



NEH Seminar
**"The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt: The Problem of Evil and the Origins of
Totalitarianism"**

Director: Kathleen B. Jones, Ph.D.
June 28 - August 6, 2009
San Diego State University
San Diego, CA

Dear Colleague:

Have you got a passion for thinking? Then I hope you'll apply to the NEH Summer Seminar on **"The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt: The Problem of Evil and the Origins of Totalitarianism,"** which I will be directing at San Diego State University in 2009. I have marvelous memories from the seminars I directed on eighteenth and nineteenth century political theory in earlier years of my academic career. They were among the most rewarding professional experiences of my life.

In 2006 and, again, in 2008, I was lucky to have fifteen colleagues from around the country join me in San Diego to study key works of Hannah Arendt, a provocative thinker. I'm eager to welcome participants to San Diego again from a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, politics, social science, history, and literature. We'll share six weeks of stimulating dialogue about some of the most thought-provoking, challenging and controversial texts in contemporary political thought. It's important that you have an interest in history and politics. But even if these fields aren't your teaching subjects, as long as you bring patience, respect for serious inquiry and diverse opinions, a willingness to tolerate ambiguity, a passion for thinking...and a sense of humor to these summer weeks, I guarantee lively discussions as we mine these extraordinary works by one of the twentieth century's most influential writers.

Seminar Topic

My goal is to explore with you three key works by the political theorist, Hannah Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *The Human Condition*. These works shed light on the problem of evil and the use of terror in the contemporary age, and provide a philosophical perspective on current debates about the use of violence to settle political conflicts, about the conditions of democracy, and about the scope and importance of human rights.

October 2006 marked the centennial of Hannah Arendt's birth in Hannover, Germany. Around the world, conferences were held to celebrate the life and work of this brilliant political philosopher, who refused to call herself a philosopher, this woman who never considered her sex an obstacle in her life, a Jew who was called anti-Semitic for her controversial portrait of Adolf Eichmann as a "thoughtless," "terrifyingly normal" person, and who was a rigorous thinker who wrote passionately about hatred and love. Hannah Arendt tackled some of the thorniest moral and political questions of modern times. Her controversial positions on violence, politics, moral judgment and the role of forgiveness and love in human affairs made her as well known in literary and political circles for her brave, powerful prose, as she was among academicians for her philosophical arguments.

Seminar Format

Participants will be welcomed with an informal dinner at my home on Sunday, June 28. Regular seminar meetings will take place in a seminar room on campus four times per week, Monday through Thursday, from 1:00-4:00 PM, beginning June 29. For each meeting we will discuss specific selections from the readings relevant to the topics assigned. I expect you to keep journals of your responses to and queries about the readings, and to use these in our meetings to generate discussions. After the first week, I will schedule one participant to use her/his entries as the basis for leading discussion and dialogue on the day's topics. I would like you to prepare a list of questions, with references to specific pages in the text, which prompted them, and distribute these to your colleagues on the day before you lead the discussion. I will schedule time to meet with each of you individually at the beginning of the seminar, and will be available to consult with you on topics of interest throughout the summer.

Because the seminar covers topics in the political theory, as well as political and social history, I have invited two colleagues of mine to share their expertise with us. [Danielle Celermajer](#) will join us from the Department of Sociology of the University of Sydney, Australia, where she directs an innovative master's degree program in human rights. Author of *The Sins of the Nation and the Rituals of Apology*. Cambridge University Press (New York and Cambridge, forthcoming) and co-editor of *Hannah Arendt and the Dilemmas of Humanism*, Cambridge Scholars Press (forthcoming) she will present a lecture on Arendt's conception of the right to have rights. Later in the summer, [Sandra Luft](#), author of *Vico's Uncanny Humanism: Reading the New Science Between Modern and Postmodern*, (Cornell University Press, 2002), will present her work on Arendt's theory of action and its resonance with Vico's philosophy.

In addition to participating in the close reading of and discussions about the primary texts, each participant will be expected to write a short critical, but creative essay/presentation on a theme related to the main topics raised by our common texts. We'll let Arendt be a model for us. She was a public intellectual who believed in the importance fostering critical thinking about public life. Her essays appeared in the leading intellectual journals of her time. So, be imaginative in creating the form as well as the content of your "essay." By all means, make this an opportunity to experiment and be creative!

For instance, you might decide to explore topics covered in the seminar through debates, dramatic presentations, different genres of literary writing or film. Or perhaps you'll create a multi-

disciplinary presentation on connections between Arendt's work and contemporary politics. I encourage group projects. Former participants have designed art works, written curriculum and lesson plans, personal essays, and poetry, using Arendt as inspiration. This shouldn't be a chore, but an opportunity to share your creative responses to the reading with your colleagues.

Director's Background and Interests

My own varied responses to reading Hannah Arendt during the thirty years of my teaching career confirm for me how important a figure she has been, both as an historical person and a theorist, in my own intellectual development. When I was a graduate student at the City University of New York in the early 1970s, she was still teaching at the New School and it is my great regret never to have taken advantage of the opportunity to study with her, as some of my peers did. Four years ago, while researching in the Library of Congress for my new book, I came across a letter from Arendt to one of my closest friends. Classic Arendt: she had invited him to her Riverside Drive apartment to discuss with her in person the ideas he had raised in his letter to her!

Reading Arendt's correspondence with many of the major thinkers and poets of her time, as well as with her friends, lovers, enemies, and students, adds depth to the portrait of a woman one can only catch a glimpse of through her writing. A few years ago, the playwright Kate Fodor made Arendt the central character in her play, *Hannah and Martin*, which tracks the controversial relationship between Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. I was so excited about how the play brought Arendt's ideas to life and stimulated lively post-play discussions that a colleague and I decided to produce the San Diego premier in June 2006. (During the seminar, we might read the play and see the video from the production.)

My scholarly research and publications on Arendt have an equally complicated trajectory. I wrote about fundamental political concepts such as authority, democracy and citizenship, using the "woman question" to focus my inquiry, in *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women*. In one chapter of that book I analyzed the contributions of Hannah Arendt to the study of authority and published a separate chapter on its themes, "What is Authority's Gender?" in *Revisioning the Political*, edited by Nancy Hirschmann and Christine DiStefano.

More recently, I have taken my writing in the direction of personal narrative. In *Living Between Danger and Love: The Limits of Choice*, a memoir I wrote about the impact of the murder of one of my students on my thinking, I used *Eichmann* to explore how questions of violence and evil came up in my own life. Since then, I have completed a new, yet to be published book, *The Road From Hell is Not Paved: A Thinking Journey*. Deliberately departing from Arendt's resistance to introspective, autobiographical writing, this book charts a course through an ordinary woman's struggle with tensions between what Arendt called the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. Working Arendt's ideas into this personal narrative helps me bring philosophy "down to earth." I plan to share parts of this work-in-progress with participants during our seminar.

Why study Hannah Arendt? Why now?

Called the "most original and profound... political theoretician of our times" for her work on totalitarianism, perhaps more than any other modern thinker, Hannah Arendt helps us understand

the politics of terror and confront the awful reality that not only “monsters” but also ordinary people commit atrocities against one another. In the post-9/11 world, Arendt’s wisdom seems more germane than ever.

Reading Arendt now against the backdrop of the trial of Saddam Hussein, the war in Iraq, and processes of globalization means confronting profound political and moral issues that emerge in classroom discussions in history, social studies, and literature. Is sovereignty the highest good of the state? Do nations have obligations to one another? Are there universal human rights? Are they enforceable? Is evil a problem of human nature or culture? What explains the rise of totalitarian power and the use of terror and fear as instruments of politics? As the language of good and evil circulates in politics and the media, filters into all our classrooms and affects the social dynamics of “insider/outsider” operating informally on many school campuses today, Arendt invites us to think. Think about the roots of “the problem of evil,” think about the meaning of human plurality and diversity, and think about the use of terror and violence by both state and non-state actors to resolve conflict or redress grievances. What is the human condition? My hope is that studying Arendt together with a diverse group of colleagues will encourage us to encourage our students and peers to think before we act.

Each of the three central texts chosen for this seminar represent distinct, yet interwoven, aspects of Arendt’s reflections on what she called the “human condition of plurality.” Each explores the philosophical implications of different crises generated by social conflict in the twentieth century. Together they continue to have remarkable cogency and relevance and repay the patient reader of these difficult works with the rewards of being challenged to reconsider the complex historical roots of totalitarianism and the persistence of tensions between freedom and equality even in democratic societies.

Perhaps the most disconcerting of the three Arendt texts we will examine is *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. *Eichmann* is a haunting book. Originally commissioned as a series of articles written for *The New Yorker*, it became a meditation on morality. Arendt wrote it while she reflected on attending the Israeli trial of Nazi deportation coordinator Adolf Eichmann. In it she reached disturbing conclusions about who bore responsibility for the Final Solution.

Sitting in that courtroom in Jerusalem, Arendt said, she was struck by an odd and disturbing thought--that the evil reflected in Eichmann’s crimes, the atrocities against humanity he committed, was the product neither of a madman nor a wicked man nor a monster, but an ordinary, normal human who had acted *without thought*. To Arendt, Eichmann was terrifying because he was “thoughtless.” The real trouble, she said, was so many were like him, normal people who did awful things, making evil banal.

The controversy surrounding the publication of *Eichmann* raged for many years and the wisdom of Arendt’s tone and conclusions continue to be debated. Yet, the importance of what she wrote about the problem of evil warrants consideration, especially in light of the ease with which different groups target others for vilification today.

Published more than fifty years ago, *The Origins of Totalitarianism (OT)* is a dense and difficult

book in which Arendt sought to “discover the hidden mechanics by which all the traditional elements of our political and spiritual world [had been] dissolved.” In a lecture she gave after the book’s appearance she explained that she had not intended to provide an elaboration of historical causes but rather to identify the peculiar “fixed and definite forms” into which various elements of western political theories and practices had crystallized in the “event” of totalitarianism.

Totalitarianism represented what she called the “crystallization” of elements of racism and conquest, which were present in European thought as early as the eighteenth century, but were exacerbated by the disintegration of the nation-state system following World War I. In *OT*, Arendt painted an enormous canvas of the political and social history of modern Europe in broad, bold strokes to bring into relief patterns of interaction among those elements. What is especially instructive for the contemporary reader of *OT* is the fact that Arendt located the origins of terror and ideology within Western, democratic societies. She urged reading the record of what she then called the “truly radical nature of Evil” in totalitarianism as a cautionary tale about the “subterranean stream of *Western* history” (emphasis added). Arendt’s story of the hidden underbelly of western history provides a controversial counterpoint for the seminar to engage in critical thinking about the apparently prevalent contemporary identification of terrorism with non-western societies.

Arendt identified the fact of our birth as the source of our freedom and was unique among modern philosophers for contending that “natality,” not mortality, was the origin of politics. Every birth signaled the chance that something new had come into being, and offered all of us already here the opportunity to live with the new and the strange. She called this opportunity the human condition of “plurality”—the fact that every human born is equally human, but in a unique way. In *The Human Condition (HC)* she explored these human conditions of “natality” and “plurality.” Both *OT* and *HC* can provide the basis for stimulating discussion about, for example, how to imagine political solutions to the problem of displaced peoples and the intertwined problems of racial and gender inequalities.

HC is also the text in which Arendt attempted a philosophy of “the political” and distinguished the activities of politics (action), from the activities of both labor (survival, the work of *animal laborans*) and work (fabrication, the activity of *homo faber*). *HC* is a commentary on the human condition “from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.” Arendt reflected on the consequences of asserting life itself “as the ultimate point of reference in the modern age” and issued a warning: “It is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.”

Seminar Location, Housing and Academic Resources

San Diego is a wonderful place to spend a summer. For recreation, the University affords a variety of sports activities, and boasts a state-of-the-art gym, complete with climbing wall! There are, of course, the world famous San Diego Beaches and the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park. Gourmets will be pleased with our numerous and varied restaurants. Theatre-goers can take part in an extensive summer schedule, including Shakespeare and contemporary drama at many venues, while sports enthusiasts can enjoy our new downtown stadium, reachable by public transport from

the University campus. Humphreys-by-the-Bay hosts the best contemporary music talent in an outdoor facility. Surrounding the county are many hiking and biking trails and we will have at least one meeting at the Mission Gorge Trails Park, followed by lunch and a hardy hike in its fields and rolling hills.

Beyond the immediate San Diego area, of course, lies the larger Southern California region, with all the excitement and stimulation this part of California has to offer--shopping, theatre, museums, Hollywood, cultural diversity. We are 15 miles from the Mexico border. The renowned Getty Museum is near enough to visit for those who want to enjoy its delights.

The seminar will be restricted to fifteen participants, each of whom will receive a stipend of \$4400. The first half will be available upon arrival, less housing deposit, and the second check at the beginning of the fourth week.

As “visiting scholars” all participants will have faculty access to and borrowing privileges for the collections of SDSU's outstanding Love Library. (I have alerted one of the librarians to our need for a group-use room for part of the time we are together so I can guide you through the use of the Library of Congress's online Arendt archives.) Visiting Scholar status also will permit participants to take advantage of SDSU's recreational facilities at special rates and to use on-site computer facilities in the faculty room (MACs and PCs are available). Internet access will also be available in your residence.

Housing in San Diego is not easy to come by, but the Office of Housing and Residential Life has helped locate housing among the University's residences. We have found what I think is an excellent location. Adjacent to the campus, on Montezuma Road, is University Towers (UT), which is a suite-styled dormitory building. In this building, a ten-minute walk to our campus seminar meeting room, we have secured accommodations on the top floor, our own “mini-wing.” Participants in 2006 and 2008 were housed there and were generally satisfied with the facilities. Other groups also rent this space in the summer, so you need to be prepared to “share the common spaces” with non-seminar participants. Each mini-suite is fully furnished with two separate bedrooms separated by a shared bath. Ordinarily shared bedrooms, we have negotiated for each bedroom to be single-person occupancy. The rooms are internet-wired, telephone-equipped, and each has a mini-fridge and microwave. Linen changes are included (weekly) and there are on-site laundry facilities (minimal charge). Meals are available in the adjacent dining facilities for an additional fee. There is 24-hour security, 24-hour use of on-site computer room, a game room and TV room, and a swimming pool. Estimated cost is \$1960 for the entire stay, without meals. A small additional fee will give you access the excellent gym facilities nearby in the Aztec Recreation Center (ARC). I am pleased that this excellent rate will make your stay affordable, leaving funds for transportation, research and other expenses from your stipend.

I strongly urge all selected participants to choose this option because it enables all participants to be housed together, facilitating collegiality. I cannot stress too much how important living near one another is to the seminar's success. Late night conversations, informal meetings, shared meals—all these facilitate dialogue. My assistant, Simone Arias, and I can put those few who may prefer to seek private apartment or house rentals in touch with resources. But such housing will be **very**

costly in San Diego in the summer. You will be asked to indicate special needs or requests if and when you are selected.

Application Process

If you are interested in applying to this seminar, please check the eligibility criteria and note the application process. Perhaps the most important part of the application is the essay that must be submitted as part of the complete application. This essay should include any personal and academic information that is relevant; reasons for applying to the particular project; your interest, both intellectual and personal, in the topic; qualifications to do the work of the project and make a contribution to it; what you hope to accomplish by participation, including any individual research and writing projects; and the relation of the study to your teaching. When my selection committee and I evaluate applications to the seminar, we will be interested particularly in applicants' statements about why they applied for this particular seminar, and what they hope to achieve, professionally or personally, by participating in it.

You should also consider whom to invite to serve as references for your application and be sure to send them your completed essay well in advance of the deadline for their letters to reach me—within one week of the application deadline.

Please remember that applications must be postmarked by March 2, 2009 and addressed as follows:

Professor Kathleen B. Jones
NEH Seminar
c/o Simone Arias
P.O. Box 17308
San Diego, CA 92117

The application cover sheet must be filled out online at this address:

<http://www.neh.gov/online/education/participants/> Please fill it out online as directed by the prompts. When you are finished, be sure to click on the "submit" button. Print out the cover sheet and add it to your application package.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email my assistant, Simone Arias (sarias2@earthlink.net). We will do our best to provide the information you need.

I look forward to receiving many high quality applications and to working with an outstanding group of professionals who will learn a great deal from one another during our time together. Thank you for your interest.

Cordially,

Kathleen B. Jones, Ph.D.
Seminar Director