

## The Politics of Children's Rights and Representation

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Beginning in late 2023, the conflict in Gaza reminded us that recognition of children's rights is tenuous and probably best called out by stating, "where you live should not determine whether you live" (Collste, 2022, p. 44). Let me horrify the reader with just one example about the reality of children's rights when representation fails: there is a ward full of babies in the paediatric intensive care unit at the Al-Nasr Children's Hospital in Gaza City. Medical professionals are doing their best to care for a full ward of critically unwell babies in the middle of a conflict. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) required the hospital to evacuate the premises. Not being able to take some of those babies with them because of their critical medical conditions, the Palestinian medical workers gained assurances from the IDF that they would care for the babies once the hospital was evacuated. Several weeks later a journalist entered the abandoned hospital and found those babies, their bodies badly decomposed with insects crawling through their chests (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2023; Salam et al., 2023). The IDF, for whatever reason, did not honour their promise to care for those babies.

Other than a basic humanity to that, the destruction of Gazan schools and hospitals are grave violations of the rights of children affected by armed conflict. We are not just talking about protection here, the inability of the world to protect children's rights mean that we are talking about survival in its most

simple form: the right to life. How more timely could this book be?

How does one digest collection of perspectives about children's rights and representations? Helpfully, the book is divided into three sections: (1) rights, participation, and representation; (2) representation and the international politics of children's rights; and (3) representation in time of inequalities and injustices. Within those sections are accounts (amongst others) of the Swedish ban on child corporal punishment, the court fight for education for children in Delhi, how children are represented in court hearings, the experience of Afghan migrants in Sweden, and Ghanaian street children. Each of the chapters are worthy of a review on their own. Succinctly put, each account is thoughtfully written by an expert in the field, supported by evidence, and concise enough to read without any real burden.

But to the question of how to digest this edited book. The truth is, that you might (as I usually do) flick through the contents to get a sense of the range of topics, then pick a chapter that has the strongest pull. In this case it was the last chapter of the volume, which gave a fascinating account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and the representation of their political struggle in Australia. This chapter, using grave examples, also offers motivation and inspiration from the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (and the failure of the "Yes" campaign in 2023 for the constitutional reform should be remembered

while reading this account), and the coloniality of being is all too familiar when the authors state, “Indigenous people have never been passive and agentless subjects of colonial power. Their histories are fuelled by resistance, political strategy, and sustained kinship systems...” (Nakata & Bray, 2023, p. 302). The reference to the concerning Don Dale Youth Detention Centre (while very different, our own residential centres come to mind) and a Queensland youth curfew proposal (for our context, read “ram raids”) vividly emphasise the narrative. The colonial history and the coloniality of being (such as, not necessarily higher crime rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, but rather greater police contact) expressed in this chapter will be all too familiar for the reader here. However, this account balances the traumatic experiences of colonisation alongside the transformative potential that Indigenous youth have for society at large. While Australia could not get to “Yes” in 2023, perhaps local communities will realise the potential these young people can offer.

The other chapter that caught my initial perusal was the work by Jana Tabak who provides a thought-provoking (and my own weeks’ long reflection) about the representation of child-soldiers in Western thinking. There are some challenges in there, with the most interesting being about child-soldiers and how they are framed in Western consciousness as needing rescuing. I must confess I am still unable to reconcile with the author’s contention, notwithstanding the numerous nuances, that child-soldiers are not simply the “objects of exploitation or the objects of salvation” (p. 164) and have exceptional agency. While I agree that we often reduce the complicated into the binary, to me, the view that child-soldiers have exceptional agency means a choice, and the consequences of that sit uncomfortably with me (but perhaps that is the very point the author is making?). Of course, the author here is an expert, and with a fair degree of reflexivity I did consider

the positioning of western liberal democratic ideals and whether these should be layered on hostilities throughout the world. The answer is, yes (which is contrary to the author’s assertions). How we treat the most vulnerable in our society (okay, and to the author’s point, many of these countries are not “our” society) is a reflection on our society, and I do not believe war crimes should be argued away as some discussion about agency or western societal handwringing.

Whether Tabak’s perspective sits well with me is not the point here. What I’m emphasising is that I am not able to recall something I have read that has constantly pulled me back into an analysis of my own views for so long after reading the piece.

Every social worker should (and needs to) read this book. It is open access, so cost is not an issue here. Time could be an issue for many, but then consider that indifference is the start of the path which ends in grave violations of the right to life. At a time when the IDF is bombing thousands of children to their deaths in Gaza (Becker, 2023; Save the Children, 2024), when is a better time to read this book?

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