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City Kids and Citizenship

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A satellite night view of Europe, where the landmasses are dark and the city lights are bright yellow and orange, creating a glowing pattern across the continent. The background is a deep blue-black space.

Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City

EDITED BY

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen

Urban Europe

Urban Europe

Fifty Tales of the City

Virginie Mamadouh and Anne van Wageningen (eds.)

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9. City kids and citizenship

Lia Karsten

Children and citizenship

From a political point of view, children are not citizens: they have no voting rights. However, there are laws and treaties that deal with the rights and duties of children. In the Netherlands, for example, school attendance is compulsory and children are prohibited from working. At the international level, the citizenship of children is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a UN treaty that has also been signed by the Netherlands.

There are differing views on the relationship between children and citizenship. One school of thought says that children are not yet adults and that childhood is simply preparation for citizenship at a later date. In this view, citizenship is a status that is attained. Children must learn how to behave as democratic citizens and should be taught this at school. A second school of thought sees the citizenship of children as a social practice. Those who adhere to this school do not make any fundamental distinction between children and adults: both age categories continually put citizenship into practice. The emphasis on social practice presumes a dynamic and relational process that is referred to as doing or practising citizenship. Putting citizenship into practice presumes at the least a visible presence in the public domain and involves the practices of dealing with 'the other' and the processes of inclusion and exclusion. Who is left out and who is allowed to join in? Who determines the rules and who can change them? This article will follow this second notion of citizenship, with an emphasis on urban public spaces as a representation and practice space. In what ways are children present in these spaces? What kind of children are they? And how much leeway do they have for their behaviour? But first we will examine the demographic position of urban children.

The demographics of children in the city

Children have always lived in the city, but they began to disappear starting from the 1960s due to mass suburbanisation, as it was especially families with children that left the city and moved to the suburban areas surrounding the large cities. The city became the domain of young, childless households. The image of the city as an unsuitable living environment for children persisted for a long time. But more recently, new groups of families have come to live in the city. First came the migrant families that quickly filled up the deserted neighbourhoods in the city (which were uninhabited as a result of suburbanisation). Thereafter, from around 2000, new, middle-class households arrived that remained in the city even after having children instead of moving to suburban areas. Both groups have contributed to the growing share of children in the city today. This is a development that we are seeing in more cities in Europe: the city is once again popular as a place for families. And with the growing popularity of the city for families, the urban citizenship of children is once again on the agenda.

Children and urban outdoor public spaces

Urban public space is important for children for two reasons: to be able to play outside and to be able to move from one place to another. When children play outside, they are competing for space with other citizens – especially adults – but also with other functions, mainly vehicle traffic and parking. The space in front of the door is the place where this competition is most visible. While playing outside was something that used to be largely taken for granted by children in the decades after World War II, today this is no longer the case. Many children have become ‘inside children’, playing mostly indoors. ‘Outside children’, who can still be found outdoors practically every day, have become a minority.

In terms of children's movement through public space, there has been a sharp decline in the autonomous freedom of movement of city kids. While almost all children used to walk (or, less frequently, bike) independently to school or to the football club, this has now become the exception, certainly for children under 10 years of age. Children are now continually brought to school and picked up from school: the backseat generation has become a widespread phenomenon. In large cities, children often take the bike or walk when they go out but almost always in the company of one of their parents. The idea that you cannot let your child go somewhere alone has become part of a discussion about responsible parenting. While this discussion was at first largely a middle-class matter, now we are seeing this cultural heritage penetrating the lower socio-economic class. In practice, this means that escorting and transporting children through urban public space requires a significant investment of time on the part of the parents and that children are rarely allowed to make their own way independently.

Both developments – the decline in the number of children playing outdoors and the reduced autonomous freedom of movement – mean that children have become less visible as small citizens on the street and in outdoor urban spaces in general. This could lead to a situation in which the citizenship of children is undermined. After all, citizenship in the sense of practising citizenship is all about the ability and the right to explore the space outdoors. If children remain indoors or are kept inside the house, they cannot practise the skill of interacting with one another and with 'other' neighbourhood children or fellow townsmen.

Children and the new urban consumption sites

The above-mentioned increase in the number of children in the city has meant that children are receiving more attention as consumers. The recent rise in middle-class families in the city

in particular has not gone unnoticed by commercial interests. The presence of families that can afford to live in the expensive city has all sorts of consequences for the way in which the city develops. The new rich urban families have become a significant market factor.

While children play outside less often than was the case in the past, they now have a much fuller schedule. Children today have on average more after-school activities than in the past: they are more often members of a club and also at after-school childcare facilities. But there is another activity that has gained quite some significance: the family outing. Families consume the city, just as many adults without children do. Urban consumption sites such as museums, restaurants and festivals are frequented by families as well. We are talking here about activities in which parent escort and adult supervision are an integral part. This new development of families that consume the city is not a general phenomenon but one that is prevalent mainly among the (upper) middle class.

What does the growing importance of the family outing mean for children and citizenship? On the one hand, it demonstrates that children nowadays are present everywhere, not only in their own neighbourhood but also in restaurants with an urban reputation or in coffee shops in the centre of the city. Children have become visible as citizens in places where they were formerly rarely seen. On the other hand, it is clear that we are talking about a specific group of children and that they are merely guests at these new places: the activities, the supervision and the rules are organised by adults. The children are given only limited space to bring their citizenship into practice.

To conclude: The city as a meeting place

What is the significance of the developments we have described for the urban citizenship of children? In the first place, it has become clear that youth experiences are extremely varied.

Children's lives differ, and the class position of one's parents makes a distinctive difference. Here we focus on three groups: to begin with, the small group of children who still do play outside, who explore the neighbourhood on their own and are streetwise. These children no longer encounter outdoors the diversity of other children that used to be quite common. This has consequences for the extent to which they can learn to interact with 'the other'. Moreover, these outdoor children are frequently mentioned as a source of public nuisance. Children who play outdoors make lots of noise, occasionally shoot a ball through a window or play pranks on the local shopkeepers. They are not always granted the right to use the outdoor urban space – or only under the conditions prescribed by the new middle class. The second group consists of the indoor children who play mainly at home – alone or with a brother or sister or friend. This is the group that no one considers problematic and who are consequently overlooked. But this group also has a limited amount of interaction with 'other' children. And finally, there are the children of the backseat generation who pop up in many places in the city but always under the watchful eye of adults and often in the company of like-minded (read: same social class) children.

All three groups of children thus have little experience with urban public space as a practice space for citizenship. Playing, biking or just being outside with many different types of children, without any parental guidance or adult supervision, has been marginalised. All three groups have limited opportunities to build up what is referred to as *bridging social capital* – the skills needed to establish relations outside of one's own group. Urban policymakers need to devote more attention to the everyday citizenship of children. Unfortunately, a formal document such as that of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child can only be of limited assistance in this. It is difficult to make the practising of citizenship legally binding, but it can be facilitated by more child-friendly spatial planning. Initiatives involving child-friendly cities (the European Child Friendly

City Network, or CFC) must be seen in this light. In the Dutch context, CFC policy should not only focus on specific provisions for children but mainly on keeping urban public spaces accessible for children. Children are generally well taken care of in the Netherlands, but there is increasing segregation in the large cities. This is the case not only at schools but also on the streets and in extracurricular clubs, even though one of the great qualities of the city is that it is home to so many different groups. The city should be a meeting place for children where differences can be bridged and where even children can build up *bridging social capital*. An example of this would be giving priority to broad sidewalks as meeting places for *all* children in the neighbourhood (and adult neighbours) and the creation of safe traffic routes along facilities that are often used by children. In countries such as Sweden and Germany, many more children move around autonomously than in the Netherlands. More European research could identify why this is the case. And we should also ask the children themselves what they think a child-friendly city should look like, as this also cultivates citizenship. In the Netherlands, child participation in urban planning is still not widely applied, but in Norway, municipalities are required by law to appoint an official responsible for involving children in urban planning issues. With the help of interactive digital maps, children are invited to think about new urban projects to be developed. European countries could learn much from each other. Stimulating European cooperation and information exchange in the area of child studies and child participation deserves to be supported more (also financially).

The author

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