

PHL 657: Hannah Arendt and Political Immortality: A Post-Theological Concept of the Political
Winter Quarter, 2016
Professor Peg Birmingham

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

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is the second part of a two quarter course (fall 2015 and winter 2016) on Arendt's concept of political immortality. Students joining the course in the winter quarter need not be concerned about missing the autumn seminar as I will devote part of the first lecture to summarizing the work done during the fall quarter. Arendt is not a systematic thinker and therefore one can jump into her work at nearly any point and begin thinking with her. Arendt's rethinking of the concept of political immortality, I argue, is motivated by what she views as the failure of the political in the 19th and 20th century, a failure that for her is rooted in the rise of modern secularization, which in her view contributed at least in part to the rise of totalitarianism. 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," which, in turn, threatened the possibility of political immortality. Arendt argues that the modern age attempted to overcome this futility by developing a concept of history as progress and a concept of the political that grafts the image of the immortal body of the theological kingdom onto that of the sacrificial space of the nation-state. Thomas Hobbes and Carl Schmitt are the two thinkers who bookend this grafting of the theological onto the secular body of the nation-state rooted in a sacrificial logic of political identity and founded in violent revolution. This seminar will explore how Arendt rethinks the modern concepts of history, law, judgment, authority, power, and the *sensus communis*, a rethinking that serves as the basis for her attempt to think a post-theological conception of political immortality. How successful she is in this attempt is part of the work of the seminar. During the winter quarter, we will focus on three of Arendt's later works: *On Revolution*, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, and *Life of the Mind*.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The seminar is reading intensive. As mentioned in the course objectives, Arendt is not a systematic thinker; one must read quite a bit of her work to grasp her thinking on particular topics and concepts that are for the most part scattered throughout her work. The main requirement of the course is to prepare the readings for each seminar meeting. In addition, each student is required to present a protocol that will briefly organize and summarize the previous seminar meeting, focusing especially on the main topics discussed and the questions that emerged and that might require further discussion and clarification. **The protocol must not be more than 3 pages single-spaced. (2 pages would be ideal.)** Sufficient copies of the protocol should be brought to class and distributed to each member of the seminar. A final paper is also required. The paper should be 9-10 pages, double spaced; the paper should address some aspect of Arendt's thinking on the concept of political immortality. As this is a reading intensive seminar, the final paper should limit itself to readings discussed in the seminar. It goes without saying that seminar attendance is required.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*

On Revolution

Life of the Mind

On Violence

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

Responsibility and Judgment (recommended)

Between Past and Future, "The Crisis in Culture" (I will post this essay as a PDF on D2L.)

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Rethinking the Conditions for Political Immortality

January 7 *The Human Condition*: Chapters 3-4

January 14 *The Human Condition*: Chapters 5-6

Political Immortality: Authority and the Law

January 21 *On Revolution*, Introduction, Chapters 1-2
On Violence, Part I

January 28 *On Revolution*, Chapters 3-4
On Violence, Part II

February 4 *On Revolution*, Chapters 4-5
Life of the Mind: Willing, "The Abyss of Freedom and the *novus ordo seclorum*,
pages, 195-237

February 11 *On Revolution*, Chapters 5-6
The Crises of the Republic, "Civil Disobedience," and "Thoughts on
Revolution" (This class may have to moved due to Professor Lynn Huffer's
mini-seminar also scheduled for this date—we will discuss an alternate date at
our first meeting.)

On Political Judgment, History, and the Sensus Communis: A New Foundation for Rethinking Political Immortality?

February 18 "Crisis in Culture" in *Between Past and Future*
Life of the Mind-Thinking, Introduction and Part One: Appearance

February 25 *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Sessions 1-4

March 3 *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Sessions 5-9

Life of the Mind, Thinking, Part II, Chapters 10-11, “The intramural warfare between thinking and common sense,” and “Thinking and doing: the spectator,” pages 80-97

March 10

Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Sessions 10-13

Life of the Mind-Appendix: “Excerpts from Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy,” pages 255-274

March 19: Final Paper Due