

#IWD2016 Academic Inspiration: ‘On Connectivity or What Reading Hannah Arendt Taught Me about the Relatedness of Things’ by Ninna Meier

*What academics or books have inspired you in your writing and research, or helped to make sense of the world around you? In this feature essay, **Ninna Meier** returns to her experience of reading **Hannah Arendt** as she sought to understand work and how it relates to value production in capitalist economies. Meier recounts how Arendt’s book **On Revolution** (1963) forged connective threads between the ‘smallest parts’ and the ‘largest wholes’ and showed how academic work is never fully relegated to the past, but can return in new iterations across time.*

*This feature essay is part of a theme week marking **International Women’s Day 2016**. March is Women’s History Month and LSE is celebrating with **LSE Women: Making History**, focusing on #LSEwomen past, present and future. If you are interested in finding out more, please visit [the LSE History blog](#).*

On Connectivity or What Reading Hannah Arendt Taught Me about the Relatedness of Things



It’s the fall of 2005 and I am sitting in the public section of the library at the Danish School of Engineering. An old aeroplane is suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the large, rectangular building, and I have a desk all to myself on the top floor, behind shelves and shelves of engineering books. It feels like a holiday coming here, a holiday for my mind. After delivering the two youngest to day care, I have a window of about six hours before I have to pick them up and I am determined to make the most of it. So I come here every day to plunge into Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1963). The book is 330 pages long, including notes, and in Arendt’s books the notes count! I know from reading *The Human Condition* (1958) that gems and treasures can be hidden in the notes; they are not to be skipped or ignored. The reason I read this book is because I am trying to understand *work* and how it relates to value production in capitalist economies for my master’s thesis. Something has changed in the way we talk

about, and relate to, work, and I want to know more about how this has changed over time and why.

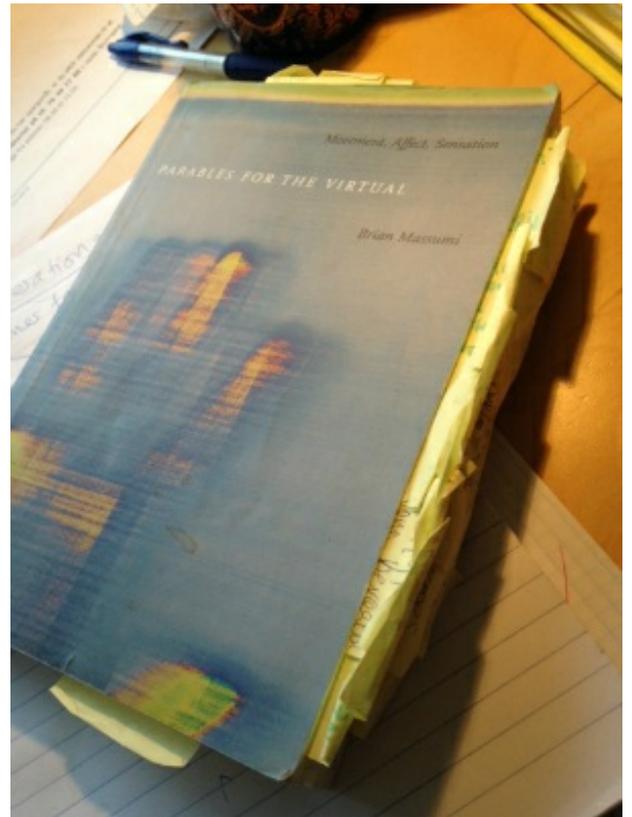
In 2005, with a background in philosophy and organisation theory, this leads me to concepts like immaterial labour, affect and the role of marketing and mass media in politics and economy. As I read more into this field, I want to understand hope, political movements, the body, societal change, the masses (as a political entity) and compassion as elements in modern politics, and how value can be drawn from these potentially powerful concepts. And from here I cycle back to Arendt, to *On Revolution*. Of course, her eminent analysis of work and labour in *The Human Condition* is important, but I read that back in my early years at university and at that point I did not know, and could not see, where reading this would take me. So in a way that doesn't count as the book that made me think about becoming an academic. But in 2005, as I am reading *On Revolution* – frantically reading it, highlighting passages left and right, marking 'good' bits with yellow post-it notes – I am amazed at her impressive ability to connect the many vast and diverse areas of her inner knowledge landscape for me, but I also sense things coming together in how I think about work and my life. I remember thinking: 'this is what I want to do. I want to understand things, learn their genealogy and find out how they relate to other things.'

After a few detours, where I tried having 'real' jobs but failed miserably to be motivated by making money – an ex-colleague actually told me: 'Don't take it personally, I think you're just too geeky to work in a bank' – I quit my job and applied for funding for a PhD. Capitalist production, apparently, was not for me. But out of the thesis on work grew a lifelong passion to understand this strange concept, what it may contain and how it changes over time.

In the PhD, I started this pursuit by examining a certain kind of work that was subject to a lot of political attention, but much less empirical research: the work undertaken by professionals in front-line management positions in public sector institutions. At this point in time, with [New Public Management](#) policies and tools being implemented throughout the public sector, demands to improve and make this work efficient were everywhere. However, the theoretical frameworks for understanding this work were less frequently based on solid empirical knowledge of how it was practised across different settings; rather, theories seemed to be adopted from research into private sector organisations or from general, normative ideals of what leadership and management *should* be. And I kept wondering: what is happening here? How are policies, theories and shared mental models of leadership and management in public sector institutions connected? And what are the consequences of this for how we attempt as a society to govern this work and for the conditions of its practice?

This is what Arendt's books have taught me: to explore how things are connected. As I was reading *On Revolution*, I re-read sections of the 1974 Surhkamp edition of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* for the discussions of the value concept (a mustard-yellow version, which my step-dad had kept for nostalgic reasons but never opened since he went to university in the 1970s and which I, due to a love of books and old books in particular, had rescued from his basement and had on my shelf). By happy accident I stumbled upon Mary Zournazi's *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (2002) and I was amused (and admittedly a bit confused) by Brian Massumi's analyses of affect in politics, mass media and immaterial labour. Somehow my reading of Arendt's works weaved threads between books such as these and the sociological and philosophical classics I had read in my first years. For me, this was an example of a way I could work in academia: I could look for the bigger picture and for the relationships between the smallest part and the largest wholes.

I still read Arendt's books on and off, revisiting them to remind myself of her breadth and the acuity of her points. Somehow she is able to say profound things about the most basic yet important elements in a human life (the things we share and the things that set us apart), things that resonate with my personal experiences as a human being. I have drawn on her in raising teenage boys (insisting on their responsibility to exercise their judgement and not just follow the herd); she has been the inspiration for lengthy (nightly) discussions about the existence of free will with my husband; and my mental model of our net of family relationships as that which is suspended under us comes from reading her. My niece is named after her as a result of my suggestion, I'd like to think. Arendt died the year I was born. Her work for the *New Yorker* on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem has taught me that the potential value of academic work might appear and reappear in iterations over time, long after the author is gone. Somehow this is a reassuring and very freeing notion to me.



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Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics. Thank you to Ninna Meier for providing the images for this essay.

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