

## What Would Arendt Say?

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Inaugural conference of the Society for Women of Ideas, November 19-20, 2021

The Society for Women of Ideas, launched in early fall, 2021, hosted their inaugural international conference, “What Would Arendt Say?” on November 19-20, 2021. A group of nine distinguished Hannah Arendt scholars were invited to reflect on what Arendt might have to say about one of the many social, political and moral crises that currently afflict the world. Despite the virtual format, the talks led to immensely stimulating discussions on current events and issues Arendt would have had much to say about were she here to offer her insights.

As an interdisciplinary scholarly forum that seeks to promote the work of women thinkers, the Society for Women of Ideas aims to provide a public space for the discussion of ideas generated by women philosophers, political theorists, writers, artists, and other researchers and practitioners engaged in the creative and provocative work of thinking. The intent of the Society is to ensure women’s contributions to intellectual history are recognized and valued, and to cultivate a community of scholars interested in learning about historical and contemporary “women of ideas.” Given the Director (Diane Enns) and founding members of the society (Antonio Calcagno and Brian Phillips) have a longstanding interest in Arendt, it seemed fitting to host the Society’s first event on her work.

The conference was organized in such a way as to maximize discussion. Each of the nine speakers presented their Arendt-inspired reflections on a particular topic for about 15-20 minutes, followed by 40-45 minutes of discussion with the other invited guests, moderators, and about 30-40 conference registrants, including students, academics and those outside of academia with an interest in Arendt. Conferences do not always permit enough time for discussion, and for thinking together about the events that currently impact us. It was the intent of the organizers to depart from the usual conference format, and by all accounts, the time spent in lively discussion—thinking what we are doing, as Arendt would say—was memorable.

Elizabeth Minnich, the author of *The Evil of Banality: On the Life and Death Importance of Thinking*, appropriately opened the conference by reflecting on why the

consequences of thoughtlessness are so dangerous, and abundantly evident in our contemporary world. Throughout the two day conference, we returned to the necessity of thinking as the condition for understanding and meaningfulness, and for preventing the worst that humankind is capable of.

Andrew Schaap (University of Exeter) and Serena Parekh (Northeastern University) spoke of different aspects of the ongoing global refugee, migrant, and deportation crises, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary complexities these crises have generated since Arendt wrote on statelessness.

Linda Zerilli (University of Chicago) and Joshua Livingstone (Queen's University) focused their respective sessions on truth and lies and the relevance of Arendt's work for understanding the political implications of their distinction. Zerilli discussed "post truth" as a picture that holds democratic theory captive to inherited conceptions of politics that Arendt would have us question. Livingstone's concern was the rise of social media, with its rampant lies and conspiracy theories that demonstrate the loss of authority Arendt warns could lead to instability and new totalitarian movements.

Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Northwestern University) presented an eloquent reading of Arendt's "We Refugees," an essay Gottlieb calls "an unclassifiable piece of writing" that is neither a call to action nor a scholarly analysis of the plight of refugees, but a compelling piece that is essential to understanding a basic feature of Arendt's work.

Marieke Borren (Open University, Netherlands) initiated a discussion of the current pandemic in her reflections on Arendt's account of human dignity. Borren argued that implicit in Arendt's analyses of the globalizing force of European imperialism, migration, and weapons of mass destruction, was a notion of human dignity informed by a proto-normative commitment to the world that human beings share. We are bound by a "negative solidarity" that confronts us with new burdens and responsibilities.

Hannah LaGrand (McMaster University) contributed an inspiring defense of the private, drawing from Arendt's description of the richness and depth of the hidden, overlooked, and unproductive dimension of life—a dimension currently threatened by excessive demands for productivity, and easily accessed tools of publicity.

Shmuel Lederman (University of Haifa; Open University of Israel) discussed the relevance of Arendt's vision of a radically participatory council democracy for our widespread contemporary disillusionment with representative democracy. He noted the centrality of this vision to Arendt's understanding of the political, and its anticipation of the anxieties and hopes of some of the most important social movements of our time.

The organizers of "What Would Arendt Say?"—Diane Enns (Ryerson University), Antonio Calcagno (University of King's College at Western University), and Brian Phillips (Independent Scholar), were thrilled to spend two days in discussions with such dynamic,

and engaging Arendt scholars, and look forward to planning future events on the relevance of Arendt's work for understanding our own social and political crises.