

**Intensive Graduate Seminar**  
**Politics, Mysticism, Hope: Weil, Arendt, Benjamin, Agamben**

Politics, Mysticism, Hope: Weil, Arendt, Benjamin, Agamben  
Intensive graduate seminar co-sponsored  
by the Estonian Graduate School of Culture Studies and Arts (GSCSA)  
and Baltic Graduate School (BGS)  
November 12-13, 2010, Tallinn University, Estonia

This intensive seminar begins with the question of how mystical hopes have informed political theories in the 20th century, and how mystical (or more broadly religious) impulses in key thinkers have been read and interpreted with „blindness and insight.“ At stake in the seminar, both explicitly and implicitly, is how to theorize „hope.“ Four thinkers form the context of our inquiry: Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben. With different degrees of „mystical temper“ or deliberate commitment to the secular, the cultural-religious heritage of each of these thinkers shaped the fibre of their thought—as well as the form of its articulation, as in the use of aphoristic or fragmentary forms. At different junctures, provoked and challenged by the immediacy of the events of *grande histoire* in mid-century, these thinkers drew on (or staged refusals of) the intellectual resources of Marxism—and Catholic or Jewish mysticism. Did they „resort“ to religious ideas when political ideas „ran out“, or did they attempt a complex, polemicizing trajectory that „drew on“ religious ideas?

As can clearly be seen by the élan with which Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” is quoted, scholarly reception rarely copes adequately with such combination of politics and mysticism. Instead, polarizing accounts of „the life and the works“ are generated, usually with a differential and preferential emphasis. The squeamish misattribution of religious inclinations to personal spiritual quest thus may result in a misleading erasure in the texture of the political thought. Similarly, lack of sufficient knowledge about textual traditions (Jesuit or Jewish) may mislocate political ideas as religious ones. For example, French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943), has drawn scholarly attention from two starkly contrasting angles: those intrigued by her blend of political radicalism and personal asceticism, and those who seek to align this Jewish thinker with the Catholic mysticism evident in her later writings. Best known for her last book, a monograph on „rootedness“ (*L’enracinement*), Weil put her political ideas into radical practice, working in a factory, participating in the Spanish Civil War, and publishing pacifist newspaper articles. Reception horizons of „political Weil“ and „religious Weil“ rarely cross in fruitful ways, or at all.

The readings in this two-day seminar will be from the writings of Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, and Giorgio Agamben. In the company of four professors from Estonia and one invited speaker, students will engage in close reading and analysis based on a working paper they will submit one week before the seminar.

Instructors:

Invited Speaker: Dr. Alexander Astrov (Central European University, Budapest)

Prof. Tiina Kirss, course coordinator (Tallinn University/University of Tartu)  
Dr. Siobhan Kattago (Tallinn University)  
Dr. Daniele Monticelli (Tallinn University)  
Prof. Rein Raud (Tallinn University)

Day One:

Lecture: How Do We Inflect Hope in Political and Cultural Thought? (Dr. Alexander Astrov)  
Discussion: Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (Dr. Siobhan Kattago)  
Lecture: Spelling Marxism in the 20th Century: Simone Weil's reflections on *Oppression and Liberty* in context (Prof. Tiina Kirss)  
Discussion: Weil's *Oppression and Liberty* (Prof. Tiina Kirss)  
Lecture: Contours of Agamben's Thought (Dr. Daniele Monticelli)  
Discussion: Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (Dr. Daniele Monticelli)  
Colloquium: Marxism and mysticism: discordances and misreadings

Day Two:

Lecture: Thinking Further about Hope (Prof. Alexander Astrov)  
Discussion: Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (Prof. Tiina Kirss)  
Discussion: Weil's *Pensées*: "Gravity and Grace" (Prof. Rein Raud)  
Round Table: Mystical politics or political mysticism? (all discussion leaders and invited speakers)  
Discussion: Student position papers  
Colloquium: A Politics of Negative Capability?

The seminar invites Ph.D. and M.A. students in various fields of cultural research and philosophy to participate in an interdisciplinary study group of 20-30 students. Students are expected to do preparatory reading in order to participate in the discussions. Upon full participation in the study programme and completion of a 4000-word essay (deadline December 5, 2010) students will be awarded 2 ECTS points.

The language of the seminar is English.

Please send:

- a motivation letter explaining why you wish to participate in this seminar (200-300 words)
  - short CV (not needed for GSCSA students)
- by **August 31, 2010**, to **lauri.kitsnik@tlu.ee** You will be notified of the acceptance of your contribution by September 15, 2010.

A course fee is not required; the accommodation and travel costs of the students of GSCSA and GBS will be reimbursed. Accommodation will be arranged by the organizers, travel details will be provided for the participants.

Additional information: Lauri Kitsnik, **lauri.kitsnik@tlu.ee**