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14. The Transactional Horizons of Child Vulnerability

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Abstract This chapter analyses child vulnerability in two major crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. The strategies of children during the pandemic in Switzerland and children's agency in climate demonstrations are captured in an online survey and in the speeches of Greta Thunberg. This shows that vulnerability is bound to how social arrangements – including human rights – mitigate natural frailty, and it advocates for better inclusion of children's rights and agency in participatory public policies.

Keywords children | climate change | COVID-19 pandemic | transactional horizons | vulnerability

14.1 INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability is a relational issue, and consequently child vulnerability is bound to how social ties and human rights mitigate natural frailty. While all human beings are vulnerable, some are more so than others due to human factors, such as power relations, that can be seen in terms of differential social recognition and redistribution of economic resources. Children are particularly affected by these dynamics, and their social positionings are highly dependent on adult-driven arrangements, including the human rights of children. In the end, children's rights are foremost designed and implemented by adults.

In this chapter, children's moving social positionings are addressed with regard to their reactions to adult-driven arrangements in two empirical cases: the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. Child vulnerability is highlighted through the theory of "transactional horizons", a notion that captures the "symbolic landscapes channeling social interaction".[1]

1 Daniel Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons of Greta Thunberg," *Societies*, vol. 11(2) (2021): 1–24, 2.

This theory, which will be presented in Section 14.2, allows a methodological understanding of social arrangements, captured through the notion of "modes of action", that will be highlighted with the two cases of children's experience in COVID-19 lockdown and mobilisation around climate change.

This theoretical framework is therefore used, in Section 14.3, for a secondary analysis of data gathered in Switzerland through an online survey in 2020 in which 157 respondents aged between 11 and 17 years talked about their experiences regarding their family and school life, their life with friends, their hobbies, and finally their activities during the COVID-19 lockdown.[2] The comparison with the "transactional horizons" that are used in the other major crisis, climate change, with a synthesis of a discursive analysis of Greta Thunberg's speeches that shows the claims that are made by children differ according to who or what is supposed to raise their vulnerability.[3] Children's positionings change with regard to the social transactions that are implied in the definition of the danger.

This perspective opens a discussion, in Section 14.4, on the role of children's participation rights in the social arrangements. In these two major crises, children and adolescents respond with innovative strategies and varying resilience but they rarely refer to their human rights. While the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) is almost universal (all states except the United States have ratified it), children hardly mention and mobilise the rights enshrined in the CRC to make their claims heard. This discrepancy between rights on paper and rights in practice indicates that the children's rights framework plays a limited role in the social arrangements that either reduce or exacerbate children's vulnerability.

The final Section 14.5 concludes with recommendations for research and policy. With the comparison of children's positionings in the two crises, it appears that child vulnerability is structured along social arrangements, including children's rights. The peculiarities of these social arrangements invite an interpretive approach to children's rights that, integrated into public policies, is believed to contribute to the efforts to lower child vulnerability.

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2 Daniel Stoecklin, "Les enfants face aux conséquences du COVID-19," in *Coronavirus. Le regard des sciences sociales*, eds. Fiorenza Gamba, Marco Nardone, Toni Ricciardi and Sandro Cattacin (Zurich, Genève: Editions Seismo, 2020), 193–213; Daniel Stoecklin, Christine Gervais, Dagmar Kutsar and Catrin Heite, "Lockdown and Children's Well-Being: Experiences of Children in Switzerland, Canada and Estonia," *Childhood Vulnerability Journal*, vol. 3 (2021): 41–59; Daniel Stoecklin and Ludivine Richner, "Inégalités et contributions des enfants en temps de pandémie," in *COVID-19: Les politiques sociales à l'épreuve de la pandémie*, eds. Emilie Rosenstein and Serge Mimouni (Genève/Zurich : Seismo, 2022), 239–253.

3 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24.

14.2 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: TRANSACTIONAL HORIZONS AND MODES OF ACTION

To allow a qualitative comparison of children's positionings in the COVID-19 crisis and in the climate crisis, the theoretical framework that is used must be able to capture the subjective views conveyed by children as they describe their experience. This is the case of the theory of "transactional horizons" based on the "actor's system and modes of action"[4] represented in Figure 1 (below).

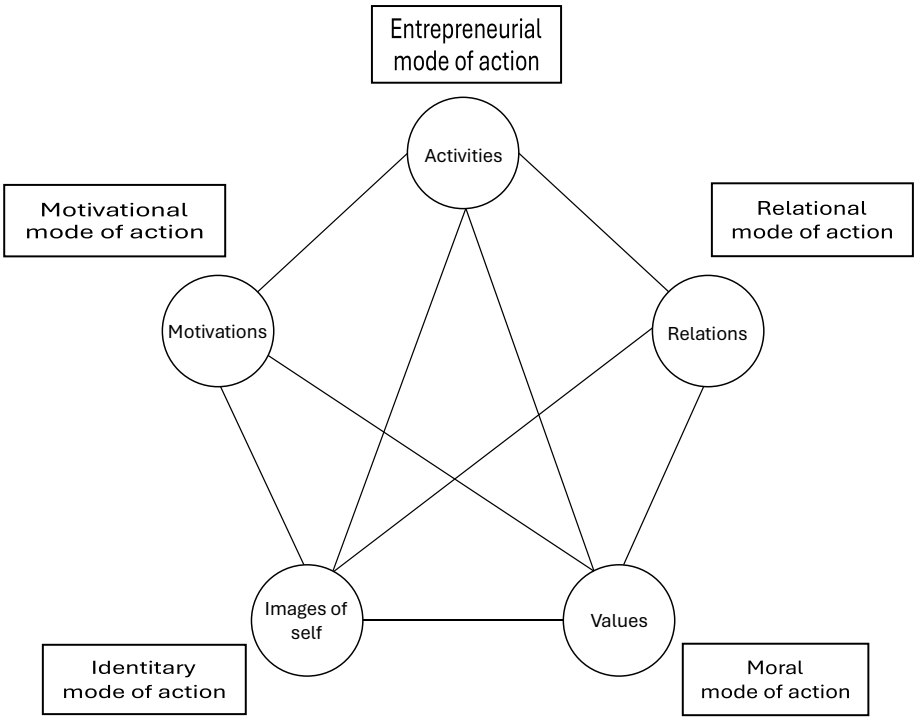

Figure 1: The Actor's System: Transactional Horizons and Modes of Action[5]

The actor's system is made of five components of personal experience, namely, activities, relations, values, images of self, and motivations. The five components of the actor's system have been identified through cross-cultural observations

4 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24.

5 Daniel Stoecklin, "Children's Right to Participation and Well-Being within and for a Sustainable Development: Towards the Expansion of the Self," in *Creating Green Citizens*, eds. Johannes Drerup, Franziska Felder, Veronika Magyar-Haas and Gottfried Schweiger (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2022), 215–237, 218.

with children in street situations.[6] These concepts inductively emerged from hundreds of accounts of children in street situations in a dozen countries[7] and were also observed in studies with other populations in Switzerland, like children in leisure facilities[8], children during the COVID-19 lockdown[9], an exploration of children's subjective understandings of well-being,[10] and a discursive analysis of Greta Thunberg's speeches[11]. They can be considered potentially universal as all human beings can refer to these notions (or synonyms) when reflecting on what they do (activities), whom they know (relations), what they believe (values), how they consider themselves (images of self), and what they want (motivations).

While respondents may use synonyms and not necessarily these concepts which are peculiar to the analyst – activities, relations, values, images of self, motivations (hereafter ARVIM) – they nevertheless always look in one or several of these directions as these can embrace an infinity of experience. These "directions to look at" are propositions with a content that is not given beforehand.[12] They are "sensitizing concepts"[13], functioning like horizons of experience in the organisation of practical and discursive consciousness. Accordingly, social transactions imply these discursive horizons. Therefore, ARVIM are considered "transactional horizons", defined as "symbolic landscapes channelling social interactions".[14]

The theory of transactional horizons not only builds on Blumer's "sensitizing concepts". It also draws on Giddens's structuration theory: the transactional horizons (ARVIM) constitute a symbolic matrix that is recursively involved in social interactions as both a medium for and an outcome of social practices. ARVIM are symbolic horizons ruling over the organisation of practical and discursive consciousness, hence forming the "structure" that Giddens defines as "rules and

6 Daniel Stoecklin, "The Agency of Children in Street Situations," in *Children in Street Situations: A Concept in Search of an Object*, eds. Riccardo Lucchini and Daniel Stoecklin (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 199–236.

7 Ibid.

8 Daniel Stoecklin, "Freely Expressed Views: Methodological Challenges for the Right of the Child to Be Heard." *Child Indicators Research*, vol. 12(2) (April 2019): 569–588; Daniel Stoecklin, Ayuko Berchtold-Sedooka and Jean-Michel Bonvin, "Children's Participatory Capability in Organized Leisure: The Mediation of Transactional Horizons," *Societies*, vol. 13(2) (2023).

9 Stoecklin, "Les enfants," 193–213; Stoecklin et al., "Lockdown and Children's Well Being," 41–59; Stoecklin and Richner, "Inégalités et contributions des enfants," 239–253.

10 Stoecklin, "Children's Right to Participation," 215–237.

11 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24.

12 David Le Breton, *L'interactionnisme symbolique* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2004), 41.

13 Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

14 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 1.

resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems".[15] Structure, in Giddens's theory, is "a virtual order of transformative relations"[16], situated in-between actors and social systems, as shown in Figure 2 (below).

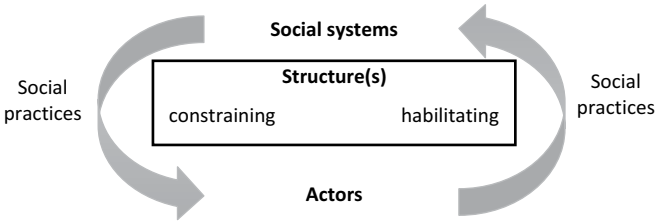

Figure 2: The Process of Structuration (adapted from Nizet 2007, 16).

Figure 2 represents the structuration theory[17], and the definition of structure in terms of "rules and resources", implicated as "a virtual order of transformative relations", perfectly fits the concept of "transactional horizons". They can be viewed as the constraining and habilitating structures, situated in Figure 2 (above), mediating the interactions among the actors and presiding over the institutionalisation of the social practices that are simultaneously building social systems and informed by them.

The links between transactional horizons form systems of action. Systems theory is applied here, as the actor's system model assumes that any change in one dimension affects the others and the overall system of action. Accordingly, one's predispositions at any stage of one's life course are considered as an outcome of the recursive links between these dimensions of experience. Configurations of systems of action can be identified through cluster analysis to obtain broader images of the dominant modes of action in a given context. With transactional horizons (ARVIM), we can compare empirical cases on a collective level (as here, the COVID-19 crisis and the climate crisis) in terms of structures of action that actors tend to be favouring their preferences indicate the constraints on which they are built. In other words, children's reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and to climate change are indicative of structures, or systems of action, that are constantly evolving according to the constraints imposed by social systems. This is a logical premise because children's social positionings can move only if structures

15 William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 98 (1) (1992): 1–29, 6.

16 Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1979), 17.

17 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.)

and social systems are unstable. Some more theoretical development on "structure" is necessary here to make this point clear.

Following Sewell, "structure is one of the most important and the most elusive terms in the vocabulary of current social sciences".[18] I contend that with the theory of transactional horizons, it is possible to overcome "the divide between semiotic and materialist visions of structure"[19] and hence the problems highlighted by Sewell regarding structuralist approaches.

As Sewell synthesises, in structuralist approaches, structure is viewed as something external to human beings: "Structures tend to appear in social scientific discourse as impervious to human agency, to exist apart from, but nevertheless to determine the essential shape of, the strivings and motivated transactions that constitute the experienced surface of social life".[20] This view of external structures probably has its root in demiurgic accounts of creation, reducing social actors to "cleverly programmed automatons".[21] Transactional horizons (ARVIM) escape the "far too rigid determinism in social life"[22] assumed by structuralists, because they reintroduce the agency of actors that has been lost with the materialist visions on structure as constituted by reified features of social life. These material contingencies are "treated as primary, hard and immutable, like the girders of a building, while the events or social processes they structure tend to be seen as secondary or superficial (…)".[23] By contrast, transactional horizons (ARVIM) point out the internal capacity of social actors to reconstruct the meanings attached to social practices and hence modify them accordingly. In other words, what presides over change is not an external "programme" but something that is in-built in human ontology, namely transactional horizons, as they are endogenous to human discursive capacities.

Therefore, transactional horizons (ARVIM), considered as a matrix of symbolic horizons pervious to human agency, also resolve the second issue underscored by Sewell, which is the problem of "awkward epistemological shifts" bound to a notion of structure that implies stability. The assumption of structures as something stable necessarily locates change "outside of structures, either in a telos of history, in notions of breakdown, or in influences exogeneous of the system in question".[24] By contrast, transactional horizons (ARVIM) allow locating

18 Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 1–29, 1.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 1–29, 2.
23 Ibid.
24 Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 1–29, 2–3.

change in the commutating reconstructions of reality made by social actors in their respective systems of action, as the "social systems" (see Figure 2 above) then become overarching systems of co-determinations among transactional horizons – that is, systems open for infinite change. In the actor's system model, change is not located outside of the system but lies in the rules of direct and indirect co-determinations among the dimensions of the system (the "transactional horizons") as represented by the lines among them in Figure 1 (above). These direct and indirect co-determinations take place at the interface of the material and subjective worlds. Here, social constructionism and social materialism are not no longer in opposition, but seen as combining. This is also coherent with the "ontologic turn" in childhood studies.[25]

Last, but not least, transactional horizons (ARVIM) overcome the divide between structure and culture. Following Sewell:

> Sociologists typically contrast "structure" to "culture". Structure, in normal sociological usage, is thought of as "hard" or "material" and therefore as primary and determining, whereas culture is regarded as "soft" or "mental" and therefore as secondary or derived.[26]

Sewell suggests that while sociologists tend to favour the material perspective, anthropologists insist more on the semiotic perspective and look at structure in terms of culture. It looks like Giddens is closer to this semiotic perspective when he writes that "Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action." This still maintains a divide between culture and structure. I contend that symbol theory[27] allows this divide to be overcome.

With the latter perspective, human practices are viewed as symbolic arrangements, and hence we must consider the duality of human language: it is both instantiating the fluidity of thoughts and institutionalising some of them in solid forms like writings, conventions, laws, etc. Consequently, structure can be viewed as institutionalised language (conventions) and culture as language in process (thoughts). This perspective reconciles culture and structure as being the same social arrangements but viewed in two different ways: diachronically as processual and synchronically as institutional. This is why thoughts and conventions

25 Leena Alanen, "Are We All Constructionists Now?," *Childhood* vol. 22(2) (2015): 149–153; Leena Alanen, "Childhood Studies and the Challenge of Ontology," *Childhood*, vol. 24(2) (2017): 147–150; Spyros Spyrou, "An Ontological Turn for Childhood Studies?," *Children and Society*, vol. 33(4) (2019): 316–323.

26 Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 1–23, 3.

27 Norbert Elias, *The Symbol Theory* (London: Sage, 1991).

co-determine each other: the diachronic fluidity of thoughts can both rely on institutionalised arrangements and rearrange them. In other words, institutions, stemming out of conventionalised language, are both constraining thoughts and habilitating them. This brings some more material-symbolic balance in the structuration theory.[28]

What we observe then, in the discourses of social actors, are outcomes of this co-determination between fluid thoughts and solidified conventions. Their views cannot be entirely free from the institutionalised arrangements; they actually rely on (at least some of) them. This is what we can grasp with more scrutiny with the theory of transactional horizons: the elements of experience embraced by different transactional horizons (ARVIM) are actually traces of incorporated habitus[29] that recursively impact institutions. Yet, Bourdieu's notion of habitus, as "embodied dispositions", is overly deterministic and hence problematic for the understanding of the interplay between personal habitus and class habitus. A more phenomenological approach is needed to understand how actors situate themselves towards specific "modes of action" that are transversal to social classes. These modes of action are closer to the ideal-types of social action identified by Max Weber (1978), in his endeavour to understand the actors' subjective reasons to act. These modes of action are further described below:

> The entrepreneurial mode of action focuses on activities that produce objects exterior to oneself (poiesis) and strategies believed to be the most efficient to achieve one's goals (corresponding to Weber's "rationally-purposeful action"). The relational mode of action puts emphasis on relational configurations (it is close to Weber's "traditional social action" when it favours habits and routines that reproduce the social status and positions of actors). The moral mode of action is based on the belief in the inherent worth of specific values (Weber's "value-rational action"). The identitary mode of action bases on the inter-subjective definition of self (it partly corresponds to Weber's "affective social action" as drives also inform subjective identity). The motivational mode of action is the most complex one. It has no correspondence in Weber's typology of social action, it is closer to inquiry (Dewey, 1938).[30]

28 Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*.

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

30 Daniel Stoecklin, "Institutionalisation of Children's Rights: Transformability and Situated Agency," *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, vol. 26(3) (2018): 548–587, 564–565.

The predominance of one mode of action over the others (which in any case are still there in more or less discrete ways) is contextual. The context in which our observations took place is a country (Switzerland) with direct democracy (popular referendums and initiatives) and a liberal economy. The regime of truth[31] in this type of capitalist society is bound to profit (maximising returns on investments) regulated by the rule of the state. This entrepreneurial ethos pervades all settings, including schools: pupils are evaluated by their scores, and this clearly makes the entrepreneurial mode of action predominant over the other modes of action (relational, moral, identitary, motivational). How does this predominance of the entrepreneurial mode of action impact children's vulnerability? This is what we are going to see, in the next section, with a secondary analysis of the modes of action of children under COVID-19 lockdown and climate change.

14.3 THE MODES OF ACTION OF CHILDREN UNDER COVID-19 LOCKDOWN AND CLIMATE CHANGE

If child vulnerability depends on social arrangements, it is important to capture the latter in appropriate ways. I contend that they can be captured as configurations of modes of action. Social arrangements are marked by five major modes of action – entrepreneurial, relational, moral, identitary and motivational – that preside over the ways in which things and people are defined and hence how social actors interact. These modes of action are framed by "transactional horizons", a notion depicting the "symbolic landscapes channeling social interaction".[32] They give a more detailed picture of the impact of social arrangements on child vulnerability, as they include children's own participation in these social arrangements. In the crises under scrutiny (COVID-19 and climate change), children's agency is highlighted through the modes of action that children are mobilising to negotiate their forms of participation.

In this section, I propose a secondary analysis comparing the findings of a survey with children during the COVID-19 lockdown in Switzerland with the outcomes of a discursive analysis of Greta Thunberg's speeches about climate change, focussing on the transactional horizons conveyed by these social actors. This secondary and comparative analysis is made in a synthetic way as there is no space to reproduce the respective findings in more detail.[33]

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31 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

32 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 2.

33 These can be found in former publications; see Stoecklin, "Les enfants," 193–213: Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24; Stoecklin et al., "Lockdown and Children's Well-Being": 41–59; Stoecklin and Richner, "Inégalités et contributions," 239–253.

I first draw on the data gathered in Switzerland through an online survey in 2020 in which 157 respondents aged between 11 and 17 years talked about their experiences regarding their family and school life, their life with friends, their hobbies, and finally their activities during the COVID-19 lockdown.[34] This study showed that children have developed agency to reduce their own vulnerability. Yet, the predominance of the entrepreneurial mode of action, reinforced by the resuming school curriculum, has almost silenced children.

The online survey was conducted in the French-speaking cantons of Switzerland (namely, Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Valais and Vaud) from 21 April to 31 May 2020, just after the first wave of contamination when the federal government enforced a "semi-lockdown". For children, the situation changed dramatically: schools were closed and their contacts with the elderly (notably grandparents) as well as "non-essential" activities and shops were restricted. With distance learning and the massive reduction of outdoor activities, children began to feel vulnerable as their sociospatial radius shrank.

The respondents expressed concerns about their family life and school curriculum, their contacts with friends, and their hobbies. Their accounts focused on what they were still and not anymore "able to do", hence framing their own experiences in entrepreneurial ways. The massive reduction in what one is able to achieve had important repercussions on the other dimensions of their personal system of action. While health was not their prior concern, but rather the consequences of health-related lockdown, they were especially frustrated to be viewed as "healthy carriers, yet vectors of the virus". This stigma triggered an identitary claim for being recognised as worthy, and consequently they undertook new solidarities and tasks, mostly within their families. Their entrepreneurial mode of action was somehow distracted from its concentration of school and leisure activities, and more directed towards the relational, identitary and motivational modes of action than usual. They were critical towards school authorities who did not ask them about their opinions. Yet, no respondent referred to the child's right to be heard (Art. 12 CRC).

Regarding children's positionings, we thus see that in the COVID-19 pandemic, the child was reduced to his "epidemiological status" (little affected by the coronavirus but still contagious). Since children have returned to school, the main concern was how students would catch up on the curriculum. It was "back to normal", meaning back to the usual dominance of the entrepreneurial mode of action. The solidarity activities within the families that appeared during the lockdown shrank

34 Stoecklin, "Les enfants," 193–213; Stoecklin et al., "Lockdown and Children's Well-Being," 41–59; Stoecklin and Richner, "Inégalités et contributions," 239–253.

after schools reopened. There has been no transfer of agentivity from the private to the public sphere, as pupils did not become political actors. Children were unheard during the COVID-19 crisis and remained voiceless as pupils were just asked to adapt to the situation. They were not heard regarding the difficulties they directly experienced due to the limit on their contacts. They were also voiceless regarding the tensions that health measures caused in the public sphere (COVID-19 pass) and the time and financial burden put on their families. Yet, they were inventive and dedicated, but the contributions of solidarity that children made and the new forms of sociability in which they participated were restricted to the private sphere. In short, during the COVID-19 crisis, children did not become political actors.

By contrast, the social positioning of children has evolved with the school strikes and demonstrations around climate change. They were heard as they marched on the streets because they were quite numerous: for instance, on 15 March 2019, an estimated 1.6 million people in 2,000 locations took to the streets. Between 2019 and 2020, innumerable pupils went on one-day school strikes, 4 million alone on the eve of the UN Summit for Climate Action in September 2019.[35] Therefore, one has to understand what it is that mobilised them so much for the cause of "saving the planet" and not at all during the COVID-19 crisis. While access to outdoor demonstrations was of course banned during the lockdown in order to contain the spread of the virus, other forms of contest could have taken place notably on social media. Why this did not happen has to do, I contend, with the transactional horizons that have been at play. During the COVID-19 crisis, the main transactional horizon was the entrepreneurial mode of action. Accordingly, the social order was not challenged. It takes a more balanced configuration of modes of action to induce social change. This is shown with the case of Greta Thunberg.

Greta Thunberg clearly positioned herself in the political world, hence not accepting the subordinated role of children in which she would be placed (beginning with school strikes). Her political agency does not lie, as for voters, in a voting capacity that she still did not have at the time, but in other powerful means: the speeches she delivered in different rallies, with and without Extinction Rebellion, and in major events and congresses such as, among others, the UN Climate Change Conference in Katovice, Poland (15 December 2018), the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland (22 January 2019), the Goldene Kamera Film and TV Awards in Berlin (30 March 2019), the Houses of Parliament in London (23 April 2019), the French National Assembly in Paris (23 July 2019), the United States

35 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 1.

Congress in Washington (18 September 2019), and the UN General Assembly in New York (23 September 2019).

The discursive analysis of the 16 speeches delivered by Greta Thunberg, and collected in her book *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*[36], shows that she mobilises all the five transactional horizons.[37] For each mode of action, the analysis identifies the reflexive operations that are implied in Greta's discursive style.

In the entrepreneurial mode of action, she objectifies wrong and good doings that affect climate change. In the relational mode of action, she personifies nature and denounces the human-induced relations of domination and the intergenerational betrayal that are affecting the earth. In the moral mode of action, she sanctifies the superior interest of nature and civilisation and calls for new rules to contain selfish ways of living. In the identitary mode of action, she displays a vision of children unified as unheard victims, yet independent, able and responsible activists, close to scientists, and therefore hated and reduced to abnormal (she refers to attempts to discredit her due to her Asperger's syndrome). And finally, in the motivational mode of action, she calls for diversified alternatives and intensified willingness.[38] This analysis suggests that

> (…) the more transactional horizons are involved in one's discourse, the more chances it has to attract attention from a wider audience. It looks like knitting transactional horizons is attracting a larger audience than apologetic rhetoric displaying just one horizon and mode action.[39]

The analysis further suggests that each transactional horizon rests on a specific reflexive operation: the entrepreneurial mode of action rests on "objectification", the relational on "personification", the moral on "sanctification", the identitary on "unification" and the motivational on "diversification". These reflexive operations are vectors of agency, as they embody the relation that subjects have with objects. It is important to note that "objects" are not only material things. They may be other persons and, conversely, oneself viewed as an "object for others", as in Cooley's perspective of the "looking-glass self", which holds that one's social identity is dependent on how one believes others view him or her.[40] The subject–object

36 Greta Thunberg, *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* (new expanded edition) (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

37 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24.

38 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 12.

39 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 12.

40 Charles Horton Cooley, *On Self and Social Organization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

relation implies an action of transformation of the subject on the object that can be captured by transitive verbs depicting the reflexive operations made by the subject. Thereby, a new definition of agency is proposed:

> Agency is being in the capacity of intervening on things through objectification, personification, sanctification, unification and diversification (…). This new definition of agency is more precise than "the capacity to make a difference" which does not indicate how this capacity is exerted.[41]

This analysis contributes to understanding Greta Thunberg's success in the federation of probably the most important social movement involving children and young people. Greta Thunberg can be viewed as an oxymoron – a child with political agency – but this is not due solely to her personality. My analysis is not psychological, but sociological: It suggests that Greta Thunberg's political agency depends less on her "character" than on the opportunities stemming out of different configurations of transactional horizons. This is the case with children in general, as they do not have the right to vote: Their political agency therefore evolves along transactional horizons that are not expressed in their own votes but in the votes of adults. Children, hence, are indirectly represented in the polls.

The climate marches exacerbated political cleavages, as children's demonstrations were either integrated or rejected in the voters' preferences. Children demonstrating and occupying the street in non-productive ways are either praised for their political agency or dismissed as being manipulated by political forces. Yet, the priorities of the latter (especially the corporate lobby groups) are the short-term returns on investments, and hence most of them are not inclined to give their profits away for the benefit of longer-term interests of future generations.[42] This explains how child vulnerability is linked to the predominance of the "instrumental-rational social action"[43] favouring short-term investments and returns.

Child vulnerability is further reinforced as children's and young people's incapacity to transform their grievances into institutional change is taken as proof of their supposed immaturity. Lobbyists for big companies show duplicity when they despise children's opinions on the grounds of their supposed immaturity viewed in terms of age: they qualify children's claims and behaviours as excessive, which is supposed to prove their immaturity and manipulation, when it is actually their

41 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 18.

42 Francois Gemenne, *L'écologie n'est pas un consensus. Dépasser l'indignation* (Paris: Fayard, 2022).

43 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

over-protectionist view on children, associated to their refusal of lowering the voting-age limit, that is exactly what impedes children's participation in the institutional order. This is not only morally perverse but also legally suspicious, as the reduction of maturity to age does not respect the distinction made between the two in the United Nations CRC (1989): Article 12, on the child's right to be heard, states that the views of the child shall be "given due weight in accordance with the age *and* [emphasis added] maturity of the child". Accordingly, one cannot just reduce maturity to age. Yet, this is what lobbies are permanently doing to safeguard their own interests: they treat young climate activists as immature on the grounds of their age.

The only way for children to break this vicious cycle is therefore to reject over-protectionist policying. This is what Greta Thunberg did, with impressive success: The political agenda has evolved like never before since her first school strike in 2018. This was possible not just due to personal charisma but mainly because her speeches contained powerful social levers: the relational, moral, identitary, and motivational horizons necessary to challenge the dominant entrepreneurial mode of action. Nothing similar happened with the COVID-19 crisis because the entrepreneurial mode of action was not as much challenged by the other modes of action.

This difference in the balancing or unbalancing of modes of action suggests that children's positionings in the COVID-19 pandemic and in climate change still strongly depend on the social constructions of childhood.[44] Table 1 (below) synthesises these social projections about children along five aspects – namely, children's vulnerability, dangerosity, future, attitude, and role – showing how the two crises are marked by important differences in those projections.

Table 1: Main Social Projections about Children in the COVID-19 Pandemic and Climate Change.

Aspects of children	In the COVID pandemic	In the Climate change
Vulnerability	Minimally affected	Victims of current policies
Dangerosity	Contagious	Polluters
Future	Slightly compromised	Highly compromised
Attitude	Obedients	Protestors
Role	Voiceless pupils	Spokespersons for scientists

44 Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (Basingstoke: Falmer Press, 1990).

The projections on children differ to a great extent, but this is not strictly bound to children's actual behaviours. These differences can be explained by the transactional horizons that underlie children's positionings in given contexts. Accordingly, differences in projections about children's vulnerability, dangerosity, future, attitude, and role are contextually constructed around the kind of threat that is identified. When human frailty is associated with the spreading of a virus, the overprotection of children is reinforced. When the danger comes from irresponsible consumerism, children are either victimised if they just complain or stigmatised if they claim for change. This has practical consequences on children's positionings and, hence, vulnerabilities. In a way, the gradients of vulnerability evolve with the cause at stake.

As the performance of children at school was the main concern during the COVID-19 pandemic, the aspects of childhood that are projected on them still derive from the predominant entrepreneurial mode of action: one wonders how children can remain efficient pupils. With the demonstrations concerned with climate change, the aspects of childhood that show up are much more critical and politicised: one wonders what future children will have and what role they may have in shaping it. The problems (COVID-19 pandemic, climate change) that social systems are confronted with have different effects on children's vulnerability because they are mediated by the transactional horizons. According to the kind of danger, social systems constrain actors with different practices, and these social arrangements either reduce or exacerbate the vulnerability of children.

This is why we observe, conversely, that children's agency takes on a political form in the context of climate change, while it takes on a familial form in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the encounter of the transactional horizons of children and those of policy-makers that build up the configurations of child vulnerability: in the pandemic, children have an agency that is structurally restricted to the private domain, while in the climate crisis it structurally spills over into the public sphere. This shows that structural effects can be more precisely approached with the concepts of transactional horizons and modes of action.

In the end, the threats supposed to make humans vulnerable are also redrawing the borders within and among the species: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat (common to adults and children) is the virus (the enemy is biological in nature), while in the case of climate change the enemy is represented by previous generations who are accused of having done nothing or not enough. This is why only climate change allows for a social movement that includes children and young people: because it is a struggle within the same species, as the "enemy" is human. The human nature of the climatic danger favours the split between generations, and thus the redistribution of roles, whereas the viral nature of the COVID-19

pandemic favours the reinforcement of the community, united to fight a common enemy, and does not therefore call into question the traditionally differentiated roles devolved to the adults and to the children.

14.4 CHILDREN RIGHTS AND CLAIMS

In this section, I turn to children's rights to try to see what role they play in the social arrangements around COVID-19 and the climate. Comparing children's positionings and agency in the COVID-19 and climate crises reveals that the institutional framework of children's rights – the United Nations CRC (1989) – is only barely claimed by children. They mostly do not really know the rights to which they are officially entitled. Rather, when referring to their human rights, children evoke "living rights" – that is, rights as they are lived.[45] Children claim their "living rights" with rather vague formulations around the "right to have a future" (in the case of climate change) and the right to study and play (in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic).

Why do children hardly mention and mobilise the rights enshrined in the CRC to make their claims heard? I contend that this discrepancy between the Convention on paper, ratified by all but one state, and the rights in practice, claimed only marginally and vaguely within people's transactional horizons, indicates that social arrangements do not rely so much on children's participation rights but on more traditional social representations of what children and childhood should be. Consequently, it is these social representations, more than the CRC, that in fact shape children's vulnerability. Yet, there is always an interplay between formal and informal norms, as moral entrepreneurs strive to put their own sets of norms into the legal system.[46] This interplay between informal sets of norms (social representations) and specific formal sets of norms (here the CRC) can be more precisely grasped in terms of "translations", as formulated by Hanson and Nieuwenhuys: "The concept of translations is about what happens with rights in the encounter of children's and other actors' perspectives, movements for social justice and the elites, authorities and opponents".[47]

45 Karl Hanson and Olga Nieuwenhuys, *Reconceptualizing Children's Rights in International Development: Living Rights, Social Justice, Translations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

46 Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963).

47 Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, *Reconceptualizing Children's Rights*, 16.

Translations therefore depict processes of bottom-up meaning-making and top-down implementation of normative claims and standards and raise the following questions:

> Whose interpretations, and whose priorities of children's rights, are being defended? How do children's living rights coalesce with top-down international child rights implementation strategies? What are the trajectories of both approaches to children's rights? Where and how do bottom-up and top-down interpretations meet, if they meet, and what are the consequences of such an encounter?[48]

The fact that children hardly mention their "official" rights is itself an effect of the social arrangements in which they live. But the same goes for the expression of their "living rights", or rights as they are lived[49]: these claims are an outcome of preformed social arrangements. Therefore, a closer look at these social arrangements is necessary and the analysis of the transactional horizons and modes of action used by social actors in a given context can be a powerful methodology to understand the "structured process translating specific claims into an institutionalised set of norms".[50]

Our findings in the cases of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis suggest that children are dependent on traditional social arrangements that filter their potential benefits from policies based on their official rights enshrined in the articles of the CRC. The contextual implementation of this international treaty proves quite variable in its effects, as the final recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to States Parties illustrate. This is especially evident with children's participation rights, notably their right to be heard. Children are entitled to participate in decisions affecting their lives according to their right to be heard, as enshrined in Article 12 of the UN CRC (1989):

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. (CRC, 1989)

48 Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, *Reconceptualizing Children's Rights*, 20–21.

49 Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, *Reconceptualizing Children's Rights.*

50 Hanson and Nieuwenhuys, *Reconceptualizing Children's Rights.*

This article is both a substantial right and a "general principle" that guides the interpretation and implementation of all the other rights incorporated in the CRC. As indicated in the General Comment on the right to be heard: "Article 12 manifests that the child holds rights which have an influence on her or his life, and not only rights derived from her or his vulnerability (protection) or dependency on adults (provision)" (CRC, 2009).

Moreover, the General Comment on the right to be heard adds that:

> States parties must assure that the child is able to express her or his views "in all matters affecting" her or him. This represents a second qualification of this right: the child must be heard if the matter under discussion affects the child. This basic condition has to be respected and understood broadly.[51]

Meanwhile, there is a debate in the field of children's rights as to what extent Article 12 goes beyond the "judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child", as expressed in paragraph 2 of Article 12 (quoted above). The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment on Article 12 (CRC, 2009), favours a large interpretation:

> The Open-ended Working Group established by the Commission on Human Rights, which drafted the text of the Convention, rejected a proposal to define these matters by a list limiting the consideration of a child's or children's views. Instead, it was decided that the right of the child to be heard should refer to "all matters affecting the child". The Committee is concerned that children are often denied the right to be heard, even though it is obvious that the matter under consideration is affecting them and they are capable of expressing their own views with regard to this matter. While the Committee supports a broad definition of "matters", which also covers issues not explicitly mentioned in the Convention, it recognises the clause "affecting the child", which was added in order to make clear that no general political mandate was intended. The practice, however, including the World Summit for Children, demonstrates that a wide interpretation of matters affecting the child and children helps to include children in the social processes of their community and society. Thus, States parties should carefully listen to children's views wherever their perspective can enhance the quality of solutions.[52]

51 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment no. 12 (2009) The Right of the Child to Be Heard*, CRC/C/GC/12, (July 20, 2009).

52 CRC/C/GC/12.

Yet, the importance of traditional social representations of children and childhood, as testified in our findings about children in the COVID-19 and climate crises, shows that this large interpretation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is far from being enforced in the decisions affecting children. It is hardly possible to deny that COVID-19 and the climate crisis are not "matters affecting the child". So why are children's official rights so weakly conveyed in people's social transactions? This question pinpoints the role and influence of international treaties, such as the CRC, in the national legislations and practices.

Although in Switzerland, where our survey on COVID-19 was conducted, the rights of the child are fully translated into the national legal system, they are far from being fully applied in practice. The same situation actually prevails in all countries, with, of course, varying degrees of discrepancy between "formal freedoms" and "real freedoms".[53] The level to which the correspondence between the latter and the former depends on conversion factors, is a question that is addressed in the "capability approach" in terms of individual and social factors acting as facilitators or obstacles to the realisation of formal entitlements.[54]

The fact that even major crises (COVID-19 and the climate) are not conducive to more systematic attention to children's rights, and not reducing the gap between children's formal and real freedom, is indicative of the inertia of the social system. The children interviewed all had a sufficient level of maturity to understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and of climate change. Hence, the obstacle to their participation in the decisions affecting them was not on the side of their individual awareness of the questions at stake. Rather, the obstacles are located on the social side, and how this happens can be specified with the analysis of transactional horizons.

The main obstacles are traditional social representations of childhood, turning children into especially vulnerable *becomings* in need of protection: they are seen as future citizens, not as present ones (*beings*). Children's voices are shaped by these future-oriented social representations[55] that are legitimising paternalistic forms of child participation and delegitimising emancipatory ones.

The present analysis underlines the following: it is according to who or what is supposed to raise their vulnerability, in the eyes of adults, that children can become or are, on the contrary, barred from becoming political actors. In the case of COVID-19, as the danger is a virus, children are not supposed to know what

53 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

54 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," *Fordham Law Review*, vol. 66(2) (1997); Sen, *Development.*

55 Karl Hanson, "Reinventing Children's Rights," *Childhood*, vol. 29(2) (2022): 149–156.

is best for them: the expertise is left to professional adults (mainly in the medical sector). In the case of climate change, as the danger comes from human behaviour inducing global warming (the "Anthropocene"), and as children are often on an equal footing with adults regarding their scientific knowledge of the phenomenon of climate change, the expertise on this matter is more disputed. Whereas children's impact on combating the COVID-19 virus is linked to their obedience to the experts, in the climate crisis children are in a position where they might become the experts. This induces a dramatic change in children's positionings and agency: like Greta Thunberg, other children are apt to lead a social movement that challenges the dominance of the entrepreneurial mode of action and instils more balance among different ways of being and doing (relational, moral, identitary, motivational).

The social movement around climate change is probably the one that counts the largest number of child participants. Their claims for political, economic, and social rights, although expressed in terms of "living rights" and not in terms of the "official rights" of the CRC, are bound to the human responsibility behind global warming. The informal mobilisation of millions of children and young people is also an indicator of the limited support of formal implementation of the CRC for children's agency: as long as the rights of the child are predominantly applied in a protectionist perspective, children will have no other choice than to act outside or despite of the official rights and the "real freedoms" they are given. A more emancipatory school of thought in children's rights[56] is necessary for social systems to mainstream children's agency into public policies. Therefore, children's rights remain a powerful tool for social change. It all depends on how States Parties to the CRC are implementing them.

Meanwhile, from children's side, things are evolving as global warming is threatening, and children do not wait for policy-makers to adopt an emancipatory approach with children's rights: they do it themselves. The case of Greta Thunberg shows that the use of all transactional horizons in her rhetoric has a great power of mobilisation and hence gives more visibility to children and youth on the political arena.[57] Still, the comparison between children in confinement and Greta Thunberg shows that, while children's rights are not explicitly used, the claims that are made by children differ according to who or what is supposed to raise their vulnerability. In the case of COVID-19, it is the virus, while climate change is happening

56 Karl Hanson, "Schools of Thought in Children's Rights," in *Children's Rights From Below: Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Studies in Childhood and Youth*, ed. Manfred Liebel (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 63–79.

57 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24.

because of the behaviours of former generations. Only the latter is conducive to a social movement, because the enemy is human and hence susceptible to be altered by the movement. Human responsibility for the spread of COVID-19 is not as clearly established, and, accordingly, children are not in a position to claim for more political, economic and social rights being put in practice as is the case with climate change.

14.5 CONCLUSION

The transactional horizons of child vulnerability are revealed by major crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. By comparing children's positionings in the two crises, it can be suggested that their vulnerability is socially structured along social arrangements. These arrangements, including the implementation of children's rights, can be methodologically understood through "transactional horizons", namely, the "symbolic landscapes that are channeling social interactions".[58] While I have not had space here to discuss Sewell's theory, I can only suggest that the theory of transactional horizons rejoins Sewell's "attempt (1) to recognise the agency of social actors, (2) to build the possibility of change into the concept of structure, and (3) to overcome the divide between semiotic and materialist visions of structure".[59] Whereas Sewell builds on Giddens's structuration theory and Bourdieu's notion of habitus, I first draw on Blumer's "sensitizing concepts" that actors use (ARVIM or synonymous notions) and consider them as forming a matrix or resources and rules that act both as mediums for and outcomes of social transactions. This is coherent with the premise that "structures can be identified as sets or matrices of rule-resource properties".[60] But I believe that the rather abstract Giddensian definition of structures can be replaced by a more pragmatic perspective centred on how social actors use language, and this is where the symbol theory of Norbert Elias (1991) is quite useful:

> […] the theory of symbol reinforces the view that structure and agency are not opposed but the same thing, a symbolic realm that must be viewed in its duality. The dual nature of language, constraining thoughts and habilitating them, is the concrete instantiation and reflection of the duality of the symbolic world we live in.[61]

58 Stoecklin, "The Transactional Horizons," 1–24, 1.
59 Sewell, "A Theory of Structure," 1–29, 3–4.
60 Giddens, *Central Problems*, 64.
61 Stoecklin, "Les enfants," 193–213, 204.

The secondary analysis of our data shows that the elements of experience embraced with different symbolic horizons (ARVIM) are actually traces of incorporated habitus[62] that recursively impact institutions. In some cases, institutions are reinforced, and in other cases they are weakened. Our two empirical examples show that the school institution is reinforced by the COVID-19 crisis and weakened by the demonstrations concerned with climate change. This proves that child vulnerability evolves along the different configurations of transactional horizons that can be conveyed in social negotiations.

Contrary to both Giddens and Bourdieu, who tend to see structures as stable, I contend that it is because the "structure" made of transactional horizons is *not stable* that children's social positionings can be moving. With transactional horizons, we are able to see that specific modes of action are recursively institutionalised when actors use differential combinations of entrepreneurial, relational, moral, identitary and/or motivational modes of action. Their practices are tinted with these combinations. When they are balanced (like in the case of Greta Thunberg), challenging the predominance of one mode of action (here the entrepreneurial mode of action) over the others, then social change is likely to happen. Conversely, the more one mode of action prevails over the others, the more stable and unchallenged the system remains. The vulnerability of children therefore depends on how practices are tinted by these different configurations of modes of action.

A hypothesis can now be formulated in the following terms: child vulnerability may rise with the unbalance of modes of action (predominance of a dominant mode of action) and be contained thanks to more balanced modes of action. Balanced modes of action allow more agency because actors can diversify their reasons to act (entrepreneurial, relational, moral, identitary and motivational) according to rationales that are deliberated democratically. In the end, child vulnerability is bound to the legitimation of the symbolic landscapes channelling social interactions. This hypothesis of the transactional horizons of child vulnerability can be tested cross-culturally (we might also say "cross-structurally") in order to compare contexts along their more or less well-balanced (or unbalanced) modes of action. This may contribute to further understand child vulnerability beyond natural frailty and accordingly adapt public policies to mitigate unbalanced social arrangements.

It is important to understand, rather than dismiss, the claims made by children and young people. An interpretive approach to children's rights is required, probably more than ever, in order to understand how children themselves translate their rights into practice as they will not wait for states to do this for them. This is

62 Bourdieu, *Practical Reason.*

illustrated by the demonstrations for climate justice, which are a way for children to "vote with their feet". When their actions cross the borders of legality, it is not because they are intrinsically deviant, but rather because adults fail to consider their claims properly. The analysis of transactional horizons can contribute to reducing the tension between generations as a proper understanding of the social determinants of children's vulnerability may foster more participatory, and hence appropriate, public policies.

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