

Tribalism and Cosmopolitanism: the 19th Annual Hannah Arendt Center Fall Conference

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On the 17th and 18th of October Bard College hosted the 16th annual Hannah Arendt Center Conference. Conferences of years past, with themes ranging from the “Burden of Our Times” and the origins of the global financial crisis in 2009 to last year’s conference on “Friendship and Politics,” have always sought to balance Arendt’s thinking with the most pressing issues of the time. This year’s conference, focused on “Tribalism and Cosmopolitanism,” was no different. Amid ongoing wars and genocides in Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan, and a backdrop of modern history still punctuated by tribalistic violence even in spite of advancements in international law, the question at the core of the conference is highly topical: Is it possible (or even aspirational) to envision a cosmopolitan, pluralist world when history is defined by a seemingly instinctual and violent adherence to tribe?

The conference drew in a diverse array of attendees. In addition to the expected crowd of academics and Hannah Arendt Center members it was well attended by Bard students and interested high-schoolers alike. The same can be said of the conference speakers; they hailed from diverse academic backgrounds, ranging from Human Rights to poetry, with a number of speakers from outside of the academic bubble.

There was no doubt to the first two speakers, Hannah Arendt Center Director Roger Berkowitz and journalist Sebastian Junger, that a fleeting sense of tribalism, the thing which this conference in part aims to help overcome, is, at once, a fleeing of essential humanity. Both emphasized the righteousness in devotion to a *strong* tribe for which a man will fight to his death protecting. Berkowitz’s emphasis on Arendt’s image of the *Stamm*, the trunk of a tree, something with roots, as metaphor for the tribe was echoed throughout the conference.

These speeches were followed by a panel of a different tone, held between Tel Aviv University professors Khaled Furani and Shai Lavi. Lavi, being Jewish-Israeli, and Furani, being Palestinian, were not so quick to romanticize the tribalistic belonging in nationalism and war, and instead presented a view of “European-invented” and imposed dialectic in which cosmopolitanism does not simply invent itself to overtake an ancient tribalism, but rather invents the notion of tribalism as opposite to itself.

The first day continued with a panel by stylist and writer Ayeshat Akanbi alongside cultural critic Thomas Chatterton Williams, in which an idealistic, intellectually curious, and wholly positive vision of cosmopolitanism was presented. This was followed with a talk by clinical psychologist Niobe Way on the inherent sensitivity of young boys and their

desire for loving friendships. These speakers all expressed desire for a pluralism that thrives by nurturing people's inherent instinctual needs for a caring, supportive tribe.

The final speaker of the day, Arendt scholar Lyndsey Stonebridge, did not have much to say in praise of any form of tribalism, but emphasized that Arendt was, at her core, "a conservationist, resisting the allure of the new." However, she was also careful to emphasize Arendt's joy, which is certainly not happiness, but rather a "kind of hope," a "joy in the face of misery."

Day two began with remarks from Bard President Leon Botstein, followed by a talk and panel featuring Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole on the bloody effects of religious tribalism in Northern Ireland and exquisite talk by Adorno Prize-winning philosopher Seyla Benhabib on Arendt's place in the Atomic Age and her relationship to Kant's cosmopolitan vision for a peace founded on global, federated cooperation, in which she urged the audience not to "confuse cosmopolitanism" with "neoliberal capital formation." This was followed by a panel from Gilbert Johnson, Philip "Rock" Lester, and Mandar Apte on the tribe and the ability to overcome it in South Central Los Angeles.

In the second to last talk of the conference, political scientist Uday Mehta, a self-avowed cosmopolitan, laid out the clearest distinction between tribalism and cosmopolitanism yet heard: "Covenant is at the heart of tribe, just as contract is at the heart of cosmopolitanism."

The final panel of the conference, featuring poet and Bard professor Ann Lauterbach alongside poet and Fellow of the Harvard Society of Fellows Zoe Hitzig was, appropriately, focused on technology. It was clear to both of them, as it was to all attendees, that digital technology has not only completely infiltrated all aspects of daily life, but has exacerbated negative tribalist instincts and distorted supposedly enlightened cosmopolitanisms. However, it proved a somewhat hopeful ending. Professor Lauterbach emphasized the timeliness of poetry in its resistance against the digital in its inability to love and reason. Hitzig also recognized that digital technology is, for better or for worse, an innate part of modern lives. She provided a vision, even to the chagrin of some audience members, of a more private, less invasive technology which would allow for open, global communication and understanding without encroaching on our humanity.

Conference speakers were not bound by any narrow definitions, instead providing beautifully tessellating considerations of tribalist instinct versus cosmopolitan aspirations. Staying close to the texts of Arendt and even closer to her wish for open intellectual dialogue, speakers tackled both the cataclysms of international politics and the minutiae of daily life. It would be difficult not to agree with Professor Mehta in his assertion that "Without a doubt," the Hannah Arendt Center Conference is the "most important intellectual conference I attend every year."