College of Europe
Collège d'Europe

Brugge Natolin

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OPENING CEREMONY

ACADEMIC YEAR 2019-2020

ALLOCUTION PROMOTION HANNAH ARENDT

Dear President of the European Council,

Dear President of the Administrative Council,

Mijnheer de Gouverneur,

Mijnheer de Burgermeester,

Your Excellencies,

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Students,

One of the most well-known and often-cited concepts of political anthropology is Aristotle's classification of the human being as a ζῷον πολιτικόν, as a "political animal" or perhaps better, "living being", in his Πολιτικά written around 330 BC. According to him - who we can regard as the father of political science - it is only through man being part of a political community, the πόλις, that he can fully realise his nature and potential. The history of mankind has shown, and our world of today keeps showing, that this political dimension of our existence accounts for much of what we have been able to achieve as humans in terms of social, legal, scientific, economic, organisational and even the moral progress, well beyond the horizons of the Greek city-states which formed the basis of Aristotle's analysis. Yet at the same time this political dimension has also all too often been a pathway to the abysses of human nature, to unrestrained barbarism and the infliction of boundless suffering by some on their fellow human beings.

How can it happen, how can it be explained that what belongs to our essence, what accounts for so much of the positive potential of our living together, the political dimension of our existence, can turn into the large-scale destruction of values and lives, the generation of evils poisoning an entire generation or more?

In 1933 a 26-year old, intellectually wide awake and strongly-willed young researcher, Hannah Arendt, was confronted with one of those turns of politics into hell, arguably one if not the most calamitous in history, the coming into power of the Nazi regime in Germany. It changed her life: Until then she had dedicated much of her life to the study of philosophy, with significant early academic recognition and much personal satisfaction. But seeing what she saw then, including the failure of philosophy, and of several leading philosophers, to comprehend the unfolding brutal political reality, made her turn to political theory. Asked nearly thirty years later, in 1964 in a TV interview what was driving her quest deep into the nature and soul of politics ever since Hannah Arendt has responded with three simple but emphatically pronounced words "Ich will verstehen" ("Je veux comprendre" – "I want to understand"). It is this relentless determination to understand by way of a thinking "without banister" (as she has called it herself) which has led her in many respects further than any other contemporary thinker not only in exploring the causes and conditions previously unimaginable spheres of hell newly brought into this world by political action during the last century but also in reminding us stringently and demandingly of our individual ethical responsibility as political living beings in the Aristotelian sense. In giving the name of Hannah Arendt to the promotion of its 471 students of the Academic Year 2019/20 the College of Europe wishes to honour and commemorate a political thinker whose rigor, originality and tenacity has made us better understand the potential, challenges and risks of politics in the modern age and whose writings are a constant reminder that we can never afford to stop thinking critically and constructively about the political systems we are inevitably a responsible part of.

Essayons de retracer sommairement une vie qui a vite traversé les frontières, intellectuelles aussi bien que géographiques. Née le 14 octobre 1906 à Hannover en Allemagne comme seul enfant de l'ingénieur Paul Arendt et de sa femme Martha, Hannah grandit dans un environnement familial d'un niveau d'éducation élevé et assez aisé. La famille est d'origine juive, mais les parents sont non-pratiquants, et Hannah expliquera plus tard que ce n'est pas à la maison qu'elle a appris d'être juive. Pour la jeune fille Hannah, très vivace et curieuse, l'année 1913 – la famille s'est entre-temps établie à Königsberg - est une année noire : elle perd d'abord son grand-père très aimé et puis, à l'âge de sept ans son père affecté d'une paralysie progressive. Elle se referme plus sur elle-même et commence assez tôt à s'enfoncer dans les livres de la grande bibliothèque de son père. La jeune Hannah est une très bonne élève à la fameuse Königin-Luise-Schule, découvre tôt la philosophie et – selon une tradition – parvient à lire la « Critique de la raison pure » d'Immanuel Kant à l'âge de 14 ans. Mais elle est aussi assez rebelle et se fait exclure en 1921 du lycée ayant boycotté un enseignant, ce qui la force de préparer son baccalauréat en tant que candidate libre. Elle profite pourtant de cette liberté accrue pour suivre – en auditeur libre - ses premiers cours à l'Université de Berlin.

Hannah passe son « Abitur » en 1924 avec des résultats brillants et commence presque immédiatement – à l'âge pour l'époque extraordinaire de 17 ans - ses études de philosophie à l'Université de Marburg. Elle a choisi Marburg surtout pour

suivre les cours de Martin Heidegger, penseur existentialiste d'une grande originalité, mais aussi assez contesté. D'une forte assertivité intellectuelle, s'engageant à fond dans les discussions même au risque de se rendre vulnérable, portant les cheveux courts selon la dernière mode féminine, Hannah se fait remarquer. Ceci aussi par Heidegger avec lequel elle commence en 1925 une liaison amoureuse qui ne durera pas puisque Heidegger ne veut risquer ni son mariage, ni sa carrière universitaire pour une affection sincère qui pourrait tourner au scandale. Hannah sera toujours reconnaissant envers Heidegger de lui avoir appris la « liberté de penser », mais en 1926 elle quitte Marburg, d'abord pour suivre les cours du célèbre phénoménologue Edmund Husserl à Freiburg et puis pour commencer à Heidelberg une thèse de doctorat sous la direction de Karl Jaspers, autre grand penseur allemand d'orientation existentialiste admiré par Hannah à cause de son ouverture d'esprit, clarté d'expression et exploration des grandes questions de la condition humaine. En novembre 1928 - elle a tout juste 22 ans – Hannah soutient avec succès sa thèse de doctorat sur le concept d'amour chez Augustin. Même si Jaspers pense qu'elle aurait pu creuser le sujet plus profondément – parfois elle a tendance, avec son désir de tout comprendre, de passer assez vite d'un sujet à l'autre – elle regardera Jaspers toujours un peu comme un père intellectuel, lui écrivant en 1957 que s'est vraiment lui qui l'a éduquée.

Sa vie sentimentale dans ces années est marquée par le mariage en 1929 avec le journaliste et essayiste Günter Stern qui sous le nom de Günter Anders deviendra un grand critique de la technologie et pionnier du mouvement antinucléaire. Ensemble ils vivent et sont inquiets par la montée rapide du Nazisme en Allemagne à partir de 1930. En partie face à l'agressivité accrue de l'antisémitisme elle a commencé à s'interroger davantage sur sa position en tant que femme intellectuelle juive dans la société allemande, travaillant sur une biographie de Rahel Varnhagen, écrivaine allemande d'origine juive de l'époque du romantisme dont elle se sent sans doute proche à travers sa situation de juive intellectuelle. Bénéficiaire d'une bourse de recherche scientifique elle se trouve bien sur la voie d'une carrière universitaire quand intervient l'année charnière de 1933. Hannah s'est décidée à ne pas rester neutre face aux développements et aide Karl Blumenfeld, président de l'Union sioniste allemande, à recueillir des témoignages de la propagande antisémite. En juillet 1933 elle est arrêtée par la Gestapo, risque le pire, et a la chance inouïe d'être relâchée après huit jours d'interrogations grâce à la sympathie d'un membre de la police judiciaire. Elle sait qu'elle n'a plus de temps à perdre et fuit avec sa mère – à pied, dans la nuit et à travers un forêt frontalier – en direction de Prague pour arriver finalement, passant par Genève, à sa destination choisie d'exil, Paris.

Les sept années à Paris (1933-1940) voient Hannah Arendt, l'exilée, survivre, au début pas trop confortablement, en tant que collaboratrice de différentes organisations juives soutenant des réfugiés juifs. En 1935 elle devient secrétaire générale d'une organisation sociale et éducative pour faciliter l'émigration d'enfants juifs rescapés de l'Allemagne nazie vers la Palestine, «Aliyat Hano'ar ». C'est la période de sa vie où elle a l'expérience la plus directe et concrète de l'impact d'un régime totalitaire sur la vie de ses victimes. Arendt ne voit plus pour elle-même un retour aux sphères supérieures abstraites de la philosophie et se rapproche des cercles d'intellectuels politiquement engagés. S'étant séparé de son mari Günter Stern, qui désespérant de leurs conditions de vie médiocre émigre de Paris aux Etats-Unis en 1936, Arendt fait la

connaissance d'un philosophe et communiste allemand engagé, Heinrich Blücher (1899-1970), avec lequel elle peut – et pourra toujours dans la suite – explorer à fond ses efforts de compréhension théorique des bouleversements politiques du présent. Ils se marient début 1940, quelques mois seulement avant leur internement en tant qu'étrangers « indésirables » dans différents camps français. Dans la confusion de la défaite française de juin 1940 Hannah parvient à quitter le camp, à pied, sans papiers, sans ressources, à la recherche de Heinrich qu'elle retrouve finalement à Montauban après avoir assuré sa survie en travaillant dans les champs. Après d'autres péripéties difficiles, se sentant menacés par la collaboration des autorités françaises avec l'Allemagne nazie, ils parviennent à obtenir des (rares) visas américains et quittent en janvier 1941 Marseille pour rejoindre, par Lisbonne, New York.

With Arendt's arrival in New York a new phase of her life starts – and the change in language is an appropriate one: Having escaped from a Europe engulfed in the cataclysm of totalitarianism and war she perceives the United States as a refuge of freedom of thinking and largely successful implementation of democratic and republican ideals. She will later write very critically about what she regarded as darkening developments in the US political system, especially during the Vietnam war, and will always be ill-at-ease with some aspects of American society. But this critical stance has never made Hannah Arendt deviate from her fundamental appreciation of the republican ideals which guided the American Revolution and the writing of the US constitution, thus creating what she saw as an entirely new body politic dedicated essentially to freedom. After 17 years of existence as a stateless person Arendt will become a US citizen in 1951, not only an act of administrative convenience but also one of faith. She also rapidly learns to master the English language with a striking sophistication, although her German and philosophical upbringing will always shine through her tendency to construct rather long and sometimes also complex sentences in English. Privately she and her husband will also maintain a habit of using some French expressions as a result of their many years in France.

In the 1940s Arendt rapidly emerges as an intellectually highly versatile and critical contributor on political and philosophical subjects to various reputed periodicals such as the Menorah Journal, Contemporary Jewish Record, the Nation, the Partisan Review, the Review of Politics. In 1944 she is appointed research director of the Conference on Jewish Relations, with the task of helping with the recovery of Jewish artefacts and libraries in liberated Europe, on behalf of the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, which she later serves as executive director from 1949 to 1952. In parallel to her work for Jewish post-war cultural reconstruction she starts teaching in 1945 European history at the reputed Brooklyn College in 1945, becomes in 1946 an editor at Schocken Books and works on her first and probably most-read political theory work, "The Origins of Totalitarianism" which appears in 1951.

The book which provides an in-depth original analysis of Nazism and Stalinism as major totalitarian political movements of the first half of the 20th century makes her almost instantly an intellectual celebrity, in the US but also in Europe. Arendt argues in the "Origins" that 19th century race-thinking, anti-Semitism and imperialism laid the foundation for totalitarianism in the 20th century. The decline of the nation-state in the context of multinational imperialism, the transnational dynamics of international

capitalism and the massive violence of the First World War generated for Arendt conditions of fundamental disorientation, fear and disrespect of the rights of the individual. This provided the toxic breeding ground for the emergence of totalitarian ideologies and regimes proposing total protection against insecurity and danger in exchange for total power and control over both masses and institutions with the indiscriminate use of terror as major instrument. In its ultimate form totalitarianism aims for Arendt at the extermination of all individuality, both morally and physically, as exemplified by the Nazi concentration camps. In the second edition of her book in 1958 Arendt added forceful reflections that individual isolation and loneliness, characteristics of the development of modern societies, are also preconditions for totalitarian domination.

Arendt's "Origins" remains a sombre book to read. Perhaps today even more than ten/twenty years ago as Arendt reminds us how growing resentment in modern societies, feelings of exclusion and loss of support for party politics and parliaments can provide ample space for the propaganda of demagogues and endanger a freedom considered all to readily as a given, but in reality always fragile. When Arendt writes that "what convinces masses are not facts" and "totalitarian propaganda thrives on the escape from reality into fiction" it makes chilling reading in our times of populist contestation of fundamental rights and values. But Arendt was far from being only negative in her "Origins", expressing her conviction that government protecting human dignity remains perfectly possible and that there is always in human history the chance of a new beginning. In what must count amongst her most marking lines she wrote at the end of the "Origins" that "beginning" is the "supreme capacity of man; politically […] identical with man's freedom [and] guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man." The reference to "each new birth" here is made more moving by the fact that Hannah Arendt never had children.

The success of the "Origins" resulted in Arendt receiving an avalanche of invitations to give public speeches and lectures. From the 1950s onwards until the end of her life she accepted teaching assignments at numerous distinguished US universities such as the University of Notre Dame (Indiana), the University of California (Berkeley); Princeton University, the Northwestern University (Evanston), the New School (New York), Yale University (Connecticut) and Wesleyan University (Connecticut). She very much enjoyed teaching, eager to exchange ideas with students, many of whom adored her in spite of her occasional severity, often stimulating debates by provocative statements, moving readily into the audiences and even amongst the seats of listening students, stopping and turning while speaking, and – at the time it was still tolerated - smoking in class rooms, normally during breaks but occasionally also during classes, with students often helping her to light up. But as much as she liked to teach and read student work, she constantly refused to accept tenure-track professorial positions, wishing to preserve her independence and to have the freedom to take up teaching offers in different academic backgrounds.

The various teaching assignments still left her ample time to continue with her research and writing. In her next major work, "The Human Condition" published in 1958, Arendt attempted nothing less ambitious than to provide a systematic philosophical understanding of human activity. Making a distinction between *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) and *vita activa* (active life) she makes a case of

the latter having been neglected by the philosophical tradition in spite of its centrality to the human condition. Arendt divides the *vita activa* into the three categories of labour, work and action. *Labour* for her is human activity directed at meeting biological and other needs of self-preservation and the reproduction of the species. Inevitably it never reaches an end, is repetitive, circular, consumption-focused and thus comes with a sense of futility which also marks for her the modern consumer society. She ranks *work at a higher level* as it involves the process of passing from an idea to the creation of a finished durable product, be it a tool or a work of art. While work is essentially creative it also comes with an instrumental reasoning which tends to make everything appear as a potential means to a defined end. The highest form of human activity is for Arendt *action* (including both speech and action) as this is the activity by which human beings disclose themselves to others, generate relationships and ultimately create a potential for objectivity as actions can be witnessed from different perspectives. In contrast to labour and work action is neither circular, nor limited to a defined end, but can have unpredictable consequences. Action, which is always collective and communicative, is therefore also the ultimate domain of human freedom, but the evolution of modern societies towards consumptive labour and instrumental work are restricting the space for real action as defined by Arendt, having become a privilege of a few, mainly scientists and artists. But, as also in the "Origins of Totalitarianism", there is no definitive fate and inevitability in this evolution: Arendt strongly emphasizes our fundamental possibility, and even in a sense responsibility, of "beginning something new" as men "though they must die, are not born to die but to begin something new".

She herself was certainly faithful to always engaging in something new. Mostly writing at her desk with a view on the Hudson in her New York Riverside Drive apartment she kept publishing not only hundreds of articles on an enormous variety of different subjects but also collections of essays around certain themes: "Between Past and Future" in 1961, with a focus on the need for permanent thinking, and learning to think, as a response to a human condition located between the past and an uncertain future; "On Revolution" in 1963, providing a comparison between the French and American Revolutions and making a case for the leaders of the American Revolution, contrary to those of the French, having created a real republican order of freedom; "Crises of the Republic" in 1972, addressing major challenges of American politics at the time, including an essay on "Lying in politics" which analyses with a harrowing relevance again to our times how rapidly the fragile texture of our political and societal environment can be "torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehoods".

Always in search of further understanding from 1961 to 1963 Arendt embarked on a journalistic assignment which would generate the biggest and still lasting controversy of her life: Covering for the journal *The New Yorker* the trial in Jerusalem of one of the key organisers of the Holocaust, SS officer Adolf Eichmann, who had been abducted and brought to Jerusalem by the Israeli Mossad, Arendt was deeply struck by the almost terrifying ordinariness, absence of malice and blind bureaucratic sense of hierarchic responsibility of the accused. Having expected someone corresponding to the dehumanising "radical evil" she had still referred to in relation with the concentration camps in the "Origins of Totalitarianism" she became convinced that

Eichmann, rather than being a determined monster of annihilation, had committed his deeds merely out of blind dedication to the regime, a need to belong and sheer "thoughtlessness" as to the consequences of his actions. This she tried to capture in the provocative subtitle of her 1963 book on the Eichmann trial, "A Report on the Banality of Evil". Although Arendt's intention was essentially philosophical in that she wanted to show that individuals can participate in monstrous atrocities out of an inability to think critically and blind allegiance to ideologies that provide a sense of meaning in a lonely and alienating world, the book provoked a storm of hostility. She was accused of trying to defend Eichmann by banalising his behaviour and denying the unprecedented enormity of the Holocaust by suggesting that these deeds were simply part of the darker potential of all human beings. It must be added that the personal attacks on her, which partly reached the level of attempts at character assassination and led many of her Jewish friends to break with her, were reinforced by her suggestion in the book that the administrative cooperation of some Jewish leaders with the Nazi authorities had contributed to the extent of the Holocaust. In this respect she perhaps paid a price for her occasional tendency to provoke and overstate as the controversy would certainly have been less if she would have explained that there had been many previous examples in the long and painful history of the persecution of the Jewish people of Jewish leaders trying through cooperation with the powers of the day to mitigate the impact of that very persecution on their people. If there was any fault at all on the side of the Jewish Councils, and this is a big "if", then it was that to seek a similar chance of mitigation through cooperation with a totalitarian system for which – as Arendt has aptly described it in "The Origins" – dehumanising terror and destruction had become an end in itself and with whom therefore no constructive cooperation was possible.

Although supported by her always helpful husband and intellectual interlocutor Heinrich Blücher and some close friends such as Karl Jaspers and the writer Mary McCarthy, Arendt felt hurt by the Eichmann controversy which made her lose many former friends and overshadowed her remaining life and career. But she never retracted her arguments, clarifying only that she considered Eichmann indeed guilty and meriting the death penalty imposed by the Israeli Court because of his refusal to consider the consequences of his own actions. Questioned in an interview in 1964 about Eichmann's excuse that the duty of obedience had been the guiding principle of his life, Arendt replied that this was an outrageous misuse of Kant's moral imperatives, adding that "No man has, according to Kant, the right to obey." This phrase was rapidly corrupted by commentators to "Niemand hat das Recht zu gehorchen" ("Nobody has the right to obey") and has become one of the most famous phrases connected with her name. Although not an entirely correct citation it certainly can be considered as a sound reflection of Arendt's moral philosophy.

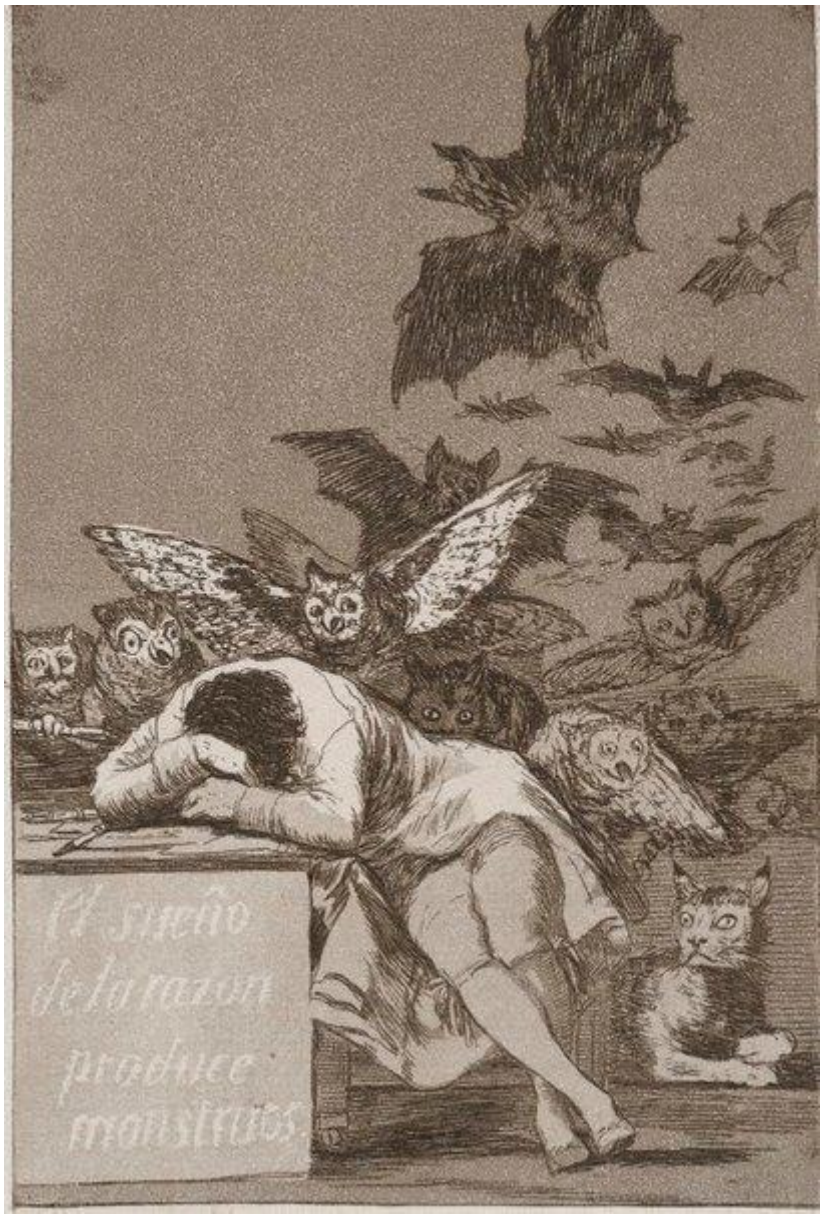
During the final years of her life Arendt, still a prolific writer and lecturer, returned again to moral philosophy, working on a major new book on "The Life of the Mind" with a focus on the mental activities of thinking, willing, and judging. Having sustained a first heart attack while lecturing in Scotland in May 1974 she recovered but refused to give up her heavy smoking. On 4 December 1975, shortly after her 69th birthday, she died of a further heart attack in her riverside apartment, while entertaining friends and with a page of the final part of the "Life of the Mind" in her typewriter. It was perhaps a fitting context for her passing away as friendships had been a great

personal resource throughout her life. In an essay of 1955 she had written about "the inherently worldless relationship between human beings as it exists in love and sometimes in friendship" and that "when one heart reaches out directly to the other, as in friendship […] the world goes up in flames as in love." In accordance with her wishes she was buried next to her beloved Heinrich with his name added to her now world-famous one on a very simple gravestone hardly reaching out of the soil on which visitors like to put small stones as if to commemorate the numerous issues she wanted her - and us - to understand:

Hannah Arendt's quest to understand, "zu verstehen", has led her into the abysses not only of the history of the 20th century but also of the human soul. She has explored these dark regions with unremitting intellectual courage and determination. Yet her "verstehen wollen" of contemporary politics was never a solitary exercise, but always one of reaching out to the others, the public, the students and us who read her today. Her critical thinking has always been intended to be a collective and communicative one, and in that sense "action" beyond the contemplative as she has defined in in the "Human Condition".

There has always been something in her quest which goes back to the fundamental trust in the force of reason and the progress of freedom which lies at the core of the essentially European Enlightenment. The critical reasoning of Kant is never far from her thoughts, and when she expresses her appreciation of the polity based on the ideal of republican freedom which came out of the American Revolution she is perfectly conscious of the European enlightenment origins of what she regards as one of the great modern realisations of political freedom. However, having witnessed the destructive forces of demagogic political obscurantism and the fragility of freedom in the 20th century the fundamental optimism of the progress of reason and freedom of the Enlightenment is not any longer possible for her. Instead freedom appears all too fragile, subject to the terrible risks of a widespread abdication of critical active political thinking by those who should normally be its beneficiaries, transforming them into willing instruments of totalitarian experiments like the "thoughtless" Eichmann. The

Spanish painter Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746 – 1828), having lived through the first cracks in political and social progress optimism towards the end of the age of Enlightenment, has in one of his famous "Caprichio" etchings found a visual expression for the disasters which the absence of thinking can generate: It is entitled "Il sueño de la razón produce monstruos" ("The sleep of reason produces monsters") and shows a sleeping man behind whom all sorts of menacing animals emerge:



One and half centuries after Goya, who had also been under consideration as a patron de promotion of the College, etched this work Hannah Arendt had seen the enormous extent into which these monsters envisaged by Goya can develop if critical political thinking, if political reason, abdicates. She has therefore left us with the forceful message, admonition and task never to relinquish, both individually and collectively our critical political thinking, to remain conscious that the objective of politics is the safeguarding of the rights and freedom of each member of the political

community and that it is through communicative and collective action that this objective is best achieved.

Dear Students of the Academic Year 2019/2020 you have reason to be proud of bearing the name of Hannah Arendt. May her fundamental message of our individual political responsibility accompany you through this year at the College and never leave you throughout your life and career afterwards. Then you will be not only bearing her name but also worthy of it.