

**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: A Public Intellectual in the Public Square," which I will be directing at the University of California, Davis for four summer weeks in 2017. I have marvelous memories from each of the previous seminars I directed over the last two decades, which have been among the most rewarding learning experiences of my professional life.

For eight summers since 2006, I have been fortunate to have colleagues from around the country join me to study key works of Hannah Arendt. I'm eager to welcome summer scholars again this year from a variety of disciplines, including history, social studies, philosophy, literature and government. We'll share four 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, I guarantee lively discussions as we explore the extraordinary thinking of one of the twentieth century's most influential writers.

This year the NEH has allowed prospective participants to apply for up to two seminars, institutes or landmark sessions, but you can only attend one. As we make selections of summer scholars for this seminar, **my committee will be especially interested in whether your essays explain why you are interested in this particular seminar and how you would contribute to and benefit from it, both personally and professionally.** So if you decide to apply, please make sure your essay provides specific information about why you are drawn to dialogue with colleagues about the works of Hannah Arendt during four summer weeks.

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

<https://securegrants.neh.gov/education/participants/>

**SEMINAR TOPIC**

My goal in this seminar is to explore with you key works by the political theorist, Hannah Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and several of her essays.

As a public intellectual, Arendt brought humanities' perspectives to bear on central 20<sup>th</sup> century questions, issues remaining salient in the present. In writing that spanned nearly a dozen books and scores of essays, including those published in major literary journals of her time, but also in her voluminous correspondence, Arendt investigated the problem of evil and terror in the contemporary age, provided a philosophical perspective on violence in politics, explored how dramatic advances in science and technology changed relationships between humans and the natural world, controversially sought to defend a "realm of privacy" against over-intrusive technologies and social practices, and examined the conditions of democratic rule and the scope and significance of global human rights. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, her biographer, wrote in *Why Arendt Matters* (2006), today, Arendt's wisdom on these and other topics seems more germane now than ever.

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. Yet Hannah Arendt refused to call herself a philosopher. She was a complicated and controversial person: a 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 a rigorous thinker who wrote passionately about hatred and love. She tackled some of the thorniest moral and political questions of modern times. Her contentious 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. Margareth von Trotta's recent film, [Hannah Arendt: The Movie](#), has played around the world to critical acclaim, generating increased interest

in Arendt. More recently, the Israeli filmmaker, Ada Ushpiz, directed a documentary on Arendt: *Vita Activa: The Spirit of Hannah Arendt*. Ms. Ushpiz will join us for a screening of her film during the first week of the seminar.

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. As Hans-Ulrich Thamer, the curator of a new exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, “Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime,” noted, “As a person, Hitler was a very ordinary man. He was nothing without the people.” ([New York Times, October 16, 2010, p. 1](#))

In the post-9/11 world, Arendt’s wisdom seems more germane than ever. Reading Arendt now against the backdrop of the “war on terror” and in the context of what is called “globalization” means confronting profound political and moral issues that emerge in different ways in history, social studies, and literature classrooms. Is sovereignty the highest good of the state? Do nations have obligations to one another? Are there universal human rights? Are these rights 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 about the human condition? Her writing urges us to think about the roots of “the problem of evil,” about the meaning of human plurality and diversity, and about the use of terror and violence by both state and non-state actors to resolve conflict or redress grievances. 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 two central texts chosen for this seminar represents 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. They 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 Arendt’s writing 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 Arendt’s meditation on morality. Written as what she called a “report” on the Israeli trial of Nazi deportation coordinator Adolf Eichmann, Arendt reached disturbing conclusions in it about who bore responsibility for the Final Solution.

Sitting in that Jerusalem courtroom, Arendt said, she was struck by an odd and disturbing thought--that the evil reflected in Eichmann’s crimes, the atrocities against humanity he had committed, was the product neither of a madman nor a wicked man nor a monster, but rather of 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 to one another.

The controversy surrounding the publication of *Eichmann* raged for many years and the wisdom of Arendt’s tone and conclusions continue to be debated. The timely release of *Hannah Arendt: The Movie*, combined with the fiftieth anniversary in 2013 of the publication of *Eichmann* has stimulated interest in the book all over again. Most recently, Bettina Stangneth’s *Eichmann Before Jerusalem* countered Arendt’s portrait of Eichmann with extensive new scholarship on Eichmann’s career. 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.

In a dense book published more than fifty years ago, *The Origins of Totalitarianism (OT)*, Arendt sought to “discover the hidden mechanics by which all the traditional elements of our political and spiritual world

[had been] dissolved.” After the book’s publication she explained she hadn’t intended to provide a linear history but wanted to identify the peculiar “fixed and definite forms” into which various aspects of western political theories and practices had crystallized in the “event” of totalitarianism. To Arendt, totalitarianism represented the “crystallization” of elements of racism and conquest present in European thought as early as the eighteenth century, but which the disintegration of the nation-state system following the First World War had exacerbated.

To bring into relief patterns of interaction among those elements, Arendt painted an enormous canvas of the political and social history of modern Europe in broad, bold strokes. She argued that racism and imperialism combined to erode the principles of a common humanity through the creation of “laws of exception” or separate sets of rights for stateless peoples, codified in the post-WW I peace treaties known as the Minority Treaties. And she identified the emergence of mass movements as forms of “negative solidarity” developing out of what she termed the “breakdown of the class system,” highlighting how such movements rested on majority consensus.

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 today. At the same time, Arendt’s identification of the Holocaust as a unique and unprecedented event remains a particularly thorny dimension of her work.

To round out our consideration of Arendt as a “public intellectual in the public square,” we will also explore selected additional essays of hers, including “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” “The Crisis in Education,” “Reflections on Little Rock,” and some pieces she wrote in the 1940s before the state of Israel was created.

### **SEMINAR FORMAT**

Summer scholars will be welcomed with a dinner at my home in Fairfield, CA on Sunday, June 25. Regular seminar meetings will take place in a classroom on UC-Davis’s campus five times per week, Monday through Friday from 1:00-4:00 PM, beginning June 26. 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. Please prepare a list of questions, with references to specific pages in the text, which prompted them. We will use these questions and selections to generate discussions. I will schedule time to meet with each of you individually at the beginning of the seminar to discuss the research, curricular, or creative projects you will undertake during the summer, and will be available to consult with you on topics of interest throughout the summer.

I direct these seminars in a format similar to an advanced graduate seminar and invite your active participation. With limited exceptions, I do not lecture. Instead, I encourage engagement in discussions with your colleagues. In other words, our meetings are intended to facilitate collegial dialogue and explore divergent interpretations of the assigned material in a relatively open-ended way. Together we dive deeply into the material we read in common, examining the varied, sometimes conflicting, ways to understand what Arendt was trying to say.

You should be prepared for an average reading amount of 70 pages per night. If you are selected for the seminar, I will discuss with you how to plan to complete some of the reading in advance.

I have invited several colleagues of mine to share their expertise with us. The Israeli filmmaker, Ada Ushpiz, who recently completed a documentary on Arendt, will present her film, *Vita Activa: The Spirit of Hannah Arendt*, and discuss its production. Dr. Ayten Gündoğdu, professor of political theory at Barnard College, will lecture based on her new book, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants*, (Oxford University Press, 2015).

In addition to participating in the close reading of and discussions about the primary texts, each summer scholar will be part of a small group and will launch the seminar's discussion on assigned topics during one randomly assigned day during the four weeks of our sessions. Finally, each summer scholar will be expected to develop a creative essay/presentation on a theme related to the main topics raised by our common readings and discussions. I invite you to be imaginative as you approach the form as well as the content of your "essay." We'll let Arendt be a model for us. She was a public intellectual who believed in the importance of fostering critical thinking about public life. Her essays appeared in the leading intellectual journals of her time. Her life and work have been the subject of plays and art exhibits as well as scholarly conferences. If you would like to develop curricular materials for use in your classrooms, I encourage you to do that. But, by all means, take this opportunity to experiment and be creative!

Former summer scholars have designed art works, written curriculum and lesson plans, personal essays, plays, and poetry, using Arendt as inspiration. You might decide to explore topics covered in the seminar through debates, dramatic presentations, genres of writing or even film. Or perhaps you'll create a multi-disciplinary presentation on connections between Arendt's work and contemporary politics. Don't treat this as a chore, but rather as an opportunity to share your creative responses to the reading with your colleagues. I encourage group projects.

To assist you in developing these projects and to explore further the application of seminar readings to your teaching and professional work, this year, I have organized an extra-seminar workshop for summer scholars. This will take place outside our regular seminar meetings on June 29th, and will be directed by the award-winning poet, [Celia Bland](#), of Bard College's Institute for Writing and Thinking, who has led similar workshops in previous years.

### **SEMINAR LOCATION, HOUSING AND ACADEMIC RESOURCES**

The location of the seminar will be on the campus of the [University of California, Davis](#). Situated in a tranquil area in the California agricultural region known as the [Sacramento Delta](#), and not far from the famous [wine-growing region of Napa Valley](#), UC-Davis is a world-class university with an excellent library and other facilities that provide a comfortable setting for the seminar. Ranked as one of the best towns to live in in the nation, Davis is also considered the most bike-friendly city in the nation. On Saturday mornings and Wednesday afternoons, year-round, Davis hosts a [farmer's market](#) as part of its commitment to sustainable living.

UC-Davis is located 15 miles west of the state's capital, Sacramento, and 72 miles east of San Francisco, making trips to these cities, and the Bay Area of California in general, an entirely possible and exciting weekend adventure.

Participants will be housed in the [University's suite-style residences](#). The cost for single-room occupancy for the four weeks is approximately \$2000, and includes basic linens and three meals a day in the University's award-winning dining facilities. (I have dined in the campus facilities and can attest to their excellence!) The dorm buildings have Internet capacity in common areas, a laundry, a small kitchen, and other amenities. There is also a group room available for informal gatherings.

I choose UC-Davis's housing option because it facilitates collegiality. Although the dorm rooms are quite modest (think back to your own college days!), they are adequate. I cannot stress too much how much living near one another adds to the seminar's success. As previous years' groups have discovered, late night conversations, informal meetings, shared meals—all these facilitate dialogue. You will be asked to indicate special needs or requests if and when you are selected.

One further note on the campus location: the campus is located in a semi-rural area. If you are driving, parking is available on campus for an additional charge. If you will not be bringing a car, the campus is walking/biking distance to the town of Davis, where you will find restaurants and other stores. But the campus itself is spread out over a large area. There are LOTS of [bikes and bike paths](#). Local bike rental is

also possible and will enable you to get around the campus and town more easily, even if you have a car, since parking in the town is often restricted.

If you are interested in applying to this seminar, please check the eligibility criteria via the web site 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 Arendt seminar; 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. **As mentioned above, 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.**

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me or my assistant, Marcie Rojas ([arendtneh@gmail.com](mailto:arendtneh@gmail.com)). 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