CREATIVITY

“For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or co-builders of a common world.”

Hannah Arendt, *The* *Origins of Totalitarianism*[[1]](#footnote-1)

Refugees are possibly the most creative people. Forced to move by any number of pressures — military, social, political, economic — they make perilous journeys to places safer than those of their origin, which may nevertheless be fraught with danger. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai states that as refugees move through shifting contexts and “can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wished to.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The requirement for refugees to “build worlds” in response to the destruction of their homes — places that have constituted their worlds for years — highlights both their closeness to, and their distance from, those into whose worlds refugees now impact. We all need to build worlds, but for some this imaginative requirement is more pressing. This is a moment of heightened importance for the many senses of dignity, subjectification and anticipation that Hannah Arendt had already noted.

While imagination may not be a fashionable concept these days, the impact of Appadurai’s words on our times should not be diminished. In being subjectively resilient and creatively productive, Appadurai’s refugees must also be alert to danger as they create new lives. For Arendt, refugees[[3]](#footnote-3) occupy an important place in twentieth century politics and ethics, and while current concerns about refugees relate to different historical forces than hers, they are still people displaced by conflict; as such, refugees are reckoned to become an increasingly affective condition in our times.[[4]](#footnote-4) For us, as for Arendt, refugees test our attitudes to life and creativity.

*Creative Futures*

“No ideology which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it.”[[5]](#footnote-5) There is something of Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of history in this passage from Arendt. In “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” he writes:

“If the historical drive does not also contain a drive to construct, if the purpose of destroying and clearing is not to allow a future already alive in anticipation to raise its house on the ground thus liberated, if justice alone prevails, then the instinct for creation will be enfeebled and discouraged.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

The notion that a critically anticipatory urge should be a key aspect of historical practice is powerful in both thinkers. For while anticipation can be regarded as creative—insofar as it brings an attitude to plausible futures in order to develop imaginative responses to the present[[7]](#footnote-7)—it does so as an act of opening-up, not of totalization. Anticipatory futures encourage creative possibilities. Anticipation then works in knotting past, present and future into a complex network of creative acts while refraining from predicting, foretelling and organizing any of these into well-defined wholes. Arendt goes further than Nietzsche in recognizing the importance of uncertainty, of unpredictability, in its relations to complexity and how it has influenced creative thought and practice in contemporaneity.[[8]](#footnote-8)

*Creative Dignity*

An important consequence of Arendt’s words is that we can creatively construct anticipatory futures in order to build current worlds as dynamic, non-determined and active interventions into complex, often dangerous, environments. Which mirrors Appadurai’s exhortation for refugees not to let their imaginations rest. This is a critical consequence when accounting for the importance of creativity in designing. For even when we are successful in our creative endeavours, we should not rest. A restless imagination is a precondition for creative future-production. But Arendt takes us further than this, bringing to the fore ethical and political concerns to complement the processual or attitudinal ones already mentioned. It is not sufficient for complex, anticipatory, imaginative creativity to operate as solitary practice. Arendt highlights the necessity to align such creativity to the co-development of the dignity of fellow-men, as she considers the dimension of action (and, with it, the political) as a pre-condition for creativity.   
 Discussing the paradox from which Arendt departs in Chapter Nine of *The* *Origins of Totalitarianism*: “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes:

“the very figure who should have embodied the rights of man par excellence — the refugee — signals instead the concept’s radical crisis.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Agamben’s thought here can be illuminating for us, as his understanding of the idea of refugee intensifies political, social, ethical, cultural and economic discourses and drives them beyond any particular circumstance of refugee or indigenous person. This also can be said of creativity. The extreme circumstances that refugees have often to endure, squeezes almost to exhaustion, their creative potential while underlining the political, social, ethical, cultural and economic conditions that accentuate their conditions. Refugees, pushed to the situation of losing their human rights, are compelled to political action and to be creative in their actions. Furthermore, the mere fact that refugees exist must “concern”[[10]](#footnote-10) all creative practice. Because even though creativity — and any practice, industry or attitude that it permeates — can be used to separate and antagonize, it can also strengthen relations between seemingly isolated existences through opening them up to others, living and non-living alike.

“For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or co-builders of a common world.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

While the many uncertainties refugees prompt highlight political, economic, social and design concerns for all of us to act upon, they also sharpen both our recognition of and response to dignity and provide examples of the potentials for restless imaginations, that ought to be considered, as previously anticipated, a necessary precondition for creative future-production. These examples are deeply needed in these dark times, in which those of us not (yet) determined to become refugees often do not consider creative political action in our lives, as we are not (yet) urged towards it. Designers have the possibility today to learn from refugees how to train a restless imagination which urges the broadening up of a public, creative and political dignity. This is for designers, and all of us, a timely and, more than ever, necessary task.

*Jamie Brassett*

See also ACTIVISM, COMPREHENSION, FREEDOM, IMAGINATION, NATALITY, PARIAH

**Jamie** **Brassett** is Reader in Philosophy, Design and Innovation at University of the Arts London and Programme Research Director at Central Saint Martins. He has a PhD in Philosophy from University of Warwick (1993). Jamie co-edited (with Betti Marenko) *Deleuze and Design* (EUP 2015) and is currently editing two collections: on anticipation (with John O’Reilly) and superheroes (with Richard Reynolds), both forthcoming 2020.

1. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,(New York, Harvest Books, 1979 [1951]), 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks*, ed. M. G. Durham and D. M. Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Harvest Book San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1979 (1951), 458. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Refugee Rights Data Project (2017) “Top Five Facts. Human Rights for Displaced People in Europe.” Available from: http://refugeerights.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/RRDP\_Top5Facts.pdf (accessed 24 March 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Arendt, *The* *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Ibid.458. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Breazeale and trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, “Towards an anticipatory view of design,” *Design Studies*, 28, (2007), 411–436; Poli, “The many aspects of anticipation,” *Foresight*, 12, no. 3 (2010), 7-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alexiou, and Zamenopoulos, (2008), “Design as a Social Process: A Complex Systems Perspective,” *Futures*, 40 (6), 586-595; Brassett, “Poised & Complex. The Becoming Each Other of Philosophy, Design and Innovation,” in *Deleuze and Design*, ed. Marenko and Brassett, Deleuze Connections Series (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 31-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 126. “Crisis” is an interesting word for Agamben to use here. It is etymologically linked to “critical” (in both senses of making judgement and being life-threatening), which in complexity theory has important connections to creativity (see note 7 above). John O’Reilly and I discuss it further in terms of philosophy and design; see: Brassett and O’Reilly, “Collisions, Design and The Swerve,” in *Advancements in Philosophy of Design*, ed. Vermaas and Vial, “Design Research Foundations” Series. (Berlin: Springer, 2018), 71-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead uses the term “concern” in “the Quaker sense” as a call to action, not simply as something to worry about; see: Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 176 and 180. Bruno Latour—for whom Whitehead is an important thinker—regards design as a “matter of concern”; see: Latour, “A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk),” in *Networks of Design. Proceedings of the International Conference of the Design History Society*, ed. Hackney, Glynne and Minton (Boca Raton, FL: Universal-Publishers, 2008), 2-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Arendt, *The* *Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Harvest Book San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1979),

    458. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)