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Polis Forum Roundtable Conversation on Hannah Arendt, Plurality, and Democracy

with
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Introduction

The Campus Plurality Project was founded in 2016 at the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College. A student led initiative, The Plurality Project seeks to embrace Arendt's axiom: "Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides." At a time when college campuses are being torn apart by the partisanship of identity politics, the students at Bard wanted to create a space for difficult questions, to allow a multitude of diverse and often unpopular voices to be heard. This conversation moves from the work of Hannah Arendt to the college campus environment today, and considers several questions: Who should be invited to campuses? Who has the right to speak? Who is empowered when a speaker presents an argument? What does it mean to be uncomfortable?

Roger Berkowitz: One of the central concepts of Hannah Arendt's work is plurality. In its most general sense, as she develops it in *The Human Condition,* plurality is the condition of human action because we, she says, are all the same, that is human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.

In order to act, we have to be the same, and yet we also have to be different. If we were not the same we couldn't respond to each other, we couldn't listen to each other, we couldn't interact and understand what each other was saying and doing; and yet if we weren't different, there would be no reason to pay attention to what other people do. And this two-fold character of equality and distinction is at the root of what she calls human plurality.

This argument about plurality—about the fact that we, on the one hand, share a common world and yet we are all multiple and different—girds a larger political argument about free speech and how we should engage with people who are different, and at times offensive, and dangerous in the world. Arendt develops this argument in many different essays. In her essay, "Truth and Politics", she says that in politics there is no truth; all there is is opinion. The idea is that in a world of plurality we can't rely on philosophical or mathematical truths about what is true and what is false. There are different opinions. And in politics what we have is persuasion; we have to listen to people and persuade

them, and persuade others that we are right and they are wrong. And there is no way to say to someone, "you're untrue, and you're wrong, and therefore we should exclude you from the discourse."

In her work, "Introduction *into* Politics", Arendt develops this argument further and says that free speech matters and is important in the world because only through free speech and listening to people who are plural and different from ourselves can we hope to know the world. She writes, "Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world as that about which we speak emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides."[1] If we're going to share a common world, we have to actually encounter that world in its objectivity, in its—maybe better than objectivity—in its impartiality; and the only way we can encounter that world is by listening to all the people in it, even those we truly disagree with and find problematic and offensive.

And so there is an argument that emerges from Arendt's understanding of plurality and politics about the need to hear all of the different people, and opinions. According to this argument, we need to reconcile ourselves to the reality of a plural world and come to love that world, even a world with evil in it and badness in it. That doesn't mean we can't judge parts of it as wrong, and we can't decide to punish or even expel people from that world eventually; but we have first to hear what they disagree with and then we have to politically seek to persuade our co-citizens and other people of our opinions, our truths. And so this is a very strong Arendtian understanding of what it means to live in a plural world that leads to a very strong defense not of free speech in the John Stuart Millian sense of leading to truth or leading to the marketplace of ideas, but freedom of speech as a necessary corollary of the fact that we are all plural people, and there are opinions in the public world and not truths.

Samantha Hill: I think without question that Hannah Arendt is a defender of free speech. She understands free speech to be essential to a healthy and vibrant democracy. And, as we were talking about earlier, and as Roger said, plurality is the fundamental fact of the human condition according to Arendt. She begins *The Human Condition,* her work on the *vita activa*, the life of action, by saying that men and not man inhabit the earth and share the world in common. We make the world together in common, and we make the world in common through speech, and word, and deed, as she likes to say.

So I actually want to go back over the quote that you pulled out of *The Promise of Politics,* and then I want to bring it into the conversation with two other pieces of her writing to talk about—to talk about what it actually means to hear opinions that we disagree with; because I think that there is perhaps a really substantial distinction in Arendt's writing between the fundamental fact of human plurality, and the fact that we share the world together, and that we have to understand the plurality of opinions that emerge from unique individuals in the world; and the kinds of people that we actually inhabit public spaces with and engage in conversations with, or the kinds of people that we invite into our home or to our universities.

She says, "Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world as that about which we speak—right? Speaking about the world—emerge in its objectivity and

1 Hannah Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics" in *The Promise of Politics*, edited by Jerome Kohn, New York, New York: Schocken Books, 2007. Pages 128-129.

visibility from all sides." So it's through speaking with one another about the world that the world itself emerges in its plurality.

So I want to draw two counter-examples around this question of speaking freely with one another that occur in our work. The first is the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem,* which she published in 1963 [...?]. And the argument that she makes at the end of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a very harsh argument. She argues that the court is not the appropriate venue for the trial of Adolph Eichmann, that it's a show trial, and that because the fundamental mores of society, of the legal system, has been broken by the phenomenal appearance of totalitarianism in the 20th century, Eichmann cannot be held accountable to the extant legal code. But she says that Eichmann must die. Why? Why must Eichmann die? Eichmann must die because he violated the fundamental fact of human plurality. He violated the fundamental fact of human plurality by saying Jewish people don't have a right to exist.

RB:He violated the fundamental fact of human plurality by working to exterminate Jewish people, not by saying that Jewish people don't have a right to exist.

SH: Fair enough; I agree with that. Yes, Eichmann of course was an anti-Semite. One of Arendt's points is that anti-Semitism is not what primarily fueled his participation in the Third Reich. He was a mindless bureaucrat who wanted to achieve status in Hitler's regime. He didn't verbally espouse anti-Semitism, but he participated in a political order that denied the fundamental human existence of other people based upon who it is they are, how they appear in the world.

We don't ask to appear here. Arendt's fond of repeating the old Oedipus at Colonus line, "Not to be born prevails over all meaning uttered in words; by far the second-best for life, once it has appeared, is to go as swiftly as possible whence it came."[2] And I think part of that is the idea that we didn't ask to come here, but that we appear here. We appear as who we are and we can't change that. She says in her famous essay "We Refugees" that people will never be happy with themselves unless they embrace who it is that they are. If they don't embrace who it is that they fundamentally are, then they are destined to be Ulysses-like wanderers.

She also makes the argument that when you're attacked as a black, or a Jew, or a woman, you have to defend yourself as a black, or a Jew, or a woman.

But back to Eichmann. She says Eichmann has to die. Eichmann does not get to share the world with us because he participated in a political regime that denied the appearance of others based upon the fundamental fact of who they are.

I want to hold this up against something that she says about the freedom of speech in her essay "Is America by Nature a Violent Society?" Freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and voluntary associations are fundamental democratic principles for Arendt. They are absolutely necessary to maintaining the space of freedom in a vibrant democracy. She says, "Freedom of assembly is among the crucial, most cherished, and perhaps most dangerous rights of American citizens. "We must not forget that the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birch Society are also voluntary associations, and who will deny that such groups aid and abet the outbreak of violence? It is difficult to see how this danger can be

2 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics) 2006. Page 273.

eliminated without eliminating freedom of assembly. Is that not too high a price to pay for political freedom?"[3]

The question, the fundamental question here is the question of political freedom, I would say. And so she's saying that these racist and hateful organizations, the KKK and the John Birch Society, they absolutely pose a threat to the fabric of American democracy; but banning them would be way too high a price to pay for our freedom of voluntary association, our freedom of speech, and our freedom of assembly. Voluntary association and civil disobedience for that matter are the cornerstone of republican democracy in America.

And I think that this is an interesting contradiction in Hannah Arendt's writing. So why is it that the KKK fundamentally has a right to exist, but Nazis like Eichmann should be banished from the face of the earth? I think there are a couple of things here we have to tease out. I don't hear her advocating that we show up at KKK protests and try to have one-on-one détentes with neo-Nazis in order to try and convince them that black people have equal rights with white people. But she's also arguing that these bigoted and racist political opinions are still political opinions. They're political opinions, and those opinions have a right to exist in our world. But for Arendt these kinds of political opinions, these judgments about people as they are, for who they are, do not necessarily have the right to appear in public. She says that we have the right to have racist opinions, but they have to be kept private, in the four walls of the house.

RB: I think it's an important question that you've raised, Sam. I think the Nazis and the KKK do have a right to express their hateful opinions in public for Arendt. I think the way Arendt thinks about it is that there's a difference between an opinion that somebody is lesser than you, which is an *opinion*, and the *action* of committing or participating in the doing of violence against others.

To use the example of the United States, you can be a United States citizen, and you can be an anti-Semite who believes that Jews are inferior, and yet you can also recognize that that's your private opinion. You can be an anti-Semite and yet treat Jews in public with respect because they're United States citizens with equal rights. You may even try to convince your fellow citizens that they should treat Jews publicly and privately as inferior; but until you succeed in that, you have to respect the common world that you live in. You can be a racist and anti-Semitic, and you can bring those opinions into the public space. What you cannot do in a democracy for Arendt is deny the right of others to disagree with you. You have to treat others as people with the right to their opinions just like you have the right to opinions.

SH: I think there are two things there, though. The first one is—and I think this is an important question: Does the KKK speaking in public, saying that blacks and Jews are not equal to whites, constitute a political action? Eichmann didn't espouse anti-Semitism but he acted, and he acted in a way that foreclosed the appearance of others in the world, to put it mildly. Does hateful speech in a public space constitute a political action if that speech prevents other people from entering into that public space by creating a threat of violence?

3 Hannah Arendt, "Is America by Nature a Violent Society?" from *Thinking Without A Banister*, ed. Jerome Kohn. (New York: Shocken) 2017. Page 357.

And I think the other question that you hit on is this question of rights. Absolutely what you cannot do in a democracy is deny the right of others to disagree with you. But Arendt is also making another argument folded in here, I think, about fundamental human rights. If we all have equal human rights, if we're all equal in our plurality, in our distinction and uniqueness, which is made visible through our appearance in the public world which allows us to become fully human, if that's guaranteed, then political disagreement seems natural and healthy in a vibrant democracy. But if somebody is not allowed to appear in the public realm and to express their uniqueness and difference because they're chased out of it through hateful speech and threats of violence, then the KKK is preventing other people from becoming fully human. And so then what's the difference between the KKK and Eichmann?

RB: Well, the KKK lynching people, there's not much difference, if any, between them and Eichmann. The KKK burning a cross is a much more difficult question, and it's one that's caused a lot of handwringing and controversy. One can argue about why one burns a cross? And the argument the KKK makes is that the cross-burning is designed to create a sense of common solidarity amongst the KKK, it's a kind of ritual. And the other side argues against the right to cross-burning and says it's a threat and thus action. And to the extent it is a threat I think that both in the law in the United States and for Arendt it can be seen as an attempt to regulate and in fact interfere with the equality of appearance in the public sphere. But one has to make that argument of whether it is a threat or not and that becomes a much more detailed, subtle, and nuanced argument about why one does what one does.

SH: I think that's a good start to a disagreement. I think then there is a question of public and private. Most cross-burnings were done on the private lawns of people of color in order to intimidate them, and not necessarily done at public rallies. There are certain symbolic actions that take place to create the threat of violence intentionally and let other people know that they are not welcome.

RB: The Supreme Court cases on cross-burning are when it's done on public land or private land belonging to the cross-burners; but this is a good place to open up the conversation. We have four Bard students here who are involved in these questions of what kind of speech should and should not be allowed on college campuses. So I'm going to let these students join in this discussion and invite them to talk a little bit about how at Bard students involved with the Arendt Center have sought to take Arendt's thinking about plurality and free speech and implement it in discussions on campus.

Charlotte Albert: I guess before we dive into that discussion I have two follow-up comments to the discussion that Roger and Sam just had. One of them is—what I'm picking up on is that people are entitled to their own opinions and whatever they'd like to believe in public and in private; but the difference is that you cannot act on your opinions if they are harmful to creating a public space that is acceptable for everyone—

SH: If they are world-destroying.

CA: Yes. And going off of the example of cross-burnings, I guess I'm reminded of *Kristallnacht* when Jewish businesses and stores were burned down letting them know that they were not welcome in these towns. I guess one difference is the destruction of private property. Like when the KKK did burn crosses on the grounds of black people's

homes as a good way to instill fear into them. How was that different than Nazis burning down businesses? They're both happening in private.

SH: But they aren't putting markers on public businesses to identify them as specifically Jewish places.

CA: Exactly.

RB: Well, on the one hand, there's a speech vs. action distinction, which obviously gets blurred. When you destroy someone's business, that's a kind of action, and it's a violent action. If you mark someone's business, as Samantha just mentioned, one could say that's just speech, that's not action, but that seems wrong. Cross-burning is another case. On the one hand, it can be seen as simply expressive speech. I'm expressing my belief in burning a cross that the white Aryan race is superior to Jews and blacks and other people. Another way of reading cross-burning is it's a threat and a call to action. I think that there have been both kinds. I think for many years cross-burning was clearly a call to action. In current white nationalist use it's often more an expression of an opinion. And I think the Supreme Court in upholding cross-burnings in the United States in the last 20 years has interpreted it as an articulation of an opinion in a very controversial way. I'm not saying they're 100 percent right. I think it's an arguable position.

CA: I guess my reasoning to think that cross-burning is equivalent to the destruction of buildings is because it is on private property and is dangerous.

RB: If a KKK sets a cross on fire on their own property?.

S**H**: I think this raises an important question though about the difference between an opinion and something that constitutes a speech act. We have, on the one hand, the protection of free speech and Arendt's defense of free speech and the defense of voluntary associations like the KKK to express their opinions no matter how harmful they are; but, on the other hand, we have the threat of violence and the way the threats of violence unfold in the public sphere. There's no question in Arendt's writing that we have to make space for all opinions no matter how odious they might be; but the extent to which we are obligated as human citizens of the world to engage those opinions and in what ways I think is a question of interpretation.

Isabelle Santana: So we're talking about acts of violence or potential acts that function as threats that maybe aren't violent. But what if threats are a move to exert your power over someone else; power is connected to the political. I guess I'm trying to situate power in this. Where are the limitations of power, because it can function positively in the sense that it creates the space for politics; but then can it also function negatively in that it can disrupt politics and prevent people from appearing in the world?

RB: Yes. So think of it in the United States as Arendt talks about it in *On Revolution*. On the one hand, power is what creates collective action, and in any particular community power can be incredibly discriminatory and exclusionary. But what she says is while you may have 30 communities that exclude Jews, and 20 that exclude other people, and 20 that exclude these people if you have a decentralized power system, it's unlikely that you'll be able to have a centralized power system that wins and excludes certain people because you have so many different power centers and power sources that they will be able to resist one tyrannical or totalitarian government.

But that doesn't mean that there won't be small towns and places and whole regions where there's no racism and anti-Semitism and certain other kinds of exclusionary politics. She's—I don't know if Sam agrees with this—she believes in constitutional limits, constitutional protections; but she's much more willing to accept local prejudices in particular communities and accept the fact that part of freedom is being able to collectively live according to our prejudices. Our prejudice for something is for her deeply part of the human condition. No one is without prejudices, and that doesn't mean that all prejudices are right or should be accepted.

For her, she also says politics is the way we attack and seek to change prejudices. But the idea that we will ever create a world where we live without prejudices is for her a totalitarian nightmare.

SH: I think I mostly agree, but I would shift the emphasis. And this, I think, is what's at the heart of the Little Rock essay. For Arendt the possibility of public action, of public happiness, of civic participation exists at the most local level of politics possible. And in that sense politics as coming together, engaging in vigorous democratic debate, deciding what is best for our town and our locality, should happen at the most local level that can exist. And I think that's consistent with her definition of plurality.

This stands against something that she reiterated several times in a lot of her later writing, especially after the Nixon debacle. She said if there is a threat going to be posed to American democracy today it's going to come through the condensation of sovereign power at the presidential level. And she's worried about constitutional erosion and what she sees unfolding in contemporary American politics. She's worried that the expansion of presidential sovereignty is going to lay down laws which prohibit this kind of local politics and disagreements, I think, from taking place. And that's one of the things that she's critical of the Supreme Court for essentially doing in the Little Rock essay, where she says that they were not acting according to the will of the people, that they were making law.

Adrian Costa: I want to shift it more toward practical terms, to students and how we tackle free speech on campus. I think it's really interesting in the time that we live in now, with this emphasis on collective identity and collective protections. I think that there's a really interesting phenomenon going on where people talk about groups or identity groups and make rules, and make large social claims about them, and make very easy-to-understand kind of guidelines. I think that the one thing about collectivist identity that is really helpful is that it's very easy to understand. You put somebody in a box, you say they are black, they do not like this word, they do not like this thing, they do not like this context, and using this word in that context—it's very easy to understand and to not be socially, you know, ostracized, or named a racist, or any of these things.

I think that in the position that we are in now as students, as people who admire and respect this idea of plurality, and on a college campus which is supposed to be an institution that is advocating a kind of stepping along the margins of society and the margins of academic thinking. We're supposed to be constantly pushing the envelope. How do we each traverse that?

I think that there's this idea out there in the world that there's one right way to do that, and I don't think that's necessarily true.

SH: What do you mean by one right way? What is that right way?

AC: I think that Arendt talks about this, this idea that we all have prejudices, we all have priorities, and this ethereal concept of free speech. There's no one right way to do it, and the idea that you're just not doing it that right way is not real. We make choices about the things that we care about and we prioritize on behalf of our campus. And so we constantly—I think that our responsibility to this campus is to, number one, be receptive to criticism, and be receptive to backlash, and be receptive to what people want to hear, and what people already know, and what people haven't heard yet.

And when I think about my position on this campus as a plurality project fellow, it's this idea that Hannah Arendt touches on in her essay of "Thinking in Moral Considerations" where she evokes the image of a gadfly, a midwife, and an electric ray, where she says the gadfly is like—

SH: The stingray comes first.

AC: The stingray comes first? Oh. The stingray stings you with—

SH: The stingray paralyzes you—

AC: Paralyzes you with a thought, so it stops you, and in the face of this new thought it stops you and it paralyzes you. And the gadfly—

SH: Irritates you, arouses you—.

AC: I've got the last one. And the midwife delivers that thought into?

SH: Wind eggs. Empty ideas.

AC: Yes. I think that the special pleasure I take in doing what I do here and what I hope happens all around the country on dozens of campuses is that people have that "aha" moment, and people have the ability to think things that they've never thought before and hear things that they've never thought before, and really explore plurality and what it means to be human. Because that's what I take pleasure in doing every day.

Mark Williams, Jr.: When I came up with this idea of the Tough Talks two years ago it didn't start from a place of community. It started from a place of selfishness, because education is inherently a selfish act, as it should be. You're trying to better yourself, and then things happen later on, and it kind of has an osmotic effect elsewhere. But I felt that I had come to college and I wasn't able to really know the world in the way that I was promised I would be able to know the world by going to college. I felt that there were a lot of ideas and opinions that I knew already, that I'd been hearing forever, and that my own kind of intellect and my abilities to argue and to reason and to actually be able to make nuanced arguments about things that even I believed was actually suffering. And so the idea, so Arendt's idea of plurality and starting the Plurality Project and coming up with the Tough Talks was about bringing in the visuals to campus not necessarily to provoke protest and invoke the ire of students, but to give students and really to give myself first and then anyone else who would want to opt into these lectures, to give students the space to actually think about ideas that weren't necessarily popular on campus.

So the easiest way I thought about doing that was, you know, just if someone believed this, I would find or think about a person and consult with Roger, Sam, and a bunch of other people about people who were along the spectrum and brought something kind of creative and new. And in bringing these people, one thing that I thought was most beneficial, not necessarily just for myself and thinking about my own education, but in thinking about the education of my peers and what it meant for a project like this to be on Bard's

campus, was that students had for the first time actually put a face and a voice to an argument that they had only ever read, or heard filtered through other kinds of sources, or never actually heard.

It's one thing to talk about second-wave feminism, traditional feminism, and what it means for individuals to live in gender roles, and work, and to hear that filtered through your own ideological filters; and it's a completely different thing to hear Suzanne Venker come to Bard and talk about the ways in which many people actually believe very strongly in gender roles because it creates navigable ways of living in the world that are beneficial for some individuals. And to hear students finally come up against that, and to actually go, "Oh, I need to refine my arguments because for the longest time I've not really said much in the way of an argument; I've just said words, and many people have said yes, I agree with the words you have said, and then that was it." So that was—I think that's the value of thinking through Hannah Arendt's ideas around plurality, because it not only allows you to think through what the world looks like; it also gives you the opportunity to be able to engage in the world. And I think that was a real-life example. And these talks and this program have been, I think, a successful endeavor in allowing students to actually engage in what it means to live in the world.

SH: I think the Venker talk provides us with a really good material example which we can follow or not follow. One of the things that a number of students asked her about when she came to Bard was trans identity. And Venker said that trans people don't exist because she is a staunch believer in, as they're called, cisgender, hetero-normative gender roles. There are men and there are women, and she told a number of trans students that trans is not a thing. So was she saying, in saying that, that those people don't have a right to exist, or don't exist? I think that's a good parallel example of how those students then engaged her, making their arguments, claiming their identity against her opinion, and created a conversation.

MW: That point especially had a lot to do with this idea of hers about biological determinism. And the students' responses to that concept of biological determinism were actually rooted in ideas of racism, sexism, etc. And the thing that was kind of fascinating to me was the way in which both sides just spoke past each other and never considered before that moment that either of them could have been wrong about it, especially because they're both coming from an experiential standpoint. So you can definitely fall into the moment of saying Well, I side with the trans students because this is their experience of the world, and as such that is the truth of the matter. But then Suzanne's is also an experience of the world, but is it one that we want to give space to, or are you inclined to give that same platform, the same value or validity as the trans students.

SH: I wonder if it creates an opportunity for the trans students to claim political power because Adrian and you, Mark, were both talking about echo chambers that are created where we don't necessarily encounter opinions other than our own even on college campuses where that's a promise of education. But in situations where we're forced to engage in conversation with people who fundamentally disagree with not only what it is that we're saying, but with our self and the way that we claim ourselves in the world, the way that we appear, does that present a political opportunity for people to claim power?

MW: I think it does. I think it does for both sides. I think for Suzanne in a way it manifests itself as a moment for her to maintain power. And I say maintain power because she is already an individual who for the most part does not necessarily suffer the consequences of a trans identity in the way that individuals who are trans have to deal with certain kinds of issues that are inherent to the identity of just trans-ness. And I think—and Roger, you can totally jump in on this one—your question, Sam, reminds me of Tony Morrison's tale about the blind woman and the dead bird. And so—Can you tell? I'm definitely going to tell that story wrong—

RB: Adrian, I think, will tell it. He likes telling it.

AC: I do. So there's a blind woman and children, there's a group of children, and to spite her, they grab a bird, and the bird is dead. And they go up to her and they ask her, knowing full well that she's blind, if the bird is alive or dead. So in that moment they are constituting her in a way that she is just blind. They are dissolving everything that makes her wholly human. All she is at that very moment is blind. And in response to that this woman says, "I don't know, but I do know that there is a bird in your hand." And so in that sense of the metaphor she, this blind woman, in the face of this misplaced concreteness, or in the face of this oppressive and harmful language, she is choosing to control her response and take political agency, and take control of what she does know. And it makes the kids obviously look silly and dumb.

MW: So that, I think, transpired in that moment. The trans students were presented with the act of someone trying to constitute their identity, and had formed for themselves in that moment political power by going against it, by constituting their own identities. Does it count as political is a different question; but there was that moment where the students constituted their own identity.

RB: This is an interesting question that I'd like all of you maybe to take a stab at if you're interested. So trans students didn't think this should be a political question. They know that trans is a real thing and that trans should be politically recognized and publicly recognized.

Venker also didn't want this to be a political question. She knows that biology says that there are two sexes and no others.

I think Arendt's understanding of the situation is that this is a political question. These are opinions, not truths. And in the public sphere, to claim that this is the truth is always illegitimate, and that these are prejudices on both sides, and we live in a world of prejudices. And politics is about getting the prejudices you don't like, undoing them, and eventually having prejudices you do like coming to be seen as truths of the world.

If I'm right that that's the Arendtian way of approaching this, that means that in all of these situations we actually have to have these arguments. And do you guys think that's right?

CA: I think that in order to have any sort of dialogue around any topic, everyone must lean into discomfort and can't try to protect themselves by being in a little bubble. Bard and most college campuses are a bubble where one opinion is predominant and people believe that it's universal. At least on Bard campus it's kind of an idea that everyone is liberal and everyone believes certain values, and that anyone who holds values other than that are looked down upon and are told not to speak up. I think that, at least the reason I

got involved in Tough Talks and the Plurality Project is because I wanted people to lean into discomfort and stop having one-sided conversations with each other where everyone was sitting around in a room and talking about the exact same thing from the same perspective, getting nowhere, just so they can hear their own voices and to say something. I wanted to have meaningful conversations with people who don't necessarily agree with my ideas or an idea that is at hand.

I think that bringing people who do not necessarily share the same ideas about the world to a campus that believes in one specific thing is actually beneficial to all as long as it's not done in a dangerous manner where people are physically acting on their thoughts. I think that all dialogues and all conversations around differences should take place and should be facilitated on college campuses especially, because this is a melting pot. And at Bard it seems to me that there's only one cheese.

SH: Do you think that we have, in an Arendtian sense, an ethical responsibility to one another to make public spaces inhabitable for all beings? I think we have to talk a little bit about courage. I think that's part of what Roger was bringing up. Not all people have equal measures of courage to step into the public realm and put themselves in that dangerous position. Anybody who enters the public realm does so dangerously. That's why courage becomes the political virtue *par excellence* in Arendt's view. But not everyone has equal courage.

CA: I guess my idea of courage and entering that space is that college is the bridge between the private and the actual public political world, and so we're in this place where we can stay within what we know and what we want to understand before having the courage to step over and enter a real world.

But I think that having facilitated conversations, not just everywhere you go, on college campuses, on our campus is just someone with a controversial idea or an opinion, or someone is always standing outside of your classroom yelling things at you from whatever different perspective there is from the classroom. But having facilitated conversations that people can have, I guess they start to gain the courage to have these conversations on their own once they leave a place where they're having these conversations safely.

IS: Going back to what Sam was saying about not everyone having the same amount of courage, there's also a question of people having different degrees of accessibility in a space, and also accessibility to power and to sharing opinions. Not everyone is born into the world with the same ability to be heard and to speak. And so I think that part of a plural space maybe can include things like a progressive stack, which is in certain spaces where you do want plurality; people who are normally not heard may speak first. Is that plurality, or is that the opposite of plurality when you think of things like safe space? Maybe a different term for safe space should be a plural space, in which your opinions do not block the opinions of other people, or do not block the existence of other people. Maybe safe space is just not the right term; maybe it should be plural space. And in plural spaces we do things like progressive stacks where people who aren't normally heard are allowed to speak first. Is that in line with plurality, or is that going against it?

RB: Does that mean that in a progressive environment it would be a conservative stack?

IS: I guess progressive stack is maybe just a word, kind of an empty phrase, and I should describe it better. I learned about this term in a few racial justice workshops I went to. It's the idea that people who are heard from the least in society have their voices elevated in that space. Where if everyone raises their hands a trans woman of color would be the first person to speak.

RB: This becomes a really interesting question. If you look at Bard, some people would say, well then, god forbid, white men should be the first to speak. And even if you looked at American society, if you looked at the media environment and the cultural landscape, you know, again, it's not going to be the same people who have a lack of access to the media that you might think would be the first to speak.

SH: I think Arendt's envisioning a public realm where the political opinions expressed are not measured by identity, the what-ness of a person, but rather by the quality of the argument being made through reason. She really emphasizes who-ness over what-ness, and tries to push against any tendency that we have to immediately boil one another down to our identity modifiers in any way. And in that way, she pushes against identity politics very strongly in the sense that you're suggesting.

But I think I really like your idea of talking about plural spaces on college campuses as opposed to safe spaces. And I think you're really hitting on something essential there. I think part of what's at stake in thinking about plurality is that in sharing the world in common we have to find a way to embrace difference instead of following this tendency we have as a society to constantly flatten difference.

If we take the progressive stack idea, which was used in protest spaces like Occupy, we would self-organize the room. So trans women of color, trans women, black men, black women, whites over here; and then we end up replicating these identity modifiers that have been imposed on us, reifying power structures that have given form to these identities in the first place.

And this is really contentious in Arendt. But I think one thing that she does explicitly talk about is the fact that in order to appear in the public realm and engage in political action that we have to be free from necessity. And she makes it very explicit in her later writing and in the preface to *The Promise of Politics* that yes, of course, everyone should have good housing, and there should be fair wages for everyone; but these things are not political questions for her.

RB: And there should be access to the public space.

SH: And there should be access to the public space.

RB: Which of course is always relative, and we always have to get there. Ideally that's where we would be.

SH: Yes. Yes.

IS: I guess I think about it in terms of wanting to have something. This is something I've been struggling with since I got to Bard, since I first took a free speech class in my freshman year. It was during the election, and I just felt really hurt. I was feeling so much pain for myself and for other students of color. And it was hard for me to want to listen to opinions that felt like they were destroying the dignity of others and erasing them from the world, and I kind of immediately resisted free speech—not resisted free speech, but was more cautious of what is free speech and what is hate speech.

And then I was exposed to the idea of plurality, kind of like what you were saying. It was like an aha moment of there are ways to mediate these tensions that still allow for open discourse and political discourse. I guess I just still have a question about the limitations of pain for students bringing in their opinions.

AC: I also kind of struggle with that in the sense that I feel like the question we're asking right now is whose responsibility is it to make sure that marginalized groups and these identities are represented and are able to have access to the space. I know, Sam, you mentioned something about being omitted from political life and being omitted from that space. I don't know if I'm misquoting you or anything like that, but I think it's a little different than that.

I think that every day you breathe as a person is an overtly political act. Everything you buy, everything you eat, everything, every mattress pad you sleep on is a political act, and it carries with it the baggage of your identity and your experiences. And in doing that I think that you have to—there's no way to omit yourself from that. And so you have to have the courage and the responsibility to go out into the public sphere and be vulnerable to these political questions, and be vulnerable like these trans students were with Suzanne Venker, be vulnerable to questioning the mere foundation of your identity. Because what's going to happen if it's not you? Suzanne Venker didn't want it to be a political question, but we have to force that question onto people because that's what we believe is right, and that's what we want to fight for.

Is that fair? No, it's not fair. I didn't ask to be born into such a group. But you know at the end of the day it comes back to this question, well, if you're not going to do it, who's going to do it? I come back to the same example of people saying, Oh, if you are emotionally exhausted, if you're having a conversation with somebody and you just become emotionally exhausted, you have the right to excuse yourself from the conversation. It kind of curbs your ability to have the discussion and gives you the excuse to not be courageous enough to defend yourself. And if you're not willing to defend yourself, what are you willing to do?

And so I think it's necessary, even though it isn't fair, in the interest of the end of politics, in the interest of the end of politicizing our identity, that I can wake up one day and not be constituted and politicized because of my identity. And that sucks, and that's going to take a long time, it's going to be a hard time; but I think that struggle makes you human, the struggle and the hardships are what makes you you.

And that's why I think we have so much—that's why in the reaction of struggle we have so much, like countless examples of beautiful art created in the reaction of struggle. And those are the pieces that we worship because they express the human capacity to survive and to thrive in the face of struggle. And if that's any concession for the fact that you have to wake up every day and fight for your life, then I think that's a great one.

MW: I hear you, but do you think it's fair or even morally sound that you have the right to incite another person to act courageously? I actually wonder about the idea that if you are exhausted, if everything is political, that everyone must be crazed. I think Arendt would scoff at that idea, because in her Little Rock essay she argues that you can be socially exclusive, and you can have your prejudices in that social sphere; but you should have the ability to never have to show your social side, your prejudices that live in the so-

cial side, in the public sphere. You should never have to have that as incitement if you don't want to because you might not want your identity to be political or to be a political act.

SH: Everything is not political. We are operating under the shadow of a kind of Foucauldian politics today which renders everything political and everything about power. And one of the things that Arendt does is train her attention towards talking about truth and talking about speech and action over this idea of everything being political.

It goes back to plurality. In order to maintain a vibrant democracy we have to protect the private sphere, the social sphere, and the public sphere, and these are fungible categories. But whenever we see them collapsing in upon one another, it's a red flag that the world of plurality is being flattened, that there's a kind of reduction happening.

Let's take the trans example as an example again. It is one thing for me to say, "I am trans". This is not in itself inherently a political act. But to say that as a trans person I'm being denied rights to medical care by the state, that is political. And those are two different things. Does that make sense?

IS: Yes, it does make sense. I guess my thought about that is basically there's a difference in telling people you need to make your case, to say who you are politically, and giving people a platform to talk about their identity that others may also have. So someone—not that someone has to step up; it's just if you want your opinion to be heard or at least the identity of yourself and that many others might have to be heard, someone has to say something.

MW: I agree with that.

IS: And I think that having a facilitated conversation helps bring people to a level of being able to say, "I can say that, I can be someone who can do that"; not an environment that says, "Oh, *you, you* are trans. You have to defend every other trans person in the world". It's more about saying, letting someone who is trans say, "I'm going to speak on behalf of myself and my identity".

AC: Just to respond to your criticisms. I think that they are extremely valid and awesome. I think that this divide between the public sphere—I mean the private sphere and the public sphere is interesting in that politics belongs to the public and that you can maintain yourself within this kind of sphere of, you know, excluding these ideas. But just an example, the example that you brought up, which is saying "I'm trans", is not an inherently political statement. If politics is about emotion—

SH: It's not.

AC: Okay, well then, is politics today really about rationale? It's about feelings and emotions and the opinions that we hold because of how we feel and how others make us feel, and how we make one another feel, you know, in the groups that we're in. And that, that political identity, I think is in—that idea of emotion I think is inseparable from your private life.

SH: I think you're talking about social questions and political questions, and they're different things. The kinds of social spaces where we offer one another recognition is different from the question of whether or not the state provides equal health insurance to all individuals based upon their identities and their individual needs.

MW: Politics is about the state.

RB: I'm trans and I decide to live as a trans individual in private. There will be many people for whom that's a political act even though I'm living in private. Just by my doing what I'm doing is going to be political.

SH: But not in the Arendtian sense, especially if you're doing it alone.

RB: Thinking is the most private thing for Arendt; but in times when people are not thinking, thinking can be political. The same thing with trans.

SH: Thinking has bearing on the political, but thinking in itself is not necessarily political. Politics for Arendt happens when we act together in concert with one another in public, and that is what is productive of power. But we live—I think this is what Adrian is saying—we live in a society, in a political culture today where we exist in this world where everything is subject to this discourse of power, and this is not Arendtian. We can talk about whether or not this is how it's playing out, we can talk about how America was a country founded upon ideals and where it's falling short right now, and we can talk about the kind of political society that we would like to have; but those are three separate things. Arendt has a very specific definition of what is political.

RB: Why doesn't everyone take one or two minutes to make a final statement.

MW: There's definitely one thing about the college campus and plurality that I've been thinking about, and it has a lot to do with the "who is" question: Who is the college campus for? Ultimately who is it of service to? Is it of service to the individual? Is it of service to the state, to the country, to the ideals of a nation, of a grander tradition? And based on where that falls, I then wonder who gets to act on a college campus? So when you talk about spaces, the college itself is a space for everyone who attends that institution, and if you have an institution like Bard it's also a space for the local community. And so when students bring people to campus, when they hold certain kinds of spaces, they create for themselves opportunities for discourse and for exclusion.

Not everyone goes to the Brothers at Bard meeting because it's primarily a meeting for black males on campus. But would they say no to other people showing up? No they wouldn't. But there is a kind of social thing, a social law: Why would you go to that space?

So in the same way no one is corrupted by that kind of maneuver or action. Where does the corruption come from?

CA: Yes, I've been thinking a lot about that because I had a conversation with someone who is a professor, and bringing up names of potential speakers he had said to not only myself, but one other person, that they would cancel their classes that day, and they should tell their students to stay home in order to protect their safety. And I thought that was kind of—it's kind of overreacting to the presence of someone.

MW: That's an asinine reaction.

CA: Yes, it was crazy, and it was crazy that it happened two separate times, this conversation happened to me and another student. And the idea that the presence of someone that is not a required conversation for anyone to attend, that people can willingly go if they want to listen, I thought that it was absurd that someone was saying, I will deny students their education or their ability to be on campus just to protect their safety by this one individual's presence.

The question of the college campus you raise is very interesting. Who gets to make these decisions of who comes and who does what? And the comment you made about

Brothers at Bard, Brothers at Bard wasn't founded by Bard; Brothers at Bard was founded by Bard students. So the question then becomes, what is Bard providing us that students haven't already provided themselves or started? I guess at the baseline, who is Bard for if you remove all the clubs and you remove all of the student initiatives, what is Bard at the backbone?

IS: I think an interesting quote just to think about that Jason Stanley said at the Heterodoxy Conference which I think about all the time is that the campus is part of the world, but not the whole world. I think it shows it as both a private and a public space, and that means that lines aren't necessarily easily drawn, and that there are complexities to all these conversations that need to be teased out. I don't know if that offers any insight, but I just think it's a good quote to chew on.

AC: These questions are hanging, and they are abstract to some degree, and they also have such a real effect on our society. I guess my job on this campus is to make that hanging cloud above everyone's head a little more visible and a little more manageable.

CA: Burst the Bard bubble.

RB: Burst the Bard bubble.

IS: There's no Bard bubble.

RB: We'll end with that. Thank you everyone.