

**Rethinking Responses to Political Crisis and Collapse:
Hannah Arendt, Edith Stein, Rosa Luxemburg, and
Simone Weil
King's College, London ON, Canada, 6th – 8th March
2020. Conference report**

Even in times when we enjoy growing interest in women philosophers-related research, a conference like this is a very attractive rarity: the newest contributions to research on Hannah Arendt, Edith Stein, Rosa Luxemburg, and Simone Weil gathered within one academic event, with 24 papers relating their works to the crises of our world today. These four philosophers shared the time, in which they lived and the place of origin. They were all born in western/central Europe in the end of 19th (in case of Luxemburg and Stein) or in the beginning of 20th Century (Arendt and Weil), lived and worked in Germany. However, bringing them together is not a matter of course. There are clear differences in their biographies and in their philosophical interests. While Rosa Luxemburg was a revolutionary, as much involved in writing, as in her political cause, and Simone Weil dedicated a large part of her work to the illumination of the nature of mechanized labor and its existential impact, Edith Stein thought from a more spiritual perspective, though not forgetting practical challenges of human existence. Of the four, only Hannah Arendt lived through the torments of the early 20th Century revolutions and the Second World War to reflect upon the development of the post-war society with its stirring globalizing tendencies.

Still, not differences, but foremost similarities and correlations between the four thinkers were in focus of this conference, also in the sense of a dialogue between the contributors. This has been vividly shown in reflecting upon the notion of community with Stein and Arendt (Calcagno, Enns, Merucci, Walker and Zaitsoff), theoretical frictions between Arendt and Luxemburg (Fulfer/Gardiner, Lotz), the relation between lies and politics in Weil and Arendt (Livingstone, Roncalli, Spear), or different accounts of political rights (Atkins, Calcagno, Massa, Robaszekiewicz). The organizers: Antonio Calcagno, who is well-known to attendees of Libori Summer Schools at HWPS, Stephen Lofts (both representing The Centre for Advanced Research in European Philosophy at King's College), and Mark Yenson (King's College, The Centre for Advanced Research in Catholic Thought) brought together a diverse group of scholars, whose contributions illuminated possibilities of responding to many aspects of political crisis, prompted – without exception – lively discussions. Besides the colleagues from King's College/University of Western Ontario, speakers from other Canadian, US-American, UK, Israeli and German universities contributed to the rich program of this event.

The conference program was framed by two keynote lectures. The opening lecture was held by Anna Rowlands (Durham University)¹, who focused on “Simone Weil as Negative Political Theologian”, at the same time underlining the relevance of all four

¹ * Due to Covid-19 related restrictions in the UK, Anna Rowlands could not attend the conference in person, but the organizers provided technical support to transmit both the lecture and the discussion on-line.

philosophers included in the title of the conference for addressing political challenges today. In her paper, Rowlands very convincingly brought Weil's theory together with her own fieldwork, specifically interviewing refugees in London and the Middle East about their experience and the role different forms of roots (origin, family, religion) played for them. This way, she was able to give a voice to forced migrants (even if this voice had its limitations and included, for communicative reasons, mainly English speaking and educated reviewees) – an extremely important task from the perspective of critical migration studies.

In the closing lecture, A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone (University of North Dakota) addressed the problem of fatigue in today's society. Relying on theories of Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt, she spoke of growing worldlessness and the fading of the in-between we experience today in what used to be perceived as communities. This growing 'desertification' of what might be described as social life, in this case meaning intersubjective communication and understanding practices, prompts the emergence of the 'desert psychology'. This kind of psychology attempts to help us adjust to this problematic development, which is where the social becomes political. When reacting to this crisis of worldliness, which includes reinforcing and practicing what is between us, as Weil suggests, through vigilant attention towards an issue or a subject, we are likely to confront what Rozelle-Stone describes as moral-psychological fatigue. The question how to address this fatigue is very worthwhile, even if it cannot be answered conclusively.

The conference program included numerous papers concerning concrete facets of contemporary political crisis, as Brexit (Woods), death penalty (Garner) or globalization (Meir). Other contributors approached the theme of the conference in a more general way by addressing issues like the relation of the secular and the political (Pirani), political normativity (Poole) or technology-based social engineering (Singh). All of them were showing current political relevance of the theories at hand. As always in cases of high-quality conferences with more than one track, many participants wished to be able to attend all presentations, at the same time acknowledging the necessities of conference program economy.

It was also clear that the invariably constructive tone of the discussion – with criticism being used as encouragement, not as a tool of showing academic superiority – offered young scholars a space to present and discuss their papers in a profitable way. To me, this was a paramount example of a productive and beneficial conference exchange, which I also know from international Hannah-Arendt-scholarship settings. One can only wish for more conferences like this one.

Participants (with paper presentations):

Jeremy Arnott (University of Western Ontario)
Ashley Atkins (Western Michigan University)
Antonio Calcagno (King's University College)
Dianne Enns (Ryerson University)
Katy Fulfer (University of Waterloo)
Rita Gardiner (University of Western Ontario)

John Garner (University of West Georgia)
Emily Laurent-Monaghan (Western University)
Joshua Livingstone (Queen's University)
Stephen Lofts (King's University College)
Christian Lotz (Michigan State University)
Manuela Massa (Martin Luther University, Halle)
Peli Meir (University of Haifa)
Bianca Merucci (King's University College)
Pietro Pirani (Western University)
Nick Poole (York University)
Karanveer Singh (King's University College)
Maria Robaszkiewicz (Universität Paderborn)
Elvira Roncalli (Carroll College)
Anna Rowlands (Durham University)
A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone (University of North Dakota)
Andrew Spear (Grand Valley State University)
Andrew Walker (King's University College)
Andrew Woods (University of Western Ontario)
Sangie Zaitsoff (University of Western Ontario)

Maria Robaszkiewicz

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