

Report on the Conference *The Politics of Beginnings: Hannah Arendt Today*

Anna Argirò

The conference *The Politics of Beginnings: Hannah Arendt Today* took place at the ICI Berlin on 15-16 February 2023. The event was organized by Facundo Vega (Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Santiago de Chile / Affiliate Fellow, ICI Berlin) and co-hosted by the ICI in cooperation with the Center for Post-Kantian Philosophy (University of Potsdam).

The conference was held both virtually and in person. It gathered an outstanding circle of Arendt scholars to explore the topic of ‘political beginnings’ throughout Arendt’s work in connection to themes dear to Arendt such as those of freedom, power, natality, democracy, revolution and human rights. It aimed not only at uncovering the importance of the concept of ‘beginning’ within Arendt’s oeuvre, but to also respond to the question: what role can Arendt’s account of political beginnings play in the conceptualization of a new time in an epoch, in which struggles against climate change, exploitation, neo-colonialism, patriarchy, and racism proliferate? Some contributors adopted a more philological approach and excavated the multiple meanings of beginning within Arendt’s corpus. Other speakers suggested ways to expand and critically re-elaborate Arendt’s position in innovative directions.

Like a red thread, the topic of “beginning” in its varied configurations crosses most of Arendt’s work. From her doctoral thesis on *Love and Saint Augustine*, which Arendt revised for publication in the late 50s / early 60s, to her last and unfinished work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt questions herself about an origin which seems to stand outside the human condition and yet is the source of human beings’ capacity of beginning something new in the common world. Human beings’ capacity to act is indeed an actualization of what Arendt calls “the human condition of natality” to the extent that it depends and responds to the beginning that came into the world when we were born (intended as having-been-created).

In this respect, Arendt often quotes the famous line *Initium ut esset homo creates est ante quem nullus fuit* from Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*. The beginning is seen by Arendt as a human experience and capacity of something absolute. However, as many speakers remarked, the absolutist trait of each new beginning does not point to and cannot be conflated with a traditional notion of authority. Indeed, based on the semantic ambiguity of the Greek term ἀρχή, which, at the same time, means “beginning” and “rule”, it has been traditionally assumed that there is an implicit connection between the act of “beginning” and that of “ruling.” Arendt challenges this connection by questioning any

hierarchical concept of power and emphasizing rather that power is generated only when people gather together in a public space.

By following the ‘migration’ of Augustine’s citation throughout Arendt’s work, Anne Eusterschulte uncovered an Arendtian “politics of ‘willing’” based on her distinction between will understood as *liberum arbitrium*, a freedom of choice that arbitrates and decides among given things, and will understood as the freedom and capacity to call something into being which did not exist before.

Eva Geulen and Rahel Jaeggi explored this intimate connection between beginning and political freedom, as well as the way in which these notions inform Arendt’s concept of revolution. Both speakers underlined that, for Arendt, revolutions must be able to mediate between the “concern for stability” and the “spirit of novelty”, rejecting changes violently imposed. By interrupting what Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, calls “the natural course of events” that, if not hindered by human action, take on the cyclicity and repetition of natural time, the foundation of a new order/time (*Novus Ordo Saeclorum*) paradoxically instantiates the infinite improbability of an absolute beginning occurring in the historical time. In her talk, Jaeggi warns against Arendt’s overestimation of the new (beginning) understood mainly as spontaneity and invites to take into account the preconditions of social and political changes.

Fina Birulés investigated the interplay between past and beginning in a possible Arendtian concept of time and history inspired primarily by Benjamin, Heidegger and Augustine. Arendt questions a concept of time intended as a linear or a cyclic movement to point towards a non-progressive and non-teleological temporality set out by the repetition of the beginning that came into the world when we were born. In Arendt’s view, this ‘return to the past’ introduces a new beginning not primordially closed. The event of a new beginning is radically contingent and depends on the plurality of human beings that confirm and take part to it.

By unfolding in a potentially infinite network of actions and reactions, the event of a new beginning keeps itself open to unpredictable consequences. This potential infinity is what determines the intrinsic “frailty” or precariousness of each new beginning, whose disruptive power risks to be annihilated by the flow of ordinary and historical time. In her paper, Bonnie Honig offered perspectives on how to preserve and stabilize/institutionalize the generative power of the new beginning in an “Arendtian politics of forgiveness” that she retraces specifically in the Judeo (as released from the Judeo-Christian) lineage of Arendt’s reflections.

Thomas Khurana, for his part, focused on the “anachronism of beginning” that, in his view, becomes particularly evident in Arendt’s approach to the question of human rights. By interpreting Arendt’s “right to have rights” as the right to participate in a community at all, Khurana remarked that this fundamental right precedes every other right and still it

comes second because it awaits its actualization in single subjective rights that can be recognized and become effective only in a social/political community. While in the context of the second half of the twentieth century, the question of human rights was framed primarily in protective terms, Arendt sets at the centre of her reflection human beings as agents and *subjects* of their rights. Similarly, Samuel Moyn suggested to reconnect Arendt's concept of political freedom to the cold war context in which it emerged, by at the same time distancing it to the positions of cold war liberals who conceived of freedom only as non-interference.

Elaborating on the capacity of beginning and acting as responding to the creatural “urge to self-display,” (*The Life of the Mind*) Diego Rossello suggested to expand Arendt's spectatorial understanding of political action to include non-human ‘agencies’. Specifically, Rossello argued that animals too can take part in the formation of a democratic, collective will and help shape a political context.

Rodolphe Gasché suggested to rethink the question of beginning in connection to Arendt's investigation of the origins of the common or public opinion on what philosophy is, as distinct from how this question has been posed by a circle of few ‘professional thinkers’ Bearing in mind Arendt's sharp distinction between Greek and Rome's philosophical mentalities, Gasché showed how Arendt retraces an alternative source of philosophy which does not have its primary horizon neither in Rome after the decline of the *res publica* nor in Greek metaphysics.

Thomas Meyer retraced the ‘beginnings’ that marked Arendt's life and intellectual path.

In her conclusive talk, Adriana Cavarero explored the question of political beginnings in relation to the *liberating* and *generating* potential of democracy in its formation. By referring to the Latin verb *surgere* which, at the same time, means “standing up against” and points to the traditional idea of an armed insurrection, and “coming into existence”, “spring forth,” Cavarero insisted on the inaugural and ‘surgive’ moment of democracy that takes place when bodies assemble and thrill together in a non-violent context. These “epiphanies of freedom” are rare and ephemeral and make it hard to preserve hope in a real change. “Do we really believe in political beginnings?” –Cavarero asks at the end of her talk. Yet, after an immense historical catastrophe, Arendt was able to rethink politics as a radical experience of collective beginnings. This confidence in the possibility of change needs to be projected not only in the future but prompts to take care of and to act now, in our present.

The recording of the talks and discussion is available on the [ICI website](#).

List of Contributors

Fina Birulés

Adriana Cavarero

Anne Eusterschulte

Simona Forti

Rodolphe Gasché

Eva Geulen

Bonnie Honig

Rahel Jaeggi

Thomas Khurana

Thomas Meyer

Samuel Moyn

Diego Rossello