- Varela Manograsso, Agustina, “Bloodless Death: Thinking the Refugee Crisis With Hannah Arendt”, en Hannah Arendt Center website (Bard College)- Medium- *Quote of the Week*, 2017, https://medium.com/quote-of-the-week/bloodless-death-thinking-the-refugee-crisis-with-hannah-arendt-c89aca3efd87.

Bloodless Death: Thinking the Refugee Crisis With Hannah Arendt

The Hannah Arendt Center in Quote of the Week Follow

Apr 4, 2017 · 8 min read

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>
> - Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees"

Hannah Arendt wrote these words in 1943 in one of her most beautiful and heartbreaking texts, "We Refugees." A few paragraphs earlier, with a view to forced displacement and concentration camps, she warned that contemporary history had created "a new kind of human being," one who set a precedent for times to come. Today, over seven decades later, and in the context of European refugee crisis, the temporary ban on refugees in the United States, and rising nationalism around the world, the echo of her words resonates powerfully as a painful prophecy. Painful because it confirms her worst fears, and also because it shows the most ignominious version of a Europe that is determined to forget its own past.

The record number of forcibly displacement people reached during the First and Second World Wars was exceeded in 2015. There are now more than 65 million people who have fled their countries of origin in conditions of extreme vulnerability. This crisis has revealed an alarming situation: as the vulnerability of the Other (whether the refugee, the asylum seeker, the economic migrant) has increased, the feeling of fear on behalf of national citizens has also increased, and this has brought about the proliferation of anti-immigrant reactions in a considerable part of Europe and America.

In this context, we witness a challenge to the construction of personal identity in terms of intersubjectivity in two very different ways: if, on the one hand, migrants who escape from the violence of war or extreme inequality and poverty are deprived of the possibility of appearing as unique persons, it is also true that in Europe (and elsewhere around the world) there is a radicalization of homogeneous identities, which restricts the sense of identity to the single belonging of the “nation.” The first case involves an exclusion that exposes the subject to forms of physical violence. In the second case, we confront the reproduction of identities that promote such exclusions and that may well turn into what Amin Maalouf calls “murderous or mortal identities.”

general, not only in terms of the boundaries of sovereign states and the limitations of international law, as well as new global responsibilities, but also in terms of violence that emerges in connection with the destruction of the intersubjective grounds of personal identity. Only if we take into account relations of violence and identity, will we be able to understand what "terrors worse than death" Hannah Arendt speaks of in the above quotations and what, if not life itself, could serve as the highest good.

Arendt builds her thinking about the refugee crisis in response to her own encounter with totalitarianism. In the preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she already points in the direction that her thought will take when she stresses that "human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity." From that moment on, Arendt devotes her work to defending the public and political spheres as spaces of human fulfillment, public spaces in which women and men can appear through their actions and words and where they can reveal their unique personal identities to others. From this perspective, "the political" can no longer be conceived as sphere restricted to "professional politicians," but as "space of appearance," one of meeting and mutual recognition, to which every individual must have potential access.

Arendt argues that "who we are" cannot be disclosed in the private sphere of life, which, according to her, is tied to the biological needs shared by all humans as members of the same species. This does not mean that the private realm has no relevance in her theory as a necessary counterpoint to public space. But to the extent that it is a way of life that is not based on the power of speech, it does not distinguish one individual from another. Moreover, we cannot discover a sense of our uniqueness, in terms of an essential identity, in our interior life. Arendt's critique of introspection is rooted in a double loss: the loss of the "common world," owing to the subject who leaves it to dive within him/herself, but also the loss of the "self," since "without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart, [each of us is] caught in its contradictions and equivocalities."[i] This is a darkness which, in Hannah Arendt' s view, "only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others […] can

In order to turn ourselves into someone with a proper name, it is not enough to accept what has been received by nature. On the contrary it is necessary to participate in political space through our actions and speech. However, neither these actions and words nor the mere presence of others is enough, it is also necessary that they actively look and listen. The configuration of personal identity requires reciprocity between acting and being recognized as an agent. Thus, living a life of passivity leads subjects to abandon the disclosure of who they are. But the indifference of spectators to actors renders actors invisible and eventually excludes them from the political space of appearance.

The instrumentalization of individuals displaced from the political sphere, who are recognized only in terms of their functionality in social life, has been a constant throughout history. Nevertheless, what the figure of the refugee in twentieth century introduced, was the maximum manifestation of a type of violence that is not exactly instrumental in its tools, nor in its dynamic. It represents a way to, as Arendt writes, “kill men without any bloodshed” and very often without a defined aim.

precisely because it does not matter who they are, or even how they can be used to play a subordinate social role. They become irrelevant for other people and the world. This is what Arendt means by "worse terrors than death": The social and political death that occurs in different grades in everyday life and may well precede extreme situations in which individuals even become dead to themselves, as happens in extermination camps.

The bloodless deaths of superfluous persons, which open the door to bloody deaths, have increased dramatically in recent years, placing millions of women and men into what we may call "spaces of nonappearance". In this situation, people not only cannot appear as a recognized biographical life to others, but they also lose the possibility of being seen and remembered.

The contemporary migrant crisis demonstrates that these symbolic "spaces of nobodies" coincides to a large degree with those "nobodies" without a physical space in the world. In "We Refugees," Arendt gives an account of the tragedy that involves the loss of refugees' countries and their homes, the loss of their occupations and languages and even the loss of the naturalness of their reactions, in short, the destruction of their "everyday world." However, what had no precedent was that all of these losses were accompanied by the impossibility of finding a "place in the (common) world." When this happens, individuals also lose the possibility of disclosing who they are anywhere. They are in danger of ceasing to exist in the meaningful world.

The world refugee crisis has given visibility to the miseries of our age, in which the dynamics of physical and nonphysical violence come together in a tragic confluence. Thus, we see images of boats full of migrants stranded at sea. We register images of lifeless bodies on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, and news of makeshift cemeteries for migrants without names (such as in Greece); there is news of legislation that promotes expulsion and closes borders without taking into account the right to apply for asylum, a pillar of international law. We also register images of people trying to jump border fences and images of what is known as "unlawful expulsions" or "hot returns", accompanied, not infrequently, with police brutality (such as in Spain), as well as images of mistreatment and abuses committed by "civil" militias who call

The news and images that we are witnessing force us to rethink if, as Judith Butler points out critically, "it is not just that some humans are treated as humans, and others are dehumanized; it is rather that the dehumanization becomes the production of the human."[iii] And this is exactly what seems to characterize the processes of renationalization that have emerged throughout Europe and now in America. If this is so, we will have to think, once again, what sense of "human being" we want to (re)construct. The current situation highlights how the dehumanization of the refugee is always a process of our own dehumanization: by denying human beings the right to act and to disclose who they are, we get used to their despair, becoming "morally indifferent" to violence, as Zygmunt Bauman argues.

If Arendt is right and there are worse terrors than physical death, it is because biological life is not the highest good. The "common world" that emerges from shared actions and words, and not the individual life, is the highest ideal to which Arendt dedicated her work. And precisely this common world vanishes not only for the excluded refugee but also for us, whenever we do not let him/her take part in it. As Lyotard, inspired by Arendt, writes, "what makes human beings alike is the fact that every human being carries within him the figure of the other (…). To banish the stranger is to banish the community, and you banish yourself from the community."[iv]

When we are unable to recognize refugees and share with them the world, we make our shared world narrower; eventually it can disappear. The refugee crisis reflects this erosive process and, precisely for this reason, it has become a matter of urgency to rethink the boundaries of "the political", as well as the limits between inclusion and exclusion, not by defining and closing margins, but in terms of continuous and necessary variation and negotiation, which, nowadays, seem to have ceased.

Agustina Varela-Manograsso

[i] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 237.

[ii] Idem.

2006), p. 91.

[iv] Jean-François Lyotard, “The Other`s Right”, Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (eds.), *On Human Rights.The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993.* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 136.

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