

Miracles in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt and Refugees as ‘Vanguard’

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The radical uncertainty that refugees face because of war, flight and exile often dramatically shapes their participation in society. Violent conflict and human rights abuses are not just disproportionately experienced by, but can also create, political subjects. Such life events can transform the motivations, sense of responsibility and political actions of individuals with refugee backgrounds. In this article, we explore the links between civil–political engagement and the life stories of such individuals, analysing our empirical data through themes in the work of Hannah Arendt. We make three central points. First, we highlight the possibility of refugees as ‘vanguard’, playing a leading role in the struggle against dark times. Second, we illustrate the importance of expanding the idea of ‘the political’ through Arendt’s understanding of political action as narrative. And, third, we explore the political freedom and hope that stem from the possibility of ‘new beginnings’.

Keywords: Refugees, Hannah Arendt, political subjecthood, vanguard

Introduction

Political subjects not only disproportionately experience violent conflict and human rights abuses, but such experiences simultaneously also further create political subjects (Salih 2013; Näsström 2015; Horst 2019). Refugees’ experiences of dehumanizing events can transform motivation, create a sense of responsibility and spur political action in a wide range of ways. In this article, we explore the links between present-day civil–political engagement by individuals with refugee backgrounds and their life stories, using themes in the work of Hannah Arendt. In what way does the moral shock of political evil—in Arendt’s time illustrated by genocide and statelessness—trigger political subjecthood? How do such moral and political miracles inform

intersubjective acts of speech and action? And how do hopeful visions of the future contribute to this process?

Horrific acts of violence and their consequences take centre stage in endeavours to understand the societal impacts of war. The precariousness that conflict and displacement create reconfigures societies in abrupt, dramatic and contradictory ways and thus the experience of uncertainty increases drastically (Butler 2004). Such permanent risk and uncertainty are existential conditions—that is, fundamental experiential realms of human existence (Bauman 2007). However, the experience of violence, the need to take risks in times of war, as well as the speed and unpredictability of unfolding events create an experience of radical uncertainty that is unique to the refugee experience (Horst and Grabska 2015).

In the context of war and violent conflict, the need to act is often urgent, but action can be difficult because of a dearth of information and the extreme unpredictability of the future. Yet, it is exactly in this uncertainty that the potential for innovation and societal transformation exists (Horst and Grabska 2015; Horst 2019). While the changing nature of things can lead some to desire to hold onto the familiar and resist transformation, it also creates space for negotiation and opportunities to push for change by those who do not conform to what is considered the norm (Grabska and Fanjoy 2015). Hence, Arendt's (1943/2007) figure of the refugee as 'vanguard', as 'conscious pariah' bravely leading the way towards new developments and ideas, helps us to theorize the creative potential of radical uncertainty in new ways.¹

Within studies of war and suffering, future-oriented moral and political action is rarely theorized even though it *is* present in people's everyday reality during and after war (Horst 2019). During and after atrocities, some individuals take care of and protect others, often at great personal risk. The existential shock of witnessing abuses of human dignity and human rights, as well as the loss of citizenship rights and the protection of the state, can motivate human beings to act long after such experiences (Lysaker 2015). These individual experiences of shock and loss cannot merely be understood in terms of existential uncertainty and vulnerability; they also function as a potential call to act (Beltrán 2009; Gilson 2013: 135; Näsström 2015). In Arendt's political thought after the Holocaust, we find the same dynamic between vulnerability and potentiality, or 'darkness' and 'illumination', in Arendt's words. In her book, *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt claims that, even in situations of political evil, there are those who function as moral exemplars:

even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth (Arendt 1968: ix, emphasis added; see Arendt 2005: 112).

We start with an exploration of Arendt's work on the figure of the refugee and her contribution to understandings of the political subject (Beltrán 2009; Näsström 2015). We argue that Arendt understands political subjecthood in democratic spaces in a *broad* sense (Zerilli 2005: 20) as speech and action, which we take to involve both narrative and communicative aspects (Benhabib 1996: 25; see also Kristeva 2001; Jackson 2002). Here, this 'broad' notion of democratic spaces refers to a wide range of meeting places across the often-assumed divide between the private and the public, such as 'coffeehouses, living rooms, kitchens, and street corners' (Zerilli 2005: 20). In Arendt's view, humans are free to act and interact politically and, in this way, to instigate new beginnings. Their doing so, especially in 'dark times', can be understood in terms of miracles, of bringing hope into the world.

The article draws not only on an Arendtian theoretical framework, but also on 15 life histories, collected through interviews with residents of Oslo, Norway, with refugee backgrounds.² These individuals fled war and violent conflict in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Palestine and Somalia, and the majority of them are now citizens of Norway. They came to Norway between 1987 and 2013, most of them as adults, and the majority have now lived in Norway for over 20 years. The article also builds on insights gained from in-depth ethnographic work and life-history research with Somali refugees in a range of contexts since 1995.³ Based on qualitative data analysis, we explore themes such as 'critical events', 'sense of (dis)empowerment', 'motivations for political action', 'understandings of responsibility' and 'perspectives on creating change'.

We present our empirical data to illustrate how these reflect Arendt's idea of miracles in dark times. We first explain the sense of the necessity to act that is often strongly present in refugee life stories due to refugees' political positions before violent conflict and/or their experiences during conflict and flight. The sense of personal responsibility, of the necessity of moral political speech and action, is closely related to Arendt's descriptions of refugees as vanguards. We then show the importance of Arendt's insistence that political action is narrative action in word and deed by discussing the many ways in which those we interviewed assert their identity and history in a new context. After that, we illustrate the importance of hope through the potential for new beginnings in the actions of those with refugee backgrounds. In conclusion, we summarize the main ways in which an Arendtian approach to political subjecthood contributes to our analysis of refugees as political subjects.

The Refugee as Vanguard: Miracles and Hope in Political Spaces of Appearance

In Arendt, the dynamic between 'darkness' and 'illumination' is discussed at least as early as in her 1951 book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which is on

evil and dehumanization as well as the breakdown of citizenship, dignity and human rights (Arendt 1951: 299). Even at the very end of this book on such dark times, Arendt expresses hope by finishing with the following words: ‘Beginning [anew] ... is the supreme capacity of man; politically it is identical with ... freedom’, which is ‘guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed [by] every man’ (Arendt 1951: 479). Arendt is preoccupied not only with dark times, but also with what she terms ‘miracles’ and ‘hope’ for the future, which is stated in her later book, *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958: 246–247). She is concerned not only with the breakdown of citizenship rights and the loss of home, occupation, language and community, but also with what she takes to be humans’ freedom in terms of natality.

The Refugee as Vanguard

Arendt touches upon this complex dynamic even in one of her earlier essays, *We Refugees* (1943), which she wrote during the period in which she herself was a stateless refugee. We are especially interested in Arendt’s statement that ‘[r]efugees driven from country to country represent the *vanguard* of their peoples’ (Arendt 1943/2007: 274, emphasis added; Lysaker 2015). A vanguard is a group of people leading the way towards new developments or ideas; it means to be in the front, or at the frontier, of something or someone and is etymologically linked to the term ‘avant-garde’ (Heuer 2007; see also Agamben 1995: 114, 118). According to Arendt, therefore, ‘what is required is not refugee policies but *political action by the refugees*, and that politics should be a matter for the citizens themselves’ (Heuer 2007: 1171, emphasis added). Refugees as vanguard can ‘gain a new standing vis-à-vis contemporary democratic states’, which implies that ‘[r]ather than being passive victims of a politics of exclusion they become *political agents in their own right*, capable of bringing something into being which did not exist before’ (Näsström 2015: 550, emphasis added).

Arendt also describes those in this group of vanguards as being ‘conscious pariahs’ rather than ‘parvenus’ (Arendt 2007: xxviii, xlii–xliii, nt. 48 at lv, 274, 276) because they choose not to be silent and not to forget, although this is what society expects them to do. They are people who, by retaining their identity, represent the vanguard of their people:

Those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of ‘indecency’, get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of gentiles (Arendt 1943/2007: 274).

By speaking up, then, these particular refugees claim history to be open to being rewritten and politics to be a space for everyone to appear and be included. By insisting on their own identity and reflecting on past suffering, they are also ‘oriented towards the *future*, towards the *politically* engaged

question of what can be *done* and what can be *hoped* for' (Curthoys 2010: 121, emphasis added; see also Heuer 2007).

As mentioned above, this kind of prospective hope is contingent upon the human condition of natality. By natality, Arendt means several things, such as being born into a shared world and, through becoming newly born, introducing something entirely unique into that world with respect to an individual's diverse characteristics (i.e. the human condition of plurality). The human condition of natality, to Arendt, is what she terms as 'new beginnings' or 'beginning anew', which involves a freedom to act, but also to raise questions about customs or traditions and a capacity to introduce innovative and unpredicted ways of acting and interacting in the world. Arendt relates the human condition of natality not only to the freedom to act in general, but also to politics and political subjecthood in particular. Arendt argues that '[s]ince action is the *political activity par excellence*, natality ... must be the central category of [the] political' (Arendt 1958: 9, emphasis added). In turn, this natality-based freedom identifies a faculty that creates miracles and hope through speech and action, which, according to Arendt, is important to re-establish institutional frameworks within which political subjecthood can yet again take place (Bowen-Moore 1989: 19–20, 47; Birmingham 2006: 70; Parekh 2008: 8–9). It is in fact this complex dynamic between negative and positive phenomena, between 'darkness' and 'illumination', fundamental to the human condition, which is at the heart of the Arendtian vision.

We learn from Arendt how rare and brave the particular figure of the refugee as a vanguard is. She describes how most people who have experienced violent conflicts and human rights abuses, who have lost their homes, occupation, language, relatives and friends, choose to forget their identity and history, to forget all the things that have previously been existentially meaningful to them. They do so because, in the societies in which they now live, no one wants to listen:

In order to forget more efficiently we rather avoid any allusion to concentration or internment camps we experienced in nearly all European countries—it might be interpreted as pessimism or a lack of confidence in the new homeland. ... Apparently nobody wants to know that contemporary history has created a new kind of human beings [*sic*—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends (Arendt 1943/2007: 265).

Democracy as Narrative Action in 'Spaces of Appearance'

In what follows, we read Arendt as a theorist of *political subjecthood*—even in dark times. What we mean by this term is the way people act, and interact, to attempt to change the conditions and quality of their lives; it is all the things that constitute a human life and make it existentially meaningful through active participation (Barnett 2012: 679; Häkli and Kallio 2014: 183; Lysaker 2015). Here, too, to be a political subject should be conceived against

the backdrop of the human condition of natality. By defining political subjecthood in this way, Arendt challenges traditional liberal understandings of politics primarily taking place in formal, public arenas (e.g. parliaments or courts) (Zerilli 2005: 20; Brennan 2017). The Arendtian definition is promising for understanding the figure of the refugee as pariah as well as vanguard, whose contributions, by definition, have a place not only in formal, but also in informal—what we above referred as ‘broad’—public arenas (Zerilli 2005: 20).

Arendt relates political subjecthood to what can be described as narrative action (Benhabib 1996: 125). According to her, one of the conditions for being human is to act and speak ‘in concert’ (Arendt 1970: 44). Or, as she puts it: ‘With speech and action we *insert* ourselves *into* the human world’ (Arendt 1958: 177, emphasis added). Thus, Arendtian politics relates action and interaction to the very basic and diverse ways in which we all develop ourselves through relationships and interactions with others. Through this communicative engagement with the distinctiveness and plurality of other people, we develop our self-understanding, including political opinions and actions: ‘In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world’ as political subjects (Arendt 1958: 179).

In *We Refugees*, Arendt (1943/2007: 269) illustrates the many ways in which refugees—in her case Jewish refugees across Europe in the early 1940s—are denied the opportunity to insert themselves into the world, because they are expected not to show who they are:

Once we could buy our food and ride on the subway without being told we were undesirable. We have become a little hysterical since newspapermen started detecting us and telling us publicly to stop being disagreeable when shopping for milk and bread. We wonder how it can be done; we already are so damnablely careful in every moment of our daily lives to avoid anybody guessing who we are, what kind of passport we have, where our birth certificates were filled out—and that Hitler didn’t like us.

How do some individuals with refugee backgrounds still claim their identity and history, show who they are and make their appearance in the world, when there are such strong forces encouraging them not to? Arendt suggests that one way is through storytelling and generally ‘in artistic transposition of individual experiences’ (Arendt 1958: 50; see also Benhabib 1996; Kristeva 2001). Storytelling is an intersubjective practice where individual real-life experiences acquire meaning for both the teller and the listener. It bridges private individualized passions and collective, shared views in public (Jackson 2002; see also Brennan 2017). Individual experience is given public meaning through the intersubjective relation created by the storytelling situation.

In this view, a transformation takes place through what ‘appears in public’ and hence is both ‘seen and heard by everybody’ (Arendt 1958: 50). As a result, according to Arendt, one can enhance one’s current life situation to

the extent that one can tell one's co-citizens a story or express oneself narratively (Benhabib 1996: 125). Julia Kristeva takes this argument further when she states that 'there is no life ... except the political life', which, in her reading of Arendt, implies that 'there is no life except in and through narrative rebirth' (Kristeva 2001: 48). If so, an individual's narrative and existence as a communicative being in the world are in and of themselves political.

Storytelling is 'a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's *experiences* of the world' (Jackson 2002: 36, emphasis in original). The storytelling process can also be transformative for the listener, who gains access to alternative visions of not only past, but also future. Thus, Arendt's political thought rests on humans' capacity to act narratively and potentially transformatively and, in so doing, to insert themselves in the world by sharing their personal and collective narratives—in short, by storytelling.

In Arendt, political subjecthood is viewed as dependent on what she calls 'spaces of appearance'. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt has in mind several characteristics. First, she defines a space of appearance 'in the *widest* sense of the word' (Arendt 1958: 198, emphasis added; see also p. 50), namely as 'the space where I appear to others as others appear to me'. This implies that a space of appearance is 'where men exist ... [and] make their appearance explicitly' (Arendt 1958: 198–199). Second, a space of appearance both '*pre-dates* and *precedes* all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government', namely 'the various forms in which the public realm can be organized' (Arendt 1958: 199, emphasis added). Consequently, such a space 'can find its proper location almost *any time* and *anywhere*' in terms of men's togetherness in the manner of speech and action (Arendt 1958: 198, 199, emphasis added). Since the Arendtian notion of a space of appearance is situated 'wherever' and 'whenever' humans appear to each other politically through speech and action, it is also in this sense exercised *across* the private/public divide (Hull 2002: 130, 144–145, 160; Owens 2004: 289; Zerilli 2005: 20; Brennan 2017).

One way in which Arendt underscores this characteristic is, in her posthumously published book, *The Promise of Politics*, where she describes a space of appearance as 'wherever human beings come together—be it private or socially, be it in public or politically—a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates' (Arendt 2005: 10). Arendt argues that exercising political subjecthood in the public presupposes elements and activities within the private sphere, such as love and reproduction (Hull 2002: 130, 144–145, 160). Thus, we challenge many traditional readings of Arendt, as her concept of a space of appearance moves beyond the liberal dichotomy between the private and the public, which argues that politics primarily is conditioned by the latter sphere (Hull 2002: 130, 144–145, 160; Owens 2004: 289; Zerilli 2005: 20; Brennan 2017).

The Political Freedom of Natality: Miracles and Hope

Yet another significant feature of the way in which Arendt approaches what political subjecthood is and how it takes place is the precondition of *freedom*. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt introduces a list of so-called human conditions that, ontologically speaking, are certain preconditions for being human in a shared world (Arendt 1958: 9–10). Here, freedom is among these preconditions, which Arendt understands as follows: ‘the *new beginning* inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of *acting*’ (Arendt 1958: 9, emphasis added).

To practise this natality-based freedom in actual cases, one must have, according to Arendt, ‘the right to have rights’, which is grounded in at least two requirements. First, active citizens should be ascribed ‘the right of every individual to belong to humanity’, which ‘should be guaranteed by humanity itself’ (Arendt 1951: 298). Second, political subjecthood presupposes that one ‘belong[s] to some kind of organized community’, within which ‘one is judged by one’s actions and opinions’ (Arendt 1951: 296–297). If we link this idea of a fundamental right to the concepts of both political expression and active participation in organized communities, we recognize that this right is fundamental, irrespective of whether one is member of, say, a political party, a civil society organization or a citizen. For Arendt, to possess such a right is to be able to practise the freedom, which comes with the human condition of natality, of being born into a shared world as well as narratively interacting within it (Birmingham 2006: 34, 57).

To be born means, among other things, to have the freedom to ‘begin anew’: ‘It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before’ (Arendt 1958: 177–178). New people enter the shared world and this can lead to new and unexpected things, creating miracles and hope for the future. As Arendt writes, the ‘fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected’ (Arendt 1958: 178; see also Owens 2012: 554). Arendt claims that there is a mutual and close link between freedom, politics and miracles: ‘If it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties’ (Arendt 1961: 169; see Arendt 1958: 246–247).

Refugee Life Histories: The Responsibility to Act

The existential shock of witnessing abuses of human dignity and human rights can give individuals a sense of the necessity of moral action. These individual experiences during periods of extremity create existential uncertainties and vulnerability, but also function as a call to action for those and their families who experienced them (Horst 2019). This call can impel individuals

to act politically long after their experiences of dark times. While the fact that people's life stories can influence their civic virtue and motivation is not unique to refugees, the dehumanizing realities that refugees experience can shape their engagement in dramatic ways. Many individuals with refugee backgrounds, whose life histories we solicited, were strongly inspired by visions of society based on justice and equality while they were also occupied with their own role and responsibility in contributing to this vision. They participated in society in Oslo, Norway, and transnationally in many ways, and they did so with a consciousness of their experience of violent conflict and exile.

Kamaran Kurdi⁴ is a local politician for the Labor Party and provides a range of formal and informal support services for newly arrived refugees and migrants. Alima Husseini runs a kindergarten in one of Oslo's most diverse neighbourhoods and understands her work as vital for bringing up Oslo's new generation of 'bridge-builders' among Oslo's residents of different backgrounds. Forough Sepheri has been involved in anti-racism campaigns from childhood, accompanying her mother, and is now active in other civil rights organizations in Norway. Yassar Al-Hassan is an artist who draws attention to the plight of Palestinian statelessness, while also working on projects that deal with situations of exclusion, discrimination and structural violence. In 2015, he was involved in the Refugees Welcome initiative whereby neighbours provided assistance to the asylum seekers who appeared in front of the local police station when the state could not handle the influx and people were sleeping on the streets.

These are some of the many examples of individuals who feel called to act politically long after they or their families experienced violent conflict, existential losses and flight. We argue that there are two reasons why a disproportionate number of individuals with refugee backgrounds are so inclined to engage politically. First, experiences of violent conflict and human rights abuses disproportionately affect those who were active political subjects in their country of origin (Horst 2013) and, second, such experiences *create* political subjects.

Many of the individuals with refugee backgrounds we interviewed for this project were members of politically active families, where the reason for flight was often related to their own political activism or that of their parents. Bashar Suleiman describes his father as a communist who had values that were marginalized in Palestine and remembers how his father was a political leader who was away a lot to discuss visions of an alternative society based on greater equality between people. Similarly, Alima Husseini says about her father:

During his youth he experienced a lot of injustice, which pushed him into engaging in a political party called the 'People's Party'. He believed in democracy and equality for women, men and children. As young as he was, he became a leader for a party and worked very hard towards his political goals. This

eventually led to his arrest. At that time I was very young, or maybe I was not even born yet, but he was sentenced to hundred days of imprisonment. While my dad himself did not talk about this or share much of his history with us, we were told by our mother and family friends.

Several others who came to Norway over two decades ago as children or young adults shared similar stories. At the same time, they discussed the influence that individual and collective experiences of violent conflict and exile have had on their own political consciousness. As a young man, Bashar Suleiman experienced what it was like not to be free and safe.⁵ He recalls:

I look at the first 14 years of my life and at growing up under occupation in Palestine. That was a very important part of my life and I developed a complete identity and found out that, 'ok, I'm growing up here now, this is a place where I don't have freedom'. You can't go out in the middle of the night in safety, you can suddenly be shot anonymously. Most likely by those occupying or soldiers or whatever, so that has shaped my personality to the largest extent. So I was very occupied with security and freedom while at the same time, when I was 15 years old, I was active politically, in many different activities or political parties in Palestine.

In the Palestinian case, as in several others involving long-standing violent conflicts, not only did those we interviewed describe their *individual* experiences and political awakening, but they also narrated *collective* stories of forced exile and statelessness (Said 1984). Yassar Al-Hassan is an artist who explored the Palestinian reality of statelessness through his art. When he recounts his life history, he tells us:

My family are asylum seekers in Gaza as they had to flee their own land in 1948, when the war against Palestine started. So they fled from a small place ... my grandfather and grandmother and my father and mother, they are from there. So they had to flee to Gaza and live in Gaza as refugees. And I was born as a refugee in Gaza and I came to Norway as refugee and I got a residence permit in Norway. But still, they call me stateless. Even on my residence permit it says I am stateless.

Thus, it becomes clear that political activism creates refugees—as the politically active are the first to be persecuted—while, at the same time, the dehumanizing experiences refugees go through during violent conflict, flight and exile create political actors. This makes it relevant to explore refugees as the vanguard of their people, the avant-garde to be looked towards in dark times.

Refugee Vanguard: Exploring the Necessity to Act

Arendt (1943/2007) argues that there are few refugees who insist upon telling the truth about their experiences and who they are; there are few who insist

upon keeping their history and identity. In her view, the majority try to forget and blend in. If so, the question becomes what it is that drives these exceptional individuals. Forough Sepehri, who describes her parents as political activists and revolutionaries, argues that, besides the fact that she grew up hearing political discussions about class and racism and has inherited a very strong belief in global solidarity from her parents, her activism is a survivor's strategy:

I cannot go out through that door here and leave it behind me, it is with me all the time. So I cannot *not* be engaged because it is as I said a survival strategy. Like this is happening with me, this is happening in our society, what can I do to make the best out of what I have? Or to channel the anger. After all I get angry about this, I do.

Her anger is directed at the injustices and discrimination she sees around her in society, based on skin colour, migration background, gender, sexual preferences and the like. As Forough argues, she *must* channel this anger into acts and speech; she does not necessarily experience this as a choice.

Many of those we talked to describe their political and civic engagements as a duty, or at least a crucial responsibility. Kamaran Kurdi, who has lived in Norway for more than 20 years, explained that, originally, he mainly contributed by helping newcomers to integrate into society. He realized, first after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States and again, with renewed force, after the 2011 terror attacks in Norway, that he had to act in new ways:

If I do not do this, and the others who think in the same way, do not do this, who will do it then? I don't expect an ethnic Norwegian to play this role that I have because I am in this society and that society, isn't it? So that's why I have to do it. I believe I have the obligation after these incidents I mentioned. I feel I have a duty to do it. Not just for my society but for the Norwegian society too. If we want to live together as a community.

Yassar Al-Hassan explains that he has survived so many lethal situations that he feels empowered to do something, especially for those who have been in similar situations. He works with asylum seekers—an engagement that first started through voluntary engagement in 2015 in his own neighbourhood where many asylum seekers were sleeping outside the police station before they could register their asylum claims. The local government was overwhelmed by the numbers and unable to handle the situation. Yassar, as one of many concerned neighbours, supported those coming into the neighbourhood with food and information. He explains:

I know how I experienced it. I understand very well what it means to travel from war and look for a new life, and the journey from your home country to another country. I understand very well what they feel when they have been at sea, for example, two, three, many days and how they think . . . They do not

deserve to sleep outside so we just tried to do something for them. Because they deserve to be in a better situation here in Norway.

Having experienced similar situations, individuals with refugee backgrounds are also often able to understand the particular experiences of asylum seekers and refugees. Furthermore, several of those we spoke to recognize their own privileged position when they explain why they act. Abdallah Sultani, a young Afghan refugee, has been trained in the art of storytelling. After a public performance in Oslo in which he describes his journey from Afghanistan, we ask him how he has experienced working with his own story. He recalls how painful it was, especially in the beginning, to relive his story. We then ask why he chooses to tell his story nevertheless and Abdallah answers:

I tell my story because people need to hear it. I tell my story because it is not just my own story, and because there are many like me who can no longer tell their stories.

Forough, Kamaran, Yassar and Abdallah, each in a unique way, describe the necessity to act. This sense of a duty to act is at times felt in relation to other refugees, whose fates they recognize as their own; they seek to challenge what they see as insufficient or dangerous societal responses to their plight. These individuals provide support to marginalized groups, stepping in when they find that the Norwegian state is providing insufficient support to asylum seekers, for example. However, they also challenge emotions and perspectives in the larger society, by using what Arendt describes as narrative action to address the fear and anger that they experience in their new country of residence from the people around them. The ensuing political action also targets other forms of marginalization and exclusion in society more generally.

Expressing Identities through Narrative Action

As we have shown, Arendt sees political subjecthood as occurring through narrative action. This understanding challenges more narrow definitions of political action as taking place in formal and organized public spheres. While individuals with refugee backgrounds do participate actively in formal spaces of political action—through voting, participating in public debates or taking up political positions, among other activities—many of those we spoke to also reflected consciously on the importance of their daily interactions with others in society.

This can be understood in light of the refugee histories and identities that Arendt argues no one wishes to hear. One of the most difficult aspects of their past that refugees need to process and come to grips with is the dehumanizing treatment they have witnessed and often were exposed to during war and violent conflict. When neighbours and family members stop seeing each other as individuals and start acting in inhuman ways, human dignity

and human rights are at stake. In *We Refugees*, Arendt describes how, in exile, refugees are also often misrecognized as nobodies: ‘Our new friends ... hardly understand that ... once we were *somebodies* about whom people cared, we were loved’ by other people (Arendt 1943/2007: 269, emphasis added). Restoring dignity through everyday actions—such as supporting and helping each other—becomes a crucial way, then, of rebuilding life, both politically and otherwise (Horst 2006). To some, claiming political subjecthood is thus also ultimately about reclaiming humanity.

Additionally, narrative action is often directed at current experiences. Being aware of the direction a society can take and the consequences this can have for certain groups in society, those with refugee backgrounds may be extra alert to societal developments that risk reducing the space for people to insert themselves into the world through speech and action. Kamaran, who is currently engaged in local politics and very active in his local neighbourhood, recalls how he came to take a more active role in Norway:

After 11 September I saw that the world changed, in a way, and perspectives on Muslims changed. And therefore I needed to fight or engage in this field so that I show the right picture of the identities I have ... I have an identity as a Muslim and as a Kurd, so now I fight for both rights and to give the right picture to this society. The picture the society creates in the media is very damaging for us. ... Not just to say but also practice this; that is the best service I have given both my religion and my nation.

Here, we see how the Arendtian idea of expressing one’s unique identity and opinions through speech and action is a way to ‘insert’ oneself into the shared world. By doing so, Arendt continues, humans turn into a political subject, which implies actively revealing oneself through appearance. While Kamaran has taken a political position in his attempts to influence conditions in Norway, he *also*—like many others—challenges the images by which others represent him as a Muslim, an immigrant or a refugee.

One central aspect of such narrative action is simply using speech and action to show society who one is in a way that challenges stereotypical representations. In everyday interactions, individuals express their identities and thereby insist on who they are and on their history as they understand it. Luul Aden works as a nurse in a hospital in Oslo where patients come from all over Norway, many of whom have little to no experience with citizens with a migrant background. She recalls how patients from outside Oslo meet her:

‘but ok, you are of course not a typical Somali’. No, but what is a typical Somali? Is it the way one looks, the way one speaks, how do they know if they have never come across Somalis before? ... And it is very strange that people dare to say ‘but you are very nice’, They are surprised ... And if they leave there with positive thoughts and ideas, then it is as if ... I feel I play a certain

role in society. . . . It is civic engagement to have to represent a whole nation in a good way, and women in a good way and Islam in a good way.

Kamaram and Luul, like many others we talked to, express concern over the increasing incidences of ‘othering’ that they see occurring in Norway and beyond. They describe othering in relation to religious identity, national background and skin colour, but exclusion based on other characteristics (e.g. sexual preferences or gender) are discussed as well. Luul and Kamaram not only register this concern, but also talk about the ways in which they are trying to challenge these developments and realities through everyday speech and action. By inserting themselves into the world, by expressing their identity and perspectives, they aim to claim belonging and inclusion for themselves and others in a wider community. Through such everyday interactions and the ripple effects they may have, those with refugee backgrounds can be the vanguard of new developments and ideas.

Hope in New Beginnings

In line with the capacity to act politically as a free subject, Arendt emphasizes hope, miracles and change. She argues that, through natality, new beginnings are always possible—people can always do the unexpected. At the same time, it is clear from the life stories we have collected that, in order to be able to sustain efforts that challenge forms of marginalization and exclusion in society, individuals need hope. One needs to have a sense of hope—a belief that it is possible to make a difference. When Yassar is asked where he believes the engagement to make a difference comes from, he answers:

It comes from . . . the engagement to change, that comes from people who love life and want to have a better situation and a better life for all. And it comes from . . . it also comes from those who have ambitions to improve the future.

Forough Sepheri explains her dedication to challenging a range of injustices she sees in society—here focusing on exclusion of marginalized groups from public events and research—in similar terms. She also adds how important it is to see that what one does matters:

I think it is because . . . we do see some changes, we do, otherwise I would not have . . . it is not so easy to look for the changes, it is not always so easy to catch, but it happens. And that’s surely without me knowing how I would have managed if there would not have been any. But that is probably one of the reasons that we continue, yes. We see the small steps, we see that our voice—even if we become angry—then maybe event organizers will think next time before they do something, and maybe researchers think more carefully next time they do a project and such.

Forough points to the fact that transformation is very difficult to spot, and takes place on a small scale, through ‘small steps’. Many of those we spoke to have similarly maintained hope by recognizing that what they do makes a

difference on the level of the individual: through action and speech in spaces of appearance, they are able to influence another person who may act differently as a consequence. Political subjecthood as narrative action, taking place wherever and whenever, thus may not have the same reach as political action that is taking place within ‘formal’, narrowly defined arenas, but has ripple effects that seem to remain largely unstudied in the social sciences and humanities.

Furthermore, by underscoring the need for hope through change, or what Arendt terms ‘new beginnings’, Forough explains that, without the freedom to act as a political subject and without the potential for new beginnings, she would probably have experienced a lack of existential meaning. Perhaps this is exactly what Arendt means by miracles: even in troubled times, such as those that Yassar, Forough and many others have experienced, humans can turn a negative experience into the positive action of politics. Thus, the Arendtian outlook involves a productive dynamic between negative and positive life moments.

Conclusion

Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their people—if they keep their identity (Arendt 1943/2007: 274).

In this article, we have argued that the ways in which individuals with refugee backgrounds have experienced violent conflict, flight and exile often shape their political subjecthood in dramatic ways. Hannah Arendt, who claims that, even in times of political evil and crisis, there is the potential for illumination, explored this reality in her essay, *We Refugees*, as well as her book, *Men in Dark Times* (see Lysaker 2015). She argues that, by virtue of natality, humans are free to act and interact politically and, in so doing, to instigate new beginnings. In this way, miracles and thus hope are brought into the world. In *We Refugees*, she highlights the ways in which societal forces require refugees to forget both their history and their identity. Yet those few refugees who insist upon telling their life stories and holding onto their identities in all their complexity give her hope. These individuals, we argue with Arendt, are the vanguard of their times.

We furthermore argue that Arendt understands political subjecthood in political spaces of appearance in the broadest sense of the term as the ways in which individuals act and interact with others to change the conditions of life in society. Political subjecthood takes place through narrative action. Thus, she broadens the understanding of political spaces beyond the commonly recognized formal spheres of representation or decision-making.

By exploring and presenting our empirical data through the lens of Arendt’s political existentialism, we have gained several insights. First, we find a sense of a necessity to act among those who have experienced violent conflict as well as degrading and dehumanizing acts as individuals or

members of families and communities. The experiences and life histories of refugees create a strong drive to engage with society and take care of the individuals within it. This sense of responsibility derives in part from an acute awareness of the consequences of not engaging. In dark times, few engage. Nevertheless, the few who insist on their history and identity as well as their right to express themselves and tell stories about their past and who they are offer hope and illumination.

Second, political subjecthood should be understood as extending beyond the narrow definition of speech and action as well as the narrowly defined public spheres. Those in marginalized positions in society, including, often, individuals with a refugee background, may find that such public, formal engagements do not allow them to challenge sufficiently the issues they wish to address. They may lack access or find their views are not properly reflected in such spaces. Thus, they (also) engage in narrative action, actively revealing their unique personal identities and challenging dominant perspectives about the world and especially their own position within it. These are the individuals upon whom Arendt calls in her book, *Men in Dark Times*, who, through their active lives even in troubled times, illuminate the world we all share.

Third, interpreting our empirical material in view of Arendt's thoughts on political subjecthood has taught us to explore the new beginnings that individuals can create. New beginnings involve a freedom to act, to introduce innovative and unpredicted ways of being and acting in the world. This freedom is expressed clearly in the actions that refugees take—to redress the situation of other refugees or marginalized groups, for example—that show a deep sense of responsibility as well as an inability to do nothing. This freedom to act and interact offers a clear hope for a future of new beginnings and miracles.

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1. See furthermore Ruba Salih's 2013 article, where she explores Palestinian refugees as 'avant-garde'.
2. The data was collected by Ebba Tellander and Cindy Horst for the ACT research project (Active Citizenship in Culturally and Religiously Diverse Societies), funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN). Furthermore, we draw on interviews collected for the project 'Gender in Politics in Somalia', funded by the RCN, and the project 'Diaspora Return: Implications for Somalia', funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
3. A total of about 100 life-history interviews were collected in this period, as well as hundreds of semi-structured interviews.
4. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of our informants.
5. This case is described in greater detail in Horst (2019).

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