

# LAUNCH PROGRAM

Hannah Arendt Consortium on Crises and Political Transformation

26 & 27<sup>th</sup> September 2024

University of Cambridge

## Day 1/ 26<sup>th</sup> of Sept: Arendt and Common Worldbuilding

9:30 – 10:15

### Opening Event:

#### Arendt on Crises and Political Transformation

**Daniele Bassi** | Postdoctoral Researcher, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

**Jo-Anne Dillabough** | Professor of Sociology of Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

**Irit Katz** | Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies, Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge

Faculty of Education,  
Donald McIntyre  
Building,  
Room GS4/GS5

10:30 – 12:30

### Agora 1: Political Spaces, Temporalities, and Criticalities in a New Age of Extremes

**Chair: Duncan Bell** | Professor of Political Thought and International Relations, Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge

**Irit Katz** | Associate Professor of Architecture and Urban Studies, Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge

**Title:** Where Action Appears: Materialising the Political in Unworlded Spaces of Refuge

**Abstract:** Arendt's reflections on the political sphere hold profound spatial attributes. Whether it is her discussion about the law as literally being a wall that encloses the political realm, or her notion of the Space of Appearance as a space created when people gather to act politically, the Arendtian understanding of the political is not based on abstract ideas but is grounded in material and embodied human environments. Space is also part of Arendt's reflections on the figure of the refugee, where the camp appears as the only space the world is willing to offer those rejected from the state–people–territory trinity of the modern state.

Camps are rightly perceived as oppressive, unworldly, and dehumanising spaces detached from everyday human environments. Their displaced residents, however, sometimes create and reappropriate these spaces to answer their human, cultural, and social needs and to address more than the mere humanitarian necessities that they were designed to provide for.

Based on Arendt's spatial, temporal, and political reflections on refuge, action, and the relationship between the private and public realms, this paper critically examines the meaning of the transformations of camps and emergency shelters by their displaced inhabitants. By examining the transforming spaces of refugee camps in the Middle East and Europe,

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the paper argues that processes of inhabitation of spaces of displacement and refuge create a material political space of appearance through which their inhabitants appear as autonomous human subjects rather than as helpless humanitarian objects, who create for themselves the human world that they are being denied of.

**Jo-Anne Dillabough** | Professor of Sociology of Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

**Title:** Imperial Afterlives and Ambivalent Intellectuals in a New Age: nation, territory and the struggle over 'public things' in the modern university

**Abstract:** In this talk, I explore Arendt's notion of common world building and its relationship to the concepts of the modern university and critical intellectualism as an twinned and entangled form of historical responsibility and political implication. I focus in particular on three aspects of Arendt's work in relation to the concept of the university as an ideal 'holding environment' (see Honig, 2017) for wider common worldbuilding against figurations of an acritical or ambivalent non-actor complicit in the sovereign violence of institutions and modernity itself. My first argument energises Arendt's incisive critique and radical historiography of the unit of the nation-state and its role in the making of modern 'sovereign' institutions such as the university, sometimes serving as conscripted extensions of imperial power or the 'imperial blueprint' out of which an early 20<sup>th</sup> century notion of modernity was born – 'empire as a way of life'. Such institutions, Arendt argued, not only set the stage for the idea of the intellectual as an entity in service to the nation and its 'territorial fixations' but also as a moralising figuration of knowledge production that advances violent nationalisms, undermining plurality and a shared public world (see also Yaqoob, 2014).

My second argument rests on Arendt's understandings of the role of early 20<sup>th</sup> century transatlantic scientisms (including race science) and their influence over modernity's futures and its conceptualisations of citizenship, in particular the university's historical role in suppressing plurality as a global human condition and the basis for the promise of politics. Here I focus specifically upon an archival study of Arendt's lectures, scholarly correspondence and course syllabi between the years of 1935 and 1965 to reveal these transatlantic influences and 'conservative revolutions' and highlight how they shaped Arendt's sublime meditations on the nature of political implication and historical responsibility in a common world. Finally, I bridge this archival analysis with a constellation of contemporary writings on the relationship between the '*imperial blueprint*' (see Gilroy, 2002; Scott, 2004) and anti-colonial and global social thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see Bell, 2021; Bhambra and Holmwood, 2021; King, 2008; Mbembe, 2017; Stoler, 2019; Hartmann, 2019). I do so to explore the ways in 'post' and 'anti'-colonialists have sought to extend and reposition Arendt's prescient critique of neo-imperialist violence through new understandings of a common world and forms of critical intellectualism yet to come.

**Stefano Bellin** | Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies, University of Warwick

**Title:** Political Imagination and the Gap Between Past and Future

**Abstract:** We live in a world that seems to have largely lost faith in politics and in the dialectic of history. While experienced differently depending on geographical location and socio-political circumstances,

our societies are affected by a profound sense of powerlessness, disenchantment, and obstructed agency with respect to the possibility of significantly transforming the political-economic order that shapes our lives and the world itself (Ngai 2005; De Lagasnerie 2020; Traverso 2016, 2021). The current political conjuncture is characterised by a tension between fast-paced social and technological transformations and the immutability of the political-economic system within which we live. My paper aims to open a conversation on this issue by linking Hannah Arendt's concepts of natality and 'the gap between past and future' to the questions of cultural memory and political imagination. To do so I will briefly analyse the current crisis of the political imagination and engage with a poem by the Palestinian poet and activist Mohammed El-Kurd.

My argument hinges on a fundamental assumption: our relationship to the world is narratively mediated and we are always already entangled in cultural narratives that shape our worldview, our collective memory, our approach to the future, and the way in which we conceive the 'political'. Each cultural and historical world functions as a *space of possibilities* that encourages certain modes of experience, thought, and action, and discourages or disallows others, and stories play a constitutive role in establishing the limits of these worlds – both enabling experience and delimiting it (Meretoja 2018). Acknowledging this is a precondition for critical engagement with these cultural narratives and for the ability to contribute to new collective imaginaries that might help us work through some of our urgent global crises. Since we cannot escape cultural narratives, we should, rather, become more skilled in analysing and evaluating different narrative practices as interpretative practices. By engaging with El-Kurd's poem, I will argue that to rekindle our political imagination we need two things: first, a '*hermeneutic awareness*' that allows us to gain a critical understanding of the cultural narratives in which we are entangled; second, a *constructive political hope* that enables us to work within the gap between past and future while nonetheless reckoning with human fragility and finitude.

**12:30 – 14:00**

**Lunch Break**

**Homerton College**

**14:00 – 16:00**

**Agora 2: Common Worldbuilding for an Uncommon World**

**Faculty of Education  
Donald McIntyre  
Building,  
Room GS4/GS5**

**Chair: Frisbee Sheffield** | Associate Professor of Classics,  
University of Cambridge

**Jess Feldman** | Hannah Arendt Centre, Bard College

**Title:** The World the General Strike Made: Labor, Work, and Action in Hannah Arendt's Council System

**Abstract:** Critics of Hannah Arendt accuse her of neglecting working-class politics in what they describe as her attempt to "enforce a separation of politics from socio-economic concerns" (Muldoon 2016). In particular, Arendt's proposal for a council system has come under fire for ignoring the councils' historical emergence from general strike movements, and for her "dismissal of any sort of industrial democracy," which purportedly "flows ... from the automatic institutional translation of her separation between action and work" (Cohen and Arato 1992). This view of Arendt overlooks how the general strike is curiously close to the heart of Arendt's political theory. In this paper, I show how Arendt gives a surprisingly central place to workers' political movements in *The Human Condition*: her only modern example of action—the activity she most closely associates with politics—comes from the labor movement. Though Arendt understates and even ignores the role of the general strike in her account of a radically democratic politics, I look to the

history of the labor movement in the U.S. at the time of Arendt's writing to find historical and contextual reasons she might have thought to find revolutionary politics elsewhere. In place of the actual general strike, then, we find the concept of action as an event that, like the strike, interrupts labor and work. Placing Arendt's examples back into the world from which they emerge—and adding to her repertoire an example from the Reconstruction period in the U.S.—I find that Arendt may not be best understood a theorist in search of a “pure concept of politics” (Cavarero 2021). Rather, Arendt's examples, in their worldly existence, push back against her tendencies toward purity and invite us into agonistic engagement with the world to which action responds.

**Norma Musih** | Post-doctoral researcher, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

**Title:** Imagination as a political force in the work of Hannah Arendt

**Abstract:** How can we imagine a different political reality from the current state of affairs? How can a specific kind of imagination, rooted in the memory of a place, challenge its national imaginaries? To develop this specific *imagination*, rethinking the relationship between past, present, and future is needed. At the same time, it is also essential to establish a tenacious relationship to the “here and now”; to pay attention to details and visualize that which seems impossible out of the horrifying violence of the present. Finally, a critical intersubjective gaze—the kind of gaze that animates judgment, must be developed.

For Hannah Arendt (2014), imagination relates to the relationships that emerge between people who can visit each other in their minds, and after Kant, she understands it the imagination as an “enlarged mentality”. To think with an enlarged mentality, Arendt says, “*means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting*”. Training is the action that generates and brings about the imagination, the action that allows the imagination to enlarge our mentality. Because the imagination is not a given, or something that materializes out of thin air, training is required. This paper proposes three practices for cultivating the imagination: unlearning the past, adopting an activist approach to the present, and envisioning alternative futures. Unlearning the past means re-examining history and questioning what we know and the mechanisms that shape this knowledge (Azoulay 2019). Political imagination, seen as a collaborative endeavor, necessitates performative and generative actions. Thus, the second practice highlights imagination as part of activism, unfolding through action rather than preceding it. The third practice leverages speculative culture to transform impossible scenarios into discussable possibilities. Training the imagination, this paper suggests, acts as a form of resistance, generating new and alternative images of the past, present, and future, and their interrelationships.

**In conversation with:**

**Frisbee Sheffield** | Associate Professor of Classics, University of Cambridge

**Sinead O'Neill** | Opera Director, Glyndebourne.

**Title:** “We Refugees”: Arendt and common worldbuilding for the public

*Reflections on Amor Mundi, Refuge and Opera at the Fitzwilliam Museum and in the City of Cambridge*

**Abstract:** Join us at the end of this Agora to engage in a conversation with Associate Professor Frisbee Sheffield (Classics) and Sinead O'Neill, Opera Director, Glyndebourne on a collaborative arts event held at Fitzwilliam Museum in June 2024 for the city of Cambridge, inspired by the work of Arendt on ‘We Refugees’: *Amor Mundi* is an opera inspired

by Hannah Arendt's journey as a refugee, classical thinking, and contemporary realities' (<https://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/events/amor-mundi-performances>). A short clip of the opera and event will be shared as part of the conversation.

17:30 – 19:15

**Agora 3: Forgiving: JL Austin's 'Hippolytus' and Hannah Arendt's Politics of Release:**

**Bonnie Honig** | Nancy Duke Lewis Professor of Modern Culture and Media and Political Science, Brown University

St John's College,  
Divinity School Main  
Lecture Theatre

**Abstract:** This paper notes resonances between Hannah Arendt's account of action as "action that appears in words" (The Human Condition, 1958) and J.L. Austin's account of performativity, where "the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action" (How to Do Things with Words, 1955/62). Both thinkers theorize promising as an exemplary speech act but only Arendt paired it with forgiveness, a kind of "release" that Austin did not take up directly. He may, however, have called our attention to it when he cited Euripides' Hippolytus, which, I argue here, may be read as a drama of (Arendtian) release. Noting the standard reading of the play's denouement as a moving scene of father-son forgiveness/reconciliation, I draw out the racial political implications of such readings today and argue for Arendt's "constant mutual release" as the preferable model – better suited to the Hippolytus and a superior aspiration for politics now.

\*The lecture will be followed by a Q&A and a drinks reception at 7:30.

Day 2/ 27<sup>th</sup> Sept:

9:30 – 11:00

**Agora 4: Exile and the Promise of Politics**

**Chair: Jo-Anne Dillabough** | Professor of Sociology of Education, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

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Building,  
Room GS4/GS5

**Zeina Al-Azmeh** | Centenary Research Fellow at Selwyn College and Teaching Associate at the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge

**Title:** From a Politics of Being Perceived to a Politics of Perceiving: Exilic Narrations of the Syrian Revolution (2011)

**Abstract:** Blame towards the international community in relation to the Syrian War complicated already conflicted attitudes among exiled Syrian intellectuals in Europe towards their host societies where inner tensions between appreciation and condemnation intensified. Energised by a recaptured faith in 'the people' after the 2011 uprising, disillusionment with the West's moral superiority, and a growing disdain towards an 'unjust and unsustainable world order', exiled Syrian intellectuals were deconstructing a historical sense of 'cultural insult' and recapturing self-narratives of empowerment, resilience, epistemic authority, and cultural self-respect in their narration of their collective trauma. This recaptured voice and sense of agency appear to be subverting a previous ethos of powerlessness, subordination, and despair. Drawing on these empirical observations from interviews with 30 exiled Syrian intellectuals in France and Germany, I argue that a paradigm shift is taking place in the 'trauma work' of exiled Syrian intellectuals, a change in the direction of focus from a *politics of being perceived* to a *politics of perceiving*. This new paradigm, I argue, repositions the margin, through its very silencing and traumatic essence, at the centre of a new world view.

**Seçkin Sertdemir Özdemir** | Collegium Researcher in the Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History, and Political Science at the University of Turku; Visiting Fellow at LSE European Institute

**Title:** Civic death and authoritarian securitisation of higher education

**Abstract:** Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Claude Lefort and many other political thinkers agree that the post-World War II model of national citizenship has failed to fully protect citizens from losing social, economic and political rights and even from being subjected to total degradation. As calls for citizenship rights that reflect inclusion and recognition of difference, diversity and multitude have increased, so too have authoritarian states invested in diversifying their techniques of governance in order to deprive targeted groups and individuals of citizenship rights. In an age of rising authoritarianism, less attention has been paid to the forms of citizen punishment that do not result in denaturalisation or geographical deportation, but which specifically and expressly remove the right of citizens to claim their citizen's rights while still retaining their place in the nation. In this paper, I analyse the interconnected but changing forms of securitisation and criminalisation directed at academics and students across the last decade by focusing on the various yet recurring tools that governments such as Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States use to target students and academics, dismiss opponent scholars, increase surveillance, expand the perfusion of distrust in higher education institutions, brand them as 'terrorists', and expel them from educational institutions as well as the public sphere. I conclude that various liberal and illiberal states have benefited greatly from the global wave of authoritarianism, and as a result, nations in both the Global North and South are not immune to the risks of autocratic governance and civic death practices.

**11:15 – 12:30**

**Agora 5: In Conversation with Bonnie Honig**  
**Bonnie Honig** | Nancy Duke Lewis Professor of Modern Culture and Media and Political Science, Brown University

**Faculty of Education,  
Donald McIntyre  
Building,  
Room GS4/GS5**

**12:30 – 13:45**

**Lunch Break**

**Homerton College**

**13:45 – 15:45**

**Agora 6: Freedom and Politics between Endurance and Change**  
**Chair: Daniele Bassi** | Postdoctoral Researcher, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

**Faculty of Education,  
Donald McIntyre  
Building,  
Room GS4/GS5**

**Thiago Dias** | Post-doctoral researcher at UNICAMP (Campinas, Brazil); Associate Researcher at Marc Bloch-Zentrum (Berlin) and at NEV, Studies in Violence, USP (São Paulo)

**Title:** Connected "politics": Arendtian Reflections from Bolsonaro's election

**Abstract:** The expanding phenomenon of disinformation has been addressed in wide political circles and evidenced in recent political

events, such as Trump's election and Brexit, and is linked to the success of new global media in shaping people's political behavior. In this paper I propose, based on Bolsonaro's electoral success in 2018, to link this phenomenon to Hannah Arendt's 20<sup>th</sup> century account of world alienation. I argue that these novel forms of communication have deepened the centuries-old process of world alienation through the production of new meaning systems of the world in which the visibility and durability of a common and shared world is undermined and flattened. Among the many different digital expressions of social life, platforms of human expression such as WhatsApp represent a space where visibility of the common world is substantially diminished, which has made it an especially efficient tool for exposing the darker side of humanity.

**Gabriele Parrino** | PhD student, Scuola Normale Superiore  
- Pisa, Italia

**Title:** Under the debris of the past. Hannah Arendt and the Legacy of the Roman Tradition

**Abstract:** When engaging with Hannah Arendt's thought, one is struck by the troubling ontological dichotomy between the dynamic nature of political action and the authoritative necessity of establishing its novelty. This paper aims to explore this apparent paradox to address the crisis of authority that affects our democratic institutions. In proposing Arendt's political ontology in this *tragic* tension, a critical account of her reception of the Roman republican concepts of *auctoritas* and *lex* must be presented, revealing a type of constitutional order that grounds power in political structures without repressing deliberation while also making action unfold alongside the formation of an institutional framework.

Accordingly, Arendt's reception of Roman thought can provide the foundations for a transformative account of democracy that gains more clarity when coupled with her 'romantic obsession' with the council system. Thriving on the civic engagement of its participants and the authoritative status of its body politic, Arendt's "Roman conciliarism" works as a participatory form of democracy responsive to people's requests while also incorporating a system of checks and balances created by themselves — a strong political tool that reinstates the possibility of change when institutions risk degenerating into static, and often oppressive regimes. In this sense, Arendt's council democracy serves as an example that inspires new visions of anti-totalitarian communities, fostering new ways of revolutionary action that, by inheriting Roman legacy, might become "our only prophecy of freedom."

**Irene Villa** | Postdoctoral researcher at the University of Verona, member of Politesse - Research Center Politics and Theories of Sexualities of the University of Verona)

**Title:** Social Exclusion and the Theatricality of Politics: A Queer Reflection Starting from Hannah Arendt

**Abstract:** As many critics of Arendt have pointed out, her distinction between needs and freedom risks relegating issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality to the realm of apolitical questions. Nevertheless, Arendt's political thought has been leveraged by prominent feminist philosophers such as Adriana Cavarero, and more recently by queer philosopher Judith Butler, to advocate for an ethics of nonviolence alongside women's and minority struggles. This paper navigates this contradiction. On one hand, it delves into the limitations of Arendt's distinction between needs and freedom, highlighting its inadequacy in addressing contemporary political phenomena as well as the project of an egalitarian and nonviolent freedom. On the other, it explores the intersection of theatre and politics as outlined by Arendt, presenting it as a valuable framework for understanding the historical strategies employed by queer groups to achieve recognition and social justice.

**Yasemin Sari** | Assistant Professor of Philosophy,  
Department of Philosophy, Seattle University

**Title:** W.E.B. Du Bois and Hannah Arendt on Democratic  
Belonging

**Abstract:** In the simplest of terms, democracy means rule by the people. Such rule demonstrates the equality of citizens that consists of the ability to partake in decision-making processes. This equality is not unconditional, but rather rests on eligibility which effectively becomes the condition of being part of a democracy. This latter ability to make collective decisions belongs then to this special set of human beings that understand themselves as “a people” or a “we.” At the basis of this ability to make decisions lies political freedom. Ultimately, this ability to make decisions, namely the ‘sovereignty’ of a people, comprises the right and freedom of self-determination that makes the question of the equality of participants of a demos even more significant. As such, equality and freedom are integral to a democracy.

In this paper, I want to complement Arendt’s account of political freedom and its corresponding principle of equality that has born valuable insights for democratic theory with W.E.B. Du Bois’s work on the material conditions of democratic belonging that can be reflected in our social and political existence. These Du Boisian insights will bring to focus how Arendt’s articulation of “real democracy” can be further substantiated through the material conditions adumbrated by Du Bois in outlining what he calls “real” or “perfect” democracy.

**Giacomo Mormino** | Postdoctoral researcher at the  
University of Verona, Member of the Hannah Arendt  
Center for Political Studies at the University of Verona

**Title:** A view of the world. Arendt and Architecture

**Abstract:** Arendt’s interest in architecture, in urban space, and in the objects that surround us is not accidental. Although Arendt did not devote an entire essay or article to questions about architectural styles, the work of the architect, the transformations of the city, the images of objects, statues and architectural figurations and representations often underpinned her texts and appear whenever she tries to give substance to her conceptualisations of the polity. Famous is the image of the table that Arendt positions as a mediating device of common worldbuilding – that in-between spaciae that simultaneously connects and separates us to the world of others. Or, by contrast, Arendtian reflections on the statues of the post-war space of Tiergarten where humans are inevitably reduced to mere ‘ghosts in an empty field,’ a tangible allegorical reference to the forms of dehumanization that are the consequence of war.

in this paper, I analyze the presence of architecture in Arendtian conceptualisations of the polity through Arendt’s notion of common worldbuilding and its challenges. I will also discuss how architecture can be considered on par with political activity characterized by interactive plurality, dialogue, self-revelation, and an infinite and unpredictable kind of labour. My argument is that Arendt’s notion of a common world embrace the realm of the ‘architect’ or curator of an interactive plurality, a dialogue, a revelation of the self (Sennett, 2008), an infinite and unpredictable kind of work, which can associate it with the *vita activa*, as described by Arendt. I close by suggesting that Arendt’s conceptualization of the dramatic theatre of a curated space disrupts the distinction between work and politics, as well as the distinction between the space of the *oikos* and the space of the *polis*.

**16:15 – 17:45**

**Agora 7: Hannah Arendt and Political Education for a Common World**

**Faculty of Education,  
Donald McIntyre  
Building,  
Room GS4/GS5**

**Michalinoz Zembylas** | Professor of Educational Theory and Curriculum Studies at the Open University of Cyprus, Honorary Professor at Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, Adjunct Professor at the University of South Australia, and Research Faculty at Lebanese American University

**Title:** Hannah Arendt and the Post-Truth Era: Rethinking Political Education

**Abstract:** This talk explores the relevance of Hannah Arendt’s political thought in addressing the challenges of the post-truth era. By examining Arendt’s reflections on truth, politics, and education, it is argued that political education—understood as the interplay between the educational nature of the political and the political nature of education—can serve as a crucial foundation for fostering a shared reality in contemporary democracies. The talk contends that Arendt’s insights offer valuable perspectives on how to navigate the complexities of post-truth politics, emphasizing the importance of judgment, plurality, and the active engagement of citizens in the democratic process.

**19:00 – 21:00**

**Closing Event**

**Location TBC**