

# The Attack of the Blob:

## *Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*

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Hanna Fenichel Pitkin

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*reviewed by Brian Knutson*

In *The Attack of the Blob*, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, professor emerita of political science at the University of California, Berkeley presents us a reading of Hannah Arendt's concept of the social. Pitkin investigates and critiques the «social» as Arendt's «problematic concept», in a manner this reader finds most suited to our contemporary consumer society. The cliched, horror-fantasy quality of 1950s kitsch, science-fiction films somehow resonates with the consumptive appetites of our late, capitalist economy at the close of the 1990s. The emotional sentiment evoked with the word «social» seems strangely similar to that cliched, horror-fantasy quality. The infant appetites of 1950s mass society nurture the growth and evolution into the present. But what kind of society are we? What kind of social are we becoming? Pitkin chose the Paramount Pictures film, *The Blob* (1958) from which to take her title and her metaphoric inspiration, however she supplies an extensive listing of 1950s genre films (note 4, pg 285), to help illustrate the point. The film screen imagery of the monstrous blob that drips and coats, permeates and consumes the innocent victims and comes from outerspace, from some place «other», illustrates a most peculiar human quality, one that forms the root of the «problematic» topic at hand: the capacity to mystify the external objective world. An objective world which includes the social.

But why kitsch, sci-fi films? Well, Pitkin has it that «Arendt writes about the social as if (my emphasis) an evil monster from outerspace, entirely external to and separate from us, had fallen upon us intent on debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes». It is this sci-fi vision that Pitkin reads in Arendt and finds so surprising, «coming from a thinker whose main effort was to teach human agency and freedom as part of a realistic understanding». We are given a view of the implicit imagery that leads away from understanding and exposes us to the realm of practiced, intentional manipulation. We are left powerless in the face of such manipulation by our own fear and lack of understanding. Some cynical souls might call such manipulation politics! For others, perhaps it is just standard fare for «political» science fiction. Arendt, however, would have it the other way around, and call the social the culprit.

This readiness with which her argument can be used to denigrate the idea of the social might well explain some of the favor Hannah Arendt shares as an «American» theorist. Arendt's American experience came as a form of refuge from war ravaged Europe where as a Jew, she knew internment at the hands of French collaborationists.

Arendt is a mid-twentieth century theorist dealing in the terms of the major themes of her day and of her experience: Fascism, Nazism, Liberalism, Totalitarianism, Anti-semitism, many -isms, and Jewish assimilation. After the Allied victory, the 1950s and the dawn of the Cold War era saw «booming times» of a more productive sort. The rescue and repair of Europe had been undertaken; the Soviet totalitarian regime stood as the necessary dichotomy in a super power world; the American capitalist economy was well established in the «military-industrial-complex»; the automobile and the rise of the suburbs were insured; and the hysteria stirred by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin secured the distaste for things «social». For Arendt, it was the time of her Princeton lectures, of her writing apologies for America's «conformist witch-hunting», and of her theorizing the «political organization of mass society». Theorizing the social under such conditions as existed in 1950s America? Is it any wonder Arendt piled the negative connotations onto the concept? But to wonder holds the difference and the tellings in the tale. And while at the turn of the millennium our fears are more and more likely to be of «the attack of the dot coms», we remain hungry for entertainment! Or at least for some food for thought! Pitkin gives us some of both.

Pitkin gives us a careful, informative, and structured presentation in a thorough, detective, investigative style. The existentialist notions that flavor her work are laced through Pitkin's tale, highlighting the European tradition of «authenticity» that shaped Arendt's professional preparation. The person-ages encountered in reviewing Arendt's life's work and academic formation shine light upon her conceptualizations and make for an impressive reading list; to name just a few: Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, both of whom she studied under, and by extension Hegel, Husserl, Kant, Kierkegaard, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, and more.... More than a few of whom, indeed, she did not share full agreement. But they are useful in understanding her theoretical constructs. Her structured categorization schemes were attempts to inquire into the «actual culture and the conduct of human action and public organization». She believed human agency and human institutions to be humanly shaped and historically developed; hence the patterns by which we live are of our own doing, created by us, and sustained by us. Such understanding and insight are the foundation for authentic human existence.

As a political theorist, Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1974), concentrated on a constellation of three interrelated concepts: «freedom», «action», and «politics». They are the building blocks of her inquiry. They structure her investigation into collective human relations. She conceptualized «freedom» as our liberation and empowerment, the purpose and goal of human existence; «action» as that by which we «found, practice, and enact cultural arrangements»; and «politics» as the sphere of human affairs in which we found and sustain our shared world, always «limited by those things which men cannot change at will». She then proceeded to create an opposing triad of «negative and evil counterparts»: «necessity», «behavior», and «society». The dichotomies illustrate the tensions to be found omnipresent in such human relations. Corresponding in order: «necessity», the individual forfeiting of one's freedom in order to participate in and reap benefit from collective human relations; «behavior», which concerns

conformity to artificial norms and conventions, obedient and uncritical self-subjection to unquestioned rules; and «society», the vehicle of mass sentiments and mass desires, the realm of human choices and deeds beyond willful decisions and purposes, as if itself alive!

Pitkin's plot and story weave around these conceptual schemes developing the crisis Arendt envisioned modern man facing, the loss of our freedom. For her, «action», «politics», and «freedom» are words with which we are familiar enough, and yet we do not really understand them as concepts. They correspond to «modes of life and living» with which we have «lost meaning». Lost because we lack «the experiences from which they spring»; and because we lack «the activities in which they belong». Precisely because we lack these «most valuable experiences and activities», we do not really understand their relevance. Restoring access to the significance of these words requires looking at the human capacity for «initiative, spontaneity, and innovation». The human capacity to interrupt the causal chain of events and processes, to intervene in history, this is what Arendt calls the «capacity for action». Hear ...Arendt is talking real American. Echoing Tocqueville's praise of the American flare for the «art of association». Talking to the rough and rugged individual with the will to act, offering the prize of real freedom. The dream is attainable, if we act. It reads like real American mythology. We can almost hear the call shouting out of the pages... «Lights! Camera! Action»!!

But action is something at odds with the social. For Arendt, the social inhibits action. The social was something she could not bring herself to think of except in terms of totalitarian suppression and bureaucratic «otherness» in which no one rules, no one leads. «They» rule and the individual serves, and likes it, or else.... But this reeks of mystification and the objectification of other persons and group rule. Pitkin suggests this occurs due to an insidious imagery which overtakes the mind of the theorist despite explicit awareness of its threat. The difficulty arises from the nature of abstract thought or from the reflexivity of the particular problem of people collectively getting their own way. I would be more inclined to call it the result of building representations and conceptualizations of our human condition and then confusing the model for the real, or conforming the real to fit the model. This paradoxical notion lies hidden in the abstract mind field just waiting to be set off. This explains the shredded remains of paradigms that litter the philosophical landscape. Arendt's concept of the «social» requires careful consideration and as we proceed we must step lightly!

What then did Arendt intend with her conceptualization of «society»? What constitutes the social at the turn of the millennium? What definition can we begin to formulate? The question is the «problematic» topic which Pitkin works at exposing. The fear which comes to the fore is a «mistaken notion of human collectivity in which individuality disappears into a single monolithic mass of society». For the basis of this reading Pitkin points to the totalitarian experience Arendt had lived through in Europe; and her «art of hypostasization» in which the adjective «social» is made into a noun, though Arendt continues to use the noun «society. This allows her to evoke a sense of personification for this «social» entity, ascribing the results of human action to some abstract agency beyond human influence. Hence, the creation of a boogie man, the Blob.

Yet, we still are left to wonder, what is the social? Is it «high society»? The respectable, fashionable, good society of socialites attending social functions, debutantes, and coming-out parties? The world of

status, deference, snobbery, social climbing, and assimilation? The world of Cleveland Amory's «Four Hundred» of American high society in his book, *Who Killed Society?* (1960) where we hear the lament for the «Good Old Days of Society». When «there were private houses and private parties and private balls and private yachts and private railroad cars and private everything. Now everything is public- even one's private life». Don't we in America well-appreciate that fact, having suffered through the bizarre reality of manipulative attack politics of the 1990s. Where is the «self-control and manners» in that? Real high society there, but is it the social?

Or is the social to be found in the world of 18th and 19th century salon society? The world of «pariahs» and «parvenus»? These are terms Arendt applies in *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* (1974), to illustrate the effort to assimilate and win acceptance into the high society of gentile aristocracy, at the price of denying ones Jewishness. The «pariah» is an outcast; ascriptively defined as biologically inferior and excluded, despised, and rejected; those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Is society the pariahmaker? Is it the source of bureaucratized racism? The «parvenu» is one who tries to climb by fraud into society, rank, or class, not by birthright. It is a term used by aristocracy to designate those of the «nouveau riche» middle class seeking aristocratic status. The «only recently arrived» with crass, pushy manners and ostentatious display of wealth. The «parvenu» strives to get by as an exception, to penetrate society solely as an individual. It carries pejorative connotations. The parvenu must not merely separate himself from his pariah group but also join and support those who condemn it. The price of lying is the need to guard against any personal or spontaneous impulses, perceptions, judgments, or feelings. Every personal wish and reaction must be subordinated to the central goal of social acceptance. It is a process of becoming scoundrel, of losing oneself. Can this be what the «social» is?

What happens when capitalist economy becomes capitalist society? The process of commodification ... commodifying everything in order to structure analyses and gain manipulation in determining relations, value, and power. Out of the 19th century industrial growth came the political idea of imperialism and the rise of the realm of business speculation. Economics was introduced into politics by the bourgeoisie, a moneymaking society of competitors. Their faith in «endless growth» is not really a political idea, it cannot serve as one. It replaces the imposed domination and financial hostility towards the royal court with their own elite monopoly on power and privilege. The consumer is bound by adherence to their rules... the entire system of status hierarchy is simply transferred from old world nobility to the new world entrepreneurial class.

Is the social then «civil society», «Bourgeois society»? Is it the public organization of the life process itself, as Marx put forth? Arendt rejected this. Her hostility to Marx was based upon the excessive materialism, naturalism, and determinism she read in his work. A mis-reading by Pitkin's account. Arendt conveniently avoids the economic «fetishism of commodities» where social relation between people assumes the relation between things. Marx condemned «reification (verdinglichung) of social relations like the classical economists' «trinity formula» of capital, land, and labor. They represent activity in material conditions. Arendt choose to conceptualize the non-material world of culture, of institutions, norms, and practices. Economics is entirely «in the field of action». Yet she left the economic to private association, to private corporate governance. In commercial society, what social choice and rule exist when such concerns are allowed to appear as private problems?

If society is the actual culture and conduct of particular collectivities of people at particular historical times, it is humanly produced, it is humanly changeable. Historical differences matter and only form and content vary with time. Does the social process, like natural process, then defy human agency? If mass man, the Lumpenproletariat, grew out of 19th century class system, the 20th century has seen the breakdown into atomized «communal relationships». The Bourgeoisie's belief in the primacy of private interest has given reign to the economic. The hierarchical pyramid bureaucracy has secured itself under the guise of private governance. The fear of totalitarian government as protected in a series of concentric circles or spheres, like an onion, bring tears to the eye. The pyramid however, threatens to bury us!

What is needed to move beyond Arendt's limited conception? Pitkin suggests dialectical thinking as a way of living with ambiguity and inconsistency that permits intellectual comprehension and mastery without resolving the tensions, allowing competing ideas to be entertained simultaneously, to sustain tension between elements without resolution. The center of politics is man as an acting being. Despite her lifelong hostility to both Hegelian and Marxist theory, her dialectical consistency places her within their tradition. If at the close of the 20th century, we are in danger of permanently losing the human capacities for action and autonomous judgment, it appears to be at the hands of private governance rather than the whim of the public one.

As an attempt to address some sort of solution, Pitkin offers four «ways of analyzing» the topic of the social: the institutional path; the characterological approach; the ideational path; and the existentialist element that she calls «Just do it!» The institutional path looks at the structure of hierarchies, markets and bureaucracies. It looks at organizational structures of large-scale patterns of interpersonal relationships and conduct; the competitive acquisitiveness and the managerialism of markets; and the complex interconnection and regulation of the bureaucratic pyramid. The characterological approach addresses personal , conduct and individual psychology in an attempt to determine our suitability to action, particularly to joint action with others. The ideational path considers thought. The concepts, patterns, and frameworks of assumptions we carry to thinking about human affairs. And the last element she calls «Just do it». Greek gods, I thought, Nike, Dike, and Zeus! Or was it the memories of Nancy Reagan's advice on the war on drugs rushing through my mind? But this fourth and final path indeed explores the direction of agency by searching out social responsibility, initiative, and solidarity. It offers the existential impetus to bridge the conceptual gap between the spectator's outlook and that of the engaged citizen. It is offered as an essential supplement to all the other approaches. The realm of engagement remains the political arena even in a consumer oriented capitalist society. The attempts to imagine the withering away of the public interest to be supplanted by the reign of corporate private governance is as much a science fiction as anything. It illustrates the attempts at restoring «high society» to its spoils and privilege. Pitkin's message is most relevant for our times. Though there is no Blob, we are it! We are the problem and the solution.

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