

# MIDWEST FACULTY SEMINAR

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CENTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING  
5845 SOUTH ELLIS AVENUE • CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60637  
TELEPHONE: 773/834-4439 • FAX: 773/834-0493  
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## MFS TOPICS 2009-2010

### **The Human Condition**

Nov. 5-7, 2009

First published in 1958, Hannah Arendt's landmark 1958 text *The Human Condition* calls into question the practice of thinking of Man as an abstraction, and argued for the need to think of men in their plurality and multiplicity. Arendt begins with the simple proposal: to "think what we are doing" as a way to understand the reality of our social practices *as they are*, rather than as we want them to be. The phrase is carefully chosen, in that one of the work's primary concerns is to understand human societies in their plurality, to study men, rather than 'Man.' Arendt considers society in practical terms as a massive gathering of individuals, each of whom represents unpredictable possibilities. Her schema examines three varieties of these possibilities in what she calls the *vita activa*, - labor, work, and action – as well as their role within the political, social, public and private realms. Basing her analysis in both a historical account of Classical Greece and her acute insights into contemporary modernity, Arendt's diagnosis of "the state of human humanity" has become an essential text for a variety of disciplines: philosophy, political science, history and literature. This seminar will explore Arendt's contributions to 20<sup>th</sup> century thought through this controversial and, hugely influential philosophical text, as well the work's relevance to contemporary discussion.

### **The Science of Morality**

Jan. 14-16, 2010

What role is there for the empirical sciences in comprehending morality? In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, questions of morality and humanity's capacity for choice have largely been the province of psychologists and philosophers, but recent work in the sciences has interjected new empirical possibilities into research and analysis. Efforts by behavioral psychologists and economists to understand the way the mind works through accounts of quantifiable behavior have found a privileged place in current popular thought about the nature of human choice and preference. Evolutionary biologists offer another approach that places human morality in a much larger context. Neuroscientists and biochemists offer still other species of insight, as well as new sources of experimental data. How have they affected psychological understandings of morality? What place has science had in philosophical accounts of the mind? What new questions and problems have been introduced because of these developments? What are the limits of such scientific account of morality? This seminar will explore the various attempts in the physical sciences to understand morality, and the implications these attempts have on questions that have been central to philosophical inquiry since the Classical era.

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## **Capitalisms**

February 25-27, 2010

The challenge of the recent economic downturn has given us a new motive for considering capitalism's various possible trajectories. How has globalization altered the character of late capitalism? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can "capitalism" still be understood as a singular economic system, or has its global reach produced a multiplicity of capitalist forms? In what way do previous historical events such as the Great Depression offer useful comparisons for the current cultural and economic moment? How do artistic forms like film and music reflect the state of capitalism? This seminar invites perspectives from business, economics, history, the social sciences and the humanities to place modern capitalism in its historical context and to speculate about its future.

## **Who Owns Culture?**

April 15-17, 2010

Changing social and technological practices have forced a reevaluation of ownership, fair use and appropriation of artistic and cultural endeavors. How do such questions impact notions of authorship, affect journalistic or academic practice, or change the administration of cultural archives? Which intellectual appropriations should be morally, legally or commercially permitted? Historically, minority groups have been sensitive about the appropriation and commercial exploitation of their cultures, yet cultural products lack protection under current intellectual property law. Is this an injustice, a regulatory oversight, or the lifeblood of a globalized culture? What are the possibilities and pitfalls of extending the logic of ownership to the art, music, rituals, stories, folklore or traditional knowledge of any cultural tradition? The debate extends to such topical questions as restitution, decolonization, and the repatriation of works to their culture of origin and challenges thinkers across the disciplines.