless attention on the 'protection of children' seems to display the features of what Cohen
37 (2002) has defined as 'moral panic'.
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50 Paradoxically, the more closely the presumed 'best interest of the child' are scrutinised
51 by the members of the so-called 'anti-gender movements', the easier is for the true interests of
52 children to be lost in the midst of a purely ideological battle. Thus, bringing Arendt back into the
53 conversation, whilst predominantly about children, these conversations between the 'anti-
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3 gender' front and queer parents are really about adults' respective conflicting conceptions of
4 'family', 'gender roles', and so forth. Children's rights and interests here only appear tangentially
5 and instrumentally.
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10 As Averett (2016, 192) has argued, it is not the '[queer parents]' identity itself, but their
11 experience of their identity in a heteronormative society, that shapes how LGBTQ people
12 parent'. The queer family seems to become a litmus test both for queer parents' own
13 reassurance of their fitness to raise children, as well as for societal external scrutiny on the
14 parenting practices of queer parents. Seeing the family as the domain of the private is almost
15 impossible, as the very conceptualisation of 'queer parenthood' is an inherently political act.
16 Here a partial parallel exists with Arendt's argument in 'Reflection on Little Rock' on the idea of
17 sheltering children from politics. In her analysis, Arendt had overlooked black parents'
18 strategies of resistance against institutional racism in the US in the 1950s (Morey 2012, 103).
19 Ralph Ellison had pointed out (cited in Morey 2012, 103) that black parents wanted their
20 children to attend de-segregated school not to penetrate into white American society, but to
21 make their children be aware of the life of African-Americans in segregated 1950s United
22 States. Echoing Averett's argument (2016, 191) on queer parents, it can be argued that the
23 experience of these Black parents' identity in a racially segregated country, crucially shaped
24 their parenting practices. In proposing this observation, of course, one must escape the risk of
25 depicting queerness as inherently 'white', thus obliterating the existence of black queer parents
26 who may simultaneously need to familiarise their children both to racial and sexual inequality
27 within the society in which they live. Nonetheless, children very often become the objects of
28 broader political battles precisely because of their unique status as presumably vulnerable
29 members of society and also, simultaneously, in spite of this very status. Parents (be them
30 heterosexual or queer, or from an ethnic majority or minority), project their own expectations
31 onto children and express these concerns through the rhetorical prism of 'the best interest of
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3 **the child**. Ultimately, it appears imperative to bring forward a radically new notion of 'the best
4 interest of the child' which simultaneously acknowledges the inescapable political nature of
5 parenting, as well as the necessity of providing safe spaces for children to become political
6 agents beyond the political practices of their parents.
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11 12 13 14 15 **Recasting Children's Political Agency in the Field of Gender and Sexuality: Challenges and** 16 17 **Opportunities** 18

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23 Previously, the author has sought to analyse the modalities, within the context of queer
24 childhood and/or queer parenting practices, in which children can acquire and exercise
25 political agency beyond the constraining framework of adults' politics. Firstly, the author has
26 looked at how the notion of the 'best interest of the child' is inevitably shaped by parents'
27 understanding of viable or unviable forms of sexual and gender identity and how, within this
28 framework, children's capacity for political agency and expression may be curtailed or
29 compressed. Secondly, the author has moved onto considering how closely queer parents are
30 scrutinised when raising children (whether they are queer themselves or not) and how
31 expectations around proper parenting practices permeate and inform the understanding of
32 what it is in the child's best interest. Seen together, both the queer child and the child raised by
33 queer parents directly interrogate the delicate interplay between children's political agency and
34 parental authority, forcing a reflection on the production of acceptable forms of childhood that
35 are profoundly shaped by heteronormative and cisgender canons of identity. This
36 acknowledgment, in turn, requires putting at the centre the child with *hir* phenomenological
37 experience of sexuality and/or gender, rather than privileging adults' normative frameworks.
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3 The question of children's political agency in relation to sexuality and gender is mediated
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5 by adults' own conceptions of what is in the child's best interest. The focus here is on children's
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7 political agency in conjunction with the 'politicisation of childhood' enacted by adults. Arendt's
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9 dismissal of the political nature of the family leads to a characterisation of her contribution as
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11 theoretically inadequate to account for the necessity of finding a balance between parents'
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13 responsibility towards their children and children's own right to self-determination.
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15 Furthermore, Arendt's argument against the 'politicisation of childhood' does not take into how
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17 parents may have profound political motivations in raising their children that may have with
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19 the anticipation of the obstacles that their offspring will face.
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23 Acknowledging parents' (political) motivations in deciding on behalf of their children,
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25 means that when legal cases involve the protection of queer children and/or children raised by
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27 queer parents, it is possible to consider children's involvement in adults' political struggle by
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29 bearing in mind the intersection between different forms of discrimination, oppression and
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31 institutionalised racism and/or homophobia and transphobia. Hence, whilst recognising
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33 parents' conception of the 'best interest of the child' as being infused by the canons pertaining
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35 to the previously cited compound of *heterosexuality / cisgenderism / biological sex / ableism*,
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37 advocates, legal practitioners and social workers may be able to address the root motivations
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39 that cause parents to develop those anxieties with respect to the well-being and future of their
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41 children. Parents may tailor their parenting practices, as Averett (2016) has suggested on the
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43 basis of what they perceive is expected of them or, as pointed out by Ralph Ellison (cited in
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45 Morey 2012, 103), in order to prepare their children for what they perceive to be a difficult
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47 future situation in which they will find themselves. Either ways, carving out a safe space for
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49 children to develop their own political identity and agency, one should simultaneously act on the
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51 social structural issues, such as institutionalised racism, homophobia and transphobia, that
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53 permeate young lives and may lead parents to create 'sheltering environments' which may
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3 lessen or reduce experiences of discrimination and/or bullying. In sum, one could argue that
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5 lessening parents' own anxieties around their children's lives could lead, in turn, to an opening
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7 up of the opportunities for children to truly experiment with their identities, be them sexual,
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9 gendered and/or ethnic identities. At the same time, however, parents should refrain, as much
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11 as possible, to burden children with unnecessary political emotional and physical challenges
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13 that colonise the child's own political space. In this sense, reflexive practices of parenting may
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15 help adults to reflect on their own motives for producing specific narratives of their children's
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17 'best interest'.
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21 Another important aspect relating to issues relating to sexuality and gender concerning
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23 children, is how to subtract them from a type of paternalistic gaze that uses the currency of
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25 'moral panic' (Cohen 2002) as its major propellant. The pluralisation of the principle of the
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27 'child's best interest' in intersectional terms relating to race, ethnicity, sex, gender, sexual
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29 orientation, gender identity, age, religion and nationality, may require a more profound re-
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31 articulation of childhood beyond ideological schemata fostered by adults. A productive creation
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33 of autonomous spaces of political experimentation for children should go, therefore, in parallel
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35 with addressing social problems that create defensiveness in the way in which parents exercise
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37 their parental authority vis-à-vis social structures and formations.
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46 ¹ For a thorough discussion see: Gray J 2017. The Sun and Daily Mail Accused of Putting Transgender Kids at Risk
47 with LGBT+ Stories. *The Huffington Post*. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/the-sun-daily-mail-transgender-uk_5a094dcbe4b0e37d2f386b74, last accessed 10th February 2018.

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49 ² Throughout this article, the pronouns *hir* will be used in order to acknowledge the fluidity of gender categories
50 beyond gender binarism. The *hir* pronoun is a neologism often used within queer studies. More information can
51 be found at: <https://genderneutralpronoun.wordpress.com/>

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53 ³ For a comprehensive approach to the development of 'anti-gender movements' in Europe please see Paternotte and
54 Kuhar (2017)

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56 ⁴ Here one can also think about the complex ethical challenges raised by the advent and rise of assisted reproductive
57 technologies and parents' capacity for choice when it comes to which characteristics children should have (see Davis
58 2010 for instance).
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5 Lennon and Mistler (2014, 63) define 'cisgenderism' as: '(...) the cultural and systemic ideology that denies, denigrates or pathologises self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned gender at birth as well as resulting behaviour, expression and community. This ideology endorses and perpetuates the belief that cisgender identities and expression are to be valued more than transgender identities and expression and creates an inherent system of associated power and privilege'.

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