Politics and Action in the works of Hannah Arendt

IS 409/808

Fall 2017
Instructor: Dr. Greg Feldman
Course time: Fridays 9:30-1:20
Seminar room: HC 1530
Email: gregory_feldman@sfu.ca
Office hours: Friday 2-3pm
Office: HC 7272
Telephone: 778-782-9345

Course summary:

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is widely recognized as one of the outstanding, original, and, at times, controversial political thinkers of the twentieth century. Renewed attention to her work has been growing the 1990s. This revival reflects a desire across the political spectrum to avoid, on the one hand, the alienation afflicting mass liberal democracies, and, on the other, the domination intensifying in autocracies. Activists and scholars draw on her work to articulate a form of politics emergent from the plurality of people themselves. Arendt saw plurality as a basic human condition from which she developed a unique perspective on political action that investigated the life of the mind, the qualities of the public realm as a “space of appearance”, the deathliness of bureaucratic governance, the ubiquity of animal laborans (the human as a laboring animal), and the promise of politics premised upon people as particular individuals. In addition, Arendt wrote numerous commentaries on key issues of her day that resonate strongly in ours such as education, science, and racism. While formally identifying herself within the German intellectual tradition, her writing drew widely on classical and medieval philosophy as well as poetry and literature. Yet, she herself rejected the title of “philosopher” insisting (in the gendered language of her day) that she studied men who actually live in the world rather than Man who exists nowhere. Accordingly, the depth of her thinking always began from reflections on the practical problems of the times.

This course is primarily a seminar that involves direct reads of Hannah Arendt’s work. It foregoes secondary commentary on her work on the assumption that students, through reading, reflecting, and discussing, can develop their own commentaries. A portion of each class will feature a short lecture to contextualize some of the issues in the assigned readings. Some video material will be used as well.

Required readings:
Assignments:

**Graduate students**

Four response papers (750 words) altogether 35%
One commentary on an unassigned piece of Arendt’s work (1250 words) 15%
Term paper (5,000 words) 35%
Class participation 15%

**Undergraduate students**

Two response papers (750 words) altogether 15%
Term paper (4000 words) 35%
Class participation (including presentation) 15%
Take-home final exam 35%

**Response papers (graduates and undergraduates)**

Graduate students will write four response papers on the assigned readings. Undergraduate students will write two response papers on the assigned readings. You must do the following in your response papers: 1) summarize the reading; 2) explain how Arendt reasons through that theme; and 3) critique and/or comment on what she has written. You may choose any days during the term to write on an assigned reading for that day, but you may only hand in one paper per class. Papers must not exceed 750 words. Please provide a word count on the paper. This assignment involves no outside sources and there is no need for citations or a bibliography. Please staple your papers together. NB! Papers are due at the beginning of class on the day that the reading is assigned on the syllabus.

**Commentary on alternative piece by Arendt (graduates)**

Graduate students will write one book review on an academic monograph (not an edited volume) on a topic of their choice that pertains to the course theme. This is due on Nov. 10th. The review should follow the same format as the response papers. Please staple your papers together.

**Term paper (graduates and undergraduates)**

The term paper must address a central theme in Arendt’s work that you draw from the assigned readings. You must organize your paper on the same format as a discussion paper. However, include in your analysis three to five academic publications that directly engage Hannah Arendt’s ideas. 1) summarize the theme; 2) explain how Arendt reasons through that theme; and 3) critique and/or comment on what she has written. There are countless journal articles, edited volumes, and monographs written on Arendt and her oeuvre. You will have to do the research and learn how others have engaged her work. You must submit an outline for your paper by Sept. 29th. The paper is due at the beginning of class on Nov. 24th … Please staple your papers together.
Take home final exam (undergraduates)

Undergraduate students will have a take home final exam in essay format. The questions will be written to give you a chance to apply some of Arendt’s ideas to contemporary issues. The exam will be available for pick up at the SIS main desk on the 7th floor of the Harbour Centre by noon on Dec. 1st. It must be handed in at the same location by noon on Dec 13th. Please staple your papers together.

Class discussion (graduates and undergraduates)

Class discussion is NOT evaluated according to how much you talk in class, but rather how much you help the class discussion move forward. This occurs, for examples, by asking stimulating, open-ended questions; by explaining why you found a particular issue in the readings to be confusing or unclear; by asking questions that force a clarification of the discussion; by politely prompting fellow students to further explain what they mean; and by making connections between different points that have come up in the discussion. Successful class participation is not necessarily a function of how well you understand the readings, but rather how much you contribute to a richer discussion of them. Do not worry about your daily class participation mark. If you do the readings with curiosity and interest, then you will find that you will have much to contribute. Your response papers will help you read with more focus and prepare you for class discussion.

Once throughout the term, each student will start off a discussion on one of the assigned readings in either EJ or BPF (not HC) for the day s/he is scheduled. The student will speak for 5-10 minutes (no more, no less) on the reading and provide the class with three discussion questions. This task will count toward class discussion for the day. It is acceptable to lead a discussion on the basis of a response paper if your scheduled date coincides with the day you submit one.

Late policy: Unless proper and authentic documentation is provided, anything handed in after the beginning of class is one day late and subject to a 1/3 letter grade reduction. Anything handed in the next day is two days late. Additional 1/3 reductions apply for each subsequent working day that the assignment is late. No assignment will be accepted electronically.

Email policy: Though I communicate via email, please note that I am not obligated to provide a prompt reply. If you need one, then it is advised to contact the main office.

Academic Integrity:
All students are expected to read and understand the university’s policies with regard to academic dishonesty (T10.02 and T10.03). These policies are available through the following url: http://www.sfu.ca/policies/gazette/teaching.html

Forms of academic dishonesty include but are not limited to the following:
- Submitting all or a portion of the same work for credit in more than one course.
- Representing another person’s work as your own for course assignments.
- Failure to acknowledge sources of facts, information, analyses, interpretations, and arguments that you incorporate in your work, whether from a source that is written, spoken
communication, or the internet and whether it is published and unpublished. Appropriate documentation of your sources is necessary when you quote, paraphrase or incorporate information and ideas generated by others.

All students in SIS classes are expected to read the SFU Library lesson on “What is Plagiarism?” and take the interactive tutorial, “Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism”

Understanding and Avoiding Plagiarism: [http://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/tutorials/plagiarism-tutorial](http://www.lib.sfu.ca/help/tutorials/plagiarism-tutorial)

Schedule:

Sept 8th, week 1: Course introduction

Sept 15th, week 2: Who was Hannah Arendt?

BPF: Preface and “Tradition and the Modern Age” pp. 3-41.

Sept 22nd, week 3: Private versus public

HC: pp. 28-58.

Sept 29th, week 4: The rise of the social

BPF: “What is Authority?” pp. 91-141.
HC: pp. 58-93.

Oct 6th, week 5: Labor and biological life

EJ: Chapters I-III, pp. 3-55.
HC: 93-118.

Oct 13th: week 6: Labor, work, and the world we inhabit

EJ: Chapters IV-V, pp. 56-82.
HC: pp. 118-144.
Guest lecture: Professor John Harriss on Karl Polanyi
Oct 20th, week 7: Instrumentalism and the absence of politics

HC: 144-167.

Oct 27th, week 8: Politics, appearance, and storytelling

EJ: Chapters VII-VIII, pp. 112-150.
HC: pp.167-192

Nov 3rd, week 9: Politics, being (human), and the space of appearance

HC: pp. 192-220.
Film: “Vita Activa: The Spirit of Hannah Arendt” (Ada Ushpiz, director)

Nov 10th, week 10: Action and historical contingency in human affairs

Film: “Vita Activa: The Spirit of Hannah Arendt” (Ada Ushpiz, director)

Nov 17th, week 11: Arendt and the Frankfurt School

Guest lecture: Prof. Samir Gandesha, Director, SFU Institute for the Humanities

Nov 24th, week 12: Objectivity, thoughtlessness, and the eclipse of politics

HC: pp. 280-304.

Dec 1st, week 13: (Begin take home final, no class meeting)

HC: pp. 305-325.