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ARENDRT IN THE REFUGEE CAMP: The political agency of world-building

ABSTRACT

Refugee camps are frequently conceived as spaces in which social and political life is reduced to biological concerns of survival or ‘bare’ life. Yet, for researchers who focus on life in the camp *as it is lived*, through material adaption, social negotiation and resistance, this Agambenian perspective is unsatisfactory. Instead, a relation is made apparent between practises of everyday life and the manifestation of a politics. This paper argues for the importance of Hannah Arendt's writings for a new understanding of how refugee camp inhabitants can develop and sustain political agency. First, it will highlight the relation by observations and analysis of ‘the jungle’ in Calais, France. This unofficial camp, although short-lived, has influenced a broad spectrum of research including examination of spatial political practice. Second, applying a phenomenological reading of Arendt's work, I argue that political agency emerges through the concept of *world-building*. World-building results from the conjunction of human activities – from the quotidian, like labour and work, to the exceptional cases of action – and their orientation towards a specific type of visibility. World-building manifests as camp inhabitants erect spaces of meaning that engage a plurality of persons, transforming them into political agents.

Key words: statelessness, common world, Calais, Agamben, politics

INTRODUCTION

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a book of two volumes written in the years during and following World War II (WWII), Hannah Arendt probes the tensions that statelessness posed to human rights and humanitarianism. In the course of her analysis, she notes the way that camps became ‘the routine solution for the problem of domicile of the displaced person,’ indeed, ‘the only “country” the world had to offer the stateless’ (1951, p. 279-84). Slow-forward and, as of 2016, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) documented that approximately two-thirds of the world’s refugees live in refugee camps, most of them in protracted situations of five years or more (Zetter and Long, 2012). This figure would apply conservatively to any broader enumeration of those labelled asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and so on. Therefore, little appears to have changed since WWII (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Malkki, 1995; Soguk, 1999; Hyndman, 2000).

Arendt observes that nation states and NGOs have the power to shut away stateless persons in camps indeterminably precisely because stateless persons lack membership in a political community. Her point resonates with Giorgio Agamben’s assertion that the camp figures are at the hidden heart of our global biopolitical order, reducing the socio-political capacity of human life to bare life (1998, p. 168-9). Refugee camps are deemed ‘spaces of exception’ – of extraterritoriality and extra-legality; spaces in which the *political agency* of any outside their nation state (‘stateless’) appears impossible. Indeed, it is a life lived in anonymity and alienation (Smith, 2004), of being nowhere (Malkki, 2002), without recourse to human and civil rights (Harrell-Bond and Verdirame, 2005), and in a permanent state of transience (Agier, 2011). Arendt’s analysis thus culminates in the tragic observation that ‘to be uprooted is to have no place in the world, recognised and guaranteed by others’ (1951, p. 475).

In recent years, the question of political agency regarding stateless persons has been problematised and most researchers of refugee camps would now reject the humanitarian conception of stateless persons as passive or helpless. While it is generally accepted that existing structures and institutions at best fail them and at worst violate their human rights, there is a growing body of literature on refugee camps that advances a material focus on *the everyday life* of the refugee camp (Peteet, 2005; Ramadan, 2013; Katz, 2015, 2017a; Redclift, 2013; Sanyal, 2014). Proponents of this approach would argue that only by delving into the materiality of camps – into ‘the very “stuff” of encampment itself’ – can we properly understand ‘the subjectivities implicated with it’ (Abourahme, 2014, p. 202). By turning to consideration of everyday life, light is shone on the ways in which stateless persons appropriate

and rescript the material and institutional structures of refugee camps. This focus is particularly salient in many empirical analyses of the appearance and growth of a specific refugee camp in Northern France: the so-called Calais ‘Jungle.’ Within a short period of time, stateless persons along with local activists not only appeared to render more durable and culturally familiar spaces, but, in doing so, also to prefigure, shape and provoke political claims to human and civil rights (PEROU, 2016).

A spatio-material analyses of refugee camps has the potential to reveal a constitutive relation between the activities of daily life and those of political life, thereby giving the appearance of political agency. However, these analyses seem to suffer from a limit of conceptual or theoretical grounds upon which this constitutive relation can be affirmed. For this, the overreliance on Agamben as a theoretical and influential source in critical Refugee Studies may be held responsible (Minca, 2005; Diken, 2004; Ek, 2006). Hannah Arendt offers us instead, I propose, a way to rethink the political agency of camp residents, not through the establishment of a totally new kind of politics (e.g., the reclaiming of bare life), but instead through the uncovering of the political significance of human plurality and the activities of *world-building*. This Arendtian intervention may further explain how the state destruction of refugee camps seems to foreclose possibilities for political mediations and mobilisations.

The main goal of this article is to provide a reading of Arendt’s writings that can better substantiate the construct of political agency that emerges from the material focus on the everyday life of refugee camps by empirical researchers. Following a phenomenological reading of her works, which will approach her writings as inquiries into the lived experiences of persons in concrete socio-historical contexts, I argue that Arendt’s concept of *world-building* enables an understanding of political agency which can be applied to refugee camps. More specifically, I will demonstrate how Arendt reconceives politics as necessarily comprising both (i) a specific conjunction of human activities and (ii) a particular logic of visibility. The former constitutes spaces of meaning (i.e., a respective common world) that enable the construction and visibility of certain political identities and thereby of political agency. In doing so, I challenge prominent interpretations of Arendt’s work that position political agency exclusively as an explicit and thus highly expressive form of action. More significantly, I contend it challenges the relegation and limitation of political agency to the framework of the nation state and national citizenship. Instead, I point to the significance of a shared experience of *worldliness*. In so doing, I propose to theoretically underpin how refugee camps may be perceived as sites of struggles over *what* and *who* counts as political.

PART 1: THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF REFUGEE CAMPS

Refugee camps, as settlements ‘where refugees are accommodated and receive assistance and services from government and humanitarian agencies’ (UNHCR, 2014, p. 12), have been subject to sharp criticism. The UNHCR acknowledges that people suffer ‘some degree of limitation on the rights and freedoms of movement and their ability to make meaningful choices about their lives’ (ibid., p. 4). Indeed, the ways in which UNHCR provision ‘violates’ camps’ inhabitants have been exposed time and time again: from depriving access to both local and international social and economic networks, hence fostering a dependency on external aid (Voutira and Harrell-Bond, 1995); to putting people at direct risk of military, factional and gender-based violence (Lischer, 2005) and dehumanising people through practices such as headcounts (Hyndman, 2000).

Due to the number of people they affect, including the impact on future generations, refugee camps have been and remain today the object of vast academic interest and research – indeed, camps are *highly theorised* spaces. Agamben’s use of the camp as an analytical tool remains highly influential, such that he has been described as ‘*the* charismatic legislator within critical Refugee Studies’ (Owens, 2009, p. 567). The Agambenian approach analyses refugee camps as the ‘permanent spatial arrangement’ to the sovereign-imposed state of exception (1998, p. 168-9). Camps are thus viewed as sites where refugees are not only excluded from, but rendered the ‘constitutive outside’ of the national order of things (Soguk, 1999, p. 51). That is to say, the camp space produces the refugee as someone who is marginal and lacking – without ‘proper agency, proper voice, proper face’ (ibid., p. 243) – and thereby consolidates the normalcy of the citizen/nation/state constellation, resulting in an exclusionary paradigm of politics and political agency.

Moreover, this exclusionary paradigm results in the exposure of the refugee’s *bare life*: that is, a life that can only be made tangible through bodily need and suffering. Recognised as the primary and most legitimate manifestation of their expression, refugees are stripped of their specific history, their socio-cultural narratives and identities; all deemed ‘too messy, subjective, unmanageable, [and] hysterical’ (Malkki, 1996, p. 385). Refugees, disregarding the specifics of their situation, are thus denied political expression (*bios*) and the means to be perceived and treated as political agents.

Although this Agambenian approach rarely argues that refugee camps are *actually* ‘spaces of passivity in which refugees wait helplessly’ (Peteet, 2005, p. 29), the focus on the containment and disciplining effects of these institutions highlights how, as Serena Parekh puts it, ‘the vast majority of stateless people remain a ‘what’ – a body to be cared for, a life to be

preserved – rather than a political subject’ (2017, p. 97). Employing Arendtian language, Parekh argues that stateless persons are denied the means to express themselves as a *who*, that is, as a unique individual with the capacity to speak and act, and not merely as a body indistinguishable from a mass of displaced people (indeed, an image typical of many humanitarian appeals). This perception frequently results in the position that, while ‘many stateless people contest this status, engage meaningfully and creatively with each other and the communities that they find themselves,’ such acts are in no way demonstrative of political agency; in fact, to perceive them as such would be to ascribe to them a ‘fool’s freedom’ (ibid., p. 96).

It is my contention that, if we want to consider politics beyond a global political order of sovereign states, this position is untenable. For one, it struggles to account for the series of negotiations instigated by the struggles of multiple and *non-sovereign* political actors, without suggesting the advent of a totally new kind of politics that can totally undermine existing structures (Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005). Indeed, somewhat frustrated with this conclusion, another critical approach has emerged in the last decade or two. This approach seeks to analyse the refugee camp as a physical and material site of complex social and political phenomena, a site of both impasse and negotiation.

Abourahme’s ‘ethnography of cement’ (2014) could be considered exemplary in this regard. In his desire to subvert the ‘structure versus agency’ problematic, he depicts the political reality of refugee camps as a series of ‘spill overs’ between the ‘symbolic-political’ and ‘material-lived’ (2014, p. 202-3). That is to say, while the very existence of refugee camps continue to represent a global failure to politically protect those most severely marginalised by the juridical paradigms of state nationalism, refugees still have to contend with ‘the material exigencies of life and the need, essentially, to build’ (ibid., p. 202). Though this ‘everyday order of things,’ as Abourahme puts it, is often neglected by scholarly work, recent efforts to investigate it have the potential to expose the Agambenian approach for offering ‘little space to register the social and political agency of those who reside in camps’ (Katz, 2017a, p. 2; see also Huysmans, 2008). These efforts discover that, as Diken and Laustsen write, ‘the camp is not just a matter of walls and fences but also doors and windows’ (2005, p. 180).

By attending to the spatial and material adaption of refugee camps, this approach wants, not only to ‘appreciate the strategies and tactics that those inhabiting such spaces adopt in their *everyday lives* to claim rights and [political] membership’ (Sigona, 2015, p. 1; emphasis mine), but also to highlight how the assemblage of a camp mediates action and practice in often contingent and unexpected ways. Such negotiations, witting or unintended, can manifest in

diverse ways: certainly, in its most explicit form, as protests and demands over human and civil rights (Rygiel, 2011, p. 11-3), but also in the creation of material and interpersonal networks or ‘assemblages’ within and beyond camp spaces, necessary for survival (Ramadan, 2013, p. 70; Mould, 2017, p. 13-4). The processes of assemblage have been read as a material ‘informalisation’ or ‘urbanisation’ of the camp, an kind of ‘urban agglomeration that challenges the regulatory authority of state and humanitarian power, as well as the narrative of refugees’ ‘helplessness’ (Agier, 2019, p. 61-75; Sanyal, 2014). To put this argument into some context, in what follows, I will provide a preliminary sketch of how ‘the everyday life’ approach has emerged within certain empirical studies in relation to ‘the Jungle’ in Calais, France.

Calais’ Jungle, France (2015–2016)

In October 2016, French police bulldozed and demolished the majority of a makeshift refugee camp on the outskirts of Calais, known popularly as ‘the Jungle’; only a school and library remained. Such informal settlements had existed in and around Calais since the 1990s, but they only gained international attention when, as a ‘detrant,’ the closure of an asylum processing centre (Sangatte), in 2002, caused a further influx of people to the site. Any official humanitarian or state provision was withdrawn and denied. Because of its location, there was an immense media and scholarly presence, thereby rendering the make-shift camp a site of multifarious and often controversial news and interpretation.

From its inception, the so-called ‘Jungle’ was depicted as a ‘metonym’ for the suffering of refugees in Europe and their descent into ‘bare life’ (Agier, 2019, p. 7). The development of this settlement reflected not only the general increase in refugees reaching Europe since 2015, but also the consolidation and coordination of European states’ policy to forcibly ‘bottleneck’ and seek tighter control over “irregular migration” (Davies et al., 2017, p. 1265-6). On the ground, as it were, these policies included forcibly, often illegally, evicting migrants from squats in Calais and forcibly moving them to the outskirts of the town (*Calais Migrant Solidarity*, 2017). Thus, in a very short amount of time, the Calais camp grew such that, at the time of its destruction, it was estimated to have housed around 10,000 persons. In this regard, ‘the Jungle’ embodied viscerally a strategy of state abandonment (or state inaction), that is, a form of state institutional indifference, violence and at worse deaths. State inaction was evident not least for the severe health risks posed by the lack of basic infrastructure, sanitation services, and its location by two chemical plants, but also for the police brutality that was widely reported

(Davies et al., 2017, p. 1276). In no uncertain terms, the Jungle could be described as an extra-territorial space undergirding a state of social exclusion and juridico-political exception.

The testimonies of the camp's inhabitants certainly speak to this brutality. In a series of interviews, stories and other textual collaborations with scholars from the University of East London (Godin et al., 2017), the violence, exploitation and dehumanisation to which the inhabitants of 'the Jungle' were subjected has been brought to a wider audience in their own words: 'I think, because we have come here, we are not human beings, we become animals, a new kind of animal,' writes *Africa*, who journeyed from Sudan, under pseudonym (ibid., p. 134-5). 'The Jungle,' a name which many residents adopted to indicate a space, a hostile wilderness, in which humans could not live, was notorious for its abject conditions: poor housing, little food and inadequate water and sanitation; blazes ignited by cooking fires and gas canisters frequently destroyed people's shelters. Important research has been (and continues to be) done, in this respect, to articulate and record the traumatic consequences of the French state's hostility and neglect towards migrants (Hargreaves, 2016; Dhesi et al., 2015)

These testimonies bring to light the everyday miseries of the Jungle. Yet, it was also a place that camp 'residents,' along with local activists and volunteers, made into a socially and politically valued, albeit temporary, 'home.' Such a loaded term is not to be used lightly in this context. Rather, it signifies here not an ideal space, but one of great significance for those ultimately dwelling there. *Babak*, an Iranian refugee, observed, 'What people are doing is building a city, they are trying to keep this as a city, trying to keep life here' (ibid., p. 145). Babak's voice is by no means representative of all views of those enduring the conditions in the camp. His view, among others, suggests nonetheless that 'the Jungle' could be conceived as *more* than a place of 'squalor' and 'permanent wounding,' and its inhabitants as *more* than the 'living dead' (Davies et al., 2017, p. 1280).

There were many volunteers and activists so appalled and outraged by the conditions in 'the Jungle' that they acted in solidarity to physically, legally and politically assist its inhabitants (Wainwright, 2016; PEROU, 2016). The Calais camp hence appeared, to some, 'a rallying point for border solidarities' (Rygiel, 2011, p. 2) and a 'site of alternative and 'other' notions of home' (Mould, 2017, p. 3), wherein 'the stages for strong social and cultural structures had somehow been forged out of nothing' (Hassett cited in Wrainwright, 2016). To filter the Calais camp through this more 'positive' empirical lens fails to counter the reality of 'the Jungle' as a space of exception, however. Arguably, this lens might instead function as a supplementary interpretation, one stimulated by reading the camp as a *material-lived* phenomenon. This 'everyday life' perspective, whose methods invoke the processes of

adaptation and adjustment of residents to the camp environment, presents significant enough ambiguities of material valuation and orientation to warrant focus on ‘the Jungle’ as *more* than a place of suffering and deprivation (Oesch, 2017). As such, the following studies were selected for either their tendencies or explicit resolve to account for makeshift spatial formations as strategies of adaptation and resistance that the inhabitants of the Calais camp developed in their everyday lives.

This scholarly work, often focussed on the material construction of ‘the Jungle,’ points to the objective to trace, document and reveal, as it were, the ‘everyday order of things’ (e.g., Mould, 2017; Katz, 2017; Agier, 2019). For many inhabitants, ‘the Jungle’ was a temporary stop on their UK-bound journey, whereas others quite literally set-up-shop, including restaurants, bakeries, cafés, a barber and even a disco. With the help of volunteers and donors, mud paths were defined into dirt roads, lined by small huts; maps of the camp illustrate how the space was organised into neighbourhoods, themselves formed in accordance to the dwellers’ place of origin (*Libération*, 2016, p. 14-5). Construction, enabled by funds to small charities like Care4Calais and Auberge des Migrants, engendered a certain sense of community by including communal spaces of relaxation and rejuvenation. The gathering of water and supplies, the arrangements for day-to day needs from cooking stoves to places of worship, facilitated the exchange of personal accounts of countries of origin, exile and journeys (Prestianni, 2014, p. 333).

In March 2016, the southern part of ‘the Jungle’ was demolished in order to make room for a more ‘acceptable’ construct of humanitarian governance: the Centre d’Accueil Provisaire (CAP). Installed by the French government, this ‘container camp’ repurposed a series of shipping containers with the intention of accommodating Calais’ migrants. Although heated and clean, the modular and sterile design of the CAP discouraged daily activities, such as cooking, play and religious assembly. Entry into (and out of) the facility was only by biometric identity checks. As Miriam Ticktin notes, ‘all indicate that the camp has tipped towards a politics of containment and repression, rather than one of protection’ (2016, p. 30). The total demolition of the Calais camp was frustrated in the immediate term as, significantly, the court at Lille ruled that certain social, medical and legal services available within ‘the Jungle’ were so integral to the lives and well-being of its inhabitants that total demolition had to be delayed until alternatives were established. The refugee camp, despite lacking grounds for human ‘dignity,’ still proved to be a *lieu de vie* [living space] (PEROU, 2016, p. 3).

The recognition of construction and community formation as manifestations of political agency amongst the squalid conditions does not romanticise or idealise ‘the Jungle.’ People

suffered overwhelming deprivations. However, and no doubt because of these abject deprivations and failure of national and international bodies, the building of ‘the Jungle’ became a public display of ‘extraordinary international solidarity,’ even depicted as ‘the birth of a new city’ (PEROU, 2016, p. 9; see also Agier, 2019, p. 71, 74-5). There was a sense of *appearing* to others within and beyond the camp itself.

In a bid to understand the tension between solidarity and deprivation, Rygiel’s analysis of ‘the Jungle’ notes three competing images. First, the camp as a space of legal and political exception, which is juxtaposed by the second image of the camp as a ‘makeshift community,’ through which migrants reveal their resourcefulness in navigating border controls in the fight for a legitimate existence (2011, p. 7-11). This latter image is complemented by that of a third: the camp as ‘a space of solidarity,’ specifically of No Border activism which asserts migrants’ right of free movement (ibid., p. 11-13). Importantly, Rygiel argues that each image speaks to a *lived reality* of the camp and so, the discursive primacy of one would commit an epistemological injustice to the subjectivities formed by the others. Together, these images represent and highlight ‘the Jungle’ as a material site of struggle in which *multiple powers*, including the inhabitants, are at work in the competition for living space and recognition.

In analysing case studies of ‘the Jungle,’ I have sought to draw out the significance of a critical approach that moves beyond the analytic of refugee camps as spaces of exception by focusing instead on the everyday life of their inhabitants. In so doing, I do not dismiss or controvert the broader socio-political structures of camp life highlighted by the Agambenian approach. Rather, like the everyday life approach, I seek to provoke a more subtle appreciation of the ways by which these oppressive structures – both material and institutional – are negotiated. Although the suffering and deprivation of the Calais camp’s inhabitants could not be alleviated without formal recognition of their legal status, to understand these negotiations as acts of political agency is to underscore their legitimacy in a broader political geography which so often seeks to confine politics to the framework of the nation state and national citizenship. Put into terms that I will explain shortly: having been positioned *outside* of the common world – as one that privileges certain forms of political expression and governance – refugee camp inhabitants are arguably in a struggle to reassert their place in it, subsequently, mediating it.

The refugee camp is not typically recognised as a space of political expression and action, yet, there is a long history, including of camps in sub-Saharan Africa and of the Palestinian (UNWRA) camps, wherein what and who counts as political in a local and global framework is challenged. This raises the question of how we best describe what is actually

happening on these sites to best articulate the relationship between the activities of everyday life and those acts of political agency.

PART 2: THINKING WITH HANNAH ARENDT

In *The Human Condition* (pub. 1958), Hannah Arendt names three fundamental human activities – labour, work, and action. She argues that politics depends on the working cohesion of these activities, thereby on living in a manner that corresponds to the human conditions of, respectively, life, worldliness, and plurality (1998, p. 7). If politics is conditioned by the possibility of political agents, for Arendt, political agency depends not on preconceived ideas of politics and political activism (as in forms of governance, representation and protest), but on these fundamental human activities and, more generally, on the human condition. Given the reconceptualization of political agency that Arendt's writings make possible in these terms, they should be regarded as an important resource for the critical study of refugee camps.

For many readers, Arendt's understanding of political agency relates to a conceptual triad in which action is superior to both labour and work. This is because action, which includes human speech, enacts the human condition of plurality, 'the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). Moreover, action and speech 'are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men' (ibid., p. 176). Deeds and words reveal one's *distinctness* insofar as they disclose a unique personal identity, compelling the question 'who are you?' as opposed to 'what are you?' from others. Action is hence conceived by Arendt as the human activity primarily constituted through the recognition of another (i.e., intersubjectivity). This analytical stress on action frequently begets a highly aestheticized vision of politics (Villa, 1999, p. 119-120), such that it would seem '[a]gency for Arendt is tantamount to the ability *to act*' (Parekh, 2017, p. 93). But, this interpretation would risk rendering the everyday activities that take place in refugee camps non-political.

Alternatively, by way of a phenomenological interpretation, I propose that political agency relates *more broadly* to the human condition and its fundamental activities. To understand the dynamic relation of everyday life to politics, I use the term *world-building* in lieu of political agency in order to elucidate how the latter results from an encounter between (i) quotidian human activities and (ii) their specific modes of visibility in the creation of spaces of meaning.ⁱⁱ Yet, before we can reach this point, a little groundwork must be laid: in particular, it is important to examine what Arendt means by world and, indeed, worldliness.

Statelessness, Rightlessness and the Common World

The concept of ‘world,’ though it may appear a simple term, has a complex philosophical lineage. More specifically, it is a core concept in the discourse and philosophical practice of phenomenology, under which Arendt was educated while living in Germany. Only recently, however, has there been a greater turn – indeed, a phenomenological one – to understand and analyse the relationship between the concept of world to politics (and law) in her work, especially in the context of migration (Borren, 2008; Oudejans, 2011; Gündoğdu, 2016; Plaetzer, 2018). This phenomenological turn has been significant in realising that Arendt’s critique of statelessness and rightlessness, particularly as it appears in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, was not merely a critique of modern nationhood and the human rights discourse, but also a means to define an existential situation – namely, *worldlessness*. In this regard, Arendt’s interpretation of the phenomenon of world relates to her personal experience and analysis of statelessness (Young-Bruehl, 1982; Bernstein, 1996; Benhabib, 2004).

The deep existential importance of the phenomenon of world was initially made apparent to Arendt in her study, not of the Greek *polis*, but of Nazi concentration camps. Nowhere else, she argues, was a ‘phantom world’ so intense (ibid., p. 438-447; see also Arendt, 1994, p. 232-47). At first, Arendt notes how memories of these camps were difficult to articulate and comprehend by observers and by survivors, who seemed unable to fully believe their own tragedy (1994, p. 242). Reality itself appears to have been rendered ‘a mass of incomprehensible data’ (1978, p. 445). People in these camps were thereby denied any form of political or even ‘human’ recognition: ‘the human masses sealed off in them are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead’ (ibid.). The concept of rightlessness implies being stripped of all those meaningful qualities that make human beings individuals and conceivably human. To this end, the very source of human life, *natality*, which manifests as human spontaneity, that is, as ‘man’s power to begin something new out of his own resources’ (1978, p. 455), is repressed. The concept of worldlessness, as per Arendt, thus attempts to depict an epistemological and ontological framework whereby the ‘feeling for reality’ or, following Kant, one’s ‘common sense’ is rendered mute (1998, p. 208-9). For this reason, Arendt describes such camps as ‘places of the living dead’ (ibid., p. 437).

Depicting the refugee camp as a ‘zone of indistinction’ between life and death, to use a phrase made popular by Agamben, seems to correspond to the experience of Nazi concentration camps as told by Arendt. And yet, as explored in the previous section, this comparison arguably fails to account for the complexity of refugee camps, including that of the experiences and

activities of their inhabitants. Because the experience of worldlessness is key to her analysis of statelessness and rightlessness, readers of Arendt's early work may overlook what actually underpins the experience of world and worldliness. Indeed, what would the experience of common sense, or a 'feeling for reality,' offer someone in the form of human dignity? Further, what is the relation of the experience of world and political agency?

In an oft-cited sentence, Arendt claims that to 'live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time' (1998, p. 52). From this, we can gather three fundamental worldly characteristics. At its basis, world concerns: (a) the appearance of things, to be taken simply as how something appears to someone; and (b) those things that appear in between people, indeed, that (a) can be shared or held in common by others. Lastly, world refers to (c) the simultaneous experience of relation and separation, which can be explained, more generally, as the fundamental orientation and structure of experience. At its core then, world indicates *a hermeneutical context of objects, interpersonal, and environment relations, as well as logics, into which we are born and in which we live*. To put it another way, world refers to *spaces of meaning*, whereby meaning involves the appearance of things which are intersubjectively conceived and thereby orientated to result in a common or sharable experience.

Certainly, one can be ripped from the world, as is the case in the experience of forced displacement. The forcibly displaced find themselves thrown outside of familiar sociocultural contexts, both material and interpersonal, and of political forms of membership. However, (and this point, I argue, is central to the claims made by proponents of political agency qua the everyday life of refugee camps), one cannot *live* life without continued reference to shared spaces of meaning. As Sophie Loidolt puts it, even prior to 'established or institutionalised' spaces (e.g., what counts as private or public space), spaces of meaning 'primarily unfold in the *experience of an activity*' (2017, p. 129). That is to say, as long as one can labour, work or act, spaces of meaning, i.e., shared worlds, can also take shape.

In what follows then, I will highlight the ways in which the fundamental human activities identified by Arendt as labour, work, and action, relate to each other, and thereby generate a common world in which we live. Lastly, I will argue that world-building (as in, political agency) concerns not only this spatial logic of activities, but also their logic of visibility, that is, how these activities appear to others. Thus I seek to demonstrate how human activities which are part and parcel of everyday life can appear and thereby stand as the actions of political agents.

The Logic of Activity: Labour, Work and Action

Because action corresponds to the human condition of plurality, it appears most closely associated by Arendt and by her readers with the existence of political agency. This is correct insofar that acting and speaking primarily facilitates the recognition of an individual in their unique *distinctness*, as a who over a what. Moments of action and speech produce what Arendt calls the ‘space of appearance’ (1998, p. 199), that is, in reference to the appearance of an individual that provokes recognition and judgement of a shared reality. Thus deeds and words illuminate not only doers/speakers, as it were, but also a common world that lies in between them. The space of appearance is thus a moment of ‘actualised plurality’ (Loidolt, 2017, p. 2).

Yet, while plurality may be the sufficient condition of action, and while action itself only requires the human condition of ‘natality’ (Katz, 2015), neither action nor natality are the only necessary conditions for *the sustained or enduring appearance of politics* or for world-building; alternatively, as Loidolt puts it, for a ‘real public!’ (2017, p. 134). Instead, I contend, politics requires the conditions of life and worldliness effected respectively by the activities of labour and work, which thereby *enhance and consolidate* such meaningful appearances.

Take for instance lip-sewing, a form of action which has become one of the few means for the stateless to protest their abhorrent treatment and insert themselves into the public space of appearance. By lip-sewing, the Woomera refugees in April 2003 rebelled against the desperate oblivion of incarceration by the Australian state (Gündoğdu, 2016, p. 160). This protest is demonstrative of, as Judith Butler would put it, ‘precarious’ bodies acting politically by ‘acting in concert’ (2015, p. 75). However, lip-sewing in and of itself would have little impact if it fails to stimulate talk, outrage and a broader network of solidarity (Owens, 2009, p. 578). The case of lip-sewing, therefore, highlights the space of appearance as transient and its political implications, though boundless, as fragile. These actions are rendered meaningless without ‘a medium where reaction becomes a chain reaction’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 190). Thus Owens argues that ‘[t]o engage in political action is to participate in founding and sustaining a common, political world that can last longer than a natural human life,’ to which she adds, ‘[t]his is partly a matter of the inherent artificiality of politics’ (2009, p. 578).

An important methodological point of comparison and contrast is to be made here. Owens argues that ‘[t]o speak and act in public is to wear a kind of ‘mask’ – a public persona that is ‘given and guaranteed by the body politic’, not the natural body’ (ibid.). While I do not fundamentally disagree with her interpretation, I propose to avoid interpreting Arendt’s distinction between the ‘natural body’ and the ‘artificiality of politics’ as a mutually exclusive

one. Rather, I would argue that they are co-dependent: the human condition of plurality depends on the creation of a world *via* work for optimum flourishing, while the experience of a common world (i.e., reality) depends on genuinely positive experiences derived from life-sustaining activities *via* labour. The notion of world-building thereby seeks to reclaim and explicate the co-dependence of human activities and human conditions.

Despite it seeming a chore and ‘given over to machines most readily’ (Ring, 1989, p. 435), labour is an activity fundamental to a full-fledged experience of the common world. Labour not only sustains life, in the most practical sense, by attending to the exigencies of the body, but, by way of its cyclical temporality, it is indispensable for cultivating a sense of trust and sensory pleasure in the reality of life. A society without labour, Arendt claims, ‘would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the *specifically human* life of its very liveliness and vitality’ (1998, p. 120). Labour is indispensable to instilling in all of us a fundamental sense of belonging to the earth (Curtis, 1999, p. 44-6). Thus, as Arendt continues to argue, ‘the price for absolute freedom from necessity is, in a sense, life itself, or rather the substitution of vicarious life with real life’ (1998, p. 120). Indeed, as the condition of life, labour intensifies our sense of reality, fundamental to worldliness.

Arendt’s argument finds corroboration in the multiple ways in which refugee camps suspend and even violate the grounds for the inhabitants to labour and thereby frustrate this sense of ‘being alive.’ Through impromptu head counts, corralling, as well as the supplanting of the need for labour activities by humanitarian aid and administration, camps ‘are characterised by a disruption of the basic activities, rhythms, and cycles of life that we take for granted’ (Gündoğdu, 2016, p. 141). Time, which is configured by a sense of waiting (presumably, to return home), seems to drag on; even the opportunity for leisure feels like a burden, ‘an abundance of meaningless free time’ (ibid., p. 143). As Agier puts it, ‘...by waiting, what [inhabitants] experience here, in the camp where they have ended up, has no meaning, no legible existence,’ only ‘interminable insomnia’ (2011, p. 72). Alternatively, there is a danger when labour, as orientated exclusively towards life as the basic survival of the body, takes priority over any other consideration or human activity. Because the humanitarian perspective frequently positions refugee camp inhabitants in a persistent state of emergency survival (Redfield, 2005), camps can become spaces in which refugees find themselves existentially stunted, indeed, ‘imprisoned in [their] metabolism’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 115). This points to the fact that, despite the importance of labour to a *specifically human* life, there remains a need for other activities, such as work.

Work, according to Arendt, consists of making things, such as building a house, writing a poem, or even, according to some of her readers, designing laws. There is a distinct spatiotemporal difference between labour and work: labour is an activity bound to the perpetual motion of production and consumption, whereas work is temporally finite and produces things according to the categories of means and ends. Moreover, work destroys nature in order to shape it into a more *stable* environment and thereby a more *habitable* world for human beings – this environment's capacity to withstand natural deterioration is what, in part, makes it a world or 'dwelling place' which can endure beyond the lifespan of a human (ibid., p. 152). Thus work relates most closely to the human condition of worldliness, for it erects the spatiotemporal conditions of permanence through which spaces of meaning can take form and flourish.

'Needless to say, refugees do not simply accept the conditions of the camps as passive victims, and many do struggle to overcome them' (Gündoğdu, 2016, p. 144). The examples offered by Gündoğdu – namely, engaging in commercial activities and organising the camp in inventive ways – correspond to the reported experiences of those living in 'the Jungle.' Here, despite great and pressing obstacles, the residents of refugee camps demonstrably strived to recover some semblance of a 'normal' (i.e., stable and habitable) life. In many cases, camp inhabitants are, partially and with great struggle, reclaiming, the 'habitual fabric of everyday life' (ibid., p. 143) and, in doing so, they are 'gradually re-establishing the social texture that they lost with their displacement' (Sanyal, 2013, p. 569). Not only can the pains of life be put at some ease, but the environment can be shaped in anticipation of and response to communal events, experiences and action. In phenomenological terms, by way of the refugee camp, stateless persons may establish a structure and orientation in response to shared experiences and appearances. In turn, spaces of meaning are created as residents better equip the spaces assigned to them, in accordance with their socially and culturally-informed needs and desires.

The seemingly enterprising spirit of camp inhabitants to labour and work in what few available spaces they have, with or without permission from proper authorities, relates fundamentally to the human conditions of life, worldliness and plurality. The destruction of 'the Jungle' resulted not only in the dispersal of stateless persons throughout Europe, but also in the erasure of having a place in the world. This analysis intends to go some way in showing that the characterisation of Arendt as a political theorist concerned only for action, an apparently exceptional activity that verges on or depicts the ancient Greek heroic, is misleading. If we take seriously her goal to understand the *vita activa* in its full complexity and dignity, that includes the activities of labour, work and hence the matters of life and

worldliness. Understood in this way, labour and work, like action, *are* political activities when they are structured and orientated towards the conditions for a political life – indeed, as activities of world-building. The structure and orientation of world-building further concerns, as I will finally argue, their particular mode of visibility.

The Logic of Visibility: The Political Agency of World-Building

The conjunction of fundamental human activities notwithstanding, world-building operates according to a logic of visibility. In *The Human Condition*, as in *Origins*, Arendt addresses the significance of rethinking politics to the problem of worldlessness, a kind of unreality which she links here not to totalitarianism, but to the rise of ‘the social.’ The social, in brief, refers to a space ‘which is neither public nor private’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 28) and is likened to the activities, problems and organisational devices of ‘housekeeping’ (ibid., p. 38). Thus the social convenes neither on a space of *invisibility*, that would protect us from the gaze of the many, nor on a space of visibility that would engage the looks of many; the lines between the private and the public are blurred. In contrast, the logic of visibility refers to the dynamics by which we (a plurality of people) are able to grant meaning to things, spaces and the actions of individuals. That is to say, visibility (the public) is stimulated insofar as we are compelled to question ‘how [the world] is to look’ and ‘what kind of things are to appear in it’ (Arendt, 2006, p. 220).

In the following, I will show how even seemingly ordinary activities can structure and orient the visibility of certain spaces and activities – this, I argue, is in effect what Arendt calls *world-building*. Thus, granted their public orientation, certain activities of even refugee camp residents can shine forth in an extra-ordinary manner, one which could be interpreted as political agency. In modern times, the sustained existence of politics or a ‘real public!’ suffers not from the lack of human activity, but from the failure of these activities to occur in spaces of proper visibility. What Arendt thus strives to understand in looking to the example of the ancient Greeks are the ways in which the distinction between the private and the public converges on the creation of proper modes of visibility.

The territorial reification of the private and the public in spaces of the household and the *polis* represents but one means of world-building, which Arendt pointedly describes as the Greek solution: ‘Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent action could take place’ (1998, p. 194). Reading of this private-public distinction as an ontological (and thus normative) distinction has been cause for much criticism of Arendt. But, as Patchen Markell notes, the focus on the ‘location’ of the private

and the public presents only a partial picture of the human condition ‘to the point of distortion’ (2011, p. 16). In fact, establishing the common world need not be so utilitarian, nor indeed conservative. To this end, Markell proposes that we focus more on the ‘phenomenality’ of artefacts and human activities, and thereby their ability to appear in a public manner. His suggestion that we read the activity of work in a *non-reductive* and *anti-territorial* way invites us to conceive of the relation between life, world and plurality differently – not only as a relation of stability and reification in the harnessing of labour, but also as a relation of provocation and response in the prospect of action (ibid., p. 36, see also Zuckerwise, 2016).

The human activity of work creates walls not simply to enclose the private from the public, but ‘to connect the private to the public’ (ibid., p. 26). Drawing from Greek antiquity, Arendt’s definition of the private is not the inverse of the public, as in the case of private capital, rather it is a constituent of public life: ‘Originally,’ she notes, ‘property meant no more or less than to have one’s location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic’ (1958, p. 61). The reification of work thus concerns more than the transformation of earth into a ‘durable institutional home’ (Markell, 2011, p. 35). Work is a *relational* activity which imparts a public and thereby *visual* dimension to private space; take for instance, the exterior face of the walls of one’s property. Moreover, the visibility of the things we create is intimately tied to the visibility of an actor or political agent – that is, the one who must ultimately pass through the walls of the private into the public. All that we do create already ‘strain[s] towards the vocabulary of [action]’ (ibid., p. 27).

In this regard, world-building effects what Arendt describes as a *transfiguration of things*, which has political implications in its capacity to draw in the attention of others. The notion stems from Arendt’s shift in focus from an analysis of making explicitly instrumental things (e.g., a table) to the work of art. Art is ‘strictly without any utility whatsoever’ and yet, it is ‘the most intensely worldly of all tangible things,’ she claims (1998, p. 167). The work of art draws us in for its beauty is ‘tangibly present’ (or real) in its capacity ‘to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 168). Art thereby encourages – *entices*, even – people to look at and judge what stands before them as well as those activities that occur in and around them.

According to Arendt, however, the power which inheres in works of art is ultimately to be found in everything; for ‘[e]verything that is must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own.’ To this she adds, ‘there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen’ (ibid., p. 172-3). The transfiguration of things (even people)

provokes the attention of and an engagement with others, which can result in a need for their perseverance as objects or stories that transcend time (Arendt, 2006, p. 205). Labour and work are acts of world-building insofar as they are orientated towards making, facilitating and preserving a highly visible world.

Following Arendt, we can begin to understand how ‘the Jungle,’ as a makeshift camp resulting from state abandonment, became a site of everyday life and political agency. Within the camp, political agency was manifest through creative activities and gestures, including, hand-scrawled images on shelters accompanied by symbols and flags of original and desired nationalities as well as humorous names for places (e.g., ‘The Jungle Books’ or ‘David Cameron Street’), all of which constituted *work* and participation in the design of the camp (Katz, 2017a, p. 6). The logic of activity is at play as long as this *work* – namely, the creation of a *habitable* environment – establishes a more enduring and familiar, even though precarious, world: shelters ‘were constantly adapted, moved and changed in reaction to specific needs, individual tastes and violent acts’ (Mould, 2017, p. 14) and a particular, political aesthetic of protest emerged (Rigby and Schlembach, 2012). Additionally, the *labour* involved in, say, making tea provided more than basic sustenance. The rather mundane rhythms of such routines, the communal and perhaps more intimate interactions it facilitates and encourages, break up the process of waiting, generate social meaning and thereby instil a sense of belonging in the camp.

To reiterate: the conjunction of fundamental human activities notwithstanding, world-building operates according to a logic of visibility. The activities involved in the construction and personalisation of the camp environment inspired solidarity, not only in terms of humanitarian aid and provisions, but in terms of public debate and collaboration. The graffiti, the tending to small gardens, and the display of bright material prints on shelter walls were each a ‘response to their need to live in an environment that accommodated a more familiar mode of everyday life’ (Katz, 2017a, p. 6; see also Wildschut, 2017), but these artifacts also played a prominent role in visually establishing the Calais camp as a space of *public* and hence *specifically human* life. In response, a plethora of artworks were produced in response to the creation and destruction of the camp by both residents and onlookers, from poems to books, biographies and comics, documentaries (e.g. *Kalès*, 2017), art installations, and even a play. These works, considered together with the construction of the Calais camp itself, constitute a material assemblage of sorts, one that could relate ‘the Jungle,’ otherwise an extra-territorial space of exception, to a wider, common world. As such, the camp could undergo

transfiguration, engendering an Arendtian sense of public visibility – a ‘real public,’ so to speak – and the appearance of political agency.

In the wake of the refugee camp’s violent destruction, these artefacts, events and, more generally, the generated and shared narratives around these activities, have the potential to extend the memory of ‘the Jungle’ as a significant space of social and political life, indeed, a place inhabited by political agents. But, along with the memory of ‘the Jungle’ as a space of *world-building*, there endures a critical acknowledgment of the camp as a space of suffering and deprivation – in other words, as a space of *worldlessness* (i.e. the loss of one’s grasp for reality). However, I would stress that the experience of worldlessness, symptomatic of the processes of world destruction, is not mutually exclusive to activities and processes of world-building. Rather, especially in such extreme circumstances, I propose that there persists a continuous negotiation from one experience to the other, prompted by the inevitable creation of spaces of meaning by way of the human activities of labour, work and even action. The destruction of ‘the Jungle’ is therefore constitutive of the destruction of a tentative, fallible ‘world’ built by stateless persons and those in solidarity with them.

CONCLUSION

Turning to the everyday life of refugee camps can illuminate the multiple ways in which residents can appropriate and rescript the material and institutional structures of these sites, rendering them into more durable, culturally familiar and symbolic spaces. By looking to ‘the Jungle’ in France as an example, this bottom-up approach conceivably highlights two significant dynamics. First, it is clear that some refugee camps, which would initially be depicted as sterile and rigid spaces, no longer quite *look* like camps. Instead, they have ascertained and evolved as artefacts and as sites of human action. Born of practicality, cultural traditions, or political symbolism, they ultimately resist the humanitarian regimes of standardisation in ‘prefabricated camps’ (Katz, 2017b). Second, these material transformations, regardless of their ordinary nature, have both responded to and themselves produced developments in social and political dynamics. As such, these transformations not only *reflect*, but potentially *effect* the construction of new social and political identities that go beyond those typically attributed to the refugee by humanitarian and state agents. These refugee camps have been transformed and re-scripted in ways that meet and reflect the new, multiple, and sometimes paradoxical demands, claims and political positions of their complex populations and diverse inhabitants. To use again the expression of Abourahme (2014, p. 202), the ‘material-lived’ spills over into the ‘symbolic-political,’ and vice versa. Refugee camps by

way of material transformation, have been interpreted as spaces of social life and political activity, and their inhabitants as political agents.

A relationship thus emerges between the activities of everyday life and the manifestation of political agency – a relationship that had yet, in this context, to be lucidly conceptualised. Without their own conceptual arsenal, the proponents of the everyday life approach are put at odds with the Agambenian critique of sovereign powers. While the Agambenian analysis is by no means mistaken, its insistence upon the legalist or state-oriented interpretation of human rights and politics, fails to do justice to the details of the bigger picture and subsequently renders the political agency of camp inhabitants' activities invisible.

The choice of the writings of Hannah Arendt as a theoretical alternative initially stems from her personal experience of statelessness and critique of rightlessness, but more so, for her phenomenologically-inspired account of the human condition – an account which is based on the phenomenality of fundamental human activities (i.e., labour, work, and action) and their modes of visibility. While I build upon a novel reading of her work, it is a reading that takes seriously the implications of daily activities on human life and the grounds for political expression, namely, the human world and plurality. As I have argued, it is the concept of world-building that conveys best the junction at which these fundamental activities and their (in)visibility meet in order to effect sustained political activity. Indeed, by means of world-building, camp inhabitants effect the potential to be seen and heard by others – namely, by those outside of the camp – in a manner which recognises them not as bodies-in-need, but as individual persons with a particular historical, sociocultural and identity.

To regard refugee camps as places of world-building, even when put into relation with such concepts as home and solidarity, is not to romanticise the refugee camp. It is to acknowledge that varying forms of citizenship (or, more broadly, of political belonging) can arise in such contexts, and that claims to human rights and human dignity can be made with legitimacy though without appeal to frameworks and conventions of the nation state. The fact that citizenship, as a concept, has been employed within recent colonial history as a marker of civility and western European ideas of progress, thereby construing anything falling outside of its frame of reference as 'barbaric,' indicates the need to look at these barbaric contexts as potentially political ones, and at the people within them not as 'primitives,' but as political agents (Isin, 2002, p. 117). Reflecting again on 'the Jungle' – a supposedly uninhabitable, wild and barbaric space, implied by its very name – it becomes apparent that such autonomous creations have the effect of challenging formal legal status as the sole measure by which to recognise political agents.

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i The name 'Jungle' has a number of undesirable orientalist connotations, which owes to my cautious use of the term. In its suggestion of a chaotic and lawless space, in which inhabitants are depicted as animals, the name given to the informal camp affirms the racist oppositions between the 'dark' subcontinents of the global south and the cultural order of European civilisations. Another origin story relates the name to the Pashto word *jangal*, meaning, forest. When asked, forced migrants in Calais would explain to reporters and volunteers that they live 'tou *jangal* [in the forest].'

ii The distinction between a 'logic of activity' and a 'logic of visibility' was inspired by Sophie Loidolt in her ground-breaking text, *The Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity* (2017). In making this distinction, Loidolt attempts to highlight how spaces of meaning are generated and oriented not only by way of activity, but also visibility. 'Visibility-based meaning-spaces,' as she puts it, 'have their ground in the event of appearance as such and in the basic fact of plurality. What orients and forms the space in [this] case is not primarily an activity but the looks of the many or protection from the looks of the many' (ibid., p. 138). Here, my goal is to assess how the respective logics are able to play out in very real contexts of refugee camps and, in doing so, to challenge more traditional applications of visibility-based spaces of meaning in terms of private and public space.