

Report on the seminar *Conjugating the Present. Words inherited from Hannah Arendt* and the public debate *Hannah Arendt: Thinking in company*.

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The international seminar *Conjugating the Present. Words inherited from Hannah Arendt* took place at the CCCB Barcelona on November 30 and December 1, 2023. The seminar was co-organized by Matias Sirczuk (Professor of Political Theory at the University of Buenos Aires - CONICET - Argentina / María Zambrano postdoctoral researcher at the University of Barcelona), the Seminari de Filosofia i Gènere, ADHUC Centre de Recerca Teoria, Gènere, Sexualitat and the CCCB in collaboration with the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs.

Throughout these days, some of the most renowned experts on Hannah Arendt's thought examined and discussed the political and philosophical potential of her insights and her way of approaching political experiences which have proven essential in addressing contemporary problems and imagining alternative and creative responses to today's political challenges.

Some of these political challenges included reflections on *Feminism*, such as those led by Linda Zerilli and Fina Birulés, with commentaries provided by Marta Segarra and Lorena Fuster. Zerilli stressed the importance of recognizing multiple temporalities in the history of feminist struggle, shifting our focus from its narration as a historical process, its periodization (and its underlying notion of progress) to action; this approach embraces imagination and requires conceptual innovation. Birulés emphasized the challenge we face when investigating female philosophers trying not to homogenize them. To achieve this task is important to equip ourselves with methodological resources to provide some order beyond mere periodization, such as the concept of "hidden tradition" which serves as a heuristic resource. Thinking with Arendt, Birulés referred to the centrality of freedom, action, mutual promises, and alliances among women not rooted in shared oppression, but rather maintaining the possibility of singularizing ourselves, distinguishing ourselves. Fuster enriched these ideas asserting that the transmission of women philosophers' thought from the past constitutes a political commitment undertaken by those in the present. In alignment with Zerilli and Birulés, Fuster highlighted the need to conceive a history of feminism centered on freedom rather than equality, knowing that complexity and plurality are not a problem to be solved, but rather an opportunity for imagination and for weaving together diverse interdisciplinary sources that contribute to comprehension. Segarra pointed out that this history to be traced is not an archeological seeking to locate an origin, but a history traced from the present, with and against the archive, recognizing that any heritage is always heterogeneous, and its unity only comes from our reception in the present.



Another point of dialogue was *Evil, ethics, and politics*. With *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in mind and sharing with Arendt the urgency to understand our own context, Claudia Hilb reflected on those unprecedented political events that seem incomprehensible to us due to the insufficient political, moral, and legal resources from the past. There could be a temptation to seek “ultimates” (the dialogue between Arendt and Jonas came to mind). Paraphrasing Derrida, who considered the present as both a gift and a poison, Hilb pointed out that the lack of “ultimates” can be too. Simona Forti, while rethinking power and evil today, and the failure of political philosophy as an explanatory tool, suggested that rather than discarding concepts, we need to continuously revisit them. Rather than getting rid of a term that has reached us from political tradition, we must try to think about it differently. An example of this could be “totalitarianism” when we distinguish it as a political event and as a political concept. Following these ideas, Fantauzzi pointed out the validity of the Arendtian approach to reality, which eschews metaphysical explanations and instead engages with experience and reality as they are perceived to avoid reducing events to theories. To further this reflection, Vega revisited the conversation between Arendt and Jonas, who believed that “ultimates” were necessary for politics, recalling Arendt’s utter pessimism because this would mean that new gods were about to rise.

On *violence and action*’s discussion panel, Peg Birmingham presented a controversial interpretation regarding Arendt’s notion of violence, arguing that she does not entirely exclude violence from politics as something pre-political or even anti-political, but rather acknowledges its political use in the context of revolutions. Extending this reading to the context of refugees and pariahs, Birmingham proposed not “civil disobedience” since no law applies to them, but rather “civil violence”, a creative use of violence in order to change their current situation. Controversial as well was Martine Leibovici’s approach to Israeli-Palestinian conflict focusing exclusively on the events of October 7th for her analysis and on a particular interpretation of Zionism, which started a heated debate among the audience, including Zerilli’s and Butler’s replies. Maria Robaszkiewicz recalled the importance of the distinction in Arendt between violence and power, talking about the silence of violence, its impotence versus action and discourse which are capable of creation and empowerment. On his part, Sirczuk addressed and dug into all these issues, making his own contributions and assessments on the subject.

The last dialogue was about *Loss and World*. In it, Rosaura Martínez addressed the theme of political action and history; with the assistance of certain psychoanalytic categories, suggested that action also requires narration to reveal its meaning. Martínez states that stories not only provide meaning but also direction: the organization of memory is always in dispute, and agency can be lost if it is not narrated. The only outcome of action is history and narrative. Zeynep Gambetti focused not so much on the loss of agency as on the loss of world, understood not as artworks or things that preserve the memory of events, but as the objects that surround us, the bare material reality, trying to go beyond capitalism that determines our relationship with things in consumer relations. We must rethink the material in its uniqueness because the *Thingness* is different from the *Whatness*, things are both material and relational. This panel was enriched with commentaries provided by Debadyta Bhattacharya and Judith Butler who,

in addition to making specific remarks about the previous presentations, contributed with a series of insights but, due to time constraints, could not be addressed in greater depth.

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As part of this international seminar, the public event *Hannah Arendt: Thinking in company* took place at the CCCB Hall on the afternoon of Thursday, November 30. Simona Forti, Zeynep Gambetti, and Linda Zerilli, with the moderation of Matías Sirczuk, discussed the relevance of Arendtian questions such as What are the new forms of contemporary evil? How can we recover the creative capacity of imagination and judgment in a scenario that collapses into precariousness? Sirczuk invited them to commit to giving continuity to the never-ending task of understanding the world and overcoming the strangeness of a present that does not allow itself to be decoded. In this endeavor, each of them narrated her own story with Arendt, her recovery of Arendt's political intuitions and notions. However, they agreed that above all, they have strived to keep her as a companion in their thoughts because that was her great legacy: she provides clues, but above all, she teaches us how to think, how to let ourselves be touched by reality and to confront the shock of the present, without sheltering ourselves in concepts, and to take the risk of speech.

The recording of the public debate *Hannah Arendt: Thinking in company* is available at the [CCCB website](#).



Simona Forti, Zeynep Gambetti, Linda Zerilli, Matías Sirczuk. November 30, 2023.

List of Participants at the seminar:

Linda Zerilli
Fina Birulés
À. Lorena Fuster
Marta Segarra
Claudia Hilb
Simona Forti
Martine Leibovici
Peg Birmingham
Matías Sirczuk
Zeynep Gambetti
Judith Butler
Rosaura Martínez Ruiz
Debaditya Bhattacharya
Stefania Fantauzzi
Facundo Vega
Maria Robaszkiewicz,
Máriam Martínez-Bascuñán

List of Participants at the public debate:

Simona Forti
Zeynep Gambetti
Linda Zerilli
Matías Sirczuk (moderator)