

**HANNAH ARENDT AND POLITICAL IMMORTALITY:
TOWARD A POST-THEOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL
PHL 656: Fall and Winter Quarters, 2015-2016
Peg Birmingham**

Office hours: Fridays 1:30-3:30 and by appointment

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COURSE OBJECTIVES: This two-quarter seminar on Hannah Arendt's conception of the political will be organized around Arendt's rethinking of the concept of political immortality, a rethinking, I argue, motivated by what she views as the failure of the political in the 19th and 20th century, failure that she locates in the rise of modern secularization that in part led to the death of immortality. Pointing out that the Greeks and Romans understood politics as the *activity* of immortalizing, Arendt claims that the modern rise of secularization meant that life, world, and politics had become "perishable, mortal, and futile." Certainly this claim is also made by Carl Schmitt for whom modern secularization is the root cause for what he views as the contemporary age of "neutralization and depoliticization." In the 1934 preface to the Second Edition of *Political Theology*, Schmitt responds to the claim that "without a concept of secularization, we cannot understand our history of the last centuries," with his well-known claim that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." Schmitt's claim is not only historical, but normative: for him there is no concept of the political without a political theology. In his essay, *The Concept of the Political*, dedicated to his friend August Schaetz of Munich "who fell in battle in the assault on Moncelu on August 28, 1917," Schmitt recovers a theological foundation of the political by developing a conception of political immortality that grafts the image of the immortal body of the theological kingdom onto that of the sacrificial, violent space of the nation-state. Significantly, and this is the concern of the seminar, Arendt's response to the depoliticization of modern secularism proceeds along significantly different lines. This seminar will explore how Arendt's conception of political immortality, rooted in the heteronomous conditions of history, law, earth, and worldly appearance and out of which the 'autonomous' political concepts depend—power, authority, action, freedom and political judgment—allows her to develop a post-theological concept of the political.

During the fall quarter we will read closely three of Arendt's major, early works: *Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Between Past and Future*, and *The Human Condition*, as well as a few essays from this period that illuminate her thought in these three major works. During the winter quarter, we will focus on three of her later works: *On Revolution*, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, and *Life of the Mind*. Throughout the two quarters, students will present on several of Arendt's important essays that accompany and illuminate these major works. Again our readings and discussions will focus on Arendt's attempt to develop a new concept of the political from out of a post-theological concept of political immortality.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE

The reading list for this course is ambitious and constitutes the major part of the work for this course. Students are expected to keep up with the readings. In addition, each student is required to give a class presentation on one of the readings for the week's seminar. The class presentation should be **no more** than 4 pages, typed single spaced. Copies of the class presentations must be distributed to all members of the seminar at the beginning of the meeting. It is the responsibility of the presenter to make copies and bring them to class for distribution. Finally, each student is required to turn in a final paper. Students planning to take both quarters of this seminar are required to turn in a 15-18 page essay at the conclusion of the winter quarter. Students planning on taking only the first quarter of the seminar must turn in a 7-10 page paper at the conclusion of the fall quarter.

Breakdown of requirements:

Participation: 20%

Class Presentation: 30%

Final Paper: 50%

REQUIRED TEXTS

Fall Quarter

Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*

Between Past and Future

The Human Condition

The Promise of Politics

Essays in Understanding: "Understanding and Politics" and "The Nature of Totalitarianism" (handouts)

The Crisis of the Republic, "Lying and Politics" (handout)

Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, "The Permanence of the Political-Theological?" and "The Death of Immortality" (handout)

Theodore Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, "Death of Immortality (63)" (handout)

Winter Quarter

Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*

Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy

On Revolution

Life of the Mind

On Violence

The Crises of the Republic, "On Civil Disobedience," and "Thoughts on Revolution"

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND PRESENTATIONS

September 10

Introduction

Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, "Permanence of the Theological-Political?" and "Death of Immortality" (**handouts**)

Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Death of Immortality (**handout**)
Arendt, *Origin of Totalitarianism*, Preface
Arendt, *The Promise of Politics: Epilogue* (**handout**)

- September 17** *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Parts I and II)
 Presentation: *Essays in Understanding: "A Reply to Eric Voegelin"* (handout)
- September 24** *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Parts II and III)
 Presentation: *Essays in Understanding*, "The Nature of Totalitarianism" (handout)
- October 2:** *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Parts III)
 Presentation: *Between Past and Future: "Truth and Politics"*
- October 8** *Between Past and Future*, "What is Authority?"
 Between Past and Future, "The Concept of History"
 Presentation: *Between Past and Future: Preface*
- October 15** *The Human Condition*: Prologue and Chapters 1-2
- October 22** **Guest lecturers: Howard Caygill and Dimitris Vardoulakis**
 "Kafka and Freedom"
- October 29** **No Class-Professor at Conference (Make-up class on November 19)**
- November 5** *The Human Condition*: Chapters 3-4
 Presentation: *Between Past and Future, "Tradition and the Modern Age"*
- November 12** *The Human Condition*: Chapter 5
 Presentation: *Between Past and Future, "What is Freedom?"*
- November 19** *The Human Condition*: Chapter 6
 Presentation: *The Promise of Politics, "Introduction into Politics"* pp. 93-153
 Presentation: *The Promise of Politics "Introduction into Politics, pp. 153-203*