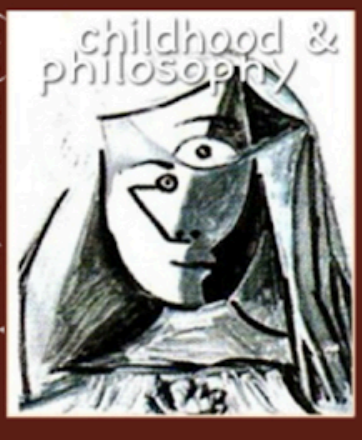

cover: picasso, *las meninas* (1957)

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no justice without agents of justice:
a critique of adultcentric and aporophobic narratives in liberal theories of justice

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abstract

In recent decades, political philosophy has expanded its analysis of children and poverty as critical categories. However, a theoretical gap persists in examining how liberal theories of justice—hegemonic in the design of public policies and global normative frameworks—reproduce adult-centric (centred on adulthood as the norm) and aporophobic (marked by rejection of impoverished individuals) narratives. These narratives are anchored in the epistemic assumptions of liberalism, such as the linkage between political autonomy and adulthood, as well as instrumental rationality, which function as symbolic structures to naturalise the marginalisation of those who do not meet these standards, particularly children and, even more starkly, those living in poverty. By reducing these subjects to mere passive recipients of assistance, liberal theories not only deny their political agency but also reinforce a dual structure of oppression: adultcentrism, which renders children invisible as legitimate interlocutors in the public sphere, and aporophobia, which stigmatises poverty as synonymous with

dehumanisation, reducing individuals to tutored subjects. This logic intersectionally constructs the figure of the 'inferiorised Other': impoverished children, excluded due to their age and socioeconomic condition, transformed into «*Los nadies*» ('Nobodies') without voice or political power. In response, the article demonstrates how adultocentrism and aporophobia intertwined within liberal theories of justice, perpetuating exclusions that this study seeks to deconstruct. Faced with this reality, *childism* is proposed as an ethical-political analytical framework that denaturalises age-based hierarchies and recognises *children* as rights-bearing subjects with political agency. While childism has been diversely interpreted in academia, here a perspective specifically focused on *children* in poverty is prioritised, as their realities expose the intersection of systemic oppression and socioeconomic marginalisation. Overcoming these oppressions requires politicising their agency, understanding that they are not merely vulnerable but actors who exercise power through everyday practices of resistance, community organisation, and demands for participation. This necessitates an ontological and epistemological shift that values relational agencies (collective, situated) and redefines justice through non-adult-centric logics. The article concludes with a proposal to dismantle adult-centric and aporophobic narratives from a childist perspective, integrating an approach rooted in deep interdependence and the pluriverse. By rejecting autonomy as an individualistic attribute and embracing it as a relational practice, new pathways emerge for constructing justice systems that not only include children but are co-designed by them. Thus, intergenerational justice cannot be founded on fictions of self-sufficiency but must rest on the explicit recognition of a radical interdependence that intertwines collective responsibilities.

keywords: adultcentrism; aporophobia; liberal theories of justice; childism; pluriversal ontology; relational agencies.

no hay justicia sin agentes de justicia: una crítica de las narrativas adultocéntricas y aporofóbicas en las teorías liberais de la justicia

resumen

En las últimas décadas, la filosofía política ha ampliado su análisis sobre la infancia y la pobreza como categorías críticas. Sin embargo, persiste un vacío teórico al examinar cómo las teorías liberales de la justicia, hegemónicas en el diseño de políticas públicas y marcos normativos globales, reproducen narrativas adultocéntricas y aporofóbica. Estas narrativas se anclan en presupuestos epistémicos del liberalismo, como la vinculación de la autonomía política a la adultez y la racionalidad instrumental, que operan como estructuras simbólicas para naturalizar la marginación de quienes no cumplen dichos estándares, en especial las infancias y, con mayor crudeza, aquellas en situación de pobreza. Al reducir a estos sujetos a meros receptores pasivos de asistencia, las teorías liberales no solo niegan su agencia política, sino que consolidan una doble estructura de opresión: el adultocentrismo, que invisibiliza a niñas y niños como interlocutores legítimos en la esfera pública, y la aporofobia, que estigmatiza la pobreza como sinónimo de deshumanización, reduciendo a las personas a sujetos tutelados. Esta lógica construye inter-seccionalmente la figura del «Otro inferiorizado»: las infancias pobres, excluidas por su edad y condición socioeconómica, convertidas en «Nadies» sin voz ni poder político. En este sentido, el artículo muestra cómo el adultocentrismo y la aporofobia se entrelazan en las teorías liberales de la justicia, perpetuando exclusiones que este estudio busca deconstruir. Ante este panorama, se propone el *childism* – infancismo – como enfoque analítico ético-político que desnaturaliza las

jerarquías etarias y reconoce a la niñez como sujetos de derecho con capacidad de agencia política. Si bien el infancia ha sido interpretado de modo diverso en el ámbito académico, aquí se prioriza una perspectiva específicamente orientada a las infancias en situación de pobreza, cuyas realidades exponen la intersección entre opresión sistémica y marginalización socioeconómica. La superación de estas dinámicas requiere politizar su agencia, trascendiendo la mirada que los reduce a meros receptores de vulnerabilidad para visibilizarlos como actores que ejercen poder a través de acciones como la resistencia cotidiana, la organización colectiva y la demanda de participación. Este proceso exige un giro epistemológico y ontológico que priorice agencias relacionales –colectivas y situadas–, redefiniendo la justicia desde parámetros que desmonten las lógicas adultocéntricas. Desde esta perspectiva, el artículo propone desmantelar las narrativas excluyentes mediante un marco childista que integra dos pilares: la interdependencia profunda –que sustituye la autonomía individualista por prácticas colaborativas– y el pluriverso –que reconoce la diversidad ontológica de las infancias. Al cuestionar la autonomía como ideal individualista y replantearla como práctica colaborativa, se habilita la construcción de sistemas de justicia no solo inclusivos, sino co-diseñados activamente por las propias infancias. Así, la justicia intergeneracional no puede fundamentarse en ficciones de autosuficiencia, sino en el reconocimiento explícito de una interdependencia radical que entrelaza responsabilidades colectivas.

palabras clave: adultocentrismo; aporofobia; teorías liberales de la justicia; infancismo; ontología pluriversal; agencias relacionales.

nenhuma justiça sem agentes de justiça: uma crítica às narrativas adultocêntricas e aporofóbicas nas teorias liberais de justiça

resumo

Nas últimas décadas, a filosofia política expandiu sua análise sobre a infância e a pobreza como categorias críticas. No entanto, persiste uma lacuna teórica na investigação de como as teorias liberais da justiça — hegemônicas na formulação de políticas públicas e nos marcos normativos globais — reproduzem narrativas adultocêntricas (centradas na adultez como norma) e aporofóbicas (marcadas pela rejeição às pessoas empobrecidas). Essas narrativas estão ancoradas em pressupostos epistêmicos do liberalismo, como a vinculação entre autonomia política e adultez, e a racionalidade instrumental, que funcionam como estruturas simbólicas para naturalizar a marginalização daqueles que não correspondem a tais padrões, particularmente as crianças e, de forma ainda mais acentuada, aquelas que vivem em situação de pobreza. Ao reduzir esses sujeitos a meros receptores passivos de assistência, as teorias liberais não apenas negam sua agência política, mas também reforçam uma dupla estrutura de opressão: o adultocentrismo, que torna as crianças invisíveis como interlocutoras legítimas na esfera pública, e a aporofobia, que estigmatiza a pobreza enquanto sinônimo de desumanização, reduzindo os indivíduos a sujeitos tutelados. Essa lógica constrói, de forma interseccional, a figura do "outro inferiorizado": crianças empobrecidas, excluídas por sua idade e condição socioeconômica, transformadas em "*los nadies*" — sem voz nem poder político. Diante dessa realidade, o artigo demonstra como o adultocentrismo e a aporofobia se entrelaçam nas teorias liberais da justiça, perpetuando exclusões que este estudo busca desconstruir. Como resposta, propõe-se o *childism* (infancismo) enquanto marco analítico ético-político que desnaturaliza hierarquias etárias e reconhece as

crianças como sujeitos de direito com capacidade de agência política. Embora o *childism* tenha recebido diversas interpretações no meio acadêmico, aqui se prioriza uma perspectiva voltada especificamente para crianças em situação de pobreza, cujas realidades revelam a intersecção entre opressões sistêmicas e marginalização socioeconômica. Superar essas opressões requer politizar sua agência, entendendo que essas crianças não são meramente vulneráveis, mas atores que exercem poder por meio de práticas cotidianas de resistência, organização comunitária e reivindicações por participação. Isso exige uma mudança ontológica e epistemológica que valorize as agências relacionais — coletivas e situadas — e redefina a justiça a partir de lógicas não adultocêntricas. O artigo conclui com a proposta de desmantelar as narrativas adultocêntricas e aporofóbicas a partir de uma perspectiva *childista*, integrando uma abordagem enraizada na interdependência profunda e no pluriverso. Ao rejeitar a autonomia como atributo individualista e compreendê-la como prática relacional, emergem novos caminhos para a construção de sistemas de justiça que não apenas incluam as crianças, mas sejam codesenhados por elas. Assim, a justiça intergeracional não pode se fundar em ficções de autossuficiência, mas deve basear-se no reconhecimento explícito de uma interdependência radical que entrelaça responsabilidades coletivas.

palavras-chave: adultocentrismo; aporofobia; teorias liberais da justiça; infancismo; ontologia pluriversal; agências relacionais.

no justice without agents of justice:

a critique of adultcentric and aporophobic narratives in liberal theories of justice

introduction

Child poverty, as a social phenomenon, occupies a central place in contemporary narratives of international organisations (such as UNICEF, CEPAL[1], and the World Bank, among others), in interdisciplinary academic discourse, in global media, and in social movements advocating for social and economic justice. However, achieving a comprehensive understanding of this issue remains challenging due to its multidimensional nature. The eradication of this scourge has been established as a global priority on the 21st-century agenda, formally enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where it holds the first position. In recent decades, its impact has intensified due to systemic crises: the COVID-19 pandemic left 300 million children in extreme poverty, according to UNICEF (2024), while the climate crisis threatens to push another 132 million into this condition by 2030 (UNDP, 2023). Addressing this problem goes beyond charity; it is an ethical imperative to preserve human dignity in an interconnected world.

The phenomenon of poverty has been analysed from economic perspectives (income-based approaches), sociological perspectives (social exclusion), anthropological perspectives (cultural practices), political perspectives (distribution of power), and philosophical perspectives (ethics of justice). A central axis of this debate concerns how poverty is addressed from the perspective of social justice: while some approaches reduce it to a technical problem of redistributing material goods or income (Rawls, 1971; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017), others emphasise its structural dimension, linked to power relations (Young, 2011) or a lack of capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). In this context, a persistent tension exists between representing people in poverty as passive

[1] CEPAL (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe) is a United Nations body responsible for promoting economic and social development in the region through research, cooperation, and policy advisory services. Founded in 1948, its work covers issues such as reducing inequality, sustainable development, and regional integration. More information at: https://www.cepal.org.

subjects of external interventions—such as welfare programmes that prioritise charity over autonomy (e.g., mass donation campaigns without community participation)—or recognising them as active agents of transformation. According to Sabina Alkire (2008), it is often argued that when people in poverty act as agents, they reduce their own poverty quite effectively. Therefore, exploring the instrumental interconnections between the agency of people in poverty and the reduction of their poverty in different contexts could help identify more effective interventions.

A paradigmatic example of agency in impoverished communities is the self-help groups studied by Solava Ibrahim (2009), where migrants from Upper Egypt, despite their limited human and financial capital, managed to transform their living conditions through collective action. Through their organisation, they built a kindergarten and a social services centre, promoting education and child development. Some groups formalised themselves as grassroots NGOs, consolidating collective capabilities such as access to clean water, the eradication of illiteracy, and leisure opportunities, demonstrating the transformative impact of community agency in contexts of vulnerability.

These examples engage with contemporary philosophical debates on justice and poverty. Ideal theory in political philosophy, represented by Rawls (1971), conceives poverty as a problem to be eradicated in a perfectly just society. In contrast, the Capabilities Approach, developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000), redefines poverty not merely as a lack of material goods but as the absence of opportunities to develop and exercise valuable capabilities. Perspectives such as those of Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght (2017), Amartya Sen (1992), and Ingrid Robeyns (2024) have enriched this debate by highlighting the importance of social structures that enable the exercise of agency. In this sense, recognising the agency of impoverished communities is not merely a matter of distributive justice but an essential step towards addressing the structural causes of poverty with an inclusive approach that is sensitive to gender, age, and socio-economic context.

Despite the notable growth in philosophical literature on poverty over the past decade (Barry & Overland, 2016; Schweiger & Graf, 2015; Schweiger & Sedmak, 2024), a concerning theoretical gap persists: the normative evaluation of

child poverty. Dominant analytical frameworks are based on assumptions about the autonomous rationality of agents (Macleod, 2015), which proves inapplicable to children, whose moral status is defined precisely by their dependence, vulnerability, and progressively developing agency (Brando & Schweiger, 2019). Although 30% of minors in middle-income countries live in multidimensional poverty (UNICEF, 2024), their situation has been marginalised in philosophical debates, treated as an appendage of adult poverty rather than a phenomenon with its own distinctive dynamics. Reflecting on children allows for the development of a theory of justice that better aligns with the reality of human beings as interdependent, in contrast to the idealised figure of the autonomous subject that underpins much of liberal thought (Fowler, 2014). This theoretical silence is not neutral: by ignoring the specificities of children in contexts of deprivation, it perpetuates a reductionist vision of intergenerational justice.

My insistence on prioritising this analysis is based on two interconnected arguments that reveal how theories of justice, despite not explicitly promoting aporophobia, reinforce exclusionary practices by operating within an adult framework (adultcentrism) that marginalises impoverished children and normalises systemic stigmatisation. Children in poverty are not merely 'adults in the making' but full rights holders in the present, as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The systematic violation of their rights to education, health, and political participation exposes a theoretical void in political philosophy: by reducing children to a preparatory stage for adulthood, hegemonic theories of justice deny children's agency and perpetuate their exclusion from the social and political sphere. This adultcentrism is not only ethically reprehensible but also intellectually short-sighted, as it reproduces dynamics of subalternity by silencing the voices of those treated as 'citizenship projects' rather than social actors with concrete demands (Liebel, 2022). Ignoring this reality renders political theory complicit in an order that objectifies impoverished children, denying them the status of valid interlocutors in the construction of justice.

I consider it imperative to recognise people living in poverty, including children, not merely as victims of an unjust system but as active agents in the construction of a more equitable society. This perspective is grounded in the need to overcome the reductionist view that regards them solely as objects of normative

intervention and to acknowledge them as active subjects whose voice, participation, and experience are essential to transforming social reality. This consideration is fundamental because poverty—and in particular, child poverty—transcends mere material deprivation or lack of income. According to Nico Brando and Gottfried Schweiger (2019, p. 6), child poverty affects political participation, subjective well-being, and provokes feelings of shame and humiliation. Furthermore, it influences how children perceive themselves, their aspirations, education, and social behaviour. These factors carry significant ethical weight in the normative evaluation of poverty, as they determine the interests and demands of those experiencing it and shape their lives over time.

This approach emerges as a critical response to aporophobic narratives that reduce impoverished people to dehumanising stereotypes, portraying them as 'social burdens' or 'threats to the system'. The dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' operates as a mechanism that reinforces structures of exclusion (Cortina, 2017, p. 57). While 'us' is associated with an imagined collective that is productive, autonomous, and morally responsible—for example, the adult middle class fulfilling labour and civic roles— 'them' is constructed as a homogeneous and passive group, stigmatised by their poverty. Thus, children living on the streets or family's dependent on state subsidies are represented as subjects without agency, condemned to tutelage or welfare intervention. This ideological construction not only obscures the structural causes of inequality—such as historical colonialism, labour precarisation, or unequal access to education—but also normalises the political exclusion of those perceived as external to the social contract. Phrases like 'social programmes create dependency; the poor just want to live off the state' illustrate how these aporophobic narratives individually blame impoverished people, ignoring the role of inadequate public health investment, racial discrimination, or the lack of educational opportunities in determining their living conditions. Adultcentrism reinforces this exclusion by denying children's agency with arguments such as 'children do not understand politics; they must be educated before expressing an opinion'. In educational and decision-making settings, this approach perpetuates the idea that children's participation should be postponed until they conform to the standards of rationality defined by adults, disregarding their right to influence matters that directly affect their lives, such as

the distribution of school resources or the design of urban spaces in marginalised communities.

When aporophobia and adultcentrism intertwine, discourses emerge such as 'poor families do not know how to raise their children; the State must intervene to rescue those children'. This reasoning, present in many welfare policies, assumes that poverty is synonymous with parental ineptitude and justifies the separation of children from their communities without considering their wishes or their right to be heard. Under this logic, the State appears as a saviour that imposes solutions from a paternalistic perspective, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation rather than recognising impoverished communities as protagonists of their own transformations (Young, 1990). Recognising them as agents of justice entails moving beyond their reduction to mere 'beneficiaries' of policies designed by privileged adults and integrating their experiences into the construction of more inclusive institutions. This analysis will lay the foundations for exploring, in the following sections, how adultcentrism and aporophobia intertwine within liberal theories of justice, perpetuating exclusions that this article seeks to deconstruct.

what is adultcentrism?

Over recent decades, adultcentrism has emerged as a critical concept for analysing how contemporary societies privilege adulthood as the sociocultural, political, and economic norm, relegating children and adolescents to subordinate roles. Although its use has expanded in grey literature—such as reports, theses, and documents from non-governmental organisations—as well as in academic studies, it still lacks a unified definition, reflecting its polysemic and context-dependent nature. However, this lack of consensus does not diminish its relevance; on the contrary, it underscores its function as an analytical tool for unveiling naturalised inequalities within power structures.

At its core, adultcentrism is understood as a system of domination that positions adults as the paradigmatic subjects of authority, rationality, and autonomy while rendering invisible those who do not conform to this model. Unlike ageism—discrimination based on age—or adultism—which focuses on prejudice and violence against children and young people—adultcentrism is a

paradigm that places adults at the centre of everything (Florio et al., 2020). This system not only marginalises specific age groups but also naturalises adulthood as the sole legitimate stage for participation in public life (Liebel, 2022). Its logic dictates how adults interact with children: from how they interpret children's rights and needs to how they respond to their demands, perpetuating a hierarchical order that denies their agency (Biswas et al., 2023).

This dynamic manifests in multiple spheres. In the sociology of children, for instance, studies examine how institutions such as schools and families reproduce age-based hierarchies that silence children's voices, treating them as mere passive recipients of adult norms (Liebel, 2022; Liebel & Meade, 2024). Manfred Liebel (2014) delves into how this system not only denies rights but also erodes children's capacity to exercise political agency by assuming they lack the necessary maturity to engage in decisions affecting them. In critical pedagogy, hierarchical educational models are challenged for suppressing student perspectives, thereby limiting their active contribution to learning (Biswas et al., 2023). For example, curricula rarely incorporate young people's opinions, reinforcing a paradigm in which knowledge remains the exclusive domain of adults (Biswas, 2021). In philosophy, childism offers a theoretical framework for destabilising adultcentrism. This ethical approach recognises children as a present moral and political agent capable of contributing unique perspectives to the construction of social justice (Biswas & Wall, 2023). Maldonado Castañeda (2024) connects this idea with the theory of epistemic injustice, arguing that adultcentrism systematically discredits children's knowledge and experiences. In courts, for example, children's testimonies are subjected to additional scrutiny, while in public debates, their analyses of social issues are often dismissed as 'naïve', perpetuating an order in which adult voices monopolise the definition of what is deemed 'rational' (Daly & Lundy, 2022).

In the realm of public policy, this logic is reflected in laws that deem those under 18 as 'incompetent' to make decisions, thereby excluding them from formal mechanisms of participation (Lansdown, 2005). Most countries deny children and youth the right to vote, marginalising them from key democratic processes, while paternalistic policies restrict their mobility and expression under the guise of 'protection' (Wall, 2022, p. 89). Such practices not only reduce children to a stage of

'adults in training' but also reinforce their exclusion from spaces where their rights are defined. Ultimately, adultcentrism operates as a structural barrier that reproduces entrenched inequalities by naturalising adult supremacy and silencing those who will inherit the consequences of today's decisions. As Biswas (2021) argues, challenging adultcentrism requires an ethical and political shift: moving beyond viewing children merely as recipients of care and embracing them as interlocutors capable of reimagining the very foundations of social justice.

what is aporophobia?

Aporophobia, a term coined by philosopher Adela Cortina in 1995/2017, is defined as the rejection, fear, or contempt towards people living in poverty. Unlike xenophobia or racism, this form of discrimination is not directed against a specific ethnic or cultural identity but rather against a socioeconomic condition, making it a phenomenon deeply rooted in structures of power and inequality. In recent years, the concept has gained prominence in academic, political, and social spheres. Aporophobia, whose etymological roots derive from the Greek *áporos* ('without resources') and *phobos* ('fear'), manifests as both symbolic and material violence by stigmatising impoverished individuals. It does so by associating poverty with a lack of merit, dangerousness, or indignity. Cortina (2017, p. 43) emphasises that this rejection is not due to any intrinsic characteristic of its victims but to a system that normalises economic exclusion and blames those who suffer from it.

According to Cortina (2017), aporophobia has both biological and cultural roots. From a neurological perspective, human beings tend to favour those they perceive as similar, while difference can provoke rejection. This instinct for self-protection, coupled with a dissociative mechanism that leads us to ignore what is uncomfortable or disturbing—such as poverty—contributes to the exclusion of the poor. Culturally, this dynamic is normalised through discourses that individualise poverty as a personal or moral failure, concealing the social and economic structures that perpetuate it. Unlike poverty itself, understood as a multidimensional phenomenon, aporophobia focuses on the social attitudes that legitimise and deepen marginalisation through contempt and rejection of the worst-off. This concept has permeated global discourse, as evidenced by reports

from the European Commission (2020) and documents from organisations such as Oxfam[2], which link aporophobia to the rise of inequality in the post-pandemic context. Its tacit inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals further reflects the recognition that combating poverty also requires eradicating the prejudices that sustain it.

The structural consequences of aporophobia fracture both the lives of those who are stigmatised and the foundations of social cohesion. I argue that this phenomenon is sustained by two interdependent pillars: the moral narrative, which attributes poverty to individual failure, and systematic dehumanisation, which reduces impoverished individuals to degrading stereotypes. The first promotes the idea that precariousness results from a lack of personal effort, ignoring structural causes such as the globalisation of labour precarity, collapsing educational systems, or gender asymmetries that condemn millions—particularly women and girls—to cycles of intergenerational exclusion. The second strips the poor of their humanity, portraying them as 'public burdens' or 'threats', as seen in rhetoric that criminalises Latin American migrants expelled from the United States under accusations of 'criminality'—a discourse which, as Adela Cortina notes, contrasts with the celebration of wealthy migrants as 'investors', while the poor are stigmatised as 'invaders'.

This dynamic, analysed by Zygmunt Bauman (2004, p. 57) in *Wasted Lives*, reveals how liberalism and neoliberalism treat the impoverished as 'human waste', glorifying capital mobility while demonising the movement of bodies. Mass deportations—justified by euphemisms such as 'national security'—exemplify how state policies criminalise survival, a mechanism that Loïc Wacquant (2010) denounces as punitive paternalism: cutting social programmes while expanding prisons and detention centres, turning poverty into a crime. Albert Sales (2014, p. 12) links this to a 'neoliberal management of marginality', where the state does not correct inequalities but rather administers them through institutional violence, such as laws that criminalise begging or evict settlements without providing housing alternatives.

[2] Oxfam is a global movement fighting inequality to eradicate poverty and injustice. It works with thousands of partners and allied organisations in nearly 70 countries, supporting communities in improving their living conditions, strengthening their resilience, and protecting their livelihoods in crisis contexts. For more information, see: https://www.oxfam.org/en.

Moreover, media stigmatisation, by equating poverty with laziness or criminality—a practice that Erving Goffman (1963) associated with social stigma—not only erodes dignity but also nullifies any possibility of political agency. As Bauman (2004, p. 16) warns, indifference to the suffering of others, normalised by discourses that divide society into the 'deserving' and the 'undesirable', corrodes the ethical bonds essential for democracy. In contractualist societies that value people based on their economic productivity, those who lack resources are systematically excluded and dehumanised. Thus, poverty becomes not only material deprivation but also a stigma that marginalises individuals from political, social, and economic spaces, reinforcing the narrative that they are incapable of contributing to society. Aporophobia, therefore, not only strips the poor of their dignity but also denies them recognition as full members of the democratic community, perpetuating an order in which justice is subordinated to individual merit and humanity is ranked according to the capital one possesses.

the connection between adultcentrism and aporophobia: the denial of agency through the construction of the inferiorised other (los nadies)

I argue that the connection between adultcentrism and aporophobia lies in a shared ontological assumption, namely: the construction of an 'inferiorized Other' (*Los nadies*[3]). Both systems function as mechanisms of dehumanisation that deny agency—that is, the ability to act, decide, and transform one's reality—to those who do not fit the minimum standard of a political subject in the narrow sense of liberal visions: a person with rational and discursive agency. This denial not only perpetuates inequalities but also consolidates a hierarchical order that excludes bodies and voices deemed 'unproductive' or 'dangerous' from the public sphere.

This brings us to the second factor contributing to the dehumanisation of people in poverty: the process of othering. Othering describes how the more powerful 'non-poor' treat the less powerful 'poor' as different and inferior (Lister, 2015). It is closely associated with and reinforced by the social processes of stereotyping and stigmatisation. It is not a neutral boundary, as it is imbued with

[3] «*Los nadies*» ('The Nobodies') is a concept coined by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano to refer to people who are marginalised and excluded by the system—those whose lives are ignored and whose worth is denied by structures of power. In *El libro de los abrazos*, Galeano (1989) describes «*Los nadies*» as those who 'are not, even though they are', highlighting the symbolic and material violence they endure in a world that reduces them to insignificance.

negative value judgements that diminish and construct 'the poor' in various ways: as a source of moral contamination, a fearful threat, an 'undeserving' economic burden, an object of pity, or even as an exotic species. Even in its most benign form, othering denies people in poverty their complex humanity and subjectivity. In its least benign form, othering shapes how non-poor individuals think, speak, and act towards 'the poor', both interpersonally and institutionally. It is reflected in the language and labels used to describe 'the poor', denying them what has been termed 'representational agency'—the power over how one is represented (Lister, 2015, pp. 142–145).

The intersection between adultcentrism and aporophobia forms the foundation of exclusion that radically denies children and adolescents in poverty the capacity for action. The migration crisis exemplifies this intersection. According to UNICEF (2019), in countries such as Spain, there is a growing trend of stigmatising unaccompanied migrant children through the negative label 'MENA', a term that obscures their status as minors and their condition as 'children before being foreigners'. Moreover, in the past year, there have been numerous cases in which these children have been criminalised socially, in the media, and politically, through narratives that collectively portray them as a social threat and a public order problem, directly associating them with criminal activity and violence. According to UNICEF (2019), these narratives are based on prejudices, generalisations, or unverified and poor-quality data[4]. These children and adolescents find themselves trapped in a paradox: on the one hand, they are treated as 'passive victims' in need of state guardianship (adultcentrism), while on the other, they are viewed as 'potential threats' due to their racialized condition of poverty (aporophobia). In this sense, not only are they denied the right to be heard, but they are also reduced to mere objects of punitive or charitable intervention, without recognition as active agents with their own voice—an essential aspect for fostering empowerment that enables them to overcome poverty.

[4] To explore this further, see: https://www.unicef.es/noticia/unicef-espana-frente-la-estigmatizacion-y-la-criminalizacion-de-los-ninos-y-ninas-migrantes.

Another paradigmatic case is the ongoing migration crisis at the United States–Mexico border. While thousands of Latin Americans are deported under the stigma of being 'criminals', unaccompanied children and adolescents remain trapped in a paradox of exclusion (Heidbrink, 2020): on the one hand, they are treated as 'passive victims' in need of institutional guardianship and 'rescue' (adultcentrism), yet at the same time, they are perceived as 'potential threats' due to their condition of poverty and presumed predisposition to crime (aporophobia). This duality reinforces the narrative that attributes migration to 'poor family decisions' while invisibilizing structural causes such as forced displacement due to violence, the climate crisis, and inequality imposed by a neoliberal system that deepens precariousness in the Global South. This practice is not an isolated incident but part of a global trend in which states implement repressive measures to manage poverty rather than address its structural roots (Hanes, 2019).

Armed conflict is another manifestation of this intersection between aporophobia and adultcentrism. Various studies (see, for example, Tynes, 2019) argue that children recruited by armed groups come from impoverished territories. Although international law prohibits child recruitment, state responses focus on the 'rehabilitation' of former combatants as passive victims, denying them the ability to denounce the conditions of exclusion that pushed them into war. Research on child soldier recruitment has shown that children join armed groups to access the resources these groups provide, and that these groups exploit poverty to attract recruits (Legassicke et al., 2023; Tynes, 2019). Their involvement in war is a survival strategy in a system that prioritises the exploitation of their territories. The subsequent stigmatisation of these minors as 'dangerous' even after leaving armed groups reflects the persistence of aporophobia: their survival is criminalised within a system that never offered them opportunities. This pattern repeats itself in other conflict contexts, such as the case of child soldiers in Africa or Palestinian minors detained in Israeli prisons under accusations of 'terrorism' (Save the Children, 2024).

The combination of aporophobia and adultcentrism not only expels impoverished children from the political sphere but also naturalises their exclusion through narratives that oscillate between victimisation and criminalisation. The connection between adultcentrism and aporophobia

demonstrates how systems of oppression reinforce one another to deny humanity. Dismantling this alliance requires, firstly, recognising the agency of the excluded not as an exception but as an everyday practice of resistance, and secondly, questioning the ontological frameworks that divide society between 'complete' subjects and 'inferior others'. In this regard, I will now analyse how this narrative has been reinforced through liberal political theories, highlighting how this framework has perpetuated adultcentric narratives that fuel aporophobia. Although there are many liberal theories, the distinctions I will mention primarily stem from reflecting on the work of John Rawls, given the influence of his work both in academia and public policymaking.

the conception of agency in liberal theories of justice: a justification that reinforces adult-centric narratives?

I argue that liberal theories of justice have constructed their normative framework on a conceptual foundation that indiscriminately merges the notions of agency, autonomy, and self-determination. This confluence, though seemingly technical, operates, in my view, as a structuring axis that reinforces the adult-centric perspectives I have mentioned. Generally, liberals assume rather minimal and reductionist standards of 'competence' to qualify an individual as a bearer of the rights associated with autonomy (Gutmann, 1980; Hill, 1999). These standards exclude children. To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to start with the definitions assumed by classical liberalism.

- **Autonomous agents**: These are individuals capable of self-governance through rational decisions, free from external coercion (a definition influenced by Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill). This concept is associated with adult rationality, material independence, and the capacity to enter contracts. For example, in Rawls, only 'free and rational agents' participate in the social contract. One of the most prominent places where Rawls employs a specific notion of agency is in what he calls the 'original position'. He does so in the context of a thought experiment designed to justify two principles regarding the justice of basic social institutions. Rawls describes agents as rational,

mutually disinterested, and highly knowledgeable about general facts, yet operating behind a 'veil of ignorance' that prevents them from knowing their gender, race, class, personal relationships, culture, history, or even the century in which they live (Hill, 1999, p. 849). All of them are driven by a single goal: to maximise their share of 'primary social goods', which any rational person is presumed to desire. Rawls does not explicitly call these hypothetical members of the original position autonomous, but he maintains that real individuals can be seen as expressing their nature as rational and autonomous beings when they act out of respect for the principles of justice that the imaginary members of the original position would adopt (Christman, 2015, p. 145).

- **Agents as bearers of self-determination rights**: Liberals defend basic autonomy rights (freedom of choice without coercion). Here, autonomous agents are not defined by their capabilities or active faculties but by their rights—the responsibility of others to allow them to choose in matters that significantly affect their lives, provided their choices appropriately respect the similar rights of others. In Rawls' theory, the rights in question are not explicitly attributed to 'autonomy' but correspond to the general rights of citizens under the first principle of liberty (Christman, 2020).

I argue that the problem arises when both dimensions are equated, as if agency could only reach its full expression in rational autonomy, and *viceversa*. This equation has profound practical and theoretical consequences. By linking the entitlement to rights and participation in the social contract exclusively to rational autonomy, liberalism establishes a moral threshold that excludes those who do not meet this adult-centred standard. In the case of children, since they do not conform to the criterion of rational autonomy (understood as cognitive maturity and freedom from interference), they are relegated to a status of 'subjects in formation'. This distinction not only justifies the exclusion of children from political rights but also naturalises their subordination within legal and social

structures where adults decide on their behalf, appealing to a 'best interest[5]' that rarely incorporates their voices (Alston, 1994; Gutmann, 1980, p. 345; Oswell, 2013, p. 240).

Rawlsian theory illustrates this point: in the original position, the agents who choose the principles of justice are conceived as autonomous and rational beings, but there is no interrogation of how to include those who lack full autonomy. Children and those facing persistent conditions of vulnerability are excluded from this status, on the grounds that they lack the necessary capacities for self-governance (Christman, 2015, p. 146). Rawls assumes that the principles of justice—such as equality of opportunity—apply to all, but he does not question how adult-centric institutions may undermine the agency of younger individuals.

The root of the problem lies in an idealisation of the political subject as a rational and independent adult— a figure that operates as the norm within liberalism. By projecting this model, liberal theories not only ignore that autonomy is a gradual and relational process (Biggeri et al., 2011; Baraldi & Cockburn, 2018)—influenced by factors such as cognitive development, access to resources, or social context—but also render invisible forms of agency that exist beyond canonical autonomy. A child who expresses disagreement with a school rule or participates in community activities is exercising agency, yet such actions are often minimised because they do not conform to the liberal standard of 'rational autonomous decision-making'. This implicit hierarchy between agency and autonomy reinforces narratives that frame children as a preparatory stage for adulthood, rather than recognising it as a life phase with intrinsic value and present rights.

The implications of this perspective are profoundly political. By equating agency with autonomy, liberalism not only excludes children but also consolidates

[5] The *best interest of the child* is a fundamental principle in international law, establishing that in all decisions and actions concerning minors, their overall well-being must be the primary consideration. Its origins trace back to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, where it is enshrined in Article 3.1 as a guiding principle to ensure rights such as protection, full development, and participation in decisions affecting them. This concept requires an assessment of factors such as the child's physical, emotional, educational, and social needs, prioritising their protection from situations of risk while respecting their voice according to their level of maturity. Furthermore, the CRC and its general comments emphasise that the best interest of the child is not a static concept but must be analysed on a case-by-case basis, incorporating multidisciplinary perspectives (UN, 1989, Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 14).

a social order in which decisions concerning children are made through an adult logic presented as universal (Pechtelidis, 2018). This is evident in institutions such as the family, school, and legal system, where adults determine what is 'best' for children without considering their participation, thus perpetuating asymmetrical power relations. The failure to distinguish between agency and autonomy is not merely a theoretical oversight but a bias that reinforces adultcentrism. From this perspective, the notion of the 'agentless child' emerges as a construction that denies children's capacity for action and autonomy. It assumes that children do not actively shape their environment but are instead moulded by it through socialisation, cultural norms, and family context. This representation is reinforced when they are depicted as passive and incompetent subjects, devoid of power and agency in the world (Florio et al., 2020, p. 7).

This idea is further strengthened by linking autonomy with individual responsibility. According to this perspective, the value of autonomy lies in the framework of responsibility that renders each of us accountable for shaping our own lives in accordance with a coherent and distinctive sense of character, conviction, and interest. From this standpoint, justice demands that individuals bear the consequences of their choices, a premise that presupposes autonomy as self-governance. This argument becomes a principle for legitimising liberal paternalism, which Lars Lindblom (2023) denounces as a paradox. While liberal theories acknowledge children's vulnerability, they use this argument to annul their agency ('we decide for their own good'), thereby perpetuating their exclusion from the political sphere. In this way, this approach not only reinforces the binary division between adult/child but also naturalises a vicious cycle:

1. It is assumed that children lack autonomy (due to their incomplete development).
2. Consequently, they are denied responsibility and participation.
3. By denying them participation, their status as 'non-autonomous' is confirmed.

This perspective paves the way for protectionist and paternalistic positions. According to David Oswell (2013, p. 240), the protectionist thesis, or the 'caretaker

thesis' (Archard, 1993, p. 77), refers to those—usually adults—who act in accordance with the general welfare of the child. Unlike older conceptions that regarded the child as the property of the father, the protectionist thesis is based on the idea that those who act in the child's best interest do not do so as legal proprietors, nor does it imply that the child lacks individuality or agency. Protectionism does not oppose the child's autonomy or freedom; it merely holds that a child does not always know or act in their own best interest and that a higher authority should and can act on their behalf. This conceptualisation of the child from a welfare-oriented perspective is also linked to the notion of the child as a developing subject (that is, due to their relative lack of reason, experience, and awareness, the child cannot fully act on their own behalf). Under this thesis, authority is distributed unequally, and children, due to their relative immaturity, may be deprived of authority (or granted only a relative degree of it) over their own lives. In this sense, while protectionism may be viewed positively in terms of, for instance, parents providing a safe environment for children to grow and learn (i.e., a space free from intruders and dangers), when taken to the extreme, this protectionism can lead to absolute control over the child and the total denial of their capacity to be the author of their own actions.

Paternalism, in turn, as Noam Peleg (2023) points out, operates here as a mechanism of control: by defining autonomy as an adult prerogative, it justifies restricting children's decisions 'to prevent harm'. But who defines what constitutes 'harm' or a rational weakness? The liberal tradition responds from paternalistic adult-centred parameters, as if rationality were a biographical achievement (being an adult) rather than a relational process. In this sense, the liberal conception of agency, anchored in ideals of rational autonomy and individual responsibility, not only excludes those who fail to meet these standards but also naturalises their subordination. By presenting the self-sufficient adult as the universal model, human interdependencies are rendered invisible, and an order is justified in which certain lives are valued only insofar as they approximate this ideal. This reinforces adult-centric narratives that marginalise children, people living in poverty, or those with disabilities, while simultaneously masking power structures that benefit those who already possess autonomy. To construct truly inclusive theories of justice, it is necessary to dismantle this paradigm, recognising agency in its

multiple forms—collective, contextual, or relational—and abandoning the fiction of an abstract, autonomous, and ultimately adult subject. Ultimately, the critique presented here does not seek to discard liberalism but to expose one of its structural limitations: by universalising rational autonomy as a prerequisite for full citizenship, these theories fail to account for human diversity, particularly those stages and conditions in which agency exists but does not conform to the terms sanctified by the liberal canon. Overcoming this bias would not only enrich political philosophy but would also allow us to envision societies where justice is not conditioned by the ability to conform to an adult ideal, but by the commitment to honour the dignity of all forms of life in their present.

the conceptualisation of agency in liberal theories of justice: a justification that fuels aporophobic narratives?

Individual agency is in tension with aporophobic narratives, which, by stigmatising and denying the dignity of those in poverty, precisely undermine these groups' capacity for agency. While liberalism insists on moral equality as a prerequisite for exercising rights and freedoms, aporophobia constructs dehumanising narratives, attributing precariousness to supposed individual failings rather than systemic structures. Thus, a coherent defence of agency within the liberal framework requires confronting these narratives, as only by dismantling the prejudices that deny agency to the most vulnerable can we ensure a reality where autonomy and social justice are not abstract ideals but material conditions for all. Addressing aporophobia as a central axis within adult-centric structures in liberal theories is crucial because, when adultcentrism intersects with poverty, it intensifies exclusion. This results in the 'othering' of those who are considered nobodies—in this case, marginalised children—into a doubly subordinate category: voiceless in liberal discourse (because they are children) and socially illegitimate (because they are poor).

Poverty is not a neutral context; it functions as a political mechanism that naturalises children's passivity, justifying paternalistic or welfare-oriented interventions that reinforce the idea that impoverished children are 'problems to be solved' by adults, rather than subjects with the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives. Integrating poverty into this discussion exposes how liberal

adultcentrism not only omits children but does so selectively, disproportionately affecting those in conditions of vulnerability. Thus, poverty becomes a key factor because it reveals that the denial of children's agency is not an abstract issue; it is intertwined with structures of class, inequality, and stigma that perpetuate cycles of exclusion.

In liberal theories of justice, such as John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*, autonomy is directly linked to the equitable distribution of primary goods—rights, freedoms, opportunities, and the social bases of respect—understood as essential resources for individuals to exercise their capacity for self-determination. However, poverty, by depriving individuals of access to these goods, radically undermines their autonomy, contradicting Rawls' principle that inequalities are only justifiable if they benefit the least advantaged. Rawls, by focusing on institutional structures, assumes that justice ensures the minimum material conditions for agency but does not delve into how economic precariousness, particularly in contexts of systemic exclusion, renders autonomy an abstract privilege for those struggling to meet their basic needs. Since Rawlsian theory primarily focuses on the distribution of wealth and income, it appears compatible with the idea of considering poverty as income falling below an established threshold (Moellendorf, 2010, p. 225). This tension reveals a paradox: while Rawlsian liberalism posits autonomy as a moral foundation, poverty exposes that, without effective redistribution and without challenging socioeconomic hierarchies, millions of people—including children—remain excluded from this ideal.

When critically analysing these normative proposals in relation to aporophobic dynamics, a significant tension emerges between their theoretical principles and their practical implications. Although liberalism does not explicitly promote aporophobia, its emphasis on individual autonomy and personal responsibility may, in certain contexts, legitimise or reinforce aporophobic attitudes and practices. Liberalism places individual freedom at the core of its normative project, prioritising autonomy and self-sufficiency as fundamental values. However, this perspective can fuel aporophobic dynamics by interpreting poverty because of personal decisions or individual failures rather than recognising its roots in unjust social and economic structures. Under this logic, the

structural conditions that perpetuate poverty tend to be rendered invisible, while those who fail to meet the standards of success in capitalist societies are stigmatised. If poverty is perceived as a 'failure' of self-management, it reinforces discourses that blame the poor for their situation, fostering attitudes of contempt and exclusion. Furthermore, the liberal distributive framework requires individuals in poverty to justify their access to social assistance based on their disadvantages or limited capabilities, reinforcing their subordinate position (Inoue, 2024, p. 332).

From a broader perspective, Cortina (2022, p. 44) argues that aporophobia is inevitably at the root of speech acts directed against those in subordinate positions. In this sense, any form of subordination or vulnerability can be interpreted as a manifestation of poverty. The social perception of child poverty, for instance, is influenced by various factors such as the media, government policies, public relations strategies, and personal experiences. Nevertheless, a persistent narrative attributes child poverty to poor decision-making or inadequate priorities within families, which over time may solidify into a common-sense belief. Expressions like 'the poor are lazy social parasites' or 'poor children are less intelligent' not only lack empirical foundation but are deliberately designed to devalue and exclude these individuals, perpetuating structural discrimination that also affects children (Schweiger, 2024, p. 511). International organisations have historically used fundraising campaigns featuring images of barefoot, malnourished children with desperate expressions. While intended to generate empathy, these paternalistic narratives reduce children to objects of pity, denying their agency and perpetuating stereotypes of passivity. Nancy Fraser (1987) critiques how welfare institutions 'create needs' by defining what is 'good' for the marginalised without consulting them. In this case, NGOs impose a view of child poverty as a 'lack of material resources', disregarding children's voices regarding their priorities (such as education or community participation). This not only stigmatises but also reinforces the idea that their autonomy is irrelevant.

I argue that paternalism contributes to strengthening this position of weakness and fuels the stigmatisation of children living in poverty. This paternalistic approach, while aiming to ensure their well-being, stigmatises them by marking their economic condition and associating it with 'dependence'. As Iris

Marion Young (1990, pp. 53–54) points out, dependence on bureaucratic institutions subjects' individuals to arbitrary and degrading treatment, violating their right to privacy and respect. Children internalise their poverty as a public stigma, reinforcing the narrative that they are 'burdens' requiring institutional control rather than subjects with rights. From this perspective, those in poverty or vulnerability are deemed 'guilty' of their own situation and of failing to do what is necessary to escape it; they may even be labelled as 'lazy' (Bayón, 2012). It is highly likely that individuals, including children experiencing socio-economic deprivation, feel ashamed, either for receiving stigmatising social benefits or for facing discrimination during the process of claiming or receiving them (Walker, 2014).

Taken together, these theories reveal a structural bias towards adult-centred perspectives that frame children as objects of protection rather than political subjects with their own voice. This reinforces exclusionary dynamics that marginalise children living in poverty, who experience a dual discrimination: for their economic situation and for their subordination within adult power structures. While these theories identify the state as a key actor, its policies tend to reproduce adultcentrism by failing to include children's active participation in the design and implementation of solutions. To overcome these limitations, it is necessary to develop a political philosophy that challenges adultcentrism and recognises children as political agents.

children as weavers of realities: childism, pluriversal ontology and relational agencies as an antidote to adultcentrism and aporophobia

The normalisation of adultcentrist narratives restricts children's agency and hinders their ability to challenge these limitations. Nevertheless, the effective exercise of agency is essential to breaking this cycle of exclusion. In this regard, it is crucial to construct counter-narratives that not only make visible but also reclaim the capacity for action of those living in poverty (Krumer-Nevo & Benjamin, 2010; Lister, 2015, p. 145). These counter-narratives challenge the representation of 'the others' as passive subjects, a dichotomy that oscillates between the benevolent image of the helpless victim and the stigmatisation of the individual as lazy and dependent on social assistance. By doing so, they contribute

to dismantling aporophobic discourses that perpetuate exclusion and reinforce structures of inequality.

From this perspective, I argue that a childist stance is key to constructing these counter-narratives, as it enables the challenge of both adultcentrism and aporophobia. According to Biswas et al. (2023, p. 3), childism is a critical theoretical lens that empowers children's experiences by transforming the structural norms that constrain them. Inspired by third-wave feminism, this approach does not merely advocate for children's equality but creatively rethinks the normative foundations that shape egalitarian social relations. To this end, it broadens foundational assumptions to equitably respond to the diversity of lived experiences among children in their condition as children. As a critical perspective, childism questions adultism, developmentalism, and ageism in both society and academia, recognizing that generational and age-based categories not only structure power relations but also intersect with other forms of oppression. Its purpose extends beyond children, as it seeks to promote social justice and the inclusion of all marginalised groups. However, far from granting children exclusive epistemic authority, childism emphasises the importance of developing a critical awareness of the conditions under which knowledge is produced.

Approaching children from a non-adultist and non-developmentalist perspective enables a deeper understanding of society. Its contribution lies in denaturalising adultcentrist, ageist, and developmentalist norms and assumptions; in recognising children's experiences and actions; in analysing the intersection of these structures with other power dynamics; and in rethinking theoretical foundations in academia. In this way, childism not only broadens our understanding of children but also transforms knowledge and institutions from a more inclusive perspective (Biswas et al., 2023). Following Erica Burman (2023), childism is not limited to critique; it seeks to formulate new and improved norms based on it. As Wall (2019, pp. 6–11) points out, this approach assumes the radical task of reconstructing academic and social norms from children's experiences, a process that involves expanding norms rather than simply eliminating them. One of its core commitments is linking children's issues with geopolitical dynamics. In this regard, childism invites researchers to interpret historically suppressed experiences to construct broader and more inclusive social understandings

(Burman, 2023, p. 11). Hence, it is essential to analyse adult–child relationships to dismantle the barriers that limit children's agency and, consequently, to reconfigure institutions (Rollo, 2016, p. 250).

Nevertheless, I argue that adopting a childist perspective does not merely involve including impoverished children within pre-existing structures; it entails a radical transformation to help reduce the adultcentrist and aporophobic narratives that perpetuate their exclusion. According to Wall (2019), understanding children from a non-adultcentrist perspective not only benefits children but also redefines the very conception of what it means to be human. By placing interdependence at the heart of social relations, it dismantles the myth of individual self-sufficiency and acknowledges precarity as an essential component of social justice. From this perspective, childism is not simply a theory about children but an intergenerational ethical project that questions the ontological and epistemological foundations that have historically marginalised children's voices.

I agree with Biswas et al. (2023, p. 3) that the issue does not lie solely in children's supposed lack of agency but in how adultist and patriarchal systems have defined—and restricted—the very concepts of agency, voice, and normativity. The challenge, then, is not merely to make impoverished children visible but to dismantle the structures that naturalise their exclusion. Therefore, I argue that this requires rethinking the ontological foundations of justice. I draw on Lister's argument (2015, p. 153) that ontological identity—that is, a person's unique sense of self—can be damaged by the shame and otherness associated with poverty. In this sense, I consider it necessary to shift from an individualist ontological conception towards an interdependent and pluriversal ontology.

John Wall (2024), a key figure in childism theorisation, proposes transcending traditional ontologies—modernist individuality, postmodern difference, and feminist relationality—through what he calls 'deep interdependence'. From this perspective, human existence is neither an isolated phenomenon nor a mere horizontal connection between individuals but a complex web of vertical and horizontal relationships linking humans and non-humans. Children, in their condition as structurally dependent subjects, paradigmatically embody this reality: their identity and autonomy do not emerge from isolation but from collective bonds that destabilise the liberal conception of independence. One

example is a study by Jane Millar and Tess Ridge (cited by Lister, 2015, p. 152) on how single mothers who had entered paid employment, and their children negotiated the everyday challenges of maintaining low-wage jobs over time. They found that family was possibly the most important resource for sustaining employment. Children were involved in a complex array of caregiving and coping strategies, not only to manage changes in their own lives but also to support their mothers in employment. In other words, attempting to escape poverty through paid work involved the active agency of both mothers and children.

I propose bringing Wall's (2024) ontology of deep interdependence into dialogue with Arturo Escobar's (2018) pluriversal ontologies, formulated as a resistance to the modern-colonial project and its imposition of a 'single world', which is based on a series of constitutive dualisms such as human/non-human, mind/body, individual/community, and so forth. Against this hegemonic narrative, Escobar proposes inhabiting a pluriverse: a tapestry of multiple worlds where diverse ways of being, knowing, and organising life coexist. According to his analysis, modernity imposed a dominant ontology that rendered other forms of existence invisible. I argue that the intersection of these ontologies allows for the articulation of an ontological counter-narrative that challenges adultcentrist representations of children, particularly those in conditions of poverty. While hegemonic discourses oscillate between benevolent victimisation and the stigmatisation of 'the others' (*Los nadies*), the pluriversal childist perspective I present understands impoverished children as active agents of resistance.

For instance, during the social uprising in Chile (2019), children from marginalised communities organised 'children's assemblies' to discuss demands such as free education and an end to police repression. They broke with the narrative of 'passive victims' by creating self-managed spaces where they expressed their demands through murals, performances, and assemblies. Likewise, the Latin American Movement of Working Children and Adolescents (Molacnats) is another example of how organised children challenge the structures of symbolic, political, and economic exclusion that perpetuate their marginalisation.

Moreover, the critique of individualist ontologies redefines autonomy. For Escobar (2016, p. 197), autonomy cannot be reduced to liberal independence;

rather, it must be conceived as the creation of conditions to transform norms from within, dynamically negotiating between tradition and innovation. This involves defending ancestral practices, reinventing organisational forms, and resisting the homogenising logics of the nation-state and the global market. Instead of the myth of the self-sufficient individual, Escobar proposes a relational autonomy, emerging from networks of interdependence and rooted in difference. This notion of relational autonomy is particularly relevant for children living in poverty, as it dismantles the idea that their exclusion results from a lack of individual agency. Instead, it reveals how poverty is a social construct that systematically denies children's collective self-definition capacity. Their autonomy is not exercised in isolation but through networks of reciprocity and solidarity, thus dismantling narratives that justify their exclusion under the pretext of their 'dependence'.

From my perspective, an approach based on deep interdependence and the pluriverse allows for the dismantling of adult-centric and aporophobic structures that normalise the exclusion of children in poverty. Recognising that autonomy is not an individualistic attribute but a relational practice opens the possibility of constructing justice systems that not only include children but are co-constructed by them. Intergenerational justice cannot be sustained based on a fictitious and self-sufficient autonomy; it must be grounded in the recognition of our radical interdependence. In this sense, childism and the pluriverse not only challenge established categories but also propose new ways of inhabiting the world, where children is not merely a subject to be integrated but a central actor in the construction of fairer and more inclusive futures.

final considerations

Focusing on justice from an ontology of deep interdependence and the pluriverse, and reconceptualising agency, allows us to radically transform the frameworks of inclusion and participation for children in poverty. These shifts in perspective contribute to:

1. Recognition of human interconnectedness: People's existence and identity—especially those of children in poverty—are constructed through relational networks. This destabilises the idea of the

self-sufficient political subject and challenges the exclusion of those who do not fit that model.

2. Plurality of ways of being and knowing: A pluriversal approach highlights multiple modes of existence, enabling the appreciation of the experiences and knowledge of children marginalised by adult-centric and aporophobic narratives.
3. Autonomy as a relational practice: Autonomy ceases to be an individual attribute attainable only in adulthood and is instead understood as a practice built through relationships of reciprocity and solidarity.
4. Structural transformation of justice: Shifting the focus from a model based on individual independence to one that values interdependence and plurality allows for questioning and dismantling the structures that perpetuate child exclusion.

Ultimately, these shifts in perspective not only make visible and legitimise the agency of children in poverty but also transform the structures that have historically justified their exclusion. Thus, progress is made towards a framework of intergenerational justice that recognises and fosters the active participation of all subjects, consolidating networks of interdependence and the diversity of experiences as foundations for a fairer and more inclusive society.

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