Hannah Arendt: Worldliness, plurality, and education

Course content

Organiser: Institutt for pedagogikk

Lecturer:
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Time and place:
May 21 (9:15 – 16) Room
May 22 (9:15 – 16) Room

Learning outcome

Description: It is not without difficulties to bring Arendt to the educational discourse since she wrote little that formally addresses education (Mackler). However, encapsulated in Arendt’s notion of a world, in her terms of action, natality and plurality as well as in her understanding of thinking and judging we find thoughts that can have a place in education.

Is education a matter of preparing students for life? Or should education contribute to make us human and to enable us to share the world with others? In turning to Hannah Arendt we meet a political thinker whose approaches are helpful to think through educational tasks and challenges of our own time. Political life is about to “make it bearable for us to live together with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and make it possible for them to bear with us” (Hannah Arendt). According to Arendt, life and world are interrelated phenomena, therefore education is not only about “life” itself (how to make a living) but also about the “world” (our practices of world-building).

If we think of the educators’ responsibility to gradually introduce the child to the world, to foster an understanding of the world as it is, then Our children are the hope for the future, and Arendt turns our view towards the double task of the educator: to protect the child and to counter world-alienation; the teacher’s task, then, would be to gradually introduce the child to the world, then turning to Arendt is particularly relevant, because worldliness (“a mode of engagement”), natality (“the miracle of beginning”), and plurality (“the basic condition of both action and speech”) at the core of her thinking.

However, in times when tradition has lost authority, in Arendt’s view this loss means to educators that they are facing a particular challenge: they have to prepare children and young people, “newcomers” in an old world, a) to be able to live a human life in a common world (“togetherness-in-plurality”) and b) to foster an attitude of caring for the world – since the world, to maintain it, from time to time, has to be “set right”. To enable young people to take responsibility for the world they need to exercise their ability to think and to judge.

Arendt was convinced that when we judge we experience the world as common to all of us because the prerequisite of judging is imagination and imagination helps to develop representative thinking or, in Kant’s language, “erweiterte Denkungsart”. Story-telling nourishes our faculty of imagination; from Arendt we can pick up the “idea of visiting”, bridging time and space, thereby exercising our ability to
view from a position different from our own. Thus stories will not only extend our own view, they will also nourish our need of feeling at home in the world, thereby counteracting the threat of world-alienation.

Content of the course:

- The course is divided into 4 parts, each of them contains a) an introductory lecture, b) a following debate.
- It is organized thematically. The proposed themes are important in Arendt’s thinking, and will shed light on the interrelation between worldliness, plurality, and education. We will read Arendt’s essay “The Crisis in Education” (1958) in the context of The Human Condition (1958), and therefore start with some of the key terms she develops in The Human Condition.
- The course contains 4 main themes:

1. For Hannah Arendt the world comes first. What is the world? Why is it crucial for the understanding of politics to make the Arendtian distinction between private and public?
   In the center of our debate will be Arendt’s terms of *natality* (which she relates to the world) and *plurality* (which she understands as the *conditio per quam* for politics). In Arendt’s own words: “Politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships”. We will look closer into her distinction between labor, work, and action as well as her distinction between the private, social and public sphere.

2. Hannah Arendt: education and renewing our common world or: her claim that teachers should introduce young people to “the world” as it is
   In Arendt’s view education has to be separated from politics. She argues that teachers have to introduce the young people to the world as it is, and to avoid telling how the world should be. Education can’t foretell the future; instead it has to keep the future open so that the next generation can take action.
   However, how can teachers introduce to the world since the break of tradition has become a fact? To approach an answer to this question we will turn to the role of authority in education, and story-telling as a possible way of handling the challenge of a “fragmented past”.

3. Hannah Arendt: Thinking and Judging – our instruments of orientation in the world
   Crisis and judgment belong together. When we judge we experience the world we share as one we have in common. Arendt said: “Insofar as judgment allows us to live in and share a common world with others, opportunity to cultivate this faculty seems vital”. What is a judgment? And what has judging to do with the phenomenon of prejudices? Are judging and worldliness (shared reality) related? What happens when we don’t think? We will ask these questions because in a rapidly changing world education solely meant as imparting knowledge is not sufficient to prepare the young generation for a double task: to live a human life and to care for the world.

4. Hannah Arendt and Democracy
   In both Europe and other parts of the world, we are witnessing a political crisis, which makes it necessary to redefine the political. That’s why we make institutions or laws, to protect and to limit, to guarantee equal rights, to preserve a “stable existence and identity of human beings in human affairs” (Fred Dewey). However, it seems as if politics has become mere technical administration, and that citizens have turned into mere spectators. Faced with this situation of
crisis turning to Arendt allows becoming deeply aware of that institutions cannot protect what is at the core of politics: freedom. What matters, then, are relationships and our responses to the world.