

POSC 276

Imagination in Politics

Fall 2015

Class Hours: TTH: 10:10-11:55

Classroom: Willis 203

Professor: Mihaela Czobor-Lupp

Office: Willis 418

Office Hours: **TTH: 3:00-5:00, W: 4:00-5:00 or by appointment**

Course Description

We think of imagination as belonging to the realm of art, that is, as aesthetic. However, is it realistic to think that imagination can be so narrowly confined? Perhaps, imagination is intrinsic to the very possibility of thinking and to the way individuals constitute their moral self and identity. Perhaps, despite the common liberal assumption, imagination is, in fact, central to politics and to the public realm.

In this course we will explore the role that imagination can play in politics and in the moral judgments that need to guide human affairs. We will see that, on the one hand, liberals are right. Imagination can be held responsible for the success of extreme ideologies, such as racism and tribal nationalism and, in extremis, for mass murder politics. On the other hand, we will see that politics at its best, that is, politics that is true to the values of freedom and democracy, needs to rely on a benign public employment of imagination, which increases the autonomy of the individuals. We will explore these different perspectives on imagination through a conversation with Hannah Arendt, a Jewish German philosopher, who immigrated to the United States in 1941.

First, we will read Arendt's work on the origins of totalitarianism and try to understand how ideological imagination beclouded so much judgment that the horrors of Stalinism and Nazism became possible. We will also explore Arendt's view of totalitarianism: the elements that favored its crystallization, the forms it took in the European politics of the 19th and the 20th centuries, as well as its structural components: its forms of mobilization and organization.

Second, we will go more in depth and focus on one of the participants to the orchestration of the 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 genocide of the Jews in Europe). Eichmann's case will provide us with the story that will help us 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 you 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 read some pieces that Arendt wrote on the work of different writers, such as Lessing, Kafka, Heine, and Dinesen. We will also read the works of these artists, because they are wonderful and because we want to develop our own interpretation of them, so that we can

engage Arendt's views critically. The intention is to understand several facets of the role that imagination can play in politics, as an antidote to totalitarianism and to the moral blindness of its perpetrators. This last section will be prefaced by a short introduction to the role culture and art play for Arendt in the human condition, both in politics and in the acts of thinking and judgment.

Course objectives

In Arendt's view, totalitarianism is the most unexpected event that shattered the foundations of modern politics, as well as the conceptual tools to think about it and to understand it. Thus, the first objective is to understand her notion of totalitarianism, both as a movement and as a political regime;

The second objective is to explore the relationship that Arendt theorizes between imagination and politics, particularly, the public ambiguity of imagination, the fact that this can enhance freedom as it can very well undermine it, thus serving projects of domination and mass murder politics;

The third objective is to understand how imagination is central to the act of thinking and to the formation of moral conscience, thus playing a central role in the prevention of evil;

The fourth objective is to grasp the meaning of Arendt's controversial idea of "the banality of evil" that she used to describe Adolf Eichmann, the orchestrator of the extermination of the Jews during the Nazi regime in the interwar Germany;

The fifth objective is to understand how story-telling, as practiced by several modern artists, can enhance the moral and public powers of imagination.

Last but not least, the final objective is to become better readers, thinkers, speakers, and writers.

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

We will also watch two movies: Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will* and Margarethe von Trotta, *Hannah Arendt*

Schedule of the screenings that will take place at the Gould Library:

10/03/2015 Sat	7:15 PM	Library 305	Triumph of the Will (305)
10/04/2015 Sun	7:15 PM	Library 305	Triumph of the Will (305)
10/10/2015 Sat	7:15 PM	Library 305	Hannah Arendt
10/11/2015 Sun	7:15 PM	Library 305	Hannah Arendt

Course Requirements:

1. **Two short (four page) essays:**

Topic for the first essay:

- a) In Arendt's view, totalitarianism governs through ideology and terror. Explain why this is the case and also show what public employment of imagination facilitates the use of total terror and ideology. Do you think that Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism can still help us to understand contemporary political phenomena and developments? Justify your answer. (The essay is due on **October 12**) (20%)

Topic for the second essay:

- b) Arendt thinks that imagination is central to the act of thinking. Explain why this is the case and, particularly, why imagination is central to the development of moral conscience. Moreover, do you agree with Arendt that Eichmann, as someone who lacked imagination and thus was incapable of thinking, was just a bureaucrat doing his duty or do you think that, in order to be able to do what Eichmann did, one needs to really be a fanatic who fervently believes in the leading ideology? (The essay is due on **November 2**) (20%)

2. **Class presentations** (in connection with the movies and the novels, plays, and short stories that we will be reading in our class) (15%)

You can choose one of the two movies. You can also choose Kafka's *Castle*, Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* or Dinesen's *The Poet*. The assignment requires you to present the main ideas of the artistic work, as well as to situate it within a larger context (of the artist's work and of his historical time) and then lead class discussion in ways that show how the artistic work helps us understand Arendt's ideas about the political role of imagination.

3. **Final Take Home Exam** (35%)

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 current 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:

Why imagination?

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

Reading: Hannah Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains”: A Conversation with Günter Gaus” (e-reserve)

September 17: *Imagination in human life: political dangers and promises*

Readings: George Kateb, “The Adequacy of the Canon” and “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility” (e-reserve)

Ideological Imagination: Antisemitism, Imperialism, Nationalism, and Totalitarianism

September 22: *Anti-Semitism*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pages 3-10, 56-88 and Hannah Arendt, Antisemitism (e-reserve)

September 24: *Imperialism and racism*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pages 123-184

September 29: *Escapist imagination: imperialism and tribal nationalism*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pages 185-266

October 1: *Total domination*

Readings: Hannah *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 305-340 and Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)” (e-reserve)

October 6: *Totalitarian imagination: propaganda and organization*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pages 341-388
Discussion of Leni Riefenstahl’s movie, *The Triumph of the Will*

October 8: *Ideology and terror*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pages 417-479, Hannah Arendt, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism: An Essay in Understanding” (e-reserve), and Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 404-411 (*Love and Kindness*)

Moral Judgment, Politics, and Imagination

October 13: *Eichmann in Jerusalem or the banality of evil*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pages 21-55 and 83-150 and Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 476-484 (a portrait of Eichmann from a Russian standpoint) (e-reserve)

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

October 15: *Thinking and imagination*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*, pages 69-110 and 166-193 (e-reserve)

October 20: *Eichmann’s failure or the modern origins of evil*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” (e-reserve)

No class on October 22!

Artists and Politics

October 27: *The human condition and the role of culture in politics*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, “Labor, Work, Action” (e-reserve) and “Culture and Politics” in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*

October 29: *Refugees and human rights*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 267-302 and “We refugees” (e-reserve)

November 3: *The power of Kafka's imagination*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, "Franz Kafka, Appreciated Anew, and Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

November 5: *Pariahs and the power of their imagination*

Reading: Hannah Arendt, "The Jew as a Pariah: A Hidden Tradition" in *Reflections on Literature and Culture*

November 10: *The power of imagination in dark times*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing" (e-reserve) and Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* (e-reserve)

November 12: *Why story-telling matters? How shall we tell stories in life in general and in politics in particular?*

Readings: Hannah Arendt, "Isak Dinesen, 1885-1965, Isak Dinesen, *The Poet*

November 17: *Final Review*