

## ***Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Plurality -*** **Over 40 international scholars discuss the relevance of Hannah Arendt today**

The “Hannah Arendt: Challenges of Plurality” International Conference was held at the University of Paderborn, Germany on December 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup>, 2018. The conference – one of the largest events debating Arendt’s thought in Germany in the last two decades – was an opportunity for international experts, and anyone with an interest in the works of Hannah Arendt, to meet and exchange ideas. The discussion centred around the concept of plurality that is unique to Arendt’s philosophy, and, more specifically, the challenges which arise from Arendtian plurality.

As opposed to the common understanding of the term ‘plurality,’ Arendtian plurality should not be taken to mean either mere diversity or a relative majority *à la* political discourse. Rather, Arendtian plurality signifies each human being’s potential to achieve a sense of uniqueness *and* equality with others. Consequently, Arendtian plurality insists on the intersubjective nature of human existence and human action in particular. That is, for Arendt, plurality attests to the fact that “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (*The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 7).

As such, Arendtian plurality emphasises two important points: First, concrete human beings, and not the abstract human being, exist with each individual having the potential to express their own uniqueness. This fact resists all reductionist approaches to understanding human existence. Second, uniqueness is achieved through our engagement with others who also reveal their own uniqueness in return. This, however, can only be the outcome of equal but different individuals acting together. Consequently, the equality contained within Arendtian plurality is one founded upon difference and not sameness. Given this, Arendtian plurality offers a fruitful alternative to conceptions of human togetherness that are not founded upon sameness and ‘oneness.’ Instead, plurality means holding difference and equality together; indeed, both are necessary for human action. As Arendt writes: “Plurality is the condition of human action because we 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.” (*The Human Condition*, 8).

Beyond the philosophical importance of such a concept, plurality contains political, ethical, and societal consequences. But this plurality is not without its challenges. For example, questions remain regarding what conditions must be in place for plurality to manifest is an ongoing debate. Not to mention events in the contemporary world which at times actively seeks to suppress pluralistic existence. Even our well-meaning intention to forsake our differences and unite in the name of what we have in common does not meet the standards of Arendtian plurality. True togetherness must be able to not only withstand, but embrace difference and uniqueness.

The opportunity to discuss these issues and much more was provided by the conference. The conference itself invited a collegial atmosphere and informed discussion on wide-ranging issues. With 40 speakers from 15 different countries, along with an

audience consisting of both students and those outside academia with an interest in Arendt in attendance, the occasion was marked by a series of rich and lively discussions over the course of three days. An extensive program and an open and inclusive atmosphere meant the interdisciplinary nature of the conference was encouraged and maintained.

The keynote was delivered by Linda Zerilli from University of Chicago, titled “On Democratic Truth-telling in an Age of ‘Alternative Facts.’” Zerilli addressed one of the central issues that brought back public interest for Arendt’s thought: the crisis of political truthfulness in the light of her insistence on factual truths being vital for the public space. The significance of the topic is manifest in the rise of right-populist governments around the world, which instrumentalize and twist facts in order to manipulate the public.

The opening lecture by Ayten Gündoğdu presented a new perspective on Arendt’s reflections in “The Life of the Mind”, showing from a phenomenological point of view, how her thoughts about animals allude to the place of nature in her writings. Central issues addressed within the conference were Arendt’s theory of judgment (Dunn, Marshall, Zinsmeier), politics and emotions (Hecker, Kajewski), the public and the private (Baş, Matzner), migration and displacement (Maffeis, Plaetzer, Robaszkiewicz, Topolski), and power (Gambetti, Volk). Some contributors were establishing a dialogue between Arendt and different philosophical traditions, such as phenomenology (Borren, McInerney, Loidolt), critical theory (Albrecht, Gómez Ramos, Kurunchi/Rösen), philosophy of language (Sedeström, Topa), Holocaust studies (Kunath), or history of ancient philosophy (Durmaz, Gebhardt). Others were reflecting on relating Arendt to other philosophers (Aronson, Kostrova, Pérez Bernal, Schindler) as well as on different facets of the concept of plurality itself, proving or contesting its relevance today (Burdman, Holst, Meints-Stender, Neame, Servan, Strandberg, Weinman).

The conference organisers did an excellent job organising the event. Some notable features include an opportunity for students of Paderborn University to contribute to the conference with projects they developed in relation to the theme ‘Challenges of Plurality.’ As a result, four projects were presented during the conference, which can be found [here](#). A more personal touch was the fact that the organizers, Dr. Maria Robaszkiewicz and Prof. Tobias Matzner, made the effort to attend each presentation. With 40 participants, this was no small feat. Furthermore, the thematic contributions for each panel worked well, facilitating a dialogue between presentations, and, of course, the audience. Testifying to the quality and success of the event, a conference proceedings will be published *Volume of Proceedings: Challenges of Plurality*, which is headed by the conference organisers. The volume marks one of the most interdisciplinary contributions to Arendt studies in recent years.

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