

“Individual Universalism? Sensus communis and reflective judgment in Kant and Arendt”, 4th of December 2024, University of Freiburg, organized by Martin Baesler (Freiburg) and Kevin Licht (Bonn)

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The conference brought together a variety of contributions discussing the topicality of Hannah Arendt’s concept of *sensus communis* that aims to derive a political philosophy of judging from Kant’s aesthetic theory in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Due to its fragmentary character and its quite free interpretation of Kant’s position, this part of Arendt’s work has been many times critiqued, neglected and dismissed. The conference in Freiburg sought to rediscover and defend the contribution of Arendt’s approach to political judging as an inherently intersubjective practice. As Arendt states in her New York lectures from 1970: “When one judges, one judges as a member of a community” (*Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 72)

Elena Romano (Berlin) argued that Arendt’s emphasis on the empirical side of the *sensus communis* could prevent Kant’s universal standpoint from an a priori exclusion of empirically diverse individual standpoints. At the same time, Romano maintained the importance of Kant reminding us that intersubjectivity is no substitute for thinking for oneself and that the community in which judgment takes place is the ideal community of the human species.

Samantha Fazekas (Dublin) aimed to counter the critique against Arendt according to which her understanding of the function that empirical examples play in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* amount to a ‘de-transcendental’ misinterpretation. Defending Arendt, Fazekas argued that Arendt places Kant’s a priori judgments in empirical reality. The universal must be read from the particular, e.g. the possibility of freedom and liberation can only be recognized in its particular realization, for instance in the American Revolution.

Kevin Licht (Bonn) explored Kant’s distinction between acting and judging, with a focus on Arendt’s interpretation that spectators (as those judging) enable action by creating a public sphere, within which actions only become communicable and understandable in the first place. Communicability inherent in judgments constitutes a mediation between judging and acting.

Alexander Schwitteck (Berlin/Bonn) critiqued Arendt’s dismissal of Kant’s explicitly political-philosophical writings, particularly her claim that Kant “never wrote a political

philosophy" (Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy, 7). Arendt thereby misses resources already present in Kant (such as in What is Enlightenment?) that also argue for the constitutively public (as opposed to private) nature of 'political judgment'.

Zanan Akin (Hagen) linked Arendt's concept of judgment to the contemporary issue of 'alternative facts,' arguing that the common sense today is no longer automatically present wherever judgment is made. In this way Akin uncovered an implicit and no longer tenable assumption in Arendt's relation to the world: That reality cannot become the subject of private opinions. As common sense is no longer inherent in judgment, it has to be created collectively.

Larissa Wallner (Frankfurt a. M.) interpreted the concept of "being at home" as central to Arendt's *sensus communis*, highlighting that home is a space where freedom from domination and thinking for oneself are possible. Wallner argued that "freedom as security" derives not primarily from a privately owned home, but from certain material and social living conditions. This idea of "home," Wallner suggested, is a place where individuals think both for themselves and for everyone else.

Martin Baesler (Freiburg) argued that political judgment, if insufficiently developed and disseminated, contributes to the creation of crises. Vital for maintaining freedom and ensuring that individuals can relate to the world in a mutually understood way is their exchange of opinions based on the practice of reflexively distancing oneself from the private conditions that shape one's initial perspective.

Astrid Hähnlein (Freiburg) discussed how even the standards or reference points of political judgment are not fixed, transhistorical categories, but must be intersubjectively reflected upon again and again. Hähnlein illustrated this by discussing how – through historical and political discourse – the Holocaust came to be seen as establishing new standards of judgment for crimes of previously unimaginable quality and dimension.

In her closing key-note lecture, Waltraud Meints-Stender (Niederrhein University of Applied Sciences) advocated for the development of a *sensus communis materialis* that reflects also on the socio-cultural structures of class society shaping individuals' judgment – something that Arendt only mentions in passing.

Overall, the conference showed that Arendt's account of the *sensus communis* can contribute in fruitful ways to contemporary questions in political theory arising from current problems in democratic processes. In particular, Arendt offers resources to connect the importance of particular, epistemic standpoints on the one side with the need for a universally valid, normative orientation on the other.

This report is the adapted version of a more elaborate contribution published in German on theorieblog.de.