



# Political Strategies of Self-representation: The Case of Young Afghan Migrants in Sweden

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## INTRODUCTION

The recent mass mobilization of children and youth on issues such as climate change, democracy, racism, labor, peace, and migration has garnered considerable attention in public debate and research. Despite what could be described as an unprecedented international diffusion and institution-ization of children's rights norms in the last decades, we have witnessed a growing unease among young people who have been contesting the regimes under which they are governed and politically represented (Bessant, 2021, p. 1ff; Cummings, 2020; Holzscheiter, 2016; Josefsson & Wall, 2020; Taft, 2019). Yet, while a growing body of scholarship has highlighted how children and youth are subject to systems of governance as much as they can shape these systems (Holzscheiter et al., 2019), still

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we have scarce empirical knowledge about the actions and strategies that are used by children and youth to claim political representation, how these are shaped by institutional, societal, and cultural contexts, what the political effects of them are, and how we theoretically can make sense of them.

One of the domains in global politics where questions around rights and political representation of children and youth has been particularly pressing is migration. The fact that children constitute one third of the roughly 90 million forcibly displaced persons around the world has not only revealed some of the challenges involved in finding well-functioning systems of governance at national and international level (Bhabha, 2014, 2019), but has also resulted in long-standing political controversies around how and by whom the rights of young non-citizens are represented (Heidbrink, 2016; Josefsson, 2019). In many recipient countries in the Global North, young migrants have contested and refused the ways in which they have been politically represented. By using extra-parliamentary actions such as street protests, mobilizing in social media, and blockades (Corruncer, 2012; Josefsson, 2017, 2019; Nicholls & Fiorito, 2015; Patler & Gonzales, 2015; Rosenberger et al., 2018), children and youth have made what Michael Saward would refer to as ‘representative claims’ of rights in seeking new forms of political representation (Saward, 2010, 2020).

In this chapter, I explore how children and youth make use of particular *strategies of self-representation* to seek political representation. I do so by taking my point of departure in a group of young Afghan migrants in Sweden and their political mobilization for their right to stay. In dialogue with political theoretical debates around democracy and representation, I examine how young political actors contest and recast dominant regimes of political representation to claim political space and a voice of their own. The focus is put on the ways in which various actors struggle over the authority to represent and give meaning to the interests, rights, and well-being of young migrants, and how these processes of representing children and youth become politically productive. The empirical observations of the mobilizations of young non-citizens against deportations spur more careful investigations into how their strategies of self-representation disrupt current legal and political orders and open up new avenues for political representation. By situating the chapter in a Swedish context of global migration and anti-deportation protests, it aims to present an empirical illustration of and theoretical framework for the study of children and youth strategies of self-representation. It thus contributes to our

understanding of politics by and for children and youth in global politics while at the same time offering a vital impetus to the more general theoretical debate around the concept of political representation.

In the first section, I provide an overview of ongoing theoretical debates around the concept of political representation in light of children and youth. In the second section, I focus on global youth migration to elaborate on the governing power of representing rights of young people and how certain forms of representation have become tools for liberal democratic states to exclude and undercut the fundamental rights of young migrants. In the third section, the political mobilization by young Afghan migrants for their right to stay is used to analyze four strategies that I suggest constitute a politics of self-representation: *Rejecting previous forms of representation; establishing, shaping and controlling political identity; creating political space; making opponents and allies*. In the concluding section, I reflect on the limits and potentials of these strategies for contesting dominant regimes of representation and how these strategies can open up spaces for political actions and agendas.

### THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The concept of political representation has played a central role in the theory and organization of representative democracies throughout the twentieth century (Disch et al., 2019; Pitkin, 1967, 2004; Runciman, 2007; Saward, 2010). In their struggles for justice, rights, and equality, scholars have been seeking to find effective forms of political representation to ensure the ‘continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens’ (Dahl, 1971, p. 1; Pitkin, 1967). In recent years, we can note a revitalized theoretical discussion which also, as this chapter suggests, has implications for how we understand political responsiveness as it relates to children and youth. What is referred to as the ‘constructive turn’ in political theory has rejected a traditional understanding of political representation as a ‘transmission of pre-constituted interests’ from a constituency via elections and that rests on an understanding where the constituents are logically prior to the representative (Disch et al., 2019; Disch, 2019, p. 7; Saward, 2020). In contrast, it has been argued that political representation must be regarded as a constitutive and mobilizing force that ‘facilitates the formation of political groups and identities’ (Urbinati, 2006, p. 37) and that ‘contribut[es] to the identity of what is represented’ (Laclau, 1996, p. 86ff). At the same time, attention has been

called to how the political representation of interests and groups also takes place in a broad range of other contexts such as social movements, philanthropic and business networks, NGOs, individual citizens and media that ‘mobilize, educate, and aggregate constituent perspectives and interests in the process of representing them’ (Disch, 2019, p. 4; see also Brito Vieira, 2017; Saward, 2020). The case of the Afghan youth mobilizing for a right to stay, as analyzed in this chapter, is thus not about political representation in the sense of elections for representatives in parliaments, but is about social movement activism and how the claims of the young people to represent themselves challenge core mechanisms of authorization and accountability beyond territoriality and the traditional institutions of representative democracies (Disch, 2019, p. 9). Building on critical democratic theory, my analysis of these processes is based on an understanding of political representation as ‘a space between the representative and the represented’ in which children and youth enter in order to disrupt dominant forms of political representation through claims and strategies of self-representation (Disch, 2019; Holzscheiter, 2016; Laclau, 1996, pp. 84–104; Saward, 2010, 2020).

To the dominant strands of political theory, and to most constitutional and institutional constructions of modern democracies, people under a certain age have simply been absent or explicitly excluded from full political citizenship, for instance by consistently being denied the right to vote or to stand for elections (Cummins, 2020; Josefsson, 2016, p. 34ff; Schrag, 1975; Wall, 2012, 2021). Similar restrictions to full political citizenship apply also to non-citizens (Beckman, 2009). In these ways, the group of young migrants in focus here have for long been barred from what are commonly regarded as key instruments of representative democracy by virtue of their ages and citizenships. Instead, political representation of children and youth in representative democracies has been following a distinct path. In the latter part of the twentieth century, we can note an increasing interest in children as citizens and rights subjects (Archard, 1993; James et al., 1998). The civil rights movements and other societal transformations in the 1960s and 1970s were accompanied by the ‘discovering’ of children and youth as rights holders (Margolin, 1978; Verhellen & Spiesschaert, 1989; see also Sandin’s chapter in this volume), which was in turn followed by a global diffusion of children’s rights norms following the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (Hallett & Prout, 2003; Josefsson, 2016, p. 23ff; Reynaert et al., 2012; Vandenhoe, 2015). This development forced governments

to be legally, morally, and politically responsive, no longer only to the rights and interests of the electorate (i.e., the adult part of the population), but also to the rights and interests of young and underaged citizens (Goddard et al., 2005; Verhellen & Spiesschaert, 1989, p. 1). However, this ‘responsiveness’ was not based on the granting of political rights to the underaged, but rather on the fact that their rights and interests were being protected by other actors like governmental authorities, and through legislative frameworks.

A new landscape of actor constellations involved in protecting the rights and interests of children resulted in ‘new defining features’ of the link between the representative and the represented that did not follow the ordinary trajectories of a reciprocal relationship between the elected and the electorate. The political representation of children and youth was carried out through a complex playing field of professionals, NGOs, international organizations, corporations, a plurality of state agencies, families, and certainly, young people themselves (Holzscheiter et al., 2019). Yet, as I will suggest below, the global mainstreaming of children’s rights and the emergence of new systems of governance for children and youth also limited what forms of political representation were possible, and turned out to be a productive tool for controlling young people and advancing other political interests and agendas, not least in the field of migration.

### THE GOVERNING POWER OF REPRESENTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH

When the new systems of child rights governance emerged at national and international levels in the latter part of the twentieth century (Holzscheiter et al., 2019; Smith, 2014; Wells, 2011), the political representation of children and youth was reshaped (see e.g., Sandin and Balagopalan in this volume). In the welfare states of the Global North, like Sweden, civil society organizations, political parties, and government-initiated inquiries and legislative processes have resulted in the implementation of new legal provisions, policy frameworks, and the establishment of ‘child rights’ institutions like national children’s ombudspersons and agencies specialized in child protection (Hallett & Prout, 2003; Quennerstedt, 2015; Sandin, 2012). While national and local authorities in areas like education, social services, health, and migration were given the responsibility of implementing new catalogues of rights, inspecting authorities, courts, child

ombudspersons, NGOs, and ‘child experts’ took on the role of representing children and youth by monitoring the implementation processes. These national developments were framed by the period’s more general trend of global mainstreaming of human rights (Koskenniemi, 2009).

The mainstreaming of human rights, as was observed by international legal scholar Martti Koskenniemi, meant that a wide range of institutions increasingly came to make use of the concept of human rights in official documents. This mainstreaming opened up the possibility for human rights experts to pronounce whether particular rights were being upheld or violated in ‘apparently neutral language’ (Koskenniemi, 2009, p. 13), which obviously had implications for political representation of children and youth. Certain actors, organizations, and institutions now claimed the authority to represent the rights of children and youth in the public sphere or vis-à-vis the government. At the same time, the act of representing younger people became a powerful tool for mobilizing constituencies and building narratives to pave the way for various political actions (Hallberg & Sandin, 2021; Holzscheiter, 2016; Peacock, 2014; Wells, 2011). These observations connect to what democratic theorists have discussed as the problematic relationship between rights, representation, and democracy (Pitkin, 2004; Runciman, 2007). Hanna Pitkin notes apparently critically, some three decades after her seminal work ‘The Concept of Political Representation’ (1967), that ‘[d]espite repeated efforts to democratize the representative system, the predominant result has been that representation has supplanted democracy instead of serving it. Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules—or rather, administers—passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them’ (Pitkin, 2004, p. 339).

Against this backdrop, the point of analysis for this chapter is not *if* the rights or interests of children and youth are sufficiently implemented or properly transmitted from represented to representative (as has dominated much scholarly work in the field of children’s rights, see for example Josefsson, 2016; Quennerstedt, 2013; Reyneart, 2009; Vandenhoe, 2015), but rather, an inquiry into *the ways in which various actors and political forces struggle over the authority* to fill rights and interests with meaning, and how claims of representing children and youth become *politically productive*. It is in this context that scholarship on the performativity of representation is helpful for our analysis (Disch, 2019; Holzscheiter, 2016; Laclau, 1996; Saward, 2010, 2020). Holzscheiter noted (2016, p. 207) that, while scholarly focus on representative claims has been

particularly productive for the empirical study of governance in a global setting, scholars have been strangely silent on performativity and the ‘exclusionary effects of representational power’ when it comes to drawing the boundaries between actors with legitimate and illegitimate representative claims (e.g., politicians, state authorities, civil society organizations, professionals, or young people that self-organize) and between citizens and non-citizens (like young migrants).

In this regard, the context of global child and youth migration requires closer examination. Although children’s rights frameworks have largely become an integrated part in administrative and legal procedures of child migration, child rights’ principles and provisions, such as the best interest of the child, have in fact been a very weak normative force in decision-making and policy, while state interests in restricting immigration has been given more weight (Bhabha, 2019; Josefsson, 2017). In addition, studies demonstrate that rights language and ‘protections discourse’ have become tools in legal decision-making and political discourse for legitimizing migration governance and undercutting access to fundamental rights of non-citizen children and youth (Andersson, 2012; Josefsson, 2016; Lind, 2019; Stretmo, 2014). Court procedures, evidence requirements, legal doctrines and case law have all been used to limit the conditions for the possibility of giving asylum-seeking children rights, and used to such an extent that deportations are motivated as being in ‘their best interest’ and with reference to a right to ‘family reunification’ in their home country (Josefsson, 2017). As a result, the legal and political institutionalization of representing young migrants rights and interests often runs contrary to how young migrants themselves perceive of their rights and best interests, namely, to reside in the recipient country and to access fundamental rights of security, education, a private life, and health (Josefsson, 2019). In political discourse, scholars have forcefully demonstrated how the ‘ethically comfortable’ public framing of protecting children from trafficking and harm has been a rhetorical device used by officials and politicians to make undocumented migrants appear before welfare authorities, which, in a next step, enabled the enforcement of immigration control and deportation (Andersson, 2012, p. 1255; Lind 2019; Stretmo 2014). In this way, the representation of young migrants’ rights has converged into migration governance and a representational politics of domination and exclusion.

## POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF SELF-REPRESENTATION: THE CASE OF YOUNG MIGRANTS IN SWEDEN

In late summer 2017, a group of young Afghan migrants started a sit-in strike outside the Swedish Parliament in Stockholm with the goal of stopping all deportations to Afghanistan. In a few days, the group grew to a couple hundred protesters and received considerable attention in leading newspapers and in social media. A couple of years before, in the wake of an increasing number of asylum seekers in 2015/2016, the Swedish government (like other European governments) had taken a range of extraordinary measures to restrict immigration (Stern, 2018). The turn towards a more restrictive immigration regime significantly reduced the chances that 30,000–35,000 young unaccompanied minors that arrived during the period would be granted a residence permit (Swedish Migration Agency 2016). The protest in front of the Swedish parliament became the start of a contentious struggle in the streets, outside detention centers, at airports and in social media to compel the Swedish government and leading politicians to give amnesty for this group. At an early stage, these youths, who called themselves *Ung i Sverige* ('Young in Sweden'), made it clear that the protest was arranged by themselves and that they did not want to be represented by others. They claimed a voice of their own independent from NGOs, networks of professionals, guardians, or the state agencies that traditionally had been representing them.

In the following section, I will explore how the claims and strategies for self-representation turned out to be key for advancing a more radical political agenda. I develop my analysis around four strategies that I suggest constitute a politics of self-representation: *Rejecting previous forms of representation; establishing, shaping and controlling political identity; creating political space; making opponents and allies*. The four strategies should not be seen as an exhaustive list, but rather as a way to outline directions and provide starting points for future studies of the political representation of children and youth.

### *Rejecting Previous Forms of Representation*

A first strategy for establishing self-representation is to refuse or oppose previous forms of representations. For the group of young migrants in the square in front of Parliament, the refusal to be represented by others was, as some of the organizers described it, 'essential to establish a direct link



to the Swedish public' and to counter dominant discourses around young Afghans that had been in circulation for some time (interview, 9 October 2018).<sup>1</sup> Evidently, the forms of representation by NGOs, legal representatives, government officials, professional organizations and child ombudspersons had not been sufficient. In an interview for a newspaper, one of the spokespersons stressed that they appreciated the support of other organizations but that they wanted to do this by themselves (Feministiskt perspektiv, 7 August 2017). The distancing from other organizations seemed at the time necessary to create room for political maneuvering and to take control over the identity that was communicated to the Swedish public. The distancing had also obvious internal political functions for the group. At a later point, when I asked one of the organizers about why the claim to represent themselves was so important to them, he explained:

*There was a distrust among young people. And organizations are not really working [...] We said that from the beginning. That we are a group to represent the young people. We should be close to the young people. We shall represent them. We should be their voice. Like this. We are not going to be a bureaucratic organization that has a lot of paperwork and stuff. In this way, we tried to be closer to the young people and represent them. We said no older Afghans would be among us. And no big organizations from the beginning. We represent ourselves. (Interview, 9 October 2018)*

The quote makes it clear how creating distance from 'bureaucratic' and 'big' organizations as well as 'older Afghans' was a way to demonstrate proximity among group members and build an identity as youth. It was also a way to create credibility internally and 'gather the forces', and to make a claim on the *authority* to represent the group. Through the quote, we can sense what Saward has pointed to before, namely, the close connection between the rejecting of an old and the making of a new representative claim (Saward, 2020, p. 8). If we, as I suggested at the start of this chapter, regard representation as 'a space between the representative and the represented', it is this space that Ung i Sverige entered and claimed. By rejecting previous forms of political representation through internal and external identity work, they made possible a *regrouping*, to use the words of critical democratic theorists (Disch, 2015, p. 490; Laclau, 1996, p. 40). This regrouping served as a political strategy for producing new political subjects, and in so doing, doors were opened to political spaces that had hitherto been closed to them. Historically, the rejection of young people

of the ways that they have been politically represented has been a recurrent first step in creating political space and paving the way for new political actions and agendas. School strikes, mass mobilizations in the streets, protests in workplaces, and a variety of more subtle strategies of civil disobedience are just a few examples of how children and youth have been using contentious repertoires (Bessant, 2021; Cummings, 2020; Holzscheiter, 2016; Josefsson & Wall, 2020; Pickard & Bessant, 2018), like many protests movements before them (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 49ff), to break into the space between the representative and represented.

### *Establishing, Shaping, and Controlling Identities*

If rejecting previous forms of representation, as described above, is an essential first step for children and youth to open up political space, the establishing, shaping, and controlling of group identity serves as a key mechanism for filling this space with representative claims. The group of young Afghan migrants protesting outside the Swedish parliament established an identity at the very start of the sit-in strike by posting a statement at their homepage and Facebook page.

*We are young in Sweden who moved here from violence and persecution. Many of us came in 2015 and have tried to find a home here. Some go to school and others play soccer in some team, some are dreaming of studying at university and having a safe future. We came here because we had to. You do not choose to flee, to be chased by the Taliban or to be close to losing your life on the Mediterranean. The trip has been very difficult from the start. To grow up under threat in Afghanistan, to be forced to flee on dangerous roads and to come here and realize that we are not welcome after all. Most were born as refugees. But we want security and a future. To make it possible, we must stay and continue to build a life here and build this country more strongly. We are young in Sweden with the hope of having a future. (Ung i Sverige, 2017b)*

The statement illustrates how representing the ‘we’ provides the backdrop to the problems at stake (‘moved here from violence and persecution’), why the group is protesting (‘we want security and a future’), and the urgency of the issue (‘we came here because we had to... [yet] realize we are not welcome after all’). At the same time, the statement comprises identity markers to create links to the surrounding society by displaying

belonging and sameness, the quintessence of the phrase ‘we are young in Sweden’.

As the strike continued in time and space, the identity of the group was shaped by a continuous back and forth movement between internal and external performances and claims of representation (Saward, 2020, p. 58). What constituted the core identity of the group, its claims, and the authority of its leadership was contested from within the group as well as from outside the group. About one month after the sit-in strike started, the organizers posted a statement at their Facebook page with the header *Respektera Ung i Sverige* (‘Respect Young in Sweden’). In the statement, the leaders of the strike positioned themselves in the context of the attacks and proclaimed what constituted the core identity of the movement.

*What we do is bigger than most and we are therefore also a target for mistrust, criticism, hatred and coup attempts [...] Above all, we want to ask adults to let us run our strike with your support or completely without you [...] We do not think it is possible to just appeal to politicians and they will give us a residence permit, because they have already heard all the arguments, they have already decided and are not listening. But we can have a broad and sharp movement to stop the deportations to Afghanistan that bring people together widely and that right now makes the government afraid to meet us at all. (Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 15 September)*

This and similar statements of the group illustrate how claims of self-representation require a constant performance and negotiation over representation and identity formation vis-à-vis the state, its agencies, NGOs, and Swedish society, as well as towards its own constituency, the group of young Afghan migrants. The group sought to create an authoritative leadership, which, as Saward notes, if successful, can also create new audiences and political spaces for further mobilization (Saward, 2020, p. 58). The staging of new subjectivities is a way to ‘appear’ before the public (Arendt, 1958, p. 50–51) as a group that can recast the defining features of representational power and transform the identity of what is represented (Laclau, 1996, p. 98), and, in turn, lay the groundwork for further political claims and actions. We can note how the establishment of a ‘we’ has also been a central component in current children and youth mobilizations from young workers fighting for decent working conditions to mass mobilizations against racism, police violence, and intergenerational climate injustice (March for our Lives, 2021, Fridays for Future, 2021,

Movimiento de Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores Hijos de Obreros Cristianos 2021; Black Lives Matter, 2021; see also Buhre, Van Daalen, and Nakata and Bray in this volume). Yet the public appearance of new group identities and the act of regrouping does not come without conflict and is in constant need of negotiation, reformulation, and defense in relation to other actors. Dominant notions of childhood as a condition, sphere, or life phase in need of particular protection has affected the opportunities, and needs, for the reformulation of identities in democratic politics (Bessant, 2020; Goddard et al., 2005; Nakata & Bray, 2020).

### *Creating (New) Political Space*

A third key strategy of self-representation is creating a political space from which one can act and raise claims of representation. This space is physical as well as virtual and symbolic, and from which one can hold other actors accountable, recast dynamics of who is an authoritative representative, and position oneself as a political actor. For *Ung i Sverige*, the struggle over space became essential for the resistance against deportations. As the protests moved between central public places in Stockholm, outside detention centers, airports, schools, and into news reporting and social media, these sites were fundamental for raising the group's claims. These sites were used, for example, for holding leading politicians, the Swedish government, and migration authorities accountable, for approaching political opponents and allies, and for working out the authority of individuals to be credible representatives for this group of young migrants.

One central geographical site was the public square. While the group started the sit-in strike at Mynttorget just outside the Swedish parliament, the local police ordered protesters to move among various central squares of Stockholm. Five days after the strike started, the group called for a press conference at the square Medborgarplatsen ('the citizen square'), about two kilometers from Mynttorget, to make a public statement. This episode illustrates how the physical and symbolic space of the square, similar to many historical protest movements in Stockholm and elsewhere, was used as a platform for creating a political space, a platform from which one could reach out to a wider audience and shape a political agenda. The press conference was covered by the major Swedish news media (Sveriges Television, Svenska Dagbladet, Dagens Nyheter, Expressen) and was live-streamed at the group's Facebook page (11 August 2017) with significant outreach (1400 comments, 3100 likes and 525 shares). At the press

conference, the spokesperson Fatemeh Khavari read from a prepared statement in front of cameras and microphones with a couple hundred young Afghan migrants sitting on the stairs behind her. In the statement, which was signed by Ung i Sverige, the protesters first described some of the experiences and obstacles the group had to overcome during the first days of the strike. But the larger part of the statement was devoted to making direct, specific calls and questions to a list of key actors in Swedish society, holding them accountable for not taking their proper responsibility to respond or meet the demands of the group. They detailed the inaction of actors such as the general director and the head of justice at the migration board, to each political party in the parliament and to the Swedish government and Prime Minister Stefan Löfven.

*On Thursday after five days of strike, representatives from the government Gustav Fridolin, Maria Ferm and Minister of Migration Helene Fritzon arrived. We said welcome, we have been waiting for you. But no one gave us an answer to our demand—to stop the deportations to Afghanistan. Why? Everyone has said that someone else has to do it. Who takes responsibility? Several have said that we are right, that Afghanistan is not safe. Why do you do nothing? [...] You cannot fool us. We know you can stop the deportations to Afghanistan. The Swedish Migration Agency makes assessments of the security situation in other countries. Fredrik Beijer you are the Head of Justice, you can take a legal position on Afghanistan. You've done it before, why can you not do it now? Afghanistan is not safe and your own report states that it will deteriorate. Mikael Ribbenvik you are responsible at the Swedish Migration Agency, how do you guarantee our safety? Politicians you have the power. To stop deportations to Afghanistan, you can grant amnesty to unaccompanied minors. Do not pretend that it is someone else who has the role of pursuing politics in Sweden, it is you who can make political decisions. (Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 11 August)*

By staging this specific event at the public square of Medborgarplatsen and having a significant amount of outreach, Ung i Sverige not only used the square as a platform to (re)present themselves as a group to a wider public, but also started to craft a political space in the Swedish political landscape. As time went on, this space in turn opened room for new actions and political maneuvering. The public square was obviously a key site of political intervention at the start of the strike, but as it developed, other geographical sites in Stockholm and around Sweden like classrooms, detention centers, town halls, streets, and other official buildings were also frequently used for taking political action. Not the least important in this

process were the public appearances of the group at these sites combined with making virtual and symbolic political space of greater outreach through the active use of social media. Frequent use of videos, public statements, photos, sharing of news reporting, and scientific reports were some of the tools used to approach opponents and allies, hold authorities accountable, and communicate substantive claims.

While the first two strategies discussed above (rejecting of previous forms of representations and establishing, shaping, and controlling of identities) are critical for paving the way for such political space, a rich catalogue of protest repertoires have been used throughout history by children and youth and in other fields of politics to intervene in preexisting political spaces and to create new ones. Schools, streets, official buildings, neighborhoods, parliaments, commercial buildings, news reporting and social media are just some examples of spaces that recurrently have been used by children and youth for making representative claims and which underlines the centrality of spatial dimensions for the crafting of political representation (Bessant, 2021; Hinton, 2021; Josefsson & Wall, 2020; Pickard & Bessant, 2018; Taft, 2019). Although it has been neglected in much liberal political theory, the critical role of spatiality for citizenship and democratic politics has been previously discussed in studies of citizenship and contentious politics (Isin, 2002; Lindahl, 2013; Mainwaring & Walton, 2018; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and in the politics of childhood (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Skelton, 2013). If we follow Isin's argument that 'space is a condition of being political' and that citizenship is bounded and expressed through various buildings, forums and assemblies (Isin, 2002, p. 3), it appears as if spatiality will remain a key dimension in the study of political representation by and for children and youth.

### *Making Opponents and Allies*

A fourth key strategy of self-representation is to navigate the political landscape by approaching opponents and allies. At an early stage of the protests, Ung i Sverige used public appearances by its members in streets, social media, press conferences, open letters and statements in mainstream media to approach agency officials, individual politicians, fractions of parties or party coalitions, and government representatives to oppose their lack of action and to hold them accountable. By criticizing conflicting positions and acts, Ung I Sverige built the political pressure needed to enable decision-makers to take new directions. In this way, the group

entered as a new player into a political playing field comprising a complex set of actors, interests, alliances, agendas, public opinions, and trends that constituted Swedish politics at that particular time. In addition, the group used press conferences and social media to defend itself from counter-protesters. In the early phases of the strike, members of the group were verbally and physically attacked by a right-wing youth organization *Nordisk Ungdom* ('Nordic Youth') (Nordisk Ungdom, 2017; Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 8 August; Expressen, 2017) and by more loosely connected anti-immigrant networks protesting the public presence of Ung i Sverige. These right-wing groups posed a threat to the very existence of Ung i Sverige, as they continually contested the public presence of the group in squares and streets. During these confrontations, the media tactics of Ung i Sverige were to publicly condemn the attacks and fiercely defend its right to assembly by positioning the opposition as 'racists' and 'nazis', as a main enemy and threat. At the same time, group members met physical attacks with nonviolent acts like sitting down, building circles, and countering and contrasting 'hateful' speech by explicitly using a language of love and a heart as a symbol of their struggle (Sydsvenskan, 2017). These confrontations were concrete and at the same time symbolic conflicts around access to and control of public places that manifested a continuum of disputes around claiming space and territory.

The press conference described above and the plethora of political actions and public statements by the group in the following years illustrates how Ung i Sverige developed a sophisticated strategy for approaching party politics. The group pushed the Swedish government for not taking its proper responsibility while simultaneously approaching other political parties in Parliament to build alliances and find support for its cause, for finding a place in the parliamentary agenda, and for proposing new legislation and policy. In its statements it became clear that Ung i Sverige would not accept mere rhetorical support or vague political responses, but sought to force the parties to take a stand on the issues. In Sweden, this period was characterized by political instability because the government was supported by a minority in Parliament and the imminent risk of an extra election made the government dependent on the opposition for approving key decisions. Following a significant increase in the number of asylum applicants in autumn 2015, the government coalition parties and several others were internally torn between the previous, more liberal immigration politics (especially for the group of children and unaccompanied minors) and the current, more restrictive asylum politics. At a

press conference, Ung i Sverige started to confront the opposition and what they apparently knew spoke to the parties' ambivalences in their political agendas and different factions.

*The Liberals have said that deportations to Afghanistan should be stopped. Good, but why do you not support the demand for amnesty? The Center Party wanted at one point to pause the deportations to Afghanistan and at another moment thinks that it is a safe country. What do you want? Give us an answer. The Moderates say nothing to us. Why do you not say anything when we call for help? Why do you let us be sent to death? The Christian Democrats have said that more young Afghans should be allowed to stay. How do you want to make it possible? What are you doing to make it happen?* (Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 11 August)

In its next step Ung i Sverige addressed the government parties (the Green Party and the Social Democrats) and their supporting party (the Left Party).

*The Green Party says that they do not want to deport us but that they have to because of public opinion in the Riksdag. Are you martyrs or are we the victims of your policies? The Social Democrats say over and over again that it is the Migration Board's decision. Does not Löfven lead this country? Why do you refuse to take responsibility for the consequences of your policies? Why do you not want to grant us amnesty? The Left Party wants to stop deportations to Afghanistan and grant amnesty. You agree with us, but what actions do you take for it? Why are not more of your leaders here?* (Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 11 August)

After a couple months, strategically approaching the political parties through statements and meetings with political representatives, publicly and informally, started to have an effect on activities in Parliament. Even though Parliament never decided on full amnesty for the entire group of up to 35,000 young Afghans that arrived in 2015, the political action of the group propelled a line of debates, legislative proposals, political agreements, and adoption of legislation (Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 28 November; Ung I Sverige 2018, 4 March; 25 April; 7 June).

In addition to approaching opponents, the actions of seeking allies and establishing links in solidarity with other groups in society appeared to be just as important in the strategy of formulating a politics of self-representation. For Ung i Sverige, seeking allies was particularly salient



about a month after the sit-in strikes started, when the group launched a new campaign to support other high-profile struggles against injustices in Sweden. Under the banner ‘We build the country’, the group initiated a series of Sweden-wide protest events in which it bundled together its cause with protests against actions like reduction of assistance to disabled people, closures of rural maternity wards, and the fight to raise pensions (Ung i Sverige, 2017a, 12 September). By naming the campaign ‘We build the country’ and starting the campaign just outside the headquarters of the Swedish labor movement, the group alluded to a classical labor movement hymn and the fact that popular movements historically have been key for building Swedish society. In addition, Ung i Sverige created alliances with party politicians and with factions of parties and political youth organizations, many times through the sharing of news or statements at its Facebook page. Another way of seeking alliances was to systematically make public lists of NGOs, artists, athletes, teachers and corporations that formally agreed to support the group in their fight against deportations (Ung i Sverige, 2018, 6 June).

The political strategy for approaching opponents and allies is something we encounter in various struggles of children and youth around the world. In this volume, we see examples in the politics of young climate activists (see the chapter in this volume by Buhres), first nation youth against discriminatory policing (see chapter by Nakata and Bray), and in child labor movements (see the chapter by Van Dalen). Central to this strategy is to position the group against unjust political orders and opponents that hold oppressive power, or adversaries that pose a direct threat to the existence of the movement. At the same time, links of solidarity and building of alliances with other parts of society outside one’s own group appears to be just as fundamental. This enemy and friend distinction, the agonistic nature of politics, has obviously been ideologically prominent in what constitutes the political in modern political theory (see e.g., Honig, 2003; Mouffe, 2005). However, while these thinkers have mainly regarded children and youth as apolitical (or simply excluded them from analysis), in contrast (and what informs this paper) is the view that children and youth play a constitutive role ‘as temporary outsiders who present both renewal and risk to the demos’ (Nakata & Bray, 2020), seeming to produce the very conditions for why agonism and the enemy/friend distinction is so central to a politics of childhood and for claims of self-representation of children and youth.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter began with the observation that, despite the unprecedented diffusion of human rights and the emergence of new systems of governance for children and youth at the turn of the twenty-first century, we have witnessed growing unease among young people, who have been contesting the regimes under which they are governed on issues such as climate, labor, gun violence, racism, and migration. The analytical focus has been on scrutinizing the ways that various actors and political forces struggle over the authority to fill rights and claims of young people with meaning and how these representations become politically productive. If political representation is conceptualized as ‘a space between the representative and the represented’, it is in this space that children and youth enter and disrupt dominant regimes of political representation through strategies of self-representation and representative claims. In turn, strategies of self-presentation enable what can be referred to as a *regrouping* (Disch, 2015; Laclau, 1996), to appear as political subjects and open up new avenues for political actions and agendas. The strategies of self-representation can recast logics of where, when, and how political representation take place from a traditional focus on political institutions (party politics, parliaments, elections) to streets, squares, schools, news reporting, and social media. But just as important, and as noted by scholars before, ‘to speak on behalf of’, to represent, a constituency does not necessarily pave the way for emancipation, democratic inclusion, or the protection of human rights, but certainly works as a means for controlling and administering certain practices and groups (Alcoff, 1991; Pitkin, 2004; Spivak, 1988).

Through the example of a group of young Afghan migrants in Sweden, who started a group called Ung i Sverige, and their political mobilization for a right to stay, I have in this chapter identified and analyzed four key strategies that I suggest constitute a politics of self-representation. A first strategy is *rejecting previous forms of representation*. For the group of young migrants that initiated a sit-in strike at the square in front of the Swedish parliament, the refusal to be represented by others enabled a first step to appear as political subjects, and with that, to open the doors to new political spaces that hitherto had been closed to them. A second strategy is *establishing, shaping, and controlling the identity of the group*. By staging new subjectivities for the public and the appearance of a new ‘we’, the group could recast the defining features of representational power and

transform the identity of who and what was represented. These actions in turn laid the groundwork for further political claims and action. A third strategy is *creating political space* from which a group can act and raise claims of representation. This space exists in physical, virtual, and symbolic senses and was crafted through the use of a rich catalogue of extra-parliamentary protest repertoires and sites such as schools, streets, official buildings, neighborhoods, parliaments, commercial buildings, news reporting, and social media as a means to hold other actors accountable and to position the group as a political actor. A fourth strategy of self-representation is *approaching opponents and allies*. Central to this strategy, as the case of Ung i Sverige illustrates, is positioning the group against unjust political orders and opponents that hold oppressive powers, or that pose direct threat existential threats. At the same time, the strategy seeks to build links of solidarity and alliances with other parts of society outside the group.

For this group of young Afghans, the political strategies of self-representation were needed to disrupt and critique the current regime of democratic and representational politics and to stake out new political routes for redrawing the normative boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Fraser, 1990; Disch, 2011, 2015; Lindahl 2013). The mobilizations of these young non-citizens against deportations spoke to the need for more careful investigations into how child and youth strategies of self-representation contest current legal and political orders more generally. Their protests exposed a central landscape of representational and democratic politics for children and youth that has largely been neglected by political sociologists and political theorists. The claims and strategies of political self-representation, I suggest, cannot be reduced to a form of politics that is complementary to institutionalized processes of representation through elections, parliaments, government authorities and court systems, as is commonly held in liberal theory (Rawls, 1997), and from which children and youth have largely been excluded. Rather, as the empirical analyses in this chapter has demonstrated, the claims and strategies are situated at the center of politics. In these disruptive forms of politics, strategies of self-representation are a critical component for reconstituting groups (Disch, 2015, p. 490; Laclau, 1996, p. 98) and redefining the conditions under which political representation takes place (Disch, 2019). This view of political representation and politics of childhood contrasts

with the global mainstreaming of international law in which focus is put on standard-setting, institutional implementation, and monitoring of well-established legal and political processes. Instead, by shifting our focus to representative claims and strategies of self-representation, we direct the analytical lens to that which disrupts such processes.

## NOTE

1. One salient public discourse at the time depicted young male migrants from Afghanistan as threats, perpetrators who harassed young women in public spaces (Hedlund, 2015; Dagens Nyheter, 11 January 2016).

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