

Politics, Society, and Culture Workshop: Dr. Anne Rethmann

October 7, 2025 @ 12:30 pm - 2:00 pm

Bio: Dr. Anne Rethmann is a postdoctoral fellow at the Martin Buber Society of Fellows in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. <https://buberfellows.huji.ac.il/people/anne-rethmann>

Title: Judging Antisemitism? Hannah Arendt and the Banality of Evil, Then and Now

Abstract:

Hannah Arendt's reports on the Eichmann trial and her reflections on the first Frankfurt Auschwitz trial remain central to ongoing debates. Misreadings of her concept of the "banality of evil"—often interpreted as a trivialization of antisemitism—show how contested her legacy continues to be, both in academic debate and in broader public discourse. At the same time, her famous notion has increasingly been appropriated in an overgeneralizing way, erasing precisely the specificity of National Socialism that Arendt insisted upon.

My aim is not simply to revisit these controversies but to trace how Arendt's notion of the banality of evil developed between Jerusalem and Frankfurt, and how it should be read not as a departure from her earlier concept of "radical evil" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* but as a shift toward questions of law, judgment, and individual responsibility. What follows is therefore a historical-philosophical reconstruction, attentive both to the trials as legal events and to Arendt's theoretical interventions, with implications extending beyond their immediate historical moment. I will unfold the argument in three steps: first, by addressing persistent misreadings of Eichmann in Jerusalem; second, by analyzing the legal-philosophical frameworks of judgment in Jerusalem and Frankfurt; and finally, by reconsidering the implications for questions of perpetrator responsibility.

At stake is a problem that remains pressing today: What—or whom—should and can be judged in a trial? And closely related: can antisemitism itself be judged in court?

PCS meets on Tuesdays at 12:30–2:00 PM in Room 8108, Sewell Social Sciences Building.

You can also join on Zoom:

<https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/96451420275?pwd=Z3cZDyWdxoEb2q7Ys3cbQlFAjnXjfs.1>

Meeting ID: 964 5142 0275

Passcode: 165604

Contact Chad Alan Goldberg (cagoldberg@wisc.edu) or Anna Milewski (aomilewski@wisc.edu) with questions.

Website: <https://www.ssc.wisc.edu/soc/pcs/>