



A Year Of Challenges: Approaching the Corona Pandemic

Instructor Details

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office hours by appointment

Course Description

We are currently in the midst of a world-wide crisis that we are not yet able to comprehend. This difference between what we are currently experiencing and what we are currently able to comprehend confronts us—as social scientists, philosophers, global thinkers—with an entire host of questions: how can we approach a crisis that is still unfolding? Which interpretive paths can we choose that, though still tentative, do reveal something about the new world we live in? And what are the appropriate forms of reflection for this *year of challenges*? These are the questions at the heart of this course, which aims at reflecting on the Corona pandemic from four perspectives, with the aim of allowing us, together, to begin to make sense of the world during and after the pandemic. The four perspectives we will elaborate are: **the Pandemic and Questions of Method and Reflection; the Pandemic and the Public Sphere; the Pandemic and the Possibility of Empathy and Solidarity; and, the Pandemic and Identity**. There will be both theoretical parts to the course, in which we discuss the possibility of a “theory of challenges”, and more practical parts, for which we gather accounts from the pandemic, and in which students will be encouraged to reflect upon their own experiences and their significance: the way in which classes were moved online, dorms were closed, and university life as we know it was altered in profound and lasting ways.

GRADING

Two reflection papers (700 words each, due in Sessions 9 and 21)	40 %
Final Presentation (in Working Groups)	20 %
1 in-class presentation (10 minutes, including handout):	20 %
Participation/Engagement:	20 %

TERMS

Presence

Students are requested to attend to classes in order to get graded. **More than 2 absences will automatically lower your final grade after your point total is calculated**, unless you can ***document*** that **all** the absences are related to an illness and/or official university event. For each additional absence your final grade will be lowered by 1/3 (a B becomes a B-, etc.).

SCHEDULE

Day	Topic	Recommended Literature
Session 1-4	<p data-bbox="331 568 683 602"><i>Sign-Up for Working Groups</i></p> <p data-bbox="331 633 485 667"><i>Introduction</i></p> <p data-bbox="331 698 879 763">“The Pandemic and the Questions of Method and Reflection”</p> <p data-bbox="331 770 879 902"><i>What are the challenges of understanding the Corona pandemic? What are the appropriate method and form of reflection for tackling these kinds of challenges?</i></p> <p data-bbox="331 909 879 1301">The Corona pandemic constitutes what we could term a “challenge of perception”: the way in which we have previously perceived the world and our place in it has changed profoundly. We have had to change the ways in which we move through the world, the ways in which we relate to each other, the ways in which we communicate—our daily life has lost something of its “taken-for-grantedness”, as we will discuss with reference to Heidegger’s writings on “being-in-the-world.”</p> <p data-bbox="331 1308 879 1675">Closely tied to the ways in which our daily lives have changed, there is the question of what is the method/form of reflection that can help us make sense of our changed world. Here, we will turn as examples to the kinds of personal reflections, often in the form of blogs, that have mushroomed during the Corona pandemic. Is this “return” to the personal a merely ephemeral phenomenon, or does it constitute a qualitatively novel way of “pandemic reflection”?</p>	<p data-bbox="901 600 1390 665">Paula Coccozza, “Has A Year of Living with Covid-19 Rewired our Brains?”</p> <p data-bbox="901 698 1390 763">Martin Heidegger, <i>Being & Time</i> (selections on “being-in-the-world”)</p> <p data-bbox="901 770 1347 804">Fang Fang, <i>Wuhan Diary</i> (selections)</p>
Session 5-8	<p data-bbox="331 1711 831 1744">“The Pandemic and the Public Sphere”</p> <p data-bbox="331 1751 879 1944"><i>What is the significance of the different “lockdowns” and other restrictions that we have experienced during the pandemic? How do these lockdowns affect us, our being in the world, and our ability to make sense of the world and our place in it?</i></p> <p data-bbox="331 1951 879 2031">This block of sessions will be dedicated to the public sphere: to understanding its role in “normal” times and to focusing in on the</p>	<p data-bbox="901 1711 1390 1809">Hannah Arendt, <i>Human Condition</i> (selections on the distinction between private and public)</p> <p data-bbox="901 1843 1378 1942">Hale, T., Kira, B., Petherick, A., Phillips T., et al. “Variation in Government Responses to COVID19”</p> <p data-bbox="901 1975 1378 2040">Balmford, B., Annan, J.D., Hargreaves, J.C. et al. “Cross-Country Comparisons</p>

	<p>public sphere during and after the pandemic. To this end, first, we will turn to Hannah Arendt’s depiction of the public as the space that allows us to experience human plurality. For Arendt, the public sphere and the diversity of perspectives it allows for is a precondition for a “common world”: a world that we all share and that cannot be reduced to only one perspective. In the second half of these sessions, we will consider in some detail the “shutting down” of the public sphere—here, we will compare, for instance, different national approaches that aimed at reducing “public contact”. Did the pandemic “reduce us” to private beings? Did it permanently alter the ways our experience of the public, and will it be possible to “reconstruct” the public after these times of challenge?</p>	<p>of Covid-19: Policy, Politics and the Price of Life”</p>
<p>Session 9-12</p>	<p><i>Reflection Essay 1 Due</i></p> <p>Practical Session I: Reflecting on the Pandemic I</p> <p>After the two theoretical meetings, students will be asked to begin their own “fieldwork” and bring to this meeting two kinds of material: a focused reflection on their very own experiences during the pandemic, which should also include a methodical part (what is the most appropriate method for writing about my experiences during the pandemic?) <i>and</i> material on the way in which their place of living/studying/pandemic dwelling dealt with the pandemic in a very concrete way. In class, we will be able to compare students’ findings, and to measure them against the theoretical framework we have constructed so far.</p>	<p><i>Materials gathered by students</i></p>
<p>Session 13-16</p>	<p>“The Pandemic and the Possibility of Empathy and Solidarity”</p> <p>One set of “pandemic” measures included the “virtualization” of human encounters: much of what used to occur “in the real” world shifted to the virtual. Whereas we used to sit together in a classroom, we are now in a Zoom meeting, while also being at home (or from wherever we decide to zoom in). How</p>	<p>Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenology of Empathy” Judith Butler, <i>Precarious Life</i> (selections)</p>

	<p>does this “virtualization” of human encounters influence the way in which we comprehend one another? And, in particular, how does it influence our ability to empathize with the other, and to feel solidarity with her? Is there solidarity in a society at a distance?</p> <p>We will discuss these questions from two viewpoints: one, we will turn to “classical” theories of solidarity that emphasize the role of embodiment, that is, the importance that I can perceive the other bodily (and that is, in real life). We will enlarge these classical texts with a reflection on the <i>Black Lives Matter</i> movement and the universal solidarity the movement inspired, even in a time when face-to-face encounters have been increasingly difficult.</p>	
Session 17-20	<p>“The Pandemic and Identity”</p> <p>Drawing on the work of Heidegger and Butler whom we have started in the first two blocks, we turn to the question of identity as <i>always relational</i>, and to the question how this relational self undergoes changes during the pandemic. The pandemic, we could say, brings out certain parts of our identity, reminding us, for instance, that we are young/old and therefore do not/do belong to the category of those “at risk”.</p> <p>The pandemic thus seems to have led to the formation of new social groups and to a reinterpretation of previous social group memberships: the high-at-risk versus the low-at-risk; the old versus the young; the sick versus the healthy. At the same time, former group memberships have become exacerbated: note, for instance, the higher mortality rate amongst people of color. Or the observation that pandemic has severely impacted gender equality.</p> <p>How can we explain these phenomena, and how do they help us make sense of the pandemic world?</p>	<p>Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who needs identity?”</p> <p>Alexandra Topping, “Covid-19 crisis could set women back decades, experts fear”</p> <p>APM RESEARCH LAB STAFF, “The Color of Coronavirus: Covid-19 deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S.”</p>
Session 21-24	<i>Reflection Paper II Due</i>	<i>Materials gathered by students</i>

	<p>Practical Session: Reflecting on the Pandemic II</p> <p>Concluding the theoretical sections of the course, we will consider once again this year of challenges, and discuss whether we have made any headway in understanding it. In this second practical session, we will emphasize the themes of empathy and identity. Students will be required to write another reflection, this time focusing on one these themes. They will also be tasked with gathering relevant material related to the way in which empathy/identity has played out in their own place of living.</p> <p>Since this is the final block of sessions, we will then move on to a wrap-up discussion. Is there still a large gap between our experiences and our ability to know, or even comprehend? And if so, what does this mean for our lives—as students and scholars, as human beings?</p> <p>And, after our final discussion, there will be a <i>Presentation of Results from Working-Groups</i></p>	
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COURSE READINGS

Please note that due to the changing nature of our subject matter, some of the articles listed below will be replaced by more recent ones.

All texts will be made available on Moodle.

Books

Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. New York: Verso.

Hall, S. (1996). “Introduction: Who Needs ,Identity’?”. In S. Hall and P. du Gay (eds.). *Question of Cultural Identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996, pp.1-17.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. Transl. J. Macquarie and E. Robinson. New York: HarperCollins.

Fang, F. (2020). *Wuhan Diary. Dispatches from a Quarantined City*. Transl. M. Berry. New York: HarperCollins.

Zahavi, D. (2014). “Phenomenology of Empathy“ in D. Zahavi, *Self and Other. Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp.112-152.

Articles:

APM RESEARCH LAB STAFF. (2020). “The Color of Coronavirus: Covid-19 deaths by race and ethnicity in the U.S.” Dec. 10, 2020. <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race> (accessed Dec. 16, 2020).

Balmford, B., Annan, J.D., Hargreaves, J.C. *et al.* “Cross-Country Comparisons of Covid-19: Policy, Politics and the Price of Life.” *Environ Resource Econ* **76**. Aug 4, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10640-020-00466-5> (accessed Dec 16, 2020).

Cocozza, P. (2020). “Has A Year of Living with Covid-19 Rewired our Brains?” *The Guardian*. Dec 13, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/13/covid-19-rewired-our-brains-pandemic-mental-health> (accessed Dec 16, 2020).

Hale, T., Kira, B., Petherick, A., Phillips T., et al. (2020) “Variation in Government Responses to COVID19”. BLAVATNIK SCHOOL WORKING PAPER. University of Oxford. Nov 24, 2020. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/variation-government-responses-covid-19> (accessed Dec 16, 2020).

Topping, A. (2020). “Covid-19 crisis could set women back decades, experts fear”. *The Guardian*. May 29, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/29/covid-19-crisis-could-set-women-back-decades-experts-fear> (accessed Dec 16, 2020).