

Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt: Work and Politics

Deep Springs College
Spring Semester 2023

Dr. William Tilleczeck

This class brings together two contemporary philosophers and social critics, Simone Weil (1909-1943) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), both of whom abhorred the totalitarianisms of their time, reflected on the possibilities of a post-Marxist politics, and theorized the meaning of labour in human life. Weil, a French mystic, ascetic, activist, and philosopher, was deeply dedicated to understanding working-class life and violence in its many forms. Arendt, a German-born philosopher (or rather, as she herself preferred, *political theorist*), wrote much of her work in the United States during and after the Second World War and offered a wealth of theoretical tools to understand human labour and work as well as freedom and political action. Our goal will be a “lecture croisée” of these two *oeuvres* oriented around two major thematics: (1) Forms of human activity and their relation to political life; (2) Marxism and its major nodal points of revolution and freedom. Along the way we will also think about ancient Greece, the tradition of political thought, colonial violence, and our own neoliberal economic reality. Readings are a combination of major works from each author (*The Need for Roots* and *The Human Condition*), essays and occasional pieces (e.g. “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force” and “Revolution and Freedom”), as well as contextualizing readings from theorists who inspired or were inspired by Weil and Arendt (Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, Albert Camus, Danielle Allen).

Required Texts

- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2018).
- Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without a Banister* (New York: Schocken Books, 2018).
- Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Routledge Classics edition (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, Routledge Classics edition (New York: Routledge, 2002).
- Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, Routledge Classics edition (New York: Routledge, 2001).

(Strongly) Recommended Text

- Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978).

French/German Texts

For those who read German and/or French, the following are useful but entirely optional:

- Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 2002).
- Simone Weil, *Oeuvres* (France: Gallimard Quarto, 1999).

Course Assignments

Overview:

1. Written reading responses + attendance/participation: 50%
2. One seminar presentation: 25%
3. One final essay + Essay proposal: 25%

Detailed Description:

1. Written reading-responses: Before each class meeting, you will submit 250 words on any aspect of the assigned readings. Here students can try out interpretations of the readings, pose questions, or attempt to work out the meaning of particularly dense passages, for example. These short responses require no engagement with secondary literature: just a close reading of the assigned text. These will be graded on a pass/fail basis and counted as part of the students' participation grade. **Responses are due by 2pm the day before each class meeting.** I will use them to structure discussion.

2. Attendance and participation: Students are expected to come to class having done the reading and ready to ask questions, listen attentively to their peers, and contribute to the discussion. One unexcused absence is permitted. Please inform me in advance if you will need to miss a class for medical, religious, or other pressing reasons.

=50% of final grade (with weekly reading-responses).

3. One seminar presentation: Each student will provide one presentation as an introduction for a class session of their choice. The student will give a presentation of approximately 20 minutes in which they are expected to (a) Provide an overview of the assigned reading; (b) Discuss any relevant contextual or biographical details that might help the class to understand the reading; (c) Discuss either 2 recent journal articles or 1 recent book that shed(s) light on the readings and helps us to consider its importance for current debates. I will be happy to help students locate appropriate secondary sources for their presentation.

=25% of final grade.

4. One final essay: 1,900-2,500 words on any topic covered in the course. Students will suggest their own topic, and I will be available to discuss and help to develop these topics. All students *must submit a final paper proposal* at least ten days before the deadline. This proposal will consist of a working (hypo)thesis, some key passages to use, and a tentative outline of the essay. The final essay may, but need not, engage with secondary literature. Proposal Deadline: April 14 | Paper Deadline: April 24

=25% of final grade.

TERM 4 READING SCHEDULE AND SESSION PLAN

Part 1. Labour, Politics, and the Human Condition

Term 4 Week 1 (January 9th – 13th): Course Introduction | Industrial Labour

- Tuesday: Simone Weil, “Factory Work” (16 pages; *pdf provided by instructor*)
- Friday: Karl Marx, “Preface,” “Estranged Labour,” “Private Property and Communism,” and “The Meaning of Human Requirements,” from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (pp. 66-101 in Tucker; students are welcome to use any edition)

Week 2 (January 16th – 20th): Producing a World

- Tuesday: Karl Marx, “The German Ideology” (pp. 146-200 in Tucker; students are welcome to use any edition)
- Friday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Prologue and Part I (pp. 1-21)

Week 3 (January 23rd – 27th): The Public and the Private | Labour

- Tuesday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part II (pp. 22-78)
- Friday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part III (pp. 79-135)

Week 4 (January 30th – February 3rd): Work | Action

- Tuesday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part IV (pp. 136-174)
- Friday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part V (pp. 175-206)

Week 5 (February 6th – 10th): Action Continued | Politics and Modernity

- Tuesday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part V cont. (pp. 207-247)
- Friday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part VI (pp. 248-288)

Week 6 (February 13th – 17th): From City to Soul

- Tuesday: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Part VI cont. (pp. 289-326)
- Friday: Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Part I (pp. 1-40)

Week 7 (February 20th – 24th): Uprootedness in Town and Countryside

Tuesday: Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Part II (pp. 41-97)

Friday: [Shakespeare Week – No class]

[Break: February 25th – March 12th]

TERM 5 READING SCHEDULE AND SESSION PLAN

Week 1 (March 13th – 17th): Nationhood

Tuesday: Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Part II (pp. 98-140)

Friday: Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Part II cont. (pp. 140-182)

Week 2 (March 20th – 24th): Growing Roots

Tuesday: Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Part III (185-240)

Friday: Weil, *The Need for Roots*, Part III cont. (pp. 240-298)

Part 2. (Post)Marxism: Rethinking Revolutionary Thought

Week 3 (March 27th – 31st): Marxism and Its Critics I

Tuesday: Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (pp. 143-45 and 469-500 in Tucker; students are welcome to use any edition)

Friday: Arendt, “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” in *Thinking Without a Banister* (pp. 3-42)

Week 4 (April 3rd – 7th): Marxism and Its Critics II

Tuesday: Weil, “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression,” in *Oppression and Liberty* (pp. 36-78)

Friday: Weil, “Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression” (cont.) in *Oppression and Liberty* (pp. 79-117)

Week 5 (April 10th – 14th): Arendt on Freedom, Violence, and Racism

- Tuesday: Arendt, "Freedom and Politics, A Lecture"; "The Freedom to be Free: The Conditions and Meaning of Revolution"; and "Is America by Nature a Violent Society?" in *Thinking Without a Banister* (pp. 220-244; 368-386; 355-359)
- Friday: Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock" + Surrounding Debate in *Dissent* (21pp; *pdf provided by instructor*)
Danielle Allen, "Law's Necessary Forcefulness: Ralph Ellison vs. Hannah Arendt on the Battle of Little Rock" (40pp; *pdf provided by instructor*)

Week 6 (April 17th – 21st): Labour and Violence in the French Empire

- Tuesday: Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" (20pp, *pdf provided by instructor*)
Weil, "Blood is Flowing in Tunisia"; "New Facts about the Colonial Problem in the French Empire"; and "The Colonial Question and the Destiny of the French People" in *Simone Weil on Colonialism: an ethic of the other* (41-44; 65-71; 105-119, *pdf provided by instructor*)
- Friday: Fanon, "On Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (pp. 30-51, *pdf provided by instructor*)
Camus, "Wages"; "The Economic and Social Future"; and "The Nobel Prize Press Incident," in *Algerian Chronicles* (pp. 53-57; 73-80; 213-216, *pdf provided by instructor*)

Week 7 (April 24th – 28th): Review and Conclusion

- Tuesday: Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, selections (pp. 32-50; 85-86; 104-106; 116-127; 145-47; 155-58; 164-181)
Arendt, "Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt," in *Thinking Without a Bannister* (pp. 443-475)
- Recommended: Arendt, Interview with Günter Gaus: [German](#) | [English](#) (youtube)
- Friday: Review and General Discussion; no assigned readings.

NB: Reading response optional. Come to class prepared to discuss: (a) Lingering questions; (b) Some general thoughts on reading Weil and Arendt together; (c) Suggestions for future versions of the course.