

POSC 276

Imagination in Politics

Fall 2020

Class Hours: TTH: 10:20-12:05

Classroom: Online/Zoom Link

Professor: Mihaela Czobor-Lupp

Zoom Office Hours: **MW: 2:15-5:00 or by appointment**

Course Description

I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote – all that is tentative. I think that all thinking...has the earmark of being tentative. And what was so great in the conversations I had with Jaspers was that you could sustain such an effort, which was merely tentative, which did not aim at any results for weeks.

It could happen to us that I would arrive – I would stay there for a few weeks – and on the first day we hit on a certain subject. One such subject I remember was ‘ein guter Vers is ein guter Vers’...And the point for me was to convince him that Brecht was a great poet. This one line was enough for us for two weeks, two sessions every day. And we came back to it again and again.

The disagreement was never quite resolved. But the thinking about such a thing itself became immensely richer, through this exchange ‘without reservations,’ as he said, that is, where you don’t keep anything back. You do not think ‘Oh, I shouldn’t say that, it will hurt him?’ The confidence in the friendship is so great that you know nothing can hurt.

Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt understood politics as the everyday art of relating in freedom as equals, an art that requires imagination and common sense. Unfortunately, she thought, modernity made a show business of politics, a struggle for power and a war where those who think differently are seen not as opponents but as enemies, before they are even given the chance to become our

friends. The increased polarization of the public realm and its colonization by (racist and nationalistic) ideologies made it impossible for the citizens to imagine ways of living together across differences and (overlapping) incompatibilities. The temptation is to reduce difference to antagonism and adversity – an easy and quick avenue to ostracism and the exclusion of those who do not belong to our group and who do not share our way of thinking. How can today's politics be healed and what role could imagination play in this enterprise? In an attempt to answer this question we will read in this course the work of Hannah Arendt. At the end of the course we will also attempt to bring her thinking in dialogue with some of the ideas of James Baldwin and Edward Said.

First, we will read substantial parts from Arendt's work on totalitarianism, ideology, truth, and lying in politics. The objective is to understand the way in which twisted or distorted politics engage ideological imagination and propaganda in ways that lead to the occlusion of truth in politics and, eventually, to the horrors of Stalinism and Nazism, to their terror and systematic politics of excluding undesirables. The endeavor is relevant for today's politics because, as Arendt argued, with the end of totalitarian political regimes, there is no guarantee that elements of totalitarianism and of ideological thinking will not linger in modern societies, including those who are liberal-democratic.

Second, we will go more in depth and focus on one of the participants to the orchestration of mass murder politics that Nazism made possible, Adolf Eichmann. The intention is to understand how Eichmann was capable of committing so much (banal) evil, as the orchestrator of the Final Solution (the extermination of Jews in Europe). Eichmann's case will provide the framework for trying to understand the challenges that modern individuals face in developing their moral conscience. What we need to comprehend is that moral conscience and the ability to think and judge in ways that allow individuals to distinguish between right and wrong cannot be developed in the absence of a specific form of imagination; an activity where, obviously, Eichmann failed.

Third, we will move towards a more theoretical understanding of Arendt's conception of imagination and of the central role this plays in the activity of thinking. To preface this endeavor we will read a very important piece by Arendt, *Introduction to Politics*. The piece will help us to better comprehend Arendt's rather peculiar view of politics, based on which alone we can come to fully grasp the way she sees the role of imagination in politics.

Fourth, will bring Arendt in dialogue with James Baldwin and Edward Said, two pariahs and exiles, as she was, the first an African American, who lived for a long time outside the US, in exile, and the other a Palestinian, who lived mostly outside his place of birth, first in Egypt and then in the US. The aim is to explore the ability of pariah's imagination not only to resist ideological imagination, but also to make social and political coexistence possible across differences and (even) across entangled and unhealable incompatibilities (the gap between oppressed and oppressors).

Course objectives

1. To understand Arendt's notion of totalitarianism and detect those totalitarian and ideological elements that continue to exist in today's politics.
2. To understand the role imagination plays in making moral and political judgments.

3. To understand the role imagination can play in resisting xenophobia, racism, and social injustice.
4. To understand the responsibility that public intellectuals bear for healing divided societies by making public spaces of coexistence across differences possible.

Achieving the Course Objectives:

We will learn about all these issues and try to reach our course objectives by carefully and closely reading different parts from the following books:

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1975, 1979, ISBN: 9780156701532;

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Books, 2006, ISBN: 9780143039881;

Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, Stanford University Press, 2007, ISBN: 9780804744997;

Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*, A Harvest Book, 1977, 1978, ISBN: 9780156519922;

Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, Schocken Books, 2007, ISBN: 9780805211948;

Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993, 1994, ISBN: 9780156588904;

Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, Schocken Books, 1994, ISBN: 9780805211863;

Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, New York: Schocken Books, 2003, ISBN: 9780805211624

The Portable Hannah Arendt, edited with an introduction by Peter Baehr, Penguin Books, 2003, ISBN: 9780142437568

James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 2000, Vintage Books, New York, ISBN: 9780307275929

Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 1996, Vintage Books, New York, ISBN: 9780679761273

We will also watch two movies: Margarethe von Trotta, *Hannah Arendt* and Raoul Peck, *I am Not Your Negro*

The course will combine synchronous and asynchronous teaching/learning methods.

First, everyone should have an Internet connection and a laptop (or access to one).

Second, PLEASE, understand that teaching/learning online involves a rethinking of what the public means. Hence, find a quiet place to connect with us during class. Be decently dressed (not a pajamas or something so relaxed that you might make us blush), be respectful of everyone, do not eat during our class. Pay attention, listen to others and be as polite and considerate of others as you would be in a classroom at Carleton. Do not quit class to go to bathroom. We will take a short break during our class time.

Course Requirements:

1. Two short (four page) essays:

Topic for the first essay:

- a) Using Arendt's conception of the role of propaganda, ideology and truth in politics, articulate possible distinctions between bad and good rhetoric and explain how each type of rhetoric would impact politics. (The essay is due on **October 12 by 10 PM Central Time**) (20%). **Email the essay to mlupp@carleton.edu in Word Format.**

Topic for the second essay:

- b) An important aspect of Arendt's conception of modern politics is that we are today in a situation in which we HAVE to think without bannisters. The standards that tradition provided are gone. We have been left without guidance. In this context, Arendt points out, imagination becomes central to the activity of thinking. In light of Arendt's conception of politics, culture, and imagination, how would you interpret her thesis? What kind of imagination would thinking require and what would thinking mean from Arendt's perspective? How would the ability to think in the sense recommended by Arendt would make possible the reinvention of politics today?
- c) (The essay is due on **November 2 by 10 PM Central Time**) (20%). **Email the essay to mlupp@carleton.edu in Word Format.**

2. Group Presentations (15%)

Group Presentation 1: Can we distinguish between good and bad rhetoric? How could Arendt's conception of propaganda, lying, and truth in politics help us operate this distinction?

Group Presentation 2: How shall we understand the public reactions to Arendt's portrait of Eichmann, to her notion of banal evil, and to her criticism of the state of Israel during the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann? Was Arendt wrong? Where those who attacked her right? Where would you situate yourselves on this issue?

[The presenters will read a few extra materials on this issue, which I will make available for them]

Group Presentation 3: Are there elements in Arendt's conception of politics that can help us reinvent and reinvigorate today democratic politics in the US, as well as in the larger world?

Group Presentation 4: Why do we need imagination in order to be able to think? How can imagination enhance our ability to understand (what is happening in the world)? What would the moral and political consequences of such ability be?

Group Presentation 5: How do you think James Baldwin would have introduced a European outsider, as Arendt, to the history of racism in the United States? What role would imagination have played in this enterprise?

Group Presentation 6: Based on Said's conception about the role of the public intellectuals in a society, how would you interpret the public presence of Arendt and Baldwin in the American society, their role, their failures, and their achievements? What can we learn from these three thinkers about how to best resist xenophobia and racism in today's societies and in their politics?

3. **Final Essay (35%), due on November 23 at 5 PM Central Time. Email the essay to mlupp@carleton.edu in Word Format.**

4. **Active and informed class participation:** This includes: (i) attending classes; (ii) doing the readings for the day; and (iii) in class assignments that will test your degree of familiarization with and understanding of the reading that you were requested to prepare for the day (10%).

What is Expected from the Students?

Students will be expected to read, think, form arguments and counter-arguments, understand the fundamental concepts, and participate (in a critical and creative manner) in class discussion. That means that students must keep up in their reading assignments and attend class regularly. Students must be fully prepared *at all times* to discuss the arguments and concepts from the previous readings. The best students will be knowledgeable, critical but balanced in their critical assessments, and will develop coherent and sound arguments that they can defend in their essays, in their exams, and in class discussion.

Academic dishonesty:

"All assignments, quizzes, and exams must be done on your own. Note that academic dishonesty includes not only cheating, fabrication, and plagiarism, but also includes helping other students commit acts of academic dishonesty by allowing them to obtain copies of your work. You are allowed to use the Web for reference purposes, but you may not copy material from any website or any other source without proper citations. In short, all submitted work must be your own.

Cases of academic dishonesty will be dealt with strictly. Each such case will be referred to the Academic Standing Committee via the Associate Dean of Students or the Associate Dean of the College. A formal finding of responsibility can result in disciplinary sanctions ranging from a censure and a warning to permanent dismissal in the case of repeated and serious offenses.

The academic penalty for a finding of responsibility can range from a grade of zero in the specific assignment to an F in this course."

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES AND READINGS:

Introduction

September 15: *Who was Hannah Arendt? Why imagination in politics?*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains”: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, “Hannah Arendt’s Storytelling,” and George Kateb, “The Adequacy of the Canon.”

Ideological Imagination and Totalitarianism

September 17: *Anti-Semitism*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Antisemitism as an Outrage to Common Sense, The Jews and Society, and The Dreyfus Affair

September 22: *Imperialism and racism*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Race and Bureaucracy and Continental Imperialism: The Pan-Movements

September 22: *Propaganda and organization*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, The Totalitarian Movement and Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics”

September 24: *Total domination*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Totalitarianism in Power

September 29: *Ideology and terror*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government and Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics”

Group Presentation 1: Can we distinguish between good and bad rhetoric? How could Arendt’s conception of propaganda/lying and truth in politics help us operate this distinction?

Moral Judgment, Imagination, and Politics

October 1: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pages 3-151

October 6: *The Banality of evil*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pages 151-280

Discussion of Margarethe von Trotta's movie, *Hannah Arendt*

Group Presentation 2: How shall we understand the public reactions to Arendt's portrait of Eichmann, to her notion of banal evil, and to her criticism of the state of Israel during the Jerusalem trial of Adolf Eichmann? Was Arendt wrong? Where those who attacked her right? Where would you situate yourselves on this issue?

[The presenters will read a few extra materials on this issue, which I will make available for them]

October 8: *Where did Eichmann fail? Thinking and imagination*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" and "Socrates"

The Political Works of Imagination

October 13: *What is politics about?*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "Introduction to Politics," 93-153

October 15: *Can we still have politics today?*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "Introduction to Politics," 153-204

Group Presentation 3: Are there elements in Arendt's conception of politics that can help us reinvent and reinvigorate democratic politics in the US, as well as in the larger world?

October 20: *Culture, Imagination, and Politics*

Reading: "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Political Significance"

October 22: *Thinking and Imagination*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)" and *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*, 69-80 and 166-179

October 27: *The power of imagination in dark times*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing"

Group Presentation 4: Why do we need imagination in order to be able to think? How can imagine enhance our ability to understand and to what moral and political consequences?

Pariah's Imagination

October 29: *Pariahs and the power of their imagination*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as a Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" and James Baldwin, "The Harlem Ghetto"

November 3: *Arendt and Baldwin: the story of two pariahs*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock" and James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 3-81

Movie: *I am Not Your Negro*

November 5: *Resisting racism: challenges, dreams, and hopes*

Reading: James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, 85-197

Group Presentation 5: How do you think James Baldwin would have introduced a European outsider, as Arendt, to the history of racism in the United States? What role would imagination have played in this enterprise?

November 10: *Edward Said on the role of public intellectuals*

Reading: Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*: "Holding Nations and Traditions at Bay" and "Speaking Truth to Power"

November 12: Humanism, imagination, and democratic criticism

Reading: *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*: "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals"

Group Presentation 6: Based on Said's conception about the role of the public intellectuals in a society, how would you interpret the public presence of Arendt and Baldwin in the American society, their role, their failures, and their achievements? What can you learn from these three thinkers about how to best resist xenophobia and racism in today's societies and in their politics?

November 17: *Final Reflections and Discussion: How shall we understand the political and moral role of imagination?*