

Arendt and the political: From freedom to power

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Abstract

The concept of “the political” and its relation to “the social” and “the philosophical” are absolutely central to the oeuvre of Arendt’s political theory. Arendt’s elaboration of the dignity of the political in *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (1961) and *On Revolution* (1963) provides a landmark contribution unsurpassed by many contemporary political theories. This paper argues that the Arendtian theorisation of the concept of the political and (its relation to the social and philosophical) significantly reinvigorates contemporary discussions of the significance of political theory, emphasising the distinctiveness of political traditions as opposed to political history. It argues against Villa’s recent assertion that Arendt’s conceptual distinction between the political and social and public and private “was too rigid for her own good” (2000:19). Arendt outlines the ‘unconscious substitution of the social for the political’ in the modern age with a breath taking clarity that is as spectacularly original as it is (apparently) shocking. In Kristeva’s words, Arendt “envisages the very transfiguration of the political” (2000:9). Her more widely cited critics on this theme (Pitkin, 1981; Bernstein, 1986 and Villa, 1999, 2000) vary in their degree of response to her central conceptual positions. While engaging with Arendt’s important contributions on the relation of the political and the social, they tend to read exclusively from Arendt’s discussion of ‘The Social Question’ in *On Revolution* (focusing upon her reading of the political implications of the French and American Revolutions and controversial interpretation of Marx as anti-political). Their readings insufficiently engage with insights from *The Human Condition* (1958:22-78) and *Between Past and Future* (1961:106-120). Overall, this paper seeks to elaborate upon the distinctiveness of the political that emerges in the work of Arendt, as well as engaging in recent critiques of Arendt’s work. Arendt demonstrates the strengths of new political theorising, one that makes possible a reintegration of thinking and action for restoring the dignity of political theory into the new millennium.

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing the space for appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by “credibility gaps” and “invisible government”, by speech that does not disclose what it sweeps under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality

Men in Dark Times (1968, viii)

We are of the world and not merely in it

Life of the Mind, Vol 1, 1978, 22

Seen from the perspective of the world of appearances and the activities conditioned by it, the main characteristic of mental activities is their *invisibility*. Properly speaking, they never appear, though they manifest themselves to the thinking, willing, or judging ego, which is aware of being active, yet lacks the urge to appear as such

Life of the Mind, Vol 1, 1978, 71

Throughout her life Arendt (1906-1975) was adamant that she was a political theorist not a philosopher. In the introduction of *Life of the Mind* Arendt says that she has “neither claim or ambition to be a “philosopher” or numbered among what Kant, not without

irony, called professional thinkers" (1982, 3). In a 1964 interview quoted in Villa, Arendt refused the honorific title of philosopher. Her profession, if she had one at all, was political theory (1999, 3). Arendt's elaboration of the dignity of the political in *The Human Condition* (1958), *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1961) and *On Revolution* (1963) provides a landmark contribution unsurpassed in much contemporary political theory. This paper argues that the Arendtian theorisation of the concept of the political (and its relation to the philosophical and the social) significantly reinvigorates contemporary discussions of the significance of political theory (see Walsh, 2003). Arendt's political theory of human natality and plurality provides an evocative account of the political and the relationship between political theory, philosophy and social theory. I argue against Villa's recent assertion that at times Arendt's conceptual distinction between the political and social and public and private "was too rigid for her own good" (2000, 19). Arendt's insights into the political/social distinction are not recognised or well understood (as commentators generally focus upon the public/private distinction in her writings) making it difficult to appreciate the original and unique contribution.

The paper addresses the following key questions. What are the contemporary implications of Arendt being considered a philosopher rather than a political theorist? What is Arendt's understanding of the political and political theory? How does it differ from philosophy and social theory? Why is there a persistent denial of Arendt's insights into the rise of the social realm in the modern age? Overall, this paper seeks to elaborate upon the distinctiveness of the political that emerges in the work of Arendt, as well as engaging with particular commentary on Arendt's work. Arendt demonstrates the strengths of new political theorising, one that makes possible a reintegration of thinking and action for restoring the dignity of political theory into the new millennium.

Freedom, political theory and philosophy

In *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt identifies the political, the realm of freedom where decisions are made through words and persuasion rather than force and violence, as a sphere of equals "where to be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule or be ruled" (1958, 32). This conceptualisation sounds very strange to contemporary ears because in our own time it is taken for granted that the political realm is the realm of power where the one, the few or the many rule over others. However it provides a very important piece of the puzzle for reclaiming the dignity of the political realm (action) and

restoring its distinctiveness against philosophy, postmodern theory, social theory, sociology, economics, early and late critical theory and psychology, despite the current trend for interdisciplinary 'synthesis'.

Arendt provides a unique reading of one of the key aspects of the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, their understanding of the public/private distinction (household/polis) that was a fundamental distinction of political theory. They associated despotic rule with the rule of heads of households against other family members and slaves. "The pre-political force, however, with which the head of the household ruled over the family and its slaves and which was felt to be necessary because man is a 'social' before he is a 'political' animal, has nothing in common with the chaotic 'state of nature' from whose violence, according to seventeenth century political thought, men could escape only by establishing a government that, through a monopoly of power and of violence, would abolish the "war of all against all" by "keeping them all in awe" (1958, 32).

The household by definition was a realm of unfreedom, but more importantly, it was also characterised as a realm that was deprived. Deprived of what you may ask? From a contemporary perspective, the private realm is the very centre of freedom from the interference of government where freedom is understood as individuals doing whatever they please. In ancient political theory the household (private realm) was the realm where one was deprived (in the dark so to speak) of the light of the public realm. An act had no meaning in the private realm, "to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" (1958, 188). It was only when an act was being seen and heard by others in the public realm created by humans as a sphere of freedom that it became significant. The polis was distinguished from the household as the sphere of equals with the latter understood as the realm of rigid inequality.

In the western tradition of political theory Aristotle makes the distinction between the necessities of life and the good life. In *The Politics* he famously claimed that man is a political animal and distinguishes between "mere living and living well" (1912, 25). This distinction is misunderstood and blurred in contemporary usage by the question that Aristotle was supposed to ask, What is the good life? The merging of mere living with the good life has compounded misunderstanding and contributes to the disparaging way some contemporary political theorists and others understand the relevance of ancient political theory. Both Plato and Aristotle distinguished between the realms of the household (private) and the polis (public). The domestic economy was considered the sphere proper for families and finances and the polis was considered a sphere of freedom where men appeared to each other as citizens in their unique distinctiveness to debate and

persuade among themselves as free and equal beings. The polis was the man made world of the political realm, where the realm of appearance and human affairs comes into being when men come together in speech and action. The name of this space, the polis was not a physical location of the city-state but refers to speaking and acting beings organising and living together for that purpose. "This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them - like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world - do not live in it" (1958, 28).

Aristotle claimed that of all that was necessary and present in human communities only two were political - action (praxis) and speech (lexis) that he referred to as *bios politikos*. The belief that these two human capacities were of the highest significance and belonged together was already evident in pre-Socratic political theory. Thinking (thought) was secondary to speech and action that were considered coequal. This originally meant that most political action (as it remains outside the sphere of violence) is transacted in words "but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they convey, is action" (1958, 26). The realm of human affairs was a realm where anything that was merely necessary or useful was strictly excluded. Aristotle's political man *zoon politikon* casts man as a living being capable of speaking. The political (actualized in the polis) meant that words and persuasion characterised the political realm, a realm excluding force and violence. Violence and commanding (ruling over others) were characteristics of the private sphere of the household outside the polis where heads of household ruled with despotic powers. The political came into being in the public realm and was opposed to the association of the household. "Everybody outside the polis - slaves and barbarians - was *aneu logou*, deprived, of course, not of the faculty of speech, but a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk to each other" (1958, 27). Despotic/uncontested rule and the political realm were 'mutually exclusive' (1958, 28)

From the key writings of Plato and Aristotle a startling picture emerges. When one reads Plato's *The Republic*, and Aristotle's *The Politics* it is apparent that the proper terrain of political 'philosophy' is with questions of who should rule? What is justice? Romantic notions of a philosopher king and questions about the temporary equality between men and women of the guardian class in contemporary political philosophy direct attention away from the simple question of what is left of the political when Plato's ideal society is ruled by philosophers? Plato's philosophy (in the guise of reason as ruler) demonstrates a fundamental contempt by the philosopher against the polis as well as revealing how he understood the relationship between philosophy and politics. Arendt (1961) identifies in

Plato's philosophy a fundamental hostility to the polis toward philosophy culminating in the death of Socrates. With the death of Socrates, Plato had begun to doubt the capacity of persuasion. Politically, Plato's philosophy encapsulated the rebellion of philosophy (the realm of contemplation) against the polis (the realm of action) (see Arendt, 1982, 16-27). Plato's philosopher-king announces his claim to rule through reason over others. As soon as the question of rule over others emerges, as in the guise of rule through reason, the political is under threat (1961, 107). "They had discovered, in the activity of thought itself, a hidden human capacity for turning away from the whole realm of human affairs which should not be taken too seriously by men (Plato) as it was patently absurd to think that man is the highest being there is (Aristotle) (1961, 47).

Necessity, the political and the social

Arendt outlines the 'unconscious substitution of the social for the political' in the modern age with a breath taking clarity that is as spectacularly original as it is (apparently) shocking. She charts the rise of the social realm in the modern age, a realm that is *neither public or private* and identifies it with the realm of activities associated with necessity and housekeeping moving into the public realm (see 1958, 22-78 & 1963, 59-114). Arendt also addressed what she referred to as 'the social question' in terms of poverty (1963, 59-114). It is the social realm that is responsible for the blurring of distinctions between the traditional understandings of the private and political and changing the relationship and significance between the two terms 'beyond recognition' for individuals and citizens. The social realm is a modern phenomenon that coincided with the emergence of the modern age (seventeenth century - twentieth century) and its political form is the nation-state (1958, 28).

The development of the social realm has meant that the decisive division between the public/private distinction as polis/household and the common world/maintenance of life are blurred beyond recognition. "In our understanding, the dividing line is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping" (1958, 28). The corresponding "scientific" thought of this development was no longer political science but national or political economy. Equality in modern times came to be associated with justice (treating everyone the same) and moved further away from the realm of freedom as the sphere of equals. Equality was a basic characteristic of the political realm and the traditional meaning of equality meant dealing

only with ones equals. Clearly, modern notions of equality as justice are quite different from those from the traditions of political theory. Equality has different meanings depending upon whether it is a political concept (individuals are equally distinctive and capable of speech and action) or a social concept (everyone has the right to be treated equally, equality as sameness).

The separation of the political and social realm in the modern world is not very distinct and the two terms are often carelessly interplayed for the other with a pathetic disregard for the political and politics. Some modern conceptions of politics completely disregard the political realm altogether and focus instead on politics as a function of society. "That politics is nothing but a function of society, that action, speech and thought are primarily superstructures upon social interest, is not a discovery of Karl Marx but on the contrary is one of the axiomatic assumptions Marx accepted uncritically from the political economists of the modern age" (1958, 33). This functionalization makes it difficult to perceive the distinctiveness of the two realms and this is not a theoretical or ideological issue because the rise of the social realm (the realm of the household) and economics into the public realm meant that all the activities associated with housekeeping become a collective concern (1958, 33). This disposition of mind arises from their anxiety about mere living than about living well" (1912, 25). The implication is that it is no longer important if the nation consists of equals or non-equals because everyone is expected to act like they belong to the same family who have one opinion and one interest. Once again the distinction between life and the good life is crucial as the extension of the social realm signifies an extension of household like rule with members of the community behaving (as distinct from acting).

The rise of the realm of society in the modern age produces the rule of nobody as distinct from the political realm and forms of rule - the one, the few and the many *but not the all* (1970, 38). One man monarchical rule that was a feature of the household in ancient Greek political theory has been transformed into society as it is today and the peak of the social order is not royal household or absolute ruler but no-man rule. The rule of no-body which is the assumed one interest of society and economics "does not cease to rule for having lost its personality" (1958, 40). The rule of nobody is not the same as no rule and could be a version that turns out to be the worst and cruelest. A crucial feature of the realm of the social is the exclusion of the possibilities for action, with members 'behaving' through normalising codes of conduct that exclude spontaneous action and/or outstanding achievement. The contemporary manifestation of mass society demonstrates the way the social realm has developed to the point where it includes and controls all its members equally. Society equalizes its members under all circumstances and the triumph of equality (justice where everybody gets treated the same) in the modern social realm is

political and legal recognition that the social realm has overshadowed the public realm. Moreover, the fundamental distinction and difference have become private matters for the individual.

The public realm and the presence of others

The public realm is the realm of appearances, the realm of the common world where we find the presence of others who see and hear what we see and hear. The term 'public' has two interrelated meanings. The first meaning of the public realm means that what is seen and heard in public is seen and heard by everybody with a wide publicity. The realm of appearance is where things are seen and heard by others and ourselves to construct our reality. "Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life - the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delight of the senses - lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance" (1958, 50).

The other interrelated meaning of the public realm refers to the world itself as what is common to all of us (rather than the one, few or many) and this is different from our private place in it. The term world does not mean earth or nature as it is a specifically human creation referring to what is fabricated by human hands as well as the affairs of the man made world together. "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it: the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" (1958, 52). The public realm (the common world) both gathers together, relates and separates. For Arendt, this is what has made mass society so difficult to bear, not the sheer numbers involved in 'mass' society but the fact that the world around them has lost the capacities of the common world and people are unrelated to each other by anything tangible. This public space is not constructed by one generation or planned for the living only as it transcends the lifespan of mortal men. It is what we have in common with those who live with us, before us and after us (1958, 52-58). "Without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible" (1958, 55).

The common world gains permanence through the publicity of the public realm. It is this very publicity of the public realm that 'shines through time', giving mortal men some kind

of permanence that they created themselves against the ravages of time. These men wanted to create something that outlasted their own existence. In this context, the problem with slavery was not just that it implied a lack of freedom and invisibility but that there was a real fear of leaving no trace that one ever existed. Both the Greek *polis* and the Roman *res publica* wanted to provide a space against the fleetingness of human life that could be protected and reserved for a permanence for mortal men. With the rise of the social realm in the modern age public admiration was used and consumed and this reality did not depend on the presence of others, but on the urgency of needs. The futility of public admiration in this sense, is that money (which is one of the most futile things there is) becomes more real and objective than reality itself. This 'objectivity' is based on money as the common denominator for the fulfilment of needs. The reality of the public realm however depends upon the simultaneous presence of others whose various perspectives demonstrate that no common measurement really exists. The important insight Arendt discloses is that the common world is where everybody gathers yet each has different location within it. "Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position" (1958, 57).

The common world gains its significance from one object having a multitude of spectators and gains its reality and significance from the different perspectives of the same object rather than the common nature of all men. This is something different to the common world where singular experience is multiplied signifying the end of the common world or in periods of radical isolation where no one can agree (1958, 58). Both of these experiences in which men are entirely private deprive men both of seeing and hearing others and being seen and heard by them. "They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times" (1958, 58). A life that is entirely private is deprived (living in the shadows or the dark) in the sense that one is deprived of the things that constitute the human life. Deprived not just from being seen and heard by others but of the 'objective' relationship to them through being related and separated by the common world. What makes the private realm deprived (in the original sense of the term) is the absence of others and the fact that private men do not appear and so what they say and do is of little consequence or interest to others. In the modern age this experience underlies the phenomenon of the mass experience of loneliness as mass society destroys both the public realm and the private realm.

The social question

In *On Revolution* Arendt claims that the 'sciences' of psychology and sociology have "buried" the concept of freedom. She provides a rich discussion of the notion of historical necessity as a category of revolutionary thought in 'The Social Question' and traces the subsequent "condensation of happenings into concepts" (1963, 59). She identifies a reality behind the appearance of the events of the French Revolution as a biological rather than a historical necessity that "it appeared now perhaps for the first time in the full light of history" (1963, 59). Arendt gives a powerfully unique perspective on the French Revolution 1789, interpreting the American Revolution 1776 as a political revolution based upon common deliberation (1963, 213) and the French Revolution (that occurred some years later) as a social revolution without actually calling it this. "The inescapable fact was that liberation from tyranny spelled freedom only for the few and was hardly felt by the many who remained loaded down by their misery" (1963, 74).

The French Revolution is the setting for a clash between the necessity of historical processes versus the life processes, the necessity of bodily needs that the human life is subject to. This occurred when the poor driven by the pressing needs of their bodies arrived at the French revolution. The concern with the life processes that has pervaded social theories of history all "have in common that they see a multitude - the factual plurality of a nation, or a people or society - in the image of one supernatural body driven by one superhuman, irresistible 'general will'" (1963, 60). The social question corresponds to the existence of poverty as a dehumanizing force which is different from deprivation as it is a constant state of acute misery and need where men are subject to the dictates of their biological bodies. "When they appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them, and the result was that the power of the old regime became impotent and the new republic was stillborn; freedom had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself. Revolutionary government became hostage to the (biological) welfare of the people (1963, 60). Robespierre referred to it as 'missing the moment to found freedom' (Arendt, 1963, 60).

It wasn't a King or a tyrant but poverty and necessity that had distracted them into missing their 'historical moment' and the revolution changed direction from freedom to the happiness of the people. Freedom 'never was' but in its place stepped the curious figure of liberty dressed in necessity. This transformation was the turning point of the Revolution and all other revolutions to come. Arendt proceeds with a unique and controversial interpretation of Marx who she identifies 'as the greatest theorist the revolutions ever had' (1963, 61). She accuses him of being much more attentive to history

than politics, ignoring the original intentions of the men of the revolutions, the foundation of freedom, for a focus on the apparently objective forces of revolutionary events. Marx, she proclaims, is *the* theorist of necessity and therefore anti-political. Marx was convinced that the French Revolution had not founded freedom because it had not solved the social question concluding that freedom and poverty are incompatible. "His most explosive and indeed most original contribution to the cause of revolution was that he interpreted the compelling needs of mass poverty in political terms as an uprising, not for the sake of bread or wealth, but for the sake of freedom as well (1963, 62). He learned from the French Revolution that poverty had the potentiality to be a potent political force. Marx transformed the social question into a political force with his understanding of exploitation, the idea that poverty results from exploitation by a 'ruling class' who possess the means of violence.

Engaging with Arendtian political theory

In *The Human Condition* Arendt's central political concern could be summed up by "this disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is" (1958, 179). Arendt's widely cited commentators (Pitkin, 1981; Bernstein, 1986 and Villa, 1996, 1999, 2000) vary in their degree of response to her central positions although they all fail to recognise the striking originality of Arendt's political theory in the distinction between the political and social. While they do engage with Arendt's important contributions on the relation of the political and the social at a particular level, they tend to focus exclusively on what Arendt had to say about the social in 'The Social Question' in *On Revolution*. They tend to focus upon her reading of the political implications of the French and American Revolutions and controversial interpretation of Marx as anti-political (which they all have trouble dealing with for various reasons). Their readings insufficiently engage with insights from certain parts of *The Human Condition* (1958, 22-78 & 145-247) and *Between Past and Future* (1961, 106-120).

In the often cited 'Rethinking the Social and the Political', Bernstein claims Arendt's analysis of the concepts of "the social" and the "political" are "provocative and disturbing" as well as "systematically misleading". Moreover, her reading and interpretation of Marx is mistaken and a gross distortion" (1986, 247). His purpose is not to outline her key points but "rather to use her insights and blindneses to rethink what is at stake in this distinction" (1986, 238). In particular Arendt's categorical distinction of the social and the political was "untenable" (and should be rejected) and would "not stand up

to critical scrutiny” although “there is something extremely important about what she stresses” (1986, 246). He believes rethinking the social/political distinction has important theoretical and practical implications for confronting the contemporary social and political situation. To begin with, Bernstein immediately voices his distress of Arendt’s prominent discussion of the *vita activa* (labor, work and action) and her claim that the modern age has theoretically glorified labor transforming modern society into a laboring society. He acknowledges that Arendt associates labor with biological necessity and concludes that Arendt’s understanding of the modern age as “extraordinarily bleak” (1986, 243).

When it comes to his critique of Arendt’s political/social distinction Bernstein chooses not to engage with what Arendt had written about this preferring instead to engage with what he identified as her informal remarks about her work, as they were “among the most revealing” (1986, 248). The first occasion is from an interview where Arendt says that each person must be given the opportunity to participate in public affairs, conceding that some may not and that some would have to be satisfied with what the others decided.

Apparently, Bernstein takes this to mean that Arendt’s distinction between the social and the political “required a major rethinking” (1986, 249). He wants to establish that there is a more intimate link between the social and the political than Arendt suggests and argues that if every person is given the opportunity to participate in politics the social question is transformed. The former claim that the linkage between the social and the political are more complex and intimate than Arendt acknowledges sits oddly with her insightful analyses of the political realm and politics (1951, 1958, 1961, 1963). In fact, Arendt specifically traces the growth of the social realm in the modern age to an increasingly growing distinction between the social/private realms (1958, 68-73). Contemporary politics is devoid of the political (in her understanding) and specifically, with the advent of mass society, a public realm as the common world of appearances.

Bernstein selects two passages from a conference on “The Work of Hannah Arendt” attended by Arendt in Toronto 1979. The two interchanges with those sympathetic to Arendt (one with Mary McCarthy) centre on distinguishing the social and the political in the contemporary modern age. Apparently, the audience was unsatisfied with Arendt’s response (Bernstein was there) and what struck Bernstein was how “evasive and feeble” Arendt was (1986, 251). However, the selected passages illustrate the non-recognition of key aspects of Arendt’s political theory. Bernstein interprets the exchanges as challenging her. She cannot tell him and the others what the content of debatable political issues would be (missing her point about foundation, beginning and events as unexpected happenings) or name a contemporary social issue that is not also political (his focus is the housing problem). It is when Bernstein raises Arendt’s questioning of the credibility of the social sciences and policy sciences that we see the depth of his misreading of Arendt.

Apparently Arendt's distinction between the social and the political (which strictly speaking was always the other way around), endorses the politically volatile myth that there is a proper domain of the social, a sphere that is left to social experts that is excluded from the political. In fact, Arendt stresses that the social realm (a realm neither public or private) is always growing, already engulfing the public realm and on its way to engulfing the private realm in the modern age.

Villa is (1996, 1999, 2000) a key contemporary commentator of Arendt's writings (referring to her as an elusive figure). His own writings tends to focus on the relationship between the public realm and political action or political theory and philosophy (Villa, 1999). Villa does refer to Arendt as a political thinker claiming there has been a failure to recognise Arendt's uniqueness of the public realm going so far as to call her a 'champion of democracy' (the rule of the many) and anti-foundational politics. This seems to be a fundamental misreading to begin with as Arendt endorsed participation but it is not clear that she endorsed democracy - the rule of the many. It is important to remember in the tradition of political theory that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, whilst being cautious of the polis were quite adamant in their rejection of democracy as a bad form of rule (Aristotle referred to it as perverse!). Their solution was the rule of reason (the philosophic solution). Arendt's notion of human plurality does not 'rule', it persuades amongst equals who are free to engage with matters of common concern to all (not many). This political realm embraced freedom, uniqueness and individuality. Strictly speaking the social realm emerged in the modern age and is a realm that is neither public or private a point that Arendt made emphatically. It's relationship to the political, public and private realm is a key concern of Arendt's political theory.

In his book that compares Arendt's theory of political action with aspects of Heidegger's philosophy he claims that her "all important" distinction was the public and private (2000, xii). There is also no mention of the political/social distinction in his earlier *Politics, Philosophy and Terror* (1999). Villa claims that Arendt's thesis about the rise of the social realm in the modern age was "somewhat vague" (1999, 143) quoting the single source of Pitkin's *Attack of the Blob* as his supporting evidence. He apparently preferred Habermas' version of the transformation of the public sphere with its historical and sociological insights. He says that Arendt's "sociological deficit" was well known with single supporting evidence Cohen and Arato's (1997) Habermasian *Civil Society and Political Theory*. Villa continues to read her central focus as the political and public realm (Villa, 2000). His initial position was that Arendt's work had a vague notion of the social (1999) moving to a claim that the political/social distinction was too rigid in her work (2000). His own engagements with Arendt have only examined the public/private but not the political/social realm (it only gets mentioned). His overall aim was to broaden the scope

of understanding of her insights after *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and whilst he goes some way towards that goal, her crucial insights on the political/social distinction remain invisible, failing to appear as such.

Pitkin's (1981) 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public' published in *Political Theory* sets out to re-examine the public-private distinction in the Arendt's political theory. Pitkin identifies the public-private distinction as a powerful theme in her writings, although strictly speaking, this already precludes Arendt's distinctive understanding of the political realm that she opposes to the social realm that is neither public or private. Pitkin understands Arendt as suggesting that the political is not equated with the governmental and that the terms the public and political are nearly synonymous (1981, 328). The way that Pitkin frames her enquiry is very revealing. After asking what exactly Arendt is saying, that everything that is useful or merely necessary was to be excluded from political life, she interprets this as meaning "simply the exclusion of the exploited by their exploiters, who can afford not to discuss economics, and devote themselves to "higher thing", because they live off the work of others" (1981, 336). She identifies more than injustice here and asks two pointed questions of Arendt: What keeps the citizens together as a body? And what do they talk about in the agora? For Pitkin, Arendt's citizens are very similar to 'rational economic man'. There is also exasperation at the fact that Arendt cannot tell her what the content of political speech and action are and why it is hard to answer this question from her text.

Pitkin claims that Arendt's understanding of the public realm seemed like it was concerned only with publicity making her understanding of the public realm incomprehensible. Apparently a comparison of Arendt with Aristotle will help cast light upon what is wrong with Arendt because Aristotle does not mention the need for individuals to distinguish themselves in the public realm. However, in *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt clearly identifies two understandings of the public realm: as publicity (being seen and heard by others and being seen and heard by them) and the common world (understood as the world common to all and distinguished from our private place in it). Pitkin does not mention this second understanding. Unlike Arendt, the supreme political value for Aristotle is justice not freedom (Pitkin doesn't mention freedom). The concept of justice is "conspicuously absent" from the work of Arendt something that Pitkin has trouble coming to terms with. Pitkin suggests that Arendt's "banishing" of justice from her political theory "denied herself what might well be the most powerful weapon in her cause" (1981, 340). Arendt's main focus was freedom and she did explicitly acknowledge the importance of justice in political theory (1961, 15, 146).

Pitkin's misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Arendt is obvious as she interprets Arendt to be endorsing elitism. She says, "Political life is not some leisure-time sport for aristocrats, in which they may cultivate their honor and display their prowess. It is the activity through which relatively large and permanent groups of people determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together, and decide their future, to whatever extent that is within human power" (1981, 343). Arendt did not endorse the rule of the few (aristocracy/oligarchy) or Pitkin's rule of the many (democracy), but the rule of all in their human natality and plurality. This seems to be a fundamentally missed point and is responsible for some fairly bad pseudo-engagement with what Arendt is supposed to say. Even the exhortations about Arendt being a female are misplaced and actually endorse the worst stereotypes making visible the anxiety generated when women speak in the universal or human position. Pitkin's own alternative sketches out a position that begins from the claim that human beings are shaped by their societies as human beings are born less developed than any other animals. For Arendt, it was precisely speech and action that distinguished humans from animals. Pitkin's 'creatures of culture' conceptualise a public realm based on human need that recognises power, privilege and suffering. Pitkin wants to keep the primacy of justice in a vision that keeps the centrality of economic and social issues central to public life without reducing political freedom to competitive advantage or mere by-product. She says 'man makes himself' falling into the very abstraction she accuses Arendt of, as Arendt spoke of *living men*, not 'man' or 'mankind' which she considered abstractions.

Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob* (1998), focused solely on Arendt's conception of the social, begs the question of why a political science professor would go to so much trouble to defend the social (against someone whom she recognizes as arguably the most important political theorist of the twentieth century). Throughout the book there is almost no discussion of the political/social nexus and a sole focus on what Arendt meant by the social. Pitkin is aware that "focusing at such length on a single, isolated mistake by a great thinker, moreover might seem downright petty and mean-spirited" (1998, 2). Describing Arendt's conceptualisations of the social as "a mistake" sets the tone for Pitkin's discussion. Pitkin correctly reads Arendt to be arguing that the rise of the social realm in the modern age has meant the lost treasure remains lost. It annoys Pitkin that Arendt focuses on the social as a noun (contrasted to the adjective political) and upsets her even more that Arendt chose not to use the perfectly good word society that was available at the time (1998, 226). Pitkin introduces the Blob construct to capture what she understands Arendt's theorisation of the social to be from Arendt's metaphor's and word choice claiming that for a theorist whose main focus was human agency and freedom, her conceptualisation of the social as an all devouring Blob "is truly astonishing" (1998, 4).

The uniqueness of so much of what Arendt says about political theory, the public realm, politics, the private realm and the social really are difficult for many commentators to come to grips with and Pitkin is no exception. Pitkin takes Arendt's social to mean a collectivity of people who "conduct themselves in such a way that they cannot control or even intentionally influence the large scale consequences of their activities" (1998, 16). She criticises Arendt for having a conceptualisation of the social that is so different from anything that has gone before (in other words, for her originality!) outlining the two dominant readings by commentators of Arendt's social as economic and as normalising. She cites Margaret Canovan's *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (1974), who thought Arendt's concept of the social was 'internally incoherent' that never reached a satisfactory 'synthesis' (1998, 17). Pitkin cites Canovan with approval claiming she was surely right in her observations even though she notes Canovan didn't expand on what she meant. There is a Hegelian subtext to the critique that works as an authority that Arendt apparently didn't adhere to! It is well known that Arendt's main protagonist was Hegel and his dialectical thinking and yet Pitkin's book stresses dialectical thinking (1998, 246-250) and "dialectical balance" on the concept of the social (1998, 284).

What is amazing about the book, are the chapters devoted to Arendt's personal life in an effort to explain how her personal life has direct bearing on her thought. There is something strangely misplaced and inappropriate about this approach. Arendt's main focus was the political realm and she strove to distinguish it from history, philosophy, economics and social theory. Pitkin reads her central concern in *The Human Condition* (1958) as the conceptual triad of labor, work and action and public, private and social claiming Arendt's central nexus was politics and the social rather than the political and the social (adding the question seems trivial) (1998, 177). Pitkin's central question here is to ask How is behavior related to labor and work? (1998, 178). The very posing of this as the central question demonstrates the way Pitkin wants to engage with Arendt on a level that does not explicate any of Arendt's insights on freedom, the public realm and action. It is as though Pitkin cannot deal with what she describes as Arendt's 'hostile' reading of Marx and her critique of the social question in the French revolution. Pitkin's reading of the *Human Condition* focuses upon chapters three and four on labor and work, but does not seem to engage effectively with what Arendt said in the chapter on the public and private realms or chapter five on action.

Pitkin identifies Arendt's central focus as action, politics and freedom with Arendt's specific insights on the political not mentioned. In Pitkin's section "Political Theory and the paradox of Modernity" Arendt's central focus on the political is not mentioned at all (1998, 5-10). In another section titled 'A Political Alternative' there is no elaboration of the political at all (1998, 62-65) and the section specifically titled 'Political Theory' slips

straight into a discussion of politics (1998, 241-246). Although Pitkin's book is about the social, she does not mention or engage with the relationship between the political and the social at all undermining the strength of her overall position. Pitkin claims there are underlying issues about the power and powerlessness of human agency (its possibilities and limitations) invoking Hobbes, but it is arguable that Machiavelli and Hobbes instigate two quite different trajectories in modern political theory, even though many contemporary theorists read Machiavelli as a natural predecessor to Hobbes. Pitkin identifies Arendt's basic distinction in the *Human Condition* as between the social and free political action (1998, 11) claiming that the social is 'clearly the opposite' to politics. Pitkin's discussion of whether Arendt meant 'necessity' or 'necessary' is cause of some concern and illustrates the level of non-engagement or even recognition of what Arendt actually argues (1998, 190). She understands Arendt to be caught in the dual political theory conundrum of free will and micro-macro nexus (1998, 242-243). In fact, Arendt's understanding of freedom had nothing to do with the Christian notion of free will (it didn't even exist in Greek and Roman times) or the liberal notion of liberty that emerged in the seventeenth century.

The importance of Arendt's political theory for actualising the dignity of political theory into the new millennium is unsurpassed by any other political theorist. So much attention is directed to what she had to say about the social realm, that attention is distracted away from her really important insights on the political and the public realm that get left in the dark so to speak. Many of Arendt's key commentators from philosophers defending philosophy or political theorists defending the social have not recognized her unique theorisation of the political with inadequate renderings of her readings burying her unique understanding of the relationships between philosophy, social theory and political theory. The beginning of the paper listed four key questions that guided this elaboration of aspects of Arendt's position and some key engagements with her work. The implications of Arendt being considered as a philosopher rather than a political theorist mean that her distinction between thought and action is missed. Philosophy is a solitary activity conducted invisibly as a dialogue with oneself. Thinking and thought more generally did not 'appear' in the public realm, where in action there dwelt an unexpected happening that was not yet a concept or a spontaneous event. The political realm existed between living appearing beings that spoke and acted together in the freedom of the political realm of human affairs. Overall, Arendt's insights on political theory provide the most promising chance for restoring the dignity and relevance of political theory into the new millennium.

Notes

1. A fuller version of this paper was presented to the Political Theory Stream, British Political Studies Association, Annual Conference, 5-7 April 2002, 'Making Politics Count', Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

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