

A CRITICAL APPROACH TO HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPT OF WORLDLINESS AND ITS APPLICABILITY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Abstract: This article will explain and critically examine Hannah Arendt's concept of worldliness with the aim of clarifying its limitations when it is used in the context of the social sciences, particularly where understanding and contributing to solving the problem of the forced displacement of people are concerned. Arendt defines "worldliness" as "having a world" in the double sense of having a tangible world of references and a political world. Her ideas regarding the worldliness of tribes and stateless people will be discussed and criticized, together with her avoidance of considering the relevance of oral history and oral resources and her position on human rights. Finally, this article proposes that social scientists require a broader conception of worldliness, in which intangible resources like shared oral narratives, virtual networks or shared views of the homeland are not dismissed, and can even serve as a basis for fighting for political and social rights.

Key words: Hannah Arendt; worldliness; social sciences; displaced people; human rights.

Introduction

Hannah Arendt's concepts of "action", "natality" and the "banality of evil" are used extensively by social scientists (see for example, respectively, Gammeltoft, 2006, p. 600; Morgan & Wilkinson, 2001, p. 208; Roseman, 2012, p. 194). They are considered valuable analytical tools, directly applicable to the understanding of contemporary social phenomena. However, this was not their initial purpose. Concepts like these are the result of Hannah Arendt's thinking "ohne Geländer" ("without banisters"), a sort of point of arrival of her work, but they are not analytical resources which can be applied to future research in exactly the same way as they were formulated. Without a doubt, Hannah Arendt's work possesses the capacity for inspiring further social science work. A wonderful example is the work of the sociologist Richard Sennett, who has brilliantly described the conditions of late capitalist Western society inspired by the methodology of thinking without banisters, inherited from his professor, Hannah Arendt. Nevertheless, these inspirational qualities should not foster an uncritical regurgitation or application of her concepts and quotations, which are sometimes taken from her texts without any appropriate context or discussion. Since these concepts were not created for such a purpose, epistemological mistakes can arise from their misuse. In this

article, I will explain and criticize Arendt's concept of worldliness with the aim of clarifying its limitations when it is used in the context of the social sciences, particularly for gaining a better understanding of and contributing to solving the problem of the forced displacement of people.

Forced mobility is an unfortunate reality of our contemporary world. September 2015 saw hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees trying desperately to reach wealthy European countries, searching for a better future and hoping to escape violence (particularly the Syrian civil war), poverty, unemployment and hopelessness.¹ In the past several years, the number of people forcibly displaced has tragically increased: In 2014 alone, 59.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, with an estimated 13.9 million people newly displaced due to conflict or prosecution.² In 2013, 3.2 percent of the world's population were international migrants³ and the UNHCR announced that 51.2 million worldwide had been forcibly displaced, a number "not previously seen in the post-World War II era."⁴ This data illustrates the dimensions of a trend that demands redoubled efforts from social scientists, and which poses unprecedented challenges.

In this context, the classical anthropological theory based on an isomorphism of space, place, and culture is in trouble (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 374). The classical conception of place as an identifier, relational, and historical locus is called into question, as argued by Marc Augé, who proposes the category of "no-place" to define the emergent reality of the crossing points, where people are in a sort of "between-state"—neither here nor there, but always moving (Augé, 1992, p. 40). The category of "place" needs to be reconsidered. Many sociologists think that places have been strained or damaged by the forces of globalization and need to be preserved somehow (Escobar, 2001, pp. 158-159). Recommendations for the younger generations of ethnologists and anthropologists include reflecting on whether the object of study should be a place, several places, a group of people, a set of events, or a set of rituals (Murchison, 2010, p. 23). They can no longer be seen as parallel to each other. The problems and the changes in power relations associated with re-localization and transience demand new categories of thought, new approaches and new sensibilities. Multi-locality forces us to think multi-locally (Rodman, 1992, p. 641). This demand parallels the recent tendencies in the social sciences against the reification

¹ According to UNHCR, 4 million Syrian refugees have already been received in neighboring countries. Most of the EU member states initially wanted to receive 120,000 Syrian refugees, but in the end, no consensus was reached, and only 40,000 will be immediately accepted in European countries. <http://www.acnur.org/t3/noticias/noticia/necesaria-una-respuesta-contundente-y-coherente-de-europa-ala-crisis-de-los-refugiados/>, consulted on 21 September 2015. In the month of July 2015, 110,000 immigrants arrived in Europe. This is considered to be a record number of arrivals in one single month. See <http://es.euronews.com/2015/08/19/julio-2015-record-absoluto-de-afluencia-de-inmigrantes-a-europa/>, retrieved on 21 September 2015.

² UNCHR Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2014. <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>, p. 2, retrieved on 3 September 2015.

³ According to data provided by United Nations (Population Division).

<http://esa.un.org/unmigration/wallchart2013.htm>, retrieved on 3 September 2015.

⁴ UNCHR Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2014. <http://www.unhcr.org/556725e69.html>, p. 5, retrieved on 3 September 2015.

and/or substantialization of the social processes under study, for example ethnic groups, races or nations (Brubaker, 2002).

Is Hannah Arendt's concept of "worldliness" still useful for obtaining a better understanding of and engaging with problems generated by this situation, or does it need to be modified? To provide a better answer to this question, we should begin by situating the concept in the author's biographical and historical background, as well as in the context of her theories. Hannah Arendt personally experienced forced displacement during the Nazi era in Germany and the Second World War. Due to her Jewish origins and her political engagement with the Jewish cause, she had to leave her native Germany and became a refugee, first in France and later in the USA, remaining stateless for 14 years until she received US citizenship in 1951. Thus it is not by chance that worldliness and its opposites, worldlessness and uprooting, are central topics of her work. For this reason, the first part of this article consists of a critical examination of these concepts. Subsequently, two examples will be used to show how Arendt used her own categories: her consideration of the status of tribes, and the situation of the Jews after the Second World War. Both of them will allow us to further elaborate on her position on human rights. Finally, a reconsideration of these categories is necessary in order to evaluate their validity for future work conducted in the social sciences.

The concept of "worldliness"

For Arendt, worldliness means 'having' a world. This world has a dual aspect: On the one hand, there is the artificial world composed of things made through work (tangible things that endure in time and enable us to identify with them) and, on the other, a political world defined by plurality where direct political action is possible. In Arendt's thinking, worldliness is one of the six human conditions. What does the term "human condition" mean? She proposes that the notion of human nature should be substituted for the idea of human condition after postulating the impossibility of appealing to a human nature outside citizens' political and legal rights, which was patently demonstrated when millions of refugees lost their shared world and were deprived of their nationality and legal status. In this sense, for Arendt, totalitarianism amounts to an attempt to destroy humanity, an attempt to destroy what is considered man's essence (Arendt, 2004, p. xxvii). By trying to destroy humanity, totalitarianism proves that there is no human nature (Arendt, 2004, p. 588): Even though Nazi and Stalinist total domination failed to achieve their ultimate ends, because not all of humanity was subjected to total domination, Arendt sees the events as proof that it is incorrect to speak of 'human nature,' since the nature of something defines it essentially and there is the possibility of losing what has defined man since the origins of civilization. However, she still believes that there is something which defines human condition and which will continue to define it while there still are a few men and women left who fit this definition of "human condition". On one hand, in *The Human Condition*, she proposes a standard of three activities against which the human condition may be studied throughout history. Her classification of what humans do (labor, work, action) serves as the abstract classification of human activities in each time and place. This implies a certain idea of permanence of what the human condition is and has been. According to her, what has

changed historically is the relationship between the performers of each group of activities and their social relevance/preponderance⁵.

On the other hand, she holds that men and women are conditioned beings, although this conditioning can never define them completely (always leaving room for the novelty resulting from free action). In relation to the three types of activities, she postulates six human conditions: plurality, life, natality, mortality, worldliness and the earth (Arendt, 1998, p. 11). Thus worldliness is considered one of the six human conditions, one of the characteristics of humans as it has been up to the present day.

As stated in *The Human Condition*, the artificial world is made of the things produced by humans, things that endure. The products of *labor* are seen as perishable (if they are consumed, they disappear; if not, they spoil quickly). By contrast, the things produced by *work* are designed to endure, and by doing so, they become an objective framework of references. This is the main difference between labor and work, which are respectively oriented towards the sustenance of life (labor) and the creation of a world (work). *Homo faber*, as conceived by Arendt, is a craftsman, the maker of this tangible reality that allows humans to orient themselves and to be surrounded by objects that make them feel “at home”. When things endure for a long time (taking as a reference the duration of human life), they become familiar to us. However, what is made for consumption—no matter if it is actually consumed or not—disappears, and nothing solid remains with which we can identify—for example, food. Durability is the main characteristic of the fruits of work, and for Arendt, the gradual difference between products of consumption and objects of use becomes an essential one. Only work can produce ‘world,’ and can allow humans to orient themselves in the middle of the natural cyclical changes (Arendt, 1998, pp. 136-174).

In her time, Arendt considered Western society to be a society of laborers, based on consumption and unable to take care of enduring things of the artificial world, because its attitude to objects consisted of ruining all it touched, of annihilating it as if it were a perishable thing. We still live in this type of capitalist-consumption society; an example of this attitude is the contemporary phenomenon of “programmed obsolescence”: things which could be produced to remain in the world for a long period of time are instead produced to perish soon. A table used to survive for more than one generation, being a familiar reference for its owners. However, in a consumerist society, a table does not endure for more than a few years because it is either simply not designed to do so or because we discard it after a few years for being “out of fashion”. Of course, consumerism is not the only threat to the perdurable world: Extreme poverty, dispossession and forced mobility are too, because they deprive people of their objects, references, and belongings. But “world” does not include only private property, which Arendt states in the context of her political theory. She considers a private space of the artificial world a necessary refuge for people, a place where they can

⁵ From my point of view, this makes the Arendtian notion of the “human condition” more universal and modern than it is usually considered to be. She continues to use the expression “human nature” even outside her 1958 work (*The Human Condition*). In the end, her idea is that human essence—human nature—has not been lost but that it could be lost. This explains why she does not consider it appropriate to use the concept of “human nature” and her wavering over the use of the expression. She mentions “human nature” in her work *On Revolution* (Arendt, 1990, p. 93), and in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1999, p. 415).

retreat at least temporarily, because nobody can stand the perpetual exposure to the public sphere. The world resulting from work also includes national borders, laws, institutions, a written history, and tangible works of art. All these elements provide references and protect a political space in which, for Arendt, political action can easily be performed. This political space is characterized by a special kind of equilibrium between equality and difference, meaning firstly that women and men have equal opportunities to participate in common issues, and secondly that they develop and show their individual differences through this participation (the political action). Understood like this, political space can be termed the “world-among-men” because it confers a special political status to each person who participates in a kind of direct democracy, whose design is inspired by classical Athenian democracy.

A criticism against Arendt’s idea that tribes do not have a world

According to Arendt, people living in tribes do not have a world, like refugees, the masses, the mob, and the women and men reduced to labor due to total domination, poverty or slavery. There are different reasons for why every one of these groups does not have a world and not having a world entails different problems for them. By examining a couple of examples, Arendt’s concept of “worldliness” will become clear, as will its limitations.

One of the reasons Arendt gives to support her statement that tribes are in a situation of worldlessness, which is quite an ethnocentric judgment, is of special interest here, because it will provide a clue as to how the Arendtian concept of worldliness should be modified in order to make it useful for current research on the situation and problems of displaced people. Arendt considers people living in tribes as “natural” beings and situates tribes at the same level as other forms of domination—people living in tribes would be subject to the domination of nature; people in totalitarian contexts would be converted into “savages” without being part of an artificial and political world, that is, of a human world (Arendt, 2004, p. 241, p. 233). The idea that people living in tribes are “natural” beings is not an isolated judgment in the Western school of thought and it has sadly been used to justify colonialism and imperialism in different moments of history. A clear example is the famous debate between Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas regarding the humanity or inhumanity of American Indians and the attitude that the Spanish Kingdom should have towards them (Valladolid, 1550-1551). Ginés de Sepúlveda considered the natives found by the first Spanish conquerors of America to be “barbarians” by nature, inhuman, illiterate and inferior, so they deserved to be dominated by full, literate, and Christian human beings, the Spaniards (he used the Aristotelian theory on slavery). On the contrary, Bartolomé de las Casas argued against their supposed inferiority and for the idea that they were civilized peoples; even if their culture was oral, they had well-organized institutions, and not having a written culture could not justify their domination and submission to slavery (Fernández-Buey, 1992, p. 336). The Aristotelian normative and political (in the sense of “belonging to the polis”) definition of human being most likely inspired Arendt’s view on tribalism: Human beings can be human beings only in a certain political and social context. However, when she made these assertions in the 1950s, there was already plenty of ethnological and anthropological data which contradicted them and, if we take into account Bartolomé de las

Casas' perspective, we can conclude that Aristotelian ideas had been refuted, or rather, that they had been interpreted in a non-racialist way since at least the 16th century.

Moreover, Arendt explains the origins of the racism ethnocentrically: She locates the origins of racism in a concept of race which results from the intersection of and stark contrasts between civilized and tribal peoples. Regarding the latter, she states in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that they act as a part of nature, but that they have not created a human world or a human reality (Arendt, 2004, p. 233). The accusation of ethnocentrism or, even more so, cultural imperialism, is supported by other evidence as well.⁶ Arendt does not assume that her ideas spring from a particular cultural context and could be valid in this specific context, but invalid in others. This problem is also present in *The Human Condition*, wherein she speaks about what “we do” and the conditions of humanity while taking the Western tradition alone with its experiences and concepts as the point of reference, thus meaning the “Western we” as if it were a universal “we”. My criticism is not leveled against her decision to draw on a single tradition, but rather against the fact that she tries to project this specific cultural context on all people in all cultures. A similar criticism was made in two immediate reviews of *The Human Condition* (Bennett, 1959, p. 686; Kedourie, 1958).

Arendt's concept of “world” includes “tangible” things which allow men to identify with them, to construct a personal identity and to have a social and a political status. In her point of view, oral cultures could not have a world in the same sense, because orality is simply too intangible to be referential, even if authentic communities of action, with a very deep sense of testimony, oral versions of history, collective memory, rituals, and narrative reconstructions of individual biographies have been described by anthropologists and novelists in plenty of oral cultures all around the world.⁷ These are exactly the same main points in Arendt's ideas on narrative identity and political and historical links, even if, in her view, one basic condition is missing: writing, which allows sustainability. For Arendt, people in a situation of worldlessness die without leaving a trace (Arendt, 2004, p. 381). For them, testimony is impossible since they do not belong to any community of meaning. This will be the main focus of my later criticism.

Not having a world: statelessness

Moving on, I will now elaborate on Arendt's position on refugees and stateless people, which she describes via the case of the Jews after the Second World War. The problem of the status of human beings without a state and citizenship, which was a massive issue in Europe during the 20th century due to the two World Wars and the politics conducted by totalitarian regimes, led Arendt to thematize the question of human rights. Her article “We

⁶ Taking as a reference Iris Marion Young's definition of cultural imperialism: “To experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other” (1990, pp. 58-59). She considers cultural imperialism to be one of the “five faces of oppression.” It involves one dominant group projecting its own experience as being representative of the whole of humanity.

⁷ Examples are Goody (1986), Achebe (1994) (published in 1958) and Bueno-Gómez (2014).

Refugees” (1943) enumerates the different degrees of loss of status which result from the uprooting of refugees by focusing on the problem of the Jews’ total loss of rights (Arendt, 2002). She finds a paradox in this situation: While Jews are persecuted as Jews, they cannot defend themselves as Jews, as they do not have a nationality as such. This paradox is related, for her, to the fact that there is no possible defense of human rights if these are not buttressed by citizenship rights. Without a state that protects people, they are no longer citizens, but only human beings. States and citizenship rights are considered part of the world; they confer worldliness. At that time, no institution existed to protect mere human beings on the sole basis that they were human beings. Nowadays, these institutions do exist, but unfortunately they cannot yet offer complete protection, which proves very difficult without the participation of states.

For Arendt, being a Jew does not give any legal status in this world. “If we should start telling the truth that we are nothing but Jews, it would mean that we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings. I can hardly imagine an attitude more dangerous, since we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while [...]” (Arendt, 1978, p. 65). In this manner, Arendt equates the status of the stateless Jew to the status of a mere human being, which, for her and in this moment, means not having any status. For Arendt, given the fact that people have been denied the possibility of being a subject with rights, it is pointless arguing that every human being has a common nature.

Two chapters in Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* deal more specifically with the question of human rights: “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” and “The Perplexities of the Rights of Man”. In them, she starts with the concrete problem of the generalization of denationalizations (in this case after World War I) in several European countries as a consequence of governmental intolerance towards opposition. As mentioned in the first chapter, the mass arrival of stateless people annulled the international right of asylum, which, up to that point, was the symbol of what had been considered the “rights of man”. In the second chapter, she analyzes this historical situation theoretically. She critiques the grounds of the traditional conception of the “rights of man”, the abstract idea of man inherited from the Enlightenment.⁸ The rights of man had been considered the natural and inalienable rights of all human beings. Arendt declares that the paradox of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is that they lay claim to an idea of an abstract human being that exists nowhere (Arendt, 2004, p. 369). The problem becomes apparent when the rights of man lose their applicability, as occurred even in countries whose laws were based on those selfsame rights, since the stateless people lacked a sovereign state to guarantee them those rights. After all, even in countries whose laws were based on the rights of man, the rights of people lacking citizenship could not be guaranteed in the way that the rights of their citizens were guaranteed (Arendt, 2004, p. 372). Arendt insists that the main privation of stateless people is their lack of a place in the world. This is a fundamental

⁸ The idea of the “rights of the man” was formulated explicitly excluding women, as denounced by enlightened feminists like Olimpe de Gouges who proposed the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* in 1791 in response to the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), passed by France’s National Constituent Assembly.

lack related to the lack of nationality, which itself constituted a lack of a community of sense, reference and remembering. The result is calamity, not due to the loss of specific rights, which has happened many times before in history, but from the loss of a community that can guarantee these rights—the loss of the right to have rights.

Similarly, in *On Revolution*, Arendt holds that the rights of man seek to reduce politics to nature, arguing that those rights are not natural but rather conceded to humans by a political community (Arendt, 1990, p. 108). Unlike Hauke Brunkhorst, I do not think that Arendt has reservations against human rights (Brunkhorst, 2006, p. 145)⁹. Her thesis seems to me to be a diagnosis of a situation—a diagnosis interpreted theoretically from the point of view of legal positivism. Contrary to the idea of man proposed during the Enlightenment (the idea on which the classical conception of human rights is based), Arendt argues that the world is inhabited by “men”, plural, and not “man”, singular. This plurality implies political differentiation. In her 1960 speech on Lessing, in *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt recognizes that, in the absence of a politically organized humanity (which she refers to as “dark times”), there is a “privilege of pariahs”, namely fraternity. This fraternity could act as a substitution for political links and as a refuge for those people who are so ashamed of their historical circumstances that they do not want to intervene politically. In dark times, pariahs, whom Arendt takes to be those who are both socially and politically excluded, stateless people, and the Jews in particular, do not have a world. Fraternity, in this “unreality”, could serve as consolation, but not as a substitution for political rights; in the same sense, the idea of “human nature”, associated with fraternity, is only an illusion which cannot substitute a world of tangible references and individual rights (Arendt, 1993, p. 16). Fraternity cannot create worldliness.

Although Arendt understands humanity in a political sense, it is important to note that this does not mean that she argues for something like a worldwide government or political community. For her, a worldwide government would be the end of any possible political life as known until now, since “political concepts are based on plurality, diversity and mutual limitations” and “a citizen is by definition a citizen among citizens of a country among countries”. She adds that “his rights and duties must be defined and limited, not only by those of his fellow citizens, but also by the boundaries of a territory” (Arendt, 1993, p. 81). Thus, frontiers and limits protect political spaces and, as it were, the plurality of communities, particularly when understood as national states (Arendt, 1993, p. 87). Arendt’s explanation of Karl Jaspers’ universalism clearly displays her position on the idea of humanity: “The unity of mankind and its solidarity cannot consist in a universal agreement upon one religion, or

⁹According to Brunkhorst, Arendt found it horrifying that pre-political savage peoples were placed on the same level as the political, educated and civilized peoples of Europe. I disagree. Even if Arendt says, from the ethnocentric perspective of Western civilization, that tribal men had not created a human world civilization, it does not mean that she has prejudices against extending human rights across the world. Arendt does not think that some human beings should possess fewer rights just for being a part of a ‘natural space’, nor does she consider their ‘natural state’ to be irreversible. However, it is true that she only considers political action possible if there is first an artificial world created through work. She maintains that action is not possible in a natural context, from which she derives her position that tribal peoples cannot have political communities (a perspective with which I do not agree, as has been explained).

one philosophy, or one form of government, but in the faith that the manifold points to a Oneness which diversity conceals and reveals at the same time”¹⁰ (Arendt, 1993, p. 90).

Conclusion

If the concept of “worldliness” proposed by Arendt is to be used in order to better understand the situation of displaced people and their problems, it has to be modified. First of all, there is no question that citizenship and individual rights are important for worldliness. Even though the necessity of protecting human beings as human beings has promoted the development of international institutions, as I have mentioned above, national states are still crucial for the protection of social and political rights. Therefore, a situation of statelessness is still a situation of vulnerability. Secondly, although national frontiers, laws, and national institutions can contribute to the construction of a world of references on which to build a political community, they can also become prisons and instruments of repression for humans in which political community is impossible. As Zygmunt Bauman mentions, a fortress can also be a prison (Bauman, 2000, p. 175). Thirdly, written history and other written references are not the only ways human beings can construct memory, references and communities of sense. Oral and non-oral cultures have used oral resources to create communities of sense and collective memory, as well as to make moral and aesthetic judgments even in the most adverse circumstances. A shared oral narrative can result in a reference as powerful and effective at expressing the values and modifying the behaviors of a group of humans as written history—even in relatively recent historical situations in European contexts such as the Spanish Civil War, where the case of a ballad, transmitted orally for more than half a century, shows the values of a rural community and their efforts to preserve past events in the absence of an official impartial history and to create a kind of “poetic justice” in the absence of legal reparation for the crimes (as discussed in Bueno-Gómez, 2014).

Gupta and Ferguson have highlighted the importance of imagined communities and remembered places as referential symbols for mobile and displaced people (1992, p. 376). It is possible to add virtual networks to this. The new communication systems—like the Internet and mobile phones—help displaced people to maintain social and familial relationships which would have otherwise been lost or destroyed, insofar as these technologies are available to them. This can help to preserve a certain social status even in circumstances of displacement, and these new virtual networks should not be dismissed as points of departure for political and social movements of liberation. Oral resources, imagined communities, remembered places and virtual networks can be more than mere consolations, they can have a more important role in worldliness than what Arendt calls “fraternity”, because they can give shape to common political ideals to fight for. The inclusion of these elements in a new conception of worldliness requires the reconsideration of one element which Arendt considers essential for worldliness: durability. Yet written history is not an automatic guarantee of permanence, because every discourse can be reinterpreted in very

¹⁰ This paragraph also highlights Arendt’s distance from communitarian theories. It is neither religion nor tradition which unites a political group, but rather the pure political relationship, plurality, rooted in a tangible world, which is itself the fruit of work.

different ways according to different interests and the historical moment. Thus, the social function of oral history is not at all different from the social function of written history; both of them are “alive” and both of them aim to preserve some information of the past in order to better understand it (Vansina, 1996, p. 64).

It is also very important to stress that the inclusion of these elements in the concept of “worldliness” is not intended to devalue the importance of spaces. Displaced people have usually been forced to leave a “place” of references for a “non-place” without meaning, and children born in “non-places” like refugee camps never even know a “real place” as a point of reference. Not to mention the fact that our whole world may be on its way to becoming a “non-place” due to the new demands of flexible capitalism, the labor market and its increasing injustices, which calls the dichotomy of place/non-place into question. However, while the same space can be a crossing point as well as a place of meaning for a community or a society at different points in time (Mas & Benach, 2012), displaced people can very quickly transform a non-place into a place as well. Even if “tangible” resources are indispensable for that—and the provision of these kinds of resources is a way of empowering people in this situation—it is important to take the role of “intangible” resources in this process into consideration too, even more so in our increasingly digitalized world. A social scientist interested in studying the phenomenon of the forcible displacement of people in order to find solutions for it should pay close attention to all the resources that groups of displaced humans have been able to create or make use of in order to surround themselves with references, that is, the “intangible” resources used to create “tangibility”, because they can also be a platform for the fight for political and social rights. Given the current political and social climate (in Europe), it is no longer possible to avoid the engagement with the social and political rights of these groups of people. For this reason, it is necessary to reconsider the tools available to social scientists and humanists and to adapt them to these new challenges and circumstances.

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