

## Report on the Launch of the Hannah Arendt Consortium on Crises and Political Transformation

*Gabriele Parrino*

The inaugural event for the *Hannah Arendt Consortium on Crises and Political Transformation* was held on September 26–27, 2024, at the University of Cambridge, England. The program brought together scholars from all over the world to explore the intersections of Arendtian thought with contemporary questions about political crises and the challenges of world-building in today's context while also focusing on the importance of reviving politics in the face of our current complicated times. Organized by prominent faculty members from the University of Cambridge, including Daniele Bassi, Jo-Anne Dillabough, and Irit Katz, this launch event attracted a diverse array of scholars, fostering dialogue on how Arendt's insights apply to pressing global and social issues.

The opening remarks, delivered by Daniele Bassi, Jo-Anne Dillabough, and Irit Katz, introduced the Consortium's goals, emphasizing the importance of Arendt's theories in addressing the relevance of critical political issues, including common worldbuilding, exile and statelessness, freedom, plurality, and the promise of politics. After the introductory part, the event proceeded in the shape of numerous panels, called *Agora*, that both resonated to and amplified the questions and the aims of the Consortium.

In the first *Agora* (*Political Spaces, Temporalities, and Criticalities in a New Age of Extremes*), moderated by Duncan Bell, Irit Katz discussed how displaced populations reappropriate unworldly spaces, transforming refugee camps into sites of political significance. Jo-Anne Dillabough examined the role of universities as “holding environments” for critical intellectualism, while Stefano Bellin addressed the presentist modern crisis of political imagination and the potential role of cultural narratives in reinvigorating public life. The second *Agora* (*Common Worldbuilding for an Uncommon World*), chaired by Frisbee Sheffield, was a session that covered diverse approaches to building a common world amid political and social fragmentation. Jess Feldman explored the council system's relevance and Arendt's account of the Workers' Movements through the lenses of the General Strike, while Norma Musih emphasized the role of political imagination as an activist force, and artistic interpretations of Arendt's themes on refuge and shared humanity, respectively. Sinead O' Neal, at the end of the panel, showed a collaborative art initiative inspired by Arendt, including an opera segment titled *Amor Mundi* that was featured to highlight the relevance of the arts in public discourse. Concluding the first day, Bonnie Honig's keynote speech in the third *Agora* (*Forgiveness in Politics*) analyzed forgiveness through Arendt's and J.L. Austin's perspectives on performative speech acts. Honig offered a unique interpretation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*

as a drama reflecting Arendtian “release,” drawing parallels with contemporary racial-political contexts.

The second day of the Launch opened with Jo-Anne Dillabough moderating a session, the fourth Agora (*Exile and the Promise of Politics*), where Zeina Al-Azmeh discussed the political narratives of Syrian exiled intellectuals that, subverting a previous ethos of powerlessness, subordination, and despair, imagined a possible transition from a politics of “being perceived” to one of “perceiving.” Seçkin Sertdemir Özdemir examined the authoritarian “civic death” imposed on academics worldwide, raising concerns about the impacts of state control in Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States on higher education and intellectual freedom.

The fifth Agora consisted of a deeply engaging discussion with Bonnie Honig in conversation with Lauren Wilcox and Irit Katz that, conducted by retracing the history of Bonnie’s work and the main themes that informed her theory, delved further into the intersection of political philosophy, performative acts, Arendtian concepts and feminist political thought, exploring the nuanced responsibilities of intellectuals in modern crises.

The sixth Agora (*Freedom and Politics between Endurance and Change*), chaired by Daniele Bassi, examined the balance between political endurance and transformative action in contemporary societies through diverse lenses. Thiago Dias presented on the relationship between digital disinformation and world alienation, using the 2018 election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil as a case study. Irene Villa provided a compelling exploration of social exclusion through Judith Butler’s queer perspective in her presentation, examining Arendt’s distinction between necessity and freedom, critiquing its limitations for addressing issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Gabriele Parrino offered a thought-provoking analysis of Arendt’s engagement with Roman republican traditions, highlighting how Arendt’s admiration for Roman *auctoritas* could inspire new models of democracy. Yasemin Sari rounded out the session with a comparative analysis of Arendt and W.E.B. Du Bois on democratic belonging, expanding on Arendt’s ideas to encompass issues of race and socioeconomic inequality. In the last section of the panel, Giacomo Mormino analyzed Arendt’s notion of common world-building through the metaphor of architecture, exploring how physical spaces mediate our connections with others.

The seventh and final agora was conducted by Michalinos Zembylas keynote lecture that closed the academic sessions with an engaging discussion on the role of political education in fostering a shared reality in the face of post-truth politics. By integrating Arendt’s reflections on truth and plurality, Zembylas argued for a political education that reinforces democratic engagement.

The Consortium’s launch event ended with a reception at Hotel du Vin, providing a reflective space for participants to discuss future collaborations and applications of Arendtian thought in addressing global crises. The Consortium was an important occasion to create philosophical relationships between Arendtian Scholars while also

opening a conjoint discourse on the new possibilities that can be actualized for facing the present crises of our dark times. Following the success of this new beginning, the Consortium plans to continue exploring the intersections of Arendt's political theory and contemporary crises, with future events aimed at expanding this dialogue on an international scale.

Special thanks to the University of Cambridge for hosting the event and to all participants for their contributions, which highlighted the enduring relevance of Arendt's work in our time, and, on a closing note, a heartfelt thanks to Jo-Anne Dillabough, Daniele Bassi, Irit Katz and Ayse Nal Akcay (the administrative led) for their care and zealous efforts to make all the participants feeling welcomed and part of a meaningful "plurality".