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Refiguring childhood: Hannah Arendt, natality, and prefigurative biopolitics

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt's concept of natality spans birth and action, which combine to inaugurate the new. Natality is used here to examine childhood as a prefigurative form of biopolitics. This concerns practices that seek to actualise envisioned futures by conditioning and constraining natality, thereby shaping the power relations that encapsulate the social and cultural world(s) of adults and children. The article concludes by reflecting on whether this corralling of natality might be subverted with a view to refiguring childhood.

Keywords

Arendt, biopolitics, childhood, natality, prefiguration

Introduction

Action...corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world...if we had a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a "who" as though it were a "what" – Hannah Arendt (1998/1958: 9-11):

At one time or another – whether in philosophical, scientific, or policy discourse – what Hannah Arendt has to say about the abstract figure of Man applies also to childhood. Although this has recently begun to collapse under the weight of its own universalising pretensions, the concept of childhood still exhibits a tendency to transform a *who* into a *what*. From roughly the mid-eighteenth century onwards, mass societies in the global North – and this is the context under investigation here – have spawned a constellation of biopolitical techniques and technologies that seek to take hold of life in the form of childhood with the aim of prefiguring human futures. To mention but one example as a way of approaching my argument: by carving that portion of human life known as childhood into developmental milestones and stages, a fictional 'normal' child was fashioned through a process of measurement, comparison, and aggregation (Rose, 1990: 131-43). This is one of the ways that childhood has come to answer to a benignly descriptive assertion which, in

everyday practical terms, is merely a matter of applying the appropriate category. Posed from the perspective of an authoritative gaze that assumes the stance of objectivity, the assertion assigns positions within the social order while also enacting an injunction to know one's place, and in this way it anticipates – indeed insists upon – a response from the subject that affirms the judgement concealed within the assertion itself, and it goes as follows: *this is a child; you are a child; I am a child*. This is the ontological touchstone that has long grounded a constellation of prefigurative practices aimed at governing the future by managing the biosocial process known as child development.

The old monological discourses of childhood have of course now been deconstructed and challenged by a 'new paradigm' which is attentive to the agency of children. In their influential *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, Alan Prout and Allison James re-presented children as 'active social beings' (1997: 25), while Nick Lee has since taken this a step further. Whereas in the past, he writes, 'there were two types of humans, the new paradigm sees only one – the human being who is a social agent' (2001: 47). While it may once have seemed obvious, or at least unproblematic, to distinguish adult 'human beings' from child 'human becomings' (Qvortrup, 1994), in the age of labour flexibility, life-long learning and what I will later present as neo-liberal enterprise culture, adults and children apparently co-habit a situation described by Lee as 'becoming without end' (2001: 85). While agreeing with Lee's focus on context, as well as his fluid rendering of the being/becoming duality, there is more that needs to be excavated from the conceptual weave that threads the being/becoming relation through the adult/child relation. Nested within it is another axis around which the question of childhood pivots, and this concerns the distinction noted above: between the *what* and the *who* in question. Moreover, this too has a crucial bearing on how childhood has been – and still is – used to prefigure the future. In other words, childhood persists as a declarative category articulated in situations where authority is at stake, where compliance is expected, and when vulnerability or 'risk' is invoked, so that the obviousness of being able to say: *s/he is a child* is accompanied by the conventional mode of address: *you are a child*, and thus the expected response is always-already assumed: *yes, I am a child*. However, there are exceptions – situations where the mode of address framed by the *whatness* of childhood is displaced by an insistence on a *who*, and I present one such case below. For now, to anticipate the discussion that follows, I wish to propose a scenario where an open question displaces the self-assuredness of

assertion; a question that is not pre-loaded with the category of 'child', thereby traversing the being/becoming relation while also troubling the child/adult distinction. The question then is not '*what* are you?' but rather '*who* are you?'

This question is derived from Arendt's concept of natality, which affords a way of engaging critically with the *whatness* of childhood. My objective is not to attempt to dispense with the category of childhood, which would be nonsensical, but rather to trouble the ways in which childhood is used to stage prefigurative forms of biopolitics. As a mode of power that seeks to bring envisioned futures into the present, prefiguration bridges being and becoming while also shaping the power relations that encapsulate the social and cultural world(s) of adults and children. This article also responds to a recent editorial for *Childhood* by Spyros Spyrou, calling for the decentring of childhood and proposing relationality as a way of moving the field in new directions. Natality is one such relational approach that can be used to think childhood beyond children.

Between birth and action: natality and the new

In her introduction to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1998: xvii), Margaret Canovan remarks that the book's 'most heartening message is its reminder of natality and the miracle of beginning'. In contrast to Arendt's former teacher Martin Heidegger, for whom authentic being-in-the-world requires facing into our inescapable mortality – our being-towards-death – Arendt's political theory is anchored in natality as the affirmation of life. Before examining the somewhat elusive concept of natality itself (as many Arendtian scholars have pointed out, Arendt never examined her own use of this concept in depth or detail), it is important to clarify what Arendt means by 'the human condition', which brings me back to her use of the words 'nature' and 'essence' in the epigraph above. Arendt is emphatic on this point: 'the human condition is not the same as human nature' (1998: 9-10). What she means is that there is no essence that would allow us to flatten human plurality into a singularity that answers to the *whatness* of 'Man'¹. Instead we need to understand how we are conditioned by a world of our own making, or to rephrase that: history lives in how we think, speak, and act. Moreover, although we are 'conditioned beings' in that the ideas, things, practices and relations that have become conditions of our individual and collective existence *have* a history, it remains the case that 'the conditions of human existence...can never "explain" what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never

condition us absolutely' (1998: 11). Though life and death, natality and mortality, amount to 'the most general condition of human existence' (1998: 8), what matters for Arendt is active life, or *action-as-beginning*, and it is this that forges the connection between natality and politics.

Natality is actualised in spaces where actors appear before each other through words and deeds, or what Arendt calls 'the space of appearances'. This is her way of saying that politics is staged in spaces of mutual exposition where it is possible to *begin* something, to set something new and unpredictable in motion, though once this process begins it is no longer a matter of individual will or intention. To take the initiative is to put natality into play, but whatever emerges from such initiative arises *between* people who co-exist in a conditioned/conditioning web of relationships. 'Wherever people come together' says Arendt, they generate a space 'that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another' (2005: 106). It is this space of the in-between – a *relational* space – that provides the setting or scene for natality. Natality is thus generated between people acting within a context that places the standing conditions in question, such that it becomes necessary or at least possible to think differently, to act otherwise – to *respond* to the situation, thereby setting something new in motion.

A crucially important feature of natality – evident in the word itself – is that it traces the source of political action to birth, such that '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' (1998: 9). In every such case, the appearance of a new-born child precipitates the question: *who* are you? (1998: 178-9). Arendt is here emphasising plurality – that each person is unique and also uniquely capable of acting in a way which, as noted above, exceeds her conditioning. Spanning birth and action, natality encapsulates the adult/child relation, yet there is a curious lacuna in how Arendt presents this in *The Human Condition*. If we track natality to the 'scene of birth' (see Cavarero, 2014) and consider the question which – for Arendt – is precipitated by the appearance of the new-born child (*Who* are you?), then what should we make of her suggestion that this question is answered through what one does and what one says in the presence of others? As Arendt puts it, 'the disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is – her qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which she may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does' (1998: 179). Although 'action as beginning corresponds

to the fact of birth' (1998: 178), it is the 'second birth' of action that is Arendt's primary concern, such that the figure of the new-born child appears only to vanish almost immediately, replaced by an expressive *who* endowed suddenly with the attributes of adult life (1998: 176-7). Otherwise put, it is as though the scene of birth merely serves to *prefigure* the political realm of action. So what exactly happens between birth and action? Arendt addresses this question in an essay on 'The crisis in education', published the same year as *The Human Condition*. 'What concerns us all' she explains, 'is the relation between grown-ups and children in general or, putting it in even more general and exact terms, our attitude toward the fact of natality' (2006: 193). Natality is a delicate balancing act, because on the one hand 'the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to her from the world', while on the other hand the world 'needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation' (2006: 182). It is here that Arendt fills out the lacuna mentioned above. Children 'are not finished but in a state of becoming' she says, and it is the responsibility of those with (temporary) authority over children to ensure that education is orientated to 'the task of renewing a common world' which is home to adults and children alike, though this must be done 'without striking from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us' (2006: 174, 182-3, 193).

To follow the thread of these remarks by Arendt is to connect natality to the question of 'becoming' which, as noted in the introduction above, traverses not only the relation between adult 'human beings' and child 'human becomings' (Qvortrup), but also a more fugitive 'becoming without end' (Lee). On one side is a mode of becoming that perceives children as incomplete adults, while on the other side is something very different, and Arendt gestures towards both. Walter Omar Kohan examines what I have just referred to as fugitive becoming under the heading of 'alternative concepts of childhood' (2011: 341-44). One such alternative is Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 'becoming-child' (1987: 272-91), which has nothing to do with a stage in the life-cycle and nor is it measurable in chronological time. Instead, in Kohan's words, becoming-child is a 'space of transformation' marked by flux, intensity, affects and experiences that cannot be anticipated or planned. Becoming-child exceeds the conditioning of historical time while also taking flight from social conditioning, which might be seen to radicalise the concept of natality. However it must be noted that this is neither a prescriptive formula nor a tried and tested practice.

Instead becoming-child operates at the threshold of imaginary projection and critical intervention.

That there is even a perceived need to invoke or summon this fugitive/radical mode of becoming says something important about natality in the context of mass society, which Arendt depicts as 'the rise of the social' and 'the loss of human experience' (1998: 321). Mass society is a society of labourers, and to labour, as opposed to experiencing the freedom to act – noting that to act is to participate in 'renewing the common world' (and by 'common' Arendt means the shared *public* world that arises between people acting in concert) – is, as Arendt sees it, merely 'to fulfil a necessary function in the life process of society' (2006: 38-49, 184). Without suggesting an exact homology, there is a striking similarity between Arendt's analysis of mass society, whereby the bureaucratic administration of the life process of society becomes 'rule by Nobody' (1970: 38), and what Michel Foucault examined through the lens of biopolitics/biopower – supervising and administering life with a view to optimising, augmenting, and regulating life processes and populations² (Foucault, 1998: 139-41). In Foucault's work, modern mass society marks the entry of biological life into the political arena, such that political strategies would henceforth be staged on the terrain of life itself. What I am suggesting is that childhood has become a type of targeted zone within the larger biopolitical arena, a zone characterised by attempts to act upon life in its 'unfinished' form (childhood), thereby transforming what *is* into what *ought* to be (see Kohan 2011: 340). Moreover, this is also a means of prefiguring the future by constituting the subject who is to inhabit the future envisioned by its architects and technicians.

In drawing Arendt and Foucault together in this way, I am not suggesting some type of seamless theoretical synthesis. Instead, I want to avail of the productive tension between natality and biopolitics. I will return to the question of becoming-child/acting otherwise later by drawing on the idea of an 'affirmative biopolitics'. First however I want to examine how natality, which could be described as life exceeding its social conditioning, is instrumental in constituting the *whatness* of childhood.

Disciplining natality: protecting the vulnerable child

In the introduction I hinted at a speech situation whereby a child refuses to answer to the *whatness* of childhood, insisting instead on being addressed as a *who*. The child in question

is not a hypothetical example but a boy who appeared before a judge in France in 1840. Originally reported in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, Michel Foucault examined the case in his *Discipline and Punish* (1977: 290-291), where he introduces the boy as 'a child of thirteen, without home or family, charged with vagabondage'. I am going to reproduce the exchange between the boy (referred to in the *Gazette* only as Béasse, presumably his surname) and the judge in full, noting that Foucault interprets the boy's 'insolence' – meaning the way he reformulates the offences he stands accused of – as 'the affirmation of a living force'. In the context of this episode, 'natality' could well stand in for Foucault's turn of phrase:

Judge: One must sleep at home.

Béasse: have I got a home?

Judge: You live in perpetual vagabondage.

Béasse: I work to earn my living.

Judge: What is your station in life?

Béasse: My station, to begin with, I'm thirty-six at least; I don't work for anybody. I've worked for myself for a long time now. I have my day station and my night station. In the day, for instance, I hand out leaflets free of charge to all the passers-by; I run after the stage-coaches when they arrive and carry luggage for the passengers; I turn cartwheels on the avenue at Neuilly; at night there are the shows; I open coach doors, I sell pass-out tickets; I've plenty to do.

Judge: It would be better for you to be put in a good house as an apprentice and learn a trade.

Béasse: Oh, a good house, an apprenticeship, it's too much trouble. And anyway, the bourgeois...always grumbling, no freedom.

Judge: Does not your father wish to reclaim you?

Béasse: Haven't got no father.

Judge: And your mother?

Béasse: No mother neither, no parents, no friends, free and independent.

Gazette des tribunaux: Hearing his sentence of two years in a reformatory, Béasse pulled an ugly face, then, recovering his good humour, remarked: 'Two years, that's never more than twenty-four months. Let's be off, then'.

What should we make of Béasse's claim that he is 'thirty-six at least'? Foucault doesn't help us here, but surely this is at odds with his description of the boy. Perhaps this a boy who refuses to be infantilised, who insists on a maturity and liberty he claims for himself through his experience of life; or to draw from Kohan once more, perhaps Béasse is becoming-child by exceeding the bounds of childhood? In any case, the exchange is framed by a deeply unequal power relationship between a judge who represents the coercive power of the law, and a boy without property or station, yet who exhibits the courage to address the law not as a *what* (a vagrant) but as a *who*, narrating the truth of his life as he sees it, and performing this truth before a public assembled in the court.

This episode sets the scene for the emergence of interventions into the space of the family in order to 'rescue' children from 'neglect'. Children such as young Béasse were perceived to be on route to a life of crime and/or dependency on public assistance, and thus destined either way to become a burden on society. Parental neglect was foremost among the alleged causes of such 'delinquency', and thus the demoralising influence of the home and the street were to be counteracted by rescuing children and placing them in enclosed institutions such as the Mettray penal colony in France – a reformatory institution for male delinquents opened the same year as Béasse was sentenced, and as Foucault describes it, a curious blend of regiment, hospital, workshop, school, and prison; a synthesis of inspection, training and punishment overseen by 'technicians of behaviour, engineers of conduct' (1977: 293).

In the decades following Béasse's appearance in court, reformatory education would gradually be supplemented by other experiments such as societies for infant life protection and the prevention of cruelty to children, school medical inspections, and juvenile courts. Taken together, these initiatives converged as a child-centric conception of vulnerability that constrained the agency of children while also defining the *whatness* of childhood. The series of infant life protection Acts in Britain for example, which paved the way for the Children's Act of 1908 (or Children's Charter as it was widely known), afford a concrete example of how the strategy of child-saving culminated in a discourse of 'protection' that muted the voice of the child within the emergent field of juvenile justice. Among the features of the juvenile courts as they came into existence in France, Britain and many American cities – more or less concurrently – was the absence of the public who provided Béasse with his audience. Henri Rollet, France's first juvenile judge made this precise point

in 1922 when he wrote that the removal of the public 'has excellent results, for the child tends to glory in the interest he arouses and takes pride in seeing his name in the newspapers' (quoted in Donzelot, 1979: 100-101).

What better example of this biopolitical imaginary than a paper read by one S. Shannon Millin before the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland in 1917. Describing the Children's Act of 1908 as 'the great charter of the helpless', Millin invoked the 'rights of children', arguing that children must be protected not only from the 'sordid greed' of predatory employers but also from the neglect of 'idle, vicious and drunken parents, who utilise their children as wage-earning instruments' (1917: 304-311). But *why* should children be rescued from these conditions? Millin's answer to this question is instructive: vulnerable children must be protected because they are an 'asset' which is otherwise denied to the nation. The title of Millin's paper makes the point succinctly: 'Child Life as a National Asset', and he was by no means alone in this strategic framing of child life. The proliferation of means to monitor and manage 'the numbers of our children, their physical fitness, and their mental development' (Crichton, 1925: 302-5) massively augmented the biopolitical vision that spawned the penal reformatory school. Deeply rooted in the theme of child-protection, the twentieth century generated an encompassing apparatus of biopower that aimed to minimise 'the manufacture of criminals and paupers' while maximising the numbers equipped to serve the nation into the future (Millin, 1917: 316).

I end this brief historical survey by returning to Béasse in 1840, and to Foucault's assessment of his sassy performance as the 'affirmation of a living force'. Staged before a public audience, Béasse *acted* in the Arendtian sense by transforming the court – albeit momentarily – into a space where he appeared before others not merely as a unique *who*, but also as the embodiment of a life lived as endless beginning. Béasse exceeds what he is permitted to be in the eyes of the law, or at least its representative – the judge who makes a ruling intended to bring the chaos of beginnings to a halt by transforming the *who* into a *what*: an apprentice with a trade, a station, a home, a fixed place in the order of things. This is what is at stake in the framing of childhood as a national asset, because such an obscenely instrumentalising (yet also mundanely practical) idea presupposes that the unpredictable and generative quality of natality can and ought to be disciplined, such that the *whatness* of childhood becomes organic material to be shaped and formed by the technicians and architects of the future. What is imagined is a future that has tamed natality by fashioning

child life into a docile subject; a scenario whereby the masses willingly conform to a socially scripted life, content to comply with the demands of normative power.

Intermediate reflection: casting the subject of enterprise

The example above of children's rights providing justification for child-protection might be contrasted with my earlier reference (in the introduction) to the 'new paradigm' with its emphasis on the agency of children, which is very much a feature of contemporary views on children's rights. Just be clear – I am not suggesting that rights discourse has evolved in a linear fashion from protection to participation; instead, as David Archard notes in his analysis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), there is a tension in the CRC between participation rights and protection rights (2004: 60-62). The same might be said of childhood in the more general sense – children are vulnerable, dependent, and potentially defenceless, *and* children 'are active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live' (James and Prout, 1997: 7). Setting aside the fact that this duality might also characterise (from Arendt) the human condition (and is thus not unique to children or childhood), this tension is by no means a contradiction. For one thing, both conceptions of childhood operate in the register of *whatness*. Additionally, as the case of Béasse's recalcitrance demonstrates, attempts to discipline natality may target agency as well as vulnerability, which is why it is important to adopt a critical attitude to the present.

Béasse's appearance in court can, I believe, assist us in this regard, though this is only the first step in staging immanent critique, because at stake is what Foucault once described as an 'historical ontology of ourselves' (1984: 45). In other words, how do we adopt a critical attitude to what we are presently saying, thinking, and doing? My response to this is to shift analytical gear, thereby approaching the present by confronting the question of *what* we are, or to be more precise: *what* are we in the process of becoming? In the context of what will be framed below as 'enterprise culture', the contemporary agents of biopolitics are – to borrow from Claire Blencowe – '*casting agents*' who are 'engaged in the production of a performance' (2010: 127, original emphasis). To the extent that adults participate in socially-scripted practices that condition natality as embodied by children – and I include myself here – then we *are* such casting agents, but it must also be noted that this is a process of *self*-conditioning too. Both Arendt and Foucault remind us that we (and

by we, I mean adults and children) are free to act otherwise, yet there may be a cost to this. Béasse's public performance cost him his liberty, while in the context of enterprise culture, natality is conditioned by rewards and sanctions attached to performances which are monitored, measured and ranked by casting agents in a whole variety of ways – commencing in school (such as exam performance) and continuing into adult working life (performance management). Before engaging with the question of acting otherwise, I want to examine a pedagogical programme called BizzWorld, which is completely silent on the theme of children's vulnerability and staged exclusively through their agency. This affords insight into how the casting agents of enterprise culture attempt to harness natality without enclosing it within the type of disciplinary apparatus that Béasse was subject to.

Casting and directing natality: children as 'architects of their futures'

This story begins in a rural community in the West of Ireland (the Republic of Ireland), but the back-story is more encompassing in terms of scale and scope. During the 2015/16 school year, 6th Class children (typically 12-13 years old) attending the local primary school in the area where I live were given an information sheet to take home to parents/guardians, requesting permission for pupils to participate in a workshop called BizzWorld. Modelled on the reality TV format known widely as Dragon's Den, children were being offered the opportunity to 'take part in an exciting hands-on programme' that would 'come to life when a member of the business community acts as the Dragon in the Den with the class'. In other words, children were invited to pitch their own business ideas to an adult playing the role of a venture capital investor. Meshing Dragon's Den with X Factor, the lure held out to children and parents/guardians alike was the possibility of competing in an annual 'Biz Factor Enterprise of the Year competition'.

To shift scale from the local to the global, BizzWorld Ireland³ is a partner to the BizzWorld Foundation, established in 1997 by the venture capital investor Tim Draper, with its headquarters based in Alameda, California⁴. The Foundation's Board of Directors is comprised on individuals in senior positions in major corporations including VISA, US Bank, and Wells Fargo, and according to its Annual Report for 2015-16, BizzWorld operates throughout the US and has partners in 100+ countries across the globe, including Ireland (referred to as 'global expansion', BizzWorld, 2016). The BizzWorld mission is to 'empower children to become 21st century thinkers by awakening their entrepreneurial spirit, inspiring

them to become the architects of their futures, and giving them the confidence to transform their world'⁵. One need only scratch the surface of this mission however to find that it cloaks a biopolitical strategy that would have been right at home in the heyday of the penal reformatory school. How does BizzWorld propose to empower children? By 'providing students with a real world context' so that the programme can 'reach young minds at a critical cognitive stage, and plant the seeds of entrepreneurship and innovation'⁶.

BizzWorld has developed a suite of in-class 'simulations'⁷ whereby, as noted above, children are encouraged to think of themselves as the 'architects of their own future', and yet they play a role that has been scripted for them. They are free to improvise – indeed this is the whole point of the programme – yet the scope of possibility is already bounded by the rules of the game. BizzWorld Ireland for example organises children into contests that enable individual children to rise above their peers, and this competitive ethos corresponds to the Foundation's claim to be connecting the content of education to a 'real-world context'. True, the competitive world of enterprise is certainly real, but not in the sense that gravity is real. To view this through the lens of Arendt's theory of action, BizzWorld constructs a constricted space of appearances whereby children appear before each other as embryonic venture capital investors. Indeed this is the cut and thrust of neo-liberal enterprise culture if viewed as a governmentality – *harnessing natality*. Furthermore, children participating in the BizzWorld experiment are coached to perceive of themselves and each other not as vulnerable minors in need of protection, but as actors, as the architects of imaginable futures, and yet their capacity to begin something – to *act* in the Arendtian sense – is contorted into a competitive ethos that generates a distribution of winners and losers. Projected into the future, this is the difference between those who (will) have the means to dispense alms to the less fortunate, and those dependent on the largesse of a global elite, which is why it would be a mistake to view BizzWorld in isolation, or to dismiss it as being of minor consequence in the larger scheme of things.

BizzWorld is anchored in a globalising culture of enterprise, and while there is not space here to unpack this in detail, it can at least be noted that among its defining characteristics is a dogmatic faith in commercially-driven innovation as the solution to problems such as poverty, climate change, and humanitarian crises (see Žižek, 2008: 15-24). In its US operations, the BizzWorld 'Impact Challenge' offers a glimpse of what lies behind the idea of teaching young entrepreneurs to become 'socially conscious citizens'⁸ (see also

BizzWorld, 2016: 14-15). BizzWorld prefigures a future where problems such as poverty are resolved not through public welfare, social rights, or distributive justice, but by philanthrocapitalism and social enterprise. The Impact Challenge programme is about transforming seed-funding provided by BizzWorld into profit that can be donated to worthy social causes, with successful ventures inspiring other children in other classrooms to do likewise. It is not without significance that it is the *donor* who is empowered by the gift – social enterprise will assist the needy, but it is the ‘self-sufficient’ entrepreneurial class of innovators who are the BizzWorld *avant-garde*.

To be empowered by BizzWorld is to become a *what* (entrepreneur, innovator) as opposed to a *who* – a *what* harnessed to a socio-economic reality powered by inequality. Stripped back to bare essentials, the strategic objective of the BizzWorld Foundation is, as Tim Draper explains, about ‘spreading venture capital entrepreneurship all over the world’⁹. The practical challenge is how to achieve this goal, and the solution is school-going children, because the classroom setting provides a captive audience – a means of organising groups of children into relations and activities that produce very specific experiences, such that children rehearse (and thus prefigure) their own futures as subjects of neo-liberal enterprise culture.

BizzWorld exhibits a trace of the old penal reformatory school by attempting to harness natality, thereby disciplining the transformative potential of creativity and imagination, so that a particular vision of the future is actualised in the present. There is, however, also an important difference worth noting, and this turns on the vulnerability/agency axis. In the BizzWorld scenario, children are not captives within an enclosed institution but instead free to enact scenarios they themselves have called into existence. Yet by playing a part that has been scripted by others, they also participate in a game of enclosure and foreclosure – bounding the world that arises between them by foregoing on the boundless possibilities of natality. Whether or not participants see through the pretence of ‘simulation’, the game itself is to be played *as though* this constrained and conditioned freedom is in fact the untrammelled freedom to begin something new. One wonders what Béasse would make of all this were he to travel forward in time, or we might ourselves travel back in time so as to recall Arendt’s words from half a century ago, because this is not just about children – our attitude to the fact of natality concerns us all.

A 'positive' biopolitics?

Might a natality-enhancing biopolitics somehow exist; a life-affirming biopolitics that doesn't render categories of person as less than fully human (Butler, 2006), or use human cohorts (such as children) as raw material to prefigure what are – the bottom line – contingent and contestable visions of the future? Miguel Vatter (2006) thinks that such a 'positive' biopolitics is possible, and he formulates his argument through an impressively erudite reading of Arendt's work on natality. At the risk of simplifying, Vatter's argument boils down to this: if biological life is the object or target of biopolitics and biopower – power that seeks to regulate and optimise life in accordance with strategic political ends – then biological life is also capable of becoming the subject of resistance (2006: 145). I will come back to this shortly, because the argument as just presented is incomplete (I still need to consider how Vatter works natality into it). First however I want to pick up on an insight which may not be immediately apparent: biopolitics and biopower are not isomorphic. Maurizio Lazzarato makes this point when he argues that 'biopower is always born of something other than itself' (2002: 103). In contrast to Vatter who, as noted already, builds his argument through a close reading of natality in Arendt, Lazzarato derives this insight from Foucault. Very different textual sources, yet Vatter and Lazzarato nevertheless converge on a biopolitical conception of resistance which is more than merely saying 'no' to power. Instead resistance is framed as a creative mode of agency capable of transforming the situation and generating something new.

What is this 'otherness' that Lazzarato gestures towards? I will let Foucault answer that question himself, and the answer is perhaps surprising in the context of the present discussion: *power* (1997: 164, 291-2). Or perhaps the answer is not so surprising after all, particularly if we recall – from Arendt – that power is not only about relations of domination and subjection. Power is also *created* through *concerted action* (Arendt, 1970: 44-52). The thread that connects action to power to resistance leads ultimately to natality, but as noted earlier, this must be understood as a *relation* that simultaneously gathers together and separates, which in turn presupposes a *context*. This is Foucault's argument too, when he insists that power should be understood as field of mobile and reversible relations, and such relations are not fixed and immutable precisely because where there is power there is also the freedom to disrupt the operations and effects of power (1997: 292). This freedom to act otherwise – to subvert existing power relations – is, as Arendt might say, the freedom to

begin something. And yet, when all is said and done, there remains the persistent problem of *how* relations of power are configured and *how* natality is conditioned and constrained. Here again we meet the *whatness* of childhood.

To return to Vatter's thesis – Vatter suggests that 'biological life needs to be reconceived as containing a caesura, a discontinuity within itself' (Vatter, 2006: 145). Natality *is* this caesura, or to put it in Arendtian terms, the life we embody is conditioned, but this does not condition us absolutely. It is this caesura, or this fracturing within life – life as conditioned and life that exceeds its conditioning – that makes possible a positive biopolitics conceived as a 'creative force' capable of generating 'new forms of life' (Foucault, 1997: 164). This, I think, is the crux of the problem, and it captures what is at stake in refiguring childhood. Viewed historically, the intensely prefigurative forms of biopolitics and biopower – those that take childhood as target and living substrate – aim to govern the future by *conditioning* the capacity to begin something new, thus suturing Vatter's caesura *before* natality becomes a disruptive force. It could be argued, convincingly I think, that philosophical, pedagogical, and scientific discourses of childhood – from Locke and Rousseau, through Pestalozzi and Froebel, to G. Stanley Hall and Arnold Gesell, and not forgetting contemporary advocates of entrepreneurship education such as the BizzWorld Foundation, meet on the ground of this insight concerning a 'caesura of life within life' (Vatter, 2006: 145). The kind of becoming portended by natality, which harbours the potential to disturb existing social arrangements, can also be harnessed to imagined futures which are projected through childhood. Taken one step further, if natality can be tamed and trained, then it holds the key to prefiguring human futures. Neither is this of mere historical significance, as BizzWorld demonstrates, because even when the *whatness* of childhood is flipped, so that vulnerability gives way to agency, childhood may still be harnessed as an asset which is leveraged in laying claim to the future. And surely this is what contemporary neo-liberal enterprise culture is all about: capturing and conditioning the radically generative and creative potential of natality?

By way of concluding...

To rephrase the question used to begin the previous section: is there a way of living with and through natality that avoids transforming beginnings into ends, thereby pressing

nativity into the service of socially-scripted destinations? Must life be lived backwards from the point of view of projected futures? I would like to finish with a few lines from Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler, both of whom speak with eloquence to such questions. In a passage that might be read in memory of Béasse's audacious performance, Cavarero writes that 'the uniqueness of the existent has no need for a form that plans or contains it. Rooted in the unmasterable flux of a constitutive exposition, she is saved from the bad habit of prefiguring herself, and from the vice of prefiguring the lives of others' (2000: 144). Butler might be read as gesturing not only to nativity, but also to becoming-child when she writes that 'the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know' (2006: 49). To thread these thoughts together: nativity names a beginning that prefigures nothing other than the possibility of beginning anew, and it is powered by an imagination that has no age limit.

Notes

1 While Arendt's frequent use of male pronouns was in keeping with convention at that time, I have altered subsequent quotations (below) to offset unnecessary gender bias.

2 On the place of biopolitics in the writings of Foucault and Arendt see Blencowe, 2010; for a superb analysis of power, subjectivity and agency in the work of Arendt and Foucault, and how this might serve to bring them into a productive dialogue without losing sight of the important differences in their respective approaches to power, see Allyn, 2002.

3 Established in 2011.

4 Draper conceived the idea of an in-class business 'simulation' in 1992 (see: An Introduction to the BizzWorld Foundation-841':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTsRdo1Mj1A>).

5 <https://www.bizworld.org/>

6 <https://www.bizworld.org/Events-NEW/40/Draper-University-Official-Launch>

7 See note 4 above.

8 <https://www.bizworld.org/Impact-Challenge>

9 Here quoting Tim Draper from 'Tim Draper – BizzWorld Foundation':

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gA_S_KEMY.

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