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Continually Redefining Protagonismo

The Peruvian Movement of Working Children and Political Change, 1976–2015

by Jessica K. Taft

Activists in the Peruvian working children's movement have been theorizing about "children's protagonismo" for nearly 40 years. Changing political contexts and the infusion of discourses from other social movements have produced three major sets of meanings for this concept, each reflecting different dynamics in Peruvian social movement history. First, the concept, infused with ideas from liberation theology and Latin American engagements with Marxism, was primarily understood in terms of class struggle and collective organization. Second, because of opportunities and threats in the 1980s and 1990s, it became

more closely associated with children's rights frameworks. Third, since the early 2000s, the movement's approach to protagonismo has drawn on indigenous theories of interdependence and relationality to challenge the individualism of neoliberal capitalism and governmentality. In holding these diverse ideological commitments together, the concept has allowed the movement of working children to communicate across multiple discursive communities.

Keywords: Social movements, Children's rights, Participation, Political discourse, Peru

Pamphlets, banners, posters, and buttons produced by the organizations and networks that make up the Peruvian movement of working children all proclaim the importance of "children's *protagonismo*." Child and adult movement participants encourage each other to "be protagonists," and enhancing children's protagonismo is one of the movement's enduring goals. Children in the movement today define protagonismo as "being able to express myself without fear," "having the power to create social change," "being respected as social actors," "making decisions," "being equals together," "claiming our rights," and "participating and encouraging others to participate."[1] The meanings that movement participants attach to this concept form a constellation around the idea of children's collective agency but are also highly varied and have developed substantially over its nearly 40-year history. This article outlines the circumstances that have given the concept its interlocking meanings and situates these meanings in Peru's changing political contexts and in the discursive landscapes of social movements across Latin America.

I build my analysis from 11 months of extensive ethnographic participant observation, conducted from 2012 to 2015, in-depth interviews with 10 adults and 14 children involved in the movement,[2] and a plethora of printed materials written and produced by activists in the movement. This includes pamphlets, proclamations, organizational statements of principles, founding documents, training materials for adults and children, web sites, flyers, press releases, and all of the issues of the *RevistaNATs*, a semiacademic journal produced by one of the movement organizations. This combination of sources provides a rich understanding of how movement participants articulate the concept of protagonismo in the daily life of the movement and in more formalized public expressions.

Protagonismo is a multifaceted concept whose meanings have morphed over time in relation to political changes and in conversation with other social movements. Although it is specifically applied to children in this case, it represents a more expansive theory of collective agency and deserves the analytic attention of scholars of Latin American social movements because it brings together elements from different historical moments and movement traditions. While many social movements in Peru and across the region have used the concept at different times over the past 40 years (Colectivo Situaciones, 2002; Montoya, 2003), the movement of working children has maintained an ongoing deep engagement with it. This has enabled theoretical continuity but also theoretical flexibility as the movement responded to new dynamics and challenges and incorporated knowledge and theory being produced in other social movements from across Latin America. While rooted in liberation theology and the popular movements of the 1970s (Montoya, 2003; Adrianzen García, 2008), the movement of working children has taken protagonismo beyond the foundational assumptions and commonsense meanings of this initial period. Influenced by the children's rights frameworks of the 1990s

(United Nations, 1989), protagonismo became increasingly connected to ideas about age-based power and inequality but was also, in some instances, confused with narrower interpretations of children's rights to participation (Cussianovich, 2000). Then, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, movement participants began to engage more with indigenous theories of interdependence and relationality in order to challenge the encroaching individualism of both the rights-based paradigm and neoliberal capitalism (Cussianovich, 2010b). Each of these historical moments added a new face to the concept of protagonismo, enriching it in different ways. Protagonismo, as theorized and deployed by the movement of working children today, presents a powerful vision of critical political engagement rooted not in (neo)liberal calls for individual empowerment or "participation" but instead in collectivity, community, and relationships of solidarity.

Peru's Movement of Working Children Today: A Brief Introduction

Made up of small base groups located in schools, churches, and neighborhoods around the nation, the Peruvian movement of working children is a multiorganizational national network of nearly 10,000 working children and adolescents between the ages of 8 and 17. Children are recruited into base groups informally via the social networks of each base. They may participate for only a short period of time or may continue their involvement into adulthood. Bases meet weekly, biweekly, or monthly, and each base elects delegates who participate in regional meetings while each regional coordinating group elects delegates to national coordinating committees. In addition to regular meetings of regional and national committees, there are annual regional and national assemblies for all participating working children. At each of these

levels of organization, one or two adults serve as supporting *colaboradores*, or adult allies, providing structure and encouragement to the youth but striving to leave organizational decision-making power in their hands (see Taft, 2015). Some of the adult supporters are former child participants, while others have been involved in the movement only as adults. Participating children develop their political organizing skills and their knowledge about children's rights and child labor politics. They launch educational and awareness-building campaigns on issues related to working children's lives, engage in advocacy work at the local, national, and international levels, plan and implement cultural events and group activities, raise funds for their projects, and participate in wider networks of children's organizations as well as in occasional political events and gatherings organized by governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or allied social movements. They receive and give each other support on schoolwork, family issues, and problems in their workplaces. In contrast to a union, the movement does not organize youth in specific workplaces or regularly confront employers. Instead, it encourages working children's individual and collective development as political, economic, and social subjects and helps them to confront various challenges in their lives. The movement has a deep commitment to centering children's voices in addressing conditions and policies related to child labor (Liebel, Overwien, and Recknagel, 2001; Liebel, 2004; van den Berge, 2007) and has long argued for the inclusion of working children's perspectives in the construction of policies on childhood and on child labor, but its primary daily focus is providing ongoing support for working children as they seek respect, dignity, and full inclusion in Peruvian society.

Over the past 40 years, the movement of working children has developed a complex landscape of organizations and institutions. El Movimiento de Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores Hijos de Obreros Cristianos (Movement of Working Children and Adolescents,

Children of Christian Workers—MANTHOC) is the oldest organization and remains at the heart of the movement, with nearly 2,000 members. The Movimiento Nacional de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores Organizados del Perú (Peruvian National Movement of Organized Working Children and Adolescents—MNNATSOP) is a network of organizations that includes closer to 10,000 working children from around the country, including the 2,000 from MANTHOC. The base groups of the two organizations are most heavily concentrated in Peru's cities, including Lima, Ica, Arequipa, Cajamarca, Cusco, Ayacucho, Puno, Juliaca, Pucallpa, and Iquitos, but there are also bases in rural areas of the Amazon basin and the Andes. MNNATSOP is explicitly secular rather than Christian, but it otherwise operates quite similarly to MANTHOC and shares MANTHOC's conceptual and ideological framework on children's work and children's rights. MNNATSOP is also one of the organizational members of the Movimiento Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores (Latin American and Caribbean Movement of Working Children—MOLACNATs), which currently includes working children's organizations from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Venezuela. Members of MANTHOC, MNNATSOP, and other smaller working children's organizations in Lima are delegates and active leaders in the Red Nacional de Niños y Adolescentes (National Network of Children and Adolescents—RedNNA), which includes working and nonworking children's organizations and addresses children's rights more broadly.

A few adult-led institutions support these explicitly child-led organizations. The Instituto de Formación de Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores (Institute for the Training of Child and Adolescent Workers—INFANT) provides training for the children in the movement. It publishes materials, facilitates research, and leads many workshops for children. The Instituto de Formación para Educadores de Jovenes Adolescentes y Niños Trabajadores (Institute for the

Training of Educators of Youth, Adolescent, and Child Workers—IFEJANT) does many of the same things but with a focus on the education and training of adult allies. IFEJANT also offers academic courses on childhood studies, children's rights, and critical pedagogy. Finally, the adults who support the movement of working children have their own organization in which they provide each other with feedback and discuss how they can further the goals of the working children's organizations. In this article, when referring to "the movement of working children" or simply "the movement" I am including all of these organizations and institutions, including those that are adult-led. These organizations are extremely closely linked to one another, and all deploy the shared discursive framework analyzed below.

The children involved in the movement are generally poor and working-class, but their work varies a great deal. Most work for or alongside family members in small enterprises. This includes work on family farms in rural areas and in restaurants, market stalls, and shops or as street vendors in cities. Some of the girls in the movement work primarily in the household, helping care for younger siblings and conducting other forms of reproductive labor for the immediate and extended family. Other children work for employers outside of the family but in similar small and informal contexts. Some run their own very small businesses, funded partly through a movement program of micro-lending and entrepreneurship. Some children in the movement say that they did not necessarily even identify themselves as "working" until they entered the movement and began to see their "helping out" as a form of labor. Unfortunately, there is no registry or comprehensive survey of movement participants, and therefore there are no demographic data available on organized working children. While there are some data on working children in general in Peru, they are not necessarily representative of the working children who participate in the movement and are compromised by methodological and

definitional ambiguities (see Bourdillon et al., 2010, for discussion of the problems with major survey data on working children). My own ethnographic research with the movement suggests that children who participate are fairly evenly balanced in terms of gender and are heavily concentrated around ages 11 to 14, with somewhat smaller numbers of participants in the upper and lower age categories (8–10 and 15–17).

Popular Movements: Protagonismo as Collective Struggle for Liberation

The concept of children's protagonismo has been part of the discursive landscape of the movement of working children since its beginnings in the late 1970s, a period of widespread popular social movements shaped by liberation theology and other Latin American engagements with Marxism. The movement of working children in Peru was founded at a 1976 meeting of the Juventud Obrera Cristiana (Young Christian Workers—JOC), a Catholic Action organization with ties to several radical clerics. One of the group's adult advisers at the time was Alejandro Cussianovich, a Salesian priest and active participant in ONIS (Oficina Nacional de Investigación Social), a group of clerics around Lima who were discussing and developing what became known as liberation theology (Peña, 1994). Cussianovich had written several texts on liberation theology, one of which eventually led to his expulsion from his order, and he had worked with young domestic workers involved in the JOC for several years prior to this meeting. Now a leading theorist of childhood in Latin America, he continues to be the intellectual heart of the working children's movement in Peru. He has written countless books and essays on working children, protagonismo, and the history of the movement, and he teaches courses on childhood and social policy at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos and at IFEJANT.

He is a beloved figure in the movement of working children, and his writings serve as the philosophical inspiration and ideological core of the movement. When he is not himself leading training sessions and discussions about protagonismo, his writings are used as resources and his definitions and words circulate throughout countless movement materials and conversations. Given this centrality, I draw heavily on his writings and my interviews with him to trace the movement's approach to protagonismo.[3]

Cussianovich spoke with me about the meeting in which the youth of the JOC decided to initiate the movement of working children (interview, July 5, 2012). At the time, many union members and labor leaders, including youth labor leaders in the JOC, were being fired from their jobs as part of a wave of repression of popular movements that came with the transition to the government of Francisco Morales Bermudez in 1975 (Angell, 1979; Valladares Quijano, 2007). In order to plan for the general strike called for July 19, 1977, there was a national gathering of 80 members of the JOC. Cussianovich remembered that the youth were not interested in talking about their own immediate situations or the problems that they were facing as recently unemployed workers but wanted to discuss the future of the country and the future of organized youth. They had been organizing in the factories but now felt that the future of young people's work was not necessarily going to be in the factories, and if there were no youth in the factories they needed to organize outside of workplaces, in the neighborhoods. Further, they were concerned that without the context of the factory young people would not really understand the concerns of workers or their identities and interests as part of the working class. This, some of the JOC members argued, meant that they needed to begin organizing at a younger age. If they themselves had started organizing when they were children, they reasoned, then they would have had a higher level of political development and political consciousness. They also argued that if

the JOC was concerned with the working class, it needed to be concerned with working-class children.

This meeting marked the founding of MANTHOC. Cussianovich was quick to point out that this project was a new idea. There were no models and no one to ask for advice about how to organize children (interview, July 5, 2012). The JOC youth started with five "intuitions" about how this new organization should operate, based on their own experiences as working children and as organized youth: (1) The organization should be autonomous, not part of or dependent upon any adult or youth organization. (2) The children themselves had to be in charge of and represent the organization. (3) An organization was not an end in itself but a tool for addressing the needs of workers and children outside of the organization. (4) The organization should be national and international because the issues of workers were not just local but linked to national and international political and economic conditions. (5) It should not be assumed that what worked in organizing and educating youth in their late teens and early twenties (like the JOC) would also work with younger children and early adolescents and therefore a new methodology and pedagogy had to be developed for this work (Chacaltana, 2000). With these ideas in mind, the JOC youth from around the country began to immediately organize groups of children in their local neighborhoods and parishes.

The youth in the JOC invoked the concept of protagonismo and applied it specifically to working children. As Cussianovich (2001: 158) describes it,

> Even before speaking of social subjects or political actors, there was talk of children's protagonismo, in opposition to the social concealment imposed on working children and childhood as a whole by the dominant culture, which both privatized and denied their

> social role. The idea of protagonismo was a general way of expressing the type of presence and social and political activity wished for organized working children.

*"*Protagonismo" had a commonsense meaning at the time. In the 1960s and 1970s Latin American social scientists and analysts were referring to "*protagonismo popular*" when discussing the ways that poor people, neighborhood groups, women's groups, unions, indigenous groups, and others were claiming space as central actors on the national political scene (Montoya, 2003; Adrianzen García, 2008). Cussianovich (2000: 48) writes that when analysts at the time spoke of protagonismo

> everyone understood what they were saying, that it was the popular organizations, the women in the barrios, the youth who were supporting the unions, who were involved in this, the public sector workers, the teachers. . . . If someone asked "What is the definition of protagonismo?" you would say, "It is this: look how the people who had been more or less shut out were now standing up, coming forward."

This was also true of the working children's use of the term at the time. Protagonismo referred to concrete experiences of social struggle and social movement activity.

Protagonismo, in this iteration, drew attention to the social and political legitimacy of new political actors, highlighting their right to have a voice and to claim space in public life. It implied a redefinition of power relations and an assertion of authority by those who had been marginalized. Protagonismo's origin in popular movements signals the importance of organization rather than simply individual agency. "Although protagonismo is an individual

right, its practical exercise actually depends on the extent to which working children manage to occupy local, regional, national, and international spaces" (Cussianovich, 2001: 163). Here we see that protagonismo describes a social relationship of power in which the protagonismo of a group is dependent on its position in social structures and institutions. It is not simply individualized empowerment. As Anabella, a 12-year-old, stated, "Protagonismo is what you can achieve in organizations" (interview, July 21, 2012). The concept's theoretical and historical roots in protagonismo popular point to the importance of social struggle and collective action to any full understanding of the term.

The relationship to working-class and popular organizing and to the JOC brought a strong class analysis to the first decades of the movement of working children (Schibotto, 1996). In what they saw as a context of increasing informalization, the members of the JOC who initiated the working children's movement were concerned with the class-consciousness of future workers. They reflected on their own histories as workers, remembering that they had started working in various informal sector jobs from a young age in order to contribute to their families and to their communities. Children were already participating in the many vibrant popular struggles in Lima at the time, attending marches and protests of the poor and helping through the various stages of land occupations and the building of Lima's *barriadas* (squatter settlements). Children were already important members of the working class, but they did not yet have their own organization (Alejandro Cussianovich, interview, July 5, 2012). Working children were seen by the JOC youth not as a separate sector defined predominantly by being children but as a subgroup of the popular classes. A flyer about MANTHOC that the movement sometimes distributes at events states that in these early years "there was a deep appreciation for the dignity of children as workers, which is to say that they were in the daily struggle against poverty,

hunger, etc., more than an attention to their condition as children or adolescents." The position of the movement in the early years was that, "as a social indicator, age is culturally relative and temporal; the conditions of workers, of social and economic subjects transcends—and provides a different angle on—the question of time and age" (Cussianovich, 2001: 162). The JOC youth felt that class identity was of greater significance than age categories and should provide a foundation for intergenerational alliances between children, youth, and adults of the working class. In the early years, MANTHOC was understood as the children's space within the broader popular movements taking place in Lima and articulated a shared agenda of class consciousness, the liberation of the poor, and systemic social and political change (Chacaltana, 2000).

In addition to its social movement character and class identity, MANTHOC was also closely connected to liberation theology through Cussianovich and other radical priests. Protagonismo, then, was also understood from this theoretical position. It was used to describe each individual's ability to be the decision maker for his or her own life. Not to have this recognized was "a problem of dignity. No one was born to not be the protagonist of their own life. This is the vocation of human beings. . . . Those whose protagonismo is negated are also having their dignity injured" (Cussianovich, 2000: 49). This language of dignity can be found in numerous liberation theology texts (Berryman, 1987; Smith, 1991; Boff and Boff, 1987). Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988: xiv) writes that the process of liberation is "the struggle to construct a just and fraternal society, where persons can live with dignity and be the agents of their own destiny." Liberation theology's language of the dignified subject has substantially shaped Cussianovich's writing and therefore pervades movement discussions of protagonismo. Much of the movement's current conversation on protagonismo continues to refer to the idea of working children as social, economic, and political subjects rather than as objects of protection.

Protagonismo rejects the idea of working children as passive victims of social processes and "transforms them from simple beneficiaries or target groups of social policies into true social partners, into active subjects rather than objects" (Cussianovich, 2001: 169). By emphasizing dignity and subjectivity, the movement's invocation of the concept of protagonismo suggests the full humanity of children, affirming their personhood, in contrast to other, more pervasive paradigms of childhood in which they are primarily passive objects for adults to manage, protect, care for, and invest in (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Zelizer, 1994; Hanson, 2012).

In the early years of the movement of working children, the discourse of protagonismo was primarily treated as common sense rather than carefully defined and specified (Swift, 2000). However, the meanings attached to the term during this period continue to play an important role in the movement's ideological and discursive framework. Social struggle, power relations, class solidarity, dignity, and the subject's right to self-determination all reverberate in the contemporary usage of the concept. For example, Joaquín, a 15-year-old movement leader, told me, "Protagonismo is the ability to act and to know that we are social actors. Being able to say we can be part of the creation of a better world, of social change, and of changing the country. . . . We will continue in this constant struggle, the delegates now and the ones to come" (interview, July 1, 2012). The historical conceptual linkage of protagonismo to the social movements of the poor and to liberation theology continue to give the term its critical political edge. However, political and social changes over the past 40 years have produced a variety of conceptual redefinitions.

Opportunities and Threats: Shifting to Protagonismo as Children's Rights

The period of internal conflict in the 1980s and 1990s was a profoundly difficult time for Peruvian social movements and grassroots organizations, including the movement of working children. Three major political changes during this time led the movement to rearticulate protagonismo in relationship to a children's rights framework. First, the period of the internal conflict and the experience of Sendero Luminoso's guerrilla violence generated some hesitation around the use of class-based rhetorics. Second, the 1990 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child increased the visibility and political utility of rights-based approaches to childhood. Third, as the International Labor Organization's International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor became more influential in the region, movement organizations found themselves needing to defend children's right to work in the face of increased international pressure to abolish all kinds of "child labor." These three changes led the movement to temper its class analysis and to draw more heavily upon the language of children's rights. The movement shifted focus away from issues of class, poverty, and workers' dignity to childhood and children's rights to social, economic, and political participation and their right to work.

The escalation of Sendero Luminoso's guerrilla violence and the government's authoritarian and violent response led many grassroots organizations, including those in the movement of working children, to deemphasize some of the more class-based politics of their work during this period. Speaking in the language of Marxism was both less feasible and less desirable as the government failed to distinguish between different movements and as Sendero targeted various left organizations and parties in Lima's barriadas for intimidation, harassment, and assassination (Jenkins, 2011; Ron, 2001; Burt, 1998). With base groups in many of the barriadas that experienced significant Sendero violence, it is not surprising that the movement of

working children focused attention on children's issues and distanced itself from the potentially deadly space of adult-led popular left movements and organizations. In this repressive context, MANTHOC concentrated on internal consolidation, developing sustainable organizational structures, and creating new spaces for the education and support of working children, including new centers in Lima, Pucallpa, and Cajamarca (Norma, interview, July 6, 2012). However, perhaps partly because of the slight symbolic and material protection of focusing its work on children, the movement did continue to use some elements of their previous political language, including maintaining the idea of protagonismo.

Cussianovich and other adults who were involved in the movement at that time acknowledged in interviews and informal conversations that the context of the internal conflict was relevant to their shifting discourse, but most of the written narrative of the movement's history focuses on the growing influence of children's rights as an international and national framework for talking about childhood. Writing about these changes, Cussianovich (2001: 40) notes, "We didn't talk about rights twenty years ago. We spoke concretely. Our language wasn't one of the right to dignity or the right to autonomy; it was the struggle for dignity, the fight for autonomy, the enactment of protagonismo, the defense of our work…. Later, another discourse was added: these are our rights." The discourse of rights became more visible after 1984 when various NGOs in Lima formed the Coordinadora de Trabajo sobre los Derechos del Niño (Coordinating Work Group for Children's Rights—COTADENI). MANTHOC was invited to participate, but the meetings were held during school hours, meaning that no children from the organization were able to attend. The children therefore asked two adult allies to participate in the meetings in the name of the movement, but it was understood that these adults could not make decisions on behalf of the movement. Rather, they had to take the conversations

to the children for their opinions and then return to the COTADENI with those positions. This was a confounding and unexpected dynamic for many of the adult-led NGOs involved in COTADENI and eventually became too much for the network to deal with procedurally; the network was then redefined as a network of adult staff from various NGOs rather than one of representatives of each organization and movement, and this led to MANTHOC's de-facto exclusion. The departure from COTADENI, however, was fairly amicable, and the movement continued to have a relationship with it (Alejandro Cussianovich, interview, August 4, 2015). In the following years, MANTHOC was involved in a few large-scale events on children's rights and continued to build its relationships with other child-focused NGOs (Enrique, interview, July 3, 2012).

The Peruvian child-focused and children's rights NGOs were not involved in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the late 1980s or in Peru's ratification of the convention in 1990 but did play a significant role in the writing of the Peruvian comprehensive law on children and adolescents (Elena, interview, July 2, 2012). The experts and NGO leaders involved in that process included several people to whom Cussianovich referred as "friends of the movement of working children": individuals who had built relationships with MANTHOC in the 1980s. This first Peruvian code, adopted in 1992 by Fujimori's government, contained elements that many in the movement argue are even stronger articulations of children's rights than those offered in the UN convention (Alejandro Cussianovich, interview, August 4, 2015). The convention and the code speak in slightly different ways about children's political rights, including the rights of association, organization, and participation. Human rights/children's rights approaches provided a discursive and legal framework that reshaped interpretations of

protagonismo and required movement activists to distinguish their own concept of it from more individualized political rights.

The institutional and governmental discussions of the UN convention and the code also drew attention to questions of children's rights as workers and their rights to work. The convention, in Article 32, states that children have a right to "be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development." While some have interpreted this article to mean that children should not work, others, including MANTHOC, argue that it is not opposed to children's work per se but rather to only some kinds of work (Bourdillon et al., 2010). At the same time, the 1992 code specified that the right to work belonged to adolescents but not children, with age 12 as the line between the two categories. The movement opposed this distinction at the time (Cussianovich, 2002) and during the period of my fieldwork continued to argue strongly against it in the many workshops, discussions, and advocacy activities that took place in response to legislative debates about possible revisions to the code. The legal process of limiting children's work was consolidated throughout the 1990s as the International Labor Organization increased the pressure on nations around the world to ratify its Convention 138 on the Minimum Age. Originally drafted in 1973, Convention 138 aims for the abolition of work done by children under the age of 15, with the exception of some "light work" for those between the ages of 12 and 14. Ratification of this convention was very slow up until at least 1989 but increased steadily through the 1990s and the early 2000s as countries also began to ratify Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor (Bourdillon et al., 2010). Convention 182, adopted in 1999, prioritized ending the most harmful and dangerous forms of children's work, but Convention 138

instead assumed that all work done below the minimum age was harmful to children, despite a lack of compelling evidence for such harm (Bourdillon, White, and Myers, 2009). In this context, working children began to face criminalization, including the threat of being removed from their families, and increased stigmatization as they were described in public discourse as the visible evidence of poverty and national "underdevelopment" (Bourdillon et al., 2010). The movement then found itself needing to defend children's work as morally and legally legitimate, a situation that had not existed during the first 15 years of MANTHOC's activity.

The criminalization of children's work made age a far more salient issue in the movement of working children. Previously, movement participants had been primarily focused on working children's status as workers and as members of the popular classes. Now their status as children became much more significant. Age-based inequalities and the idea that an "adult-centric society" excluded children from full participation in economic, social, and political life became increasingly important to the movement's discourse and analysis. This shift can be seen in the articles and books published by the movement during the 1990s and early 2000s. In my analysis of the archive of written materials, I found that the earlier writings and materials (for example, Rivera Román, 1994) tended to include *jovenes* (youth) while most of the pamphlets and workbooks published after 1997 dropped them and spoke instead about working children and adolescents. Books and articles published later in the 1990s (for example, IFEJANT, 1997) also involved many more extensive critiques of the International Labor Organization and the various campaigns to "end child labor." Until then the movement had not really had a target or opposition. The campaigns against child labor gave it a new direction and drew much of its organizing attention. The debate between the abolitionists and the reformers or regulationists

(including MANTHOC) became the central political issue, giving it a key policy focus and new set of goals.

The threat from the abolitionist approach led movement participants in Peru and the international working children's movements to develop their own analyses of children's work, articulating the perspective that they refer to as *valoración critica* (critical appreciation). They are firmly against the exploitation of children and argue for children's right to "dignified work," but they do not believe that all work is necessarily harmful to children or that work is always incompatible with children's growth, development, and well-being. Instead, they argue that work can be, under the right conditions, effectively and productively integrated with both learning and with play and can have many positive impacts on children (Liebel, 2004; Bourdillon et al., 2010; Taft, 2013). In the many workshops, assemblies, and discussions I attended, movement participants argued that work is part of what makes us human, that it can be a fulfilling experience, and that it is a key way in which individuals participate in community life. To exclude children from work is therefore to exclude them from full economic and social citizenship. Movement participants also often pointed out that children's work was a valuable part of Peruvian culture, particularly in the indigenous cultures of the Andes and the Amazon. Through work, they suggested, children learned skills and developed emotional connections to their ancestors and to their communities. This approach to children's work highlights the fact that movement participants imagine children's rights in a nonindividualistic way and see them as firmly rooted in community participation and belonging. In informal conversations and formal interviews, children in the movement said that work was part of their culture, part of their daily lives, and something that they enjoyed because it made them valuable contributors to their families and communities.

The debates in the 1990s over child labor and Peru's ratification of the UN convention clearly drew the movement's attention increasingly to age and the category of childhood. The organizations began to discuss children as a social group and not simply child workers as a subset of the working class. Indeed, when MNNATSOP was founded in 1996 the declaration of principles stated that one of the organization's central goals was "the exercise and defense of the rights of all children, but those of working children in particular." This was a far cry from the earlier statements that situated MANTHOC as the "children of Christian workers" and identified participants primarily as part of a broader working-class movement. This is not to say that class analysis was abandoned but rather to highlight the fact that the movement increasingly saw participants *primarily* as children, representing the needs and interests of childhood, rather than as workers, representing the needs and interests of the working class. The organizations took on more of the language of children's rights and became more connected to the broader children's rights organizational landscape rather than cultivating their connections with popular organizations or labor unions. This engagement with children's rights was partly a strategic response to the political opportunities provided by the drafting of the Peruvian code, the ratification of the UN convention, and the growing international children's rights community, but it was also the result of the threat embedded in the ILO's call to end child labor and the persistent dangers and tensions of class-based leftist politics and social movements in Peru during this period.

In addition to drawing the movement increasingly into the institutional terrain of children's rights organizations and the analysis of childhood, these larger political shifts influenced the way the movement articulated its central concept of protagonismo. The concept became increasingly linked to ideas about children as subjects of rights but also needed to be

distinguished from the individualist liberal paradigm offered by this framework. As many others have noted, the UN convention attempts to integrate a protectionist dimension within a rights-based framework and so can be interpreted in multiple ways (Daiute, 2008; Earls, 2011; Melton, 2008; Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie, and Vandevelde, 2009). The movement of working children has generally used the convention's language of children's rights in order to emphasize children's agency. Children in the movement today regularly speak of themselves as "subjects of rights, not objects of protection." Central to this frequently articulated slogan is the concept of subjectivity. Being a subject, not just "having rights," is key, especially to the way the movement bridges the paradigm of protagonismo with children's rights frameworks. To "be a subject of rights, we also have to have social presence, and be recognized as true social actors. This requires changing the dominant culture from an adult-centric society" (Cussianovich, 1997: 97). Protagonismo clearly was transformed by the children's rights approach that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, but as a theory of children's collective subjectivity and agency it remains distinct from the children's rights paradigm.

Today, the language of rights is pervasive in children's discourses and conceptual frameworks. Flor, a 10-year-old girl, said that after beginning to participate in the movement she realized that "it was a place where working children can exercise our rights and can be protagonists." When I asked her what it meant to her to be a protagonist, she replied, "To lead the way for our rights" (interview, October 9, 2013). Defending and promoting children's rights has become an important part of movement participants' understandings of protagonismo, and it also shapes contemporary organizing and action as they address not just children's right to work but also their rights to quality health care, a clean environment, and a life without violence (to name just a few subjects of recent educational campaigns organized by some of the base groups

during the period of my fieldwork). Movement organizations have been active in advocating for laws that would prohibit the physical punishment of children, have been part of the recent marches against violence against women and girls, and have played a central role in the civil society response to proposed changes to the code on childhood and adolescence that would diminish children's political rights and autonomy.

Confronting Neoliberalism: Protagonismo as a Relational Project

As the movement of working children responded to changing political conditions and drew increasingly on the language of children's rights, the concept of protagonismo also had to be distinguished from this approach (Cussianovich, 2010a). Over the past 15 years, in order to challenge the tendency of rights-based frameworks to focus on individual well-being rather than collective justice, the concept of protagonismo has taken on a new dimension that could be summarized as a relational ontology, defined by Arturo Escobar (2010: 39) as a worldview "which eschew[s] the divisions between nature and culture, individual and community, us and them." This third face of protagonismo is a critical response to neoliberalism informed by indigenous politics.

Movement writing in the 1990s began to engage with anti-neoliberal analysis as Peruvians dealt with consequences of the structural adjustments implemented by Fujimori's government. For example, a workbook published by the movement (Rivera Román, 1994) includes over 100 pages of discussion of global capitalism and neoliberal structural adjustment. Movement political education through the late 1990s and early 2000s included discussions of globalization, and movement organizations participated in protests and wrote declarations

against debt, structural adjustment policies, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (MANTHOC, 2000; 2004). While earlier critiques of neoliberalism focused on its economic and policy implications for working children, later materials also consider how neoliberalism was a threat to working children's protagonismo. In his 2010 book on the subject, Cussianovich sought to warn readers and movement activists against turning protagonismo into merely a celebration of the autonomous, acting individual celebrated by neoliberalism, arguing that this approach to the concept would be counter to its critical and communitarian roots. Neoliberalism, as a cultural and not just political-economic force, calls for all individuals, including children and youth, to be self-sufficient and responsible participants in the market and civil society (Harris, 2004; Kennelly, 2011). Thus protagonismo, as a critical concept, must be about more than just the individuals' ability to act on their own behalf. In sociological terms, it cannot be understood as a synonym for "agency." A movement booklet for adult allies notes that protagonismo is "an expression of solidarity," to be distinguished from engagement in the world based on the "enactment of celebrity, authority, or force" (IFEJANT, 1994: 10). This is one reason that the movement has consistently rejected any translation of protagonismo as "leadership." Enrique, an adult supporter who used to be a child participant, told me that "protagonismo sometimes seems similar to leadership, but it isn't: leaders are at the head, protagonists are equals together" (interview, July 3, 2012). The booklet quoted above also argues that "one of the criteria for protagonismo is the promotion of the protagonismo of others" and that protagonismo includes attention to organized social groups' social and political power rather than merely the empowerment of isolated individuals (IFEJANT, 1994: 10).

The 2000s brought new kinds of political opportunities for Peruvian civil society organizations. As Stephanie McNulty (2011) has pointed out, the decentralizing reforms of the

period increased the mechanisms for civil society organizations to participate in governance. The movement of working children, with its range of registered local, regional, and national organizations, has been included in some of these opportunities, especially in local participatory budgeting processes and municipal children's consultative councils, the first of which was created in 2008. However, scholars have also suggested that these kinds of participatory opportunities can be products and producers of neoliberal governmentality (Leal, 2007). Focusing specifically on children's participation, Rebecca Raby (2014: 87) identifies concerns about "the narrow production of self-governing subjectivities that resonate with neoliberal individualism." In the face of the growing state interest in children's formal civic participation, the Peruvian movement of working children has had to specify how protagonismo is distinct from more (neo)liberal interpretations of children's rights to participation, organization, and association. Article 12 of the UN convention and most spaces for children's participation emphasize children's rights to express themselves, but protagonismo also incorporates elements of "decision-making, the education of children, and organization" (Cussianovich, 2010a: 44). Marco, a 14-year-old, noted that "protagonismo means that we are the ones who make the decisions. We are the ones who advocate, socially and politically. We create our own activities, our own projects" (interview, August 7, 2012). Protagonismo is not simply the ability to express oneself or to have an individual voice within the confines of a prestructured liberal participatory opportunity but requires an analysis of the extent to which a social group influences the political and social world. The concept of protagonismo draws our attention to collective political power, not merely individual voice. Movement participants often discuss whether the new participatory opportunities enable working children to have real influence (protagonismo) or only self-expression. The movement wants to use these opportunities to increase the visibility, legitimacy,

and political authority of working children but remains skeptical about them and is trying to improve and influence them. Adults from IFEJANT and MANTHOC have become part the advisory board for Lima's consultative councils and have been advocating for a series of workshops for council participants on topics of political concern and skills for political engagement. The movement also supports the children who represent it on these councils; adult allies meet regularly with them and strategize with them about how to accomplish their goals and communicate their perspectives to adult policy makers. Representatives regularly report to their base groups and seek their opinions. Thus, rather than treating the youth participants in these spaces as just free-floating neoliberal individuals, the movement has created patterns of interaction that encourage them to see themselves as representing their bases and to connect their individual roles to the collective endeavors of the movement. The longer-term impacts of this kind of political education for working children can be seen in the 2016 election of Tania Pariona, a former working child who was a national delegate for MNNATSOP and is now a Frente Amplio congressperson from Ayacucho. Both children and adults involved in the movement celebrated Tania's election on social media and expressed their confidence that she would continue to be part of their community and work with them in the shared struggle for working children's rights and dignity.

In order to push back against some of the more individualized and (neo)liberal approaches to children's agency and political participation, Cussianovich's writing in the past 10 years has begun to make the case for the relational and collective dimensions of protagonismo by referencing previously ignored indigenous Andean worldviews. He writes (2010a: 11), "In the Andean world, with its conception of *runa/jaqi* (the people) and *pachamama* (the Mother Earth), there is a rationality that overcomes the dichotomy that defines dominant Western thought. In

Andean culture, the individual is not the main actor, and everything has a collective connotation, including personal lived experiences, which are collective experiences, in relationship with everything." By drawing attention to the Western, colonial, and (neo)liberal binaries of individual/community and adult/child, and by imagining an explicitly non-liberal vision of protagonismo, movement participants are also engaging with larger social movement conversations on the meaning of participation and politics in contemporary Latin America. Cussianovich's writings cite the work of decolonial thinkers such as Anibal Quijano (1998) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2006) and resonate with those reimagining politics and community from the perspective of indigenous struggles (de la Cadena, 2010; Escobar, 2010; Patzi Paco, 2004). While the children in the movement do not make explicit reference to these intellectuals or to indigenous cosmopolitics, they do sometimes make explicitly decolonial claims and articulate a relational worldview. For example, they often reject the ILO's vision of nonworking childhood as a colonialist imposition on the ground that "work is part of our culture of childhood" (Graciela, interview, October 9, 2013). As the 2011 Declaration on the World Day for Dignity for Working Children, written by child and adolescent delegates of several movement organizations, stated: "We value work because it allows us to be active protagonists in the economy of our families and of our society. We see it as our historical and cultural inheritance from our ancestors. . . . It is a space where we connect with other people and with nature" (RedNNA, 2011). Children in the movement also regularly articulate strongly relational interpretations of protagonismo. For example, Carlos, an 11-year-old, stated, "Protagonismo is the way I can speak and participate but the way I can also let others participate, give them a hand and some support so that they can all be participants" (interview, September 14, 2013). The emphasis on the communal and relationship-oriented aspects of protagonismo can also be seen in

the fact that children in the movement's social centers and base groups consistently work together to cook, clean, and organize their activities and take on the tasks of educating each other about their rights, teaching each other new concrete skills, and encouraging quieter children in their groups to speak up and share their ideas.

Cussianovich's theorizing has also increasingly addressed issues of affect and emotion through the development of the "pedagogy of tenderness." In an early formulation of this concept (1995: 64) he wrote, "Children are not objects of tenderness, they are constructors of social relationships that allow for the expression of the transformative forces of affection, caring, kindness, friendship, confidence, self-esteem, and respecting of others as equals who are simultaneously different from me and similar to me." Tenderness is understood not simply as caring for children but in the context of more egalitarian social relationships. To have relationships of tenderness is to treat people, including children, with the profound respect that they deserve as equals and full human beings. Cussianovich (2010b) argues that tenderness is necessary to push back against misuses of the concept of protagonismo that emphasize power at the expense of listening, care, and respect for diverse others. Loving relationships, emotion, and community have taken on a more prominent role in the theorization of protagonismo, partly as a critical response to the impersonal and individualized rationality of neoliberal governance.

Conclusion: Co-optation, Collaboration, and Multiplicity

Protagonismo has been a resonant concept for the Peruvian movement of working children for nearly 40 years. During that time, the movement has refined, redefined, and added to it in response to political opportunities and threats and in conversation with other social

movement theories, including liberation theology, human rights paradigms, and relational worldviews. By tracing this movement's development of a single concept, we can see how movement ideas are shaped both by their surrounding political opportunity structures and by the knowledge practices and discourses of other social movements. But the history of the concept of protagonismo is not one of linear transformation. Rather, each new historical development has added another piece to the concept, but the earlier pieces have not been replaced or removed. The concept has continued to expand and grow, with various meanings coming forward or receding at different moments. Similar to the theoretical practices that Chela Sandoval (2000) has identified as differential oppositional consciousness, movement thinkers strategically shift among the multiple meanings of protagonismo, referencing different elements for different purposes and in different contexts. The movement connects protagonismo to children's rights frameworks when seeking to garner support from major international children's NGOs, to relationality and indigenous perspectives on interdependence when building alliances with some activist communities, and to liberation theology when it seeks to organize in new parishes. Thus the concept serves as a bridge between potentially conflicting frameworks. By holding these multiple historical moments and their associated ideological commitments together it allows the movement of working children to be in conversation with multiple discursive communities, including both radical social movements and more institutionalized children's and human rights advocates.

However, multiplicity has its costs. Recently, movement participants have expressed serious concerns about the dangers of the term's co-optation by the Peruvian state. Because protagonismo has so many faces, it can be adopted by institutions that engage with only one of them. For example, government-sponsored participatory institutions for children are

increasingly invoking protagonismo but treating it as if it were a synonym for individualized political participation, erasing its collective and critical dimensions. These new concerns about co-optation reflect important shifts in social movement politics. The new opportunities for collaboration with government have created distinctive tensions and challenges for social movements in the region (Arditi, 2008; Escobar, 2010; Motta, 2013).

Despite the strong intellectual relationship with other social movements' ideas and occasional participation in events hosted by others, the movement today is not well connected to adult activists and adult-run organizations. Its own campaigns and events tend to get attention primarily from those who are explicitly interested in children's rights rather than from the broader field of leftist or progressive movements. While in its early years children were fairly well incorporated into working-class organizing, the movement today is quite isolated. Focusing on children tends to be seen by adult activists (and scholars) as too specific, narrow, or even soft. Many adults are unaware of the organizing done by children and are dismissive of children's political agency and capacity. But the working children themselves and their movement's well-developed perspectives on protagonismo could make important contributions to adult-led social movements. Childhood studies can contribute to scholarship on adults: an analysis of children's protagonismo enriches our understanding of contemporary Peruvian social movements and illuminates a nuanced theoretical perspective on collective political agency.

Notes

1. These phrases were used by many different children in formal interviews and in movement activities observed during the years 2012–2015.

2. All names of adults and children in the movement have been changed to protect their identities, with the exception of Alejandro Cussianovich, one of the movement's founding figures. Translations from Spanish to English of all materials, ethnographic encounters, and interviews are mine.

3. Cussianovich's ideas and arguments should not be seen as just his own. He emphasizes that they are developed through his conversations with working children and collaborators and are thus the product of the movement. In my months of observations, I heard many of the same ideas articulated by children and adults. They are not simply copying Cussianovich but expressing the collective knowledge and shared understanding of their organizations.

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