HANNAH ARENDT’S THE HUMAN CONDITION

Political Science 24500 / 34500 / Fundamentals 22212
Winter Quarter 2009
Wednesdays, 9:30 am–12:20 pm, Pick 506

This seminar will be devoted to a reading of Hannah Arendt’s The Human Condition (1958), one of the most influential works of political theory written in the twentieth century. Through careful study of the meaning and function of Arendt’s often-puzzling distinctions among “public,” “private” and “social” and among “labor,” “work,” and “action,” we’ll try to understand her account of the significance and prospects of human activity, including especially political activity, in modernity. Along the way we’ll encounter such themes as: the relation between philosophy and politics in and beyond Athens; the significance of the scientific revolution for modernity; the possibilities and problems of consumer culture; the meanings of work and leisure in the twentieth century; the nature and basis of political power and freedom; the relations between art and politics; and many others. In addition to The Human Condition, we’ll read a small number of essays on related subjects by Arendt; excerpts from some of the other thinkers with whom Arendt was more or less explicitly in conversation; and a handful of selections from later historians, scientists, theorists, and critics which will help us to situate Arendt in the larger contexts of twentieth-century intellectual life, and which will also give us different angles on some of the key issues in Arendt’s book. This is a limited-enrollment, by-consent seminar, open to advanced undergraduates and to graduate students; in the event of a scarcity of places, priority may be given to undergraduates.

TEXTS: Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago, 1958, 2nd ed. 1998), and Bertolt Brecht, Life of Galileo, trans. John Willett (Penguin, 2008) will be available for purchase at the Seminary Co-op. You may use any University of Chicago Press edition of HC. Willett’s translation of Brecht has also been published by Methuen and Arcade; you need not purchase this edition if you have access to one of the others, though it’s inexpensive and has some useful introductory material. All other readings will be on e-reserve through the course’s Chalk site.

WRITING ASSIGNMENT: A seminar paper of 15–20 pages, due on Monday, March 16, 2009, on a topic of your choice, approved in advance by me (by Friday, February 20).

GRADES: Your grade for the seminar paper will determine your grade for the course. However, any student who is absent for three or more sessions of the seminar (except in cases of medical or other documentable emergency) will only be graded on a pass-fail basis.

LATE PAPERS AND INCOMPLETENESS: Unless you have arranged prior to the due date to take an incomplete, late papers (except in cases of medical or other documentable emergency) will be penalized 2/3 of a letter grade per day, e.g. an A paper 2 days late becomes a B-minus.

PLAGIARISM is grounds for failing the course.
WEEKLY MEETINGS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS:

Jan. 7. Introduction


1. Arendt, HC, 1–21.


1. Arendt, HC, 22–78.

Jan. 28. “Labor”


Feb. 4. “Work,” I

1. Arendt, HC, 137–66.

Feb. 11. “Work,” II


Feb. 18. “Action,” I

1. Arendt, HC, 175–207.
Feb. 25. “Action,” II


Mar. 3. “The Vita Activa and the Modern Age,” I


Mar. 10. “Vita Activa and the Modern Age,” II