
Arendt's Fear of the Social

Arendt'in Toplumsal Dair Endiřesi

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Abstract: In her book, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt explores the interconnected nature of the concepts of freedom, action, and the political. However, the theme of 'the social' remains one of the most perplexing aspects throughout the book. After presenting an exegesis of the second chapter of the book where Arendt discussed rise of the social predominantly, this article will try to evaluate different meanings of the social by incorporating eminent Arendt critics Hanna Fenichel Pitkin and Seyla Benhabib. The present article defends that Pitkin's idea that linked rise of the social to the denial of human agency and Benhabib's analysis of the social as sociability best expressed the meaning of the social in terms of showing both the destruction it caused and the possibility it held to construct an alternative public sphere and re-invent politics.

Keywords: Public realm, private realm, the rise of the social, human agency, sociability.



Introduction

Margaret Canovan in her *Introduction* to Arendt's *The Human Condition* says: "Hannah Arendt is preeminently the theorist of beginnings... Belonging to no genre, it (*The Human Condition*) has no successful imitators, and its style and manner remain highly idiosyncratic..." (1998: vii). Should I be asked to generalize this comment for a whole body of Arendt's works, I would say that Arendt's thinking neither belongs to genre of, what I might call, a 'post-nothing theory of something' (original but of little value), nor does it resemble a 'post-something theory of nothing' (futile revision of vulgarized originality).

Arendt's originality comes from the methodology she employed and the way she delivered her thoughts. Although one cannot find a systematic political philosophy in Arendt's works (Villa, 2007: 1), she successfully identified different layers of the past, e.g. in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and developed a unique narrative on how these layers crystallized into a peculiar form in the present (Benhabib, 1990: 172). Moreover, this unique way of storytelling, when associated with experienced phenomena in Arendt, challenged the conventional understanding of objectivity and impartiality as Disch (1993: 666). Last but not least, conceptual density (i.e. trialities such as labour/work/action or public/private/ social realms) in *The Human Condition* also provided an unorthodox approach in political theory. In short, Arendt's ingenuity or originality in thinking and writing requires the same level of ingenuity in reading her works.

The Human Condition appears very puzzling with regard to which concepts deserved more attention or held greater significance in Arendt's philosophy, whose main concern is to regain 'the political' its lost dignity and to protect what is 'authentically political'. Although Arendt's endeavour in *The Human Condition* revolves around concepts of freedom, action, and the political, theme of 'the social' remains one of the most perplexing aspects throughout the book. After presenting an exegesis of the second chapter of the book where Arendt discussed rise of the social predominantly, this study will try to evaluate different meanings of the social by incorporating eminent Arendt critics Hanna Fenichel Pitkin and Seyla Benhabib. The main argument here is that Pitkin's idea of the social that implies denial of human agency and Benhabib's analysis of the social as



sociability that holds the possibility to construct an alternative public sphere help us understand the complex phenomenon in Arendt in terms of the root of the problem and the hints about the solution.

Arendt on the Rise of the Social

Chapter Two of the book is where Arendt presents the distinction between the public and the private. Arendt elaborates on definitions of the public and the private through dichotomies. The distinction between the two basically coincides with the distinction between the political and the household in the ancient city state (Arendt, 1998: 28). Arendt maintains that the private is the sphere governed by necessity to fulfil biological needs, while the public is the sphere of freedom where 'who' is revealed through speech and action (Arendt, 1998: 73).

Arendt then draws attention to how the distinction between the two realms is blurred. When human activity in one space infringes the space of another and establishes its values upon that space, the activity also derives the space of its autonomy, transforming it into something different. This is exemplified by what the activity of labour has done to the public realm. For Arendt, the public has turned into the space of 'national housekeeping' due to the colonization by the private. Here all those that must be public have been turned into or passed to private realm while all those that must belong to private have been made public, which brings about the threat of extinction for both realms due to destruction of freedom and plurality (Arendt, 1998: 50-58; D'entreves, 1994: 46-47).

This is where Arendt problematizes rise of the social (i.e. how life itself becomes the central preoccupation of modern politics). For Arendt (1958: 28), the social is a modern phenomenon that represents a hybrid space. It, like a monster, emerges as an absorbing and transformative phenomenon that captures both realms. As a result, today, politics has become a task of social obligations linked to the management of necessity (Arendt, 1958: 33). In the modern society, a novel form of living together, best characterized by the mass society which is the highest level of world alienation, emerged in a way that individuals have been united only by their common biological needs and survival and not by a public world of action and speech.



This process which removed all distinctions of rank, status, or title and replaced them with mere function started with the absorption of the family and its economic activities by larger social groups which then expanded into social classes. However, it is with the emergence of mass society that these classes have themselves been absorbed by the society. That's why Arendt argues that with the emergence of mass society, the social sphere, following centuries-long development, has finally moved up into a state where it encircles and regulates all members of the society equally because we find no boundary between the public and the private, no distinction among individuals, which signifies a danger (Arendt, 1998: 41-46; D'entreves, 1994: 47-48).

Arendt's fear of the social is based on her idea that rise of the social has brought about the loss of freedom, which makes action impossible, which in turn destroys the political. This mode of society excludes the possibility of original and distinctive action. Individuals are expected to share the same private interests and behave in a predictable manner. She had earlier showed, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, how this form of society allows for forms of despotic rule (Arendt, 1973: 475). Here, what we know as state and government gives place to pure administration after victory of the society produces some sort of communistic fiction, whose political characteristic is that it is ruled by 'invisible hand' (1998: 44-45).

Reflections on the Rise of the Social

Arendt's defamatory narrating of rise of the social have drawn different reactions from her readers. In a simple sense, many critics have read Arendt's analysis as intrusion of what is essentially categorized as the private into the public sphere (Villa, 1996: 20, 24; McGowan, 1997: 263). Some others, in a phenomenologically narrow sense, have equated it with economics and considered it as expression of Arendt's reaction to communism, socialism and welfare state (Pitkin, 1998: 16).

However, this reading of the social might have been much more credible if it had adopted a broader picture of the term throughout the book. In addition to intrusion of economic activities and accompanying division of labour, the social in Arendt emerges as an administrative phenomenon in which life process of individuals is organized and regularized.



This society has reached the point at which it embraces and controls every member. It equalizes everyone as soon as it colonizes the public (Arendt, 1998: 40). Moreover, as conformism is basic feature of this society, behaviour replaces action and the society expects a certain set of totalizing behaviour from its members in order to survive (Arendt, 1998: 41-45). Therefore, the social in Arendtian analysis cannot be taken as one-dimensional, merely intrusion of economic activities into the public. Rather, it can be analysed as multi-dimensional phenomenon, referring also to rise of the mass society based on conformism as an administrative phenomenon, though Arendt's analysis lacks, to some extent, Foucauldian sense or notion of biopolitics.

Broader analyses of Arendt's understanding of the social have been offered by eminent Arendt critics, namely by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin and Seyla Benhabib, who contemplated on multi-faceted meanings of Arendt's social.

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin provided a broad analysis of the social in her *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Pitkin (1998: 3) drew attention to how Arendt uses an adjective as a noun and personifies and demonizes it. Arendt writes about the social as a living, autonomous agent that aims to dominate, absorb, and debilitate human beings, 'gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serves its purposes'. This depiction of the social is Arendt's way of talking about a collectivity of people who behave individually in ways that prevent them from performing coordinated action so that they cannot take charge of what they are doing (Pitkin, 1998: 196). This interpretation that includes a sense of denial of the human agency as a consequence of an illusion is a new reading of Arendt's idea of the social.

Pitkin reaches at this new understanding of the social by elaborating on different facets of the social. The first one refers to 'high society', also called as conformist or parvenu social. The respectable and fashionable socialites, the world of status, coming-out parties, 18th and 19th century *salon* society, the parvenu who tries to climb by fraud into society and ultimate goal of social acceptance may reflect some features of the high society. The second facet is economic/biological social that sees society as a bourgeois minded agent combined with the idea of inevitability in-



herited in nature. Capitalist economy turns into capitalist society when economics is introduced into politics by the bourgeois. Here, the social seems to have become the bourgeois society which makes the consumers bound by adherence to the rules of the bourgeois. This picture of the social implies that no political action is possible in both settings. In either case, the social refers to the other of the political, which means the denial of human agency. Denial of human agency, as the third facet of the social, presents the social as ‘the lack of politics where politics could and should be’ (Pitkin, 1998: 240), which implies self-imposed helplessness of human beings in front of humanly created conditions.

Pitkin’s analysis is an important contribution in terms of uncovering the close relationship between rise of the social and trilogy of freedom-action-political and exploring how this leads to denial of human agency. She talks about how we start to see the world around us, a creation of our own making, as inevitable. As Pitkin puts it firmly, this comes out as a result of the aggregation of bourgeois greed and surface conformity of the parvenu. It leads to an illusion of helplessness in identifying and coping with human problems in the modern society (Pitkin, 1998: 92-93, 192). Therefore, rise of the social does not only mean emergence of a new type of collectivity but also rise of a pop-up world of illusion.

Another insightful interpretation of the social has been provided by Seyla Benhabib, who presents it as amorphous, anonymous and uniformizing reality which corresponds to ‘glorified national housekeeping in economic and pecuniary matters’ (Benhabib, 1996: 22). She argues that Arendt’s social bears three different meanings.

With regard to the first meaning of the social, pointing to Arendt’s definition of society as ‘the form in which nothing but the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of like assumes public significance’ and only activities relating to mere survival are permitted to appear in the public (Arendt, 1998: 46), Benhabib (1996: 23-24) claims that emergence of such a market of economic exchange and commodification have been evaluated before Arendt by Hegel, Marx and Polanyi as marking an epochal turning point in human history. A serious weakness of Benhabib’s that interpretation, however, is the failure to acknowledge how Arendt relates this epochal turning point to her analysis of the decline of the public



sphere. This is very much connected to Arendt's claim that only the public sphere is where the freedom can be actualized and the political finds its true meaning, an argument we cannot find to such an extent in Arendt's predecessors.

Evaluating the second sense of the social that is about the mass society, Benhabib begins with Arendt's consideration on the contrast between 'behaviour' and 'action'. Behaviour is the ideal typical activity of individuals who are bearers of social roles as bureaucrats, businessmen, executive, and so on while action is individualizing behaviour that reveals the self rather than conceals it behind social mask. She then relates this contrast to Arendt's idea that society excludes possibility of creative and spontaneous action. Society expects certain type of behaviour from its members in the name of normalization, and homogenization (Arendt, 1998: 40). However, Benhabib does not expand on this evaluation since she thinks that there has been no analysis of mechanisms of social control and integration in Arendt (Benhabib, 1996: 25-26). Although Arendt's analysis lacks a comprehensive evaluation of mechanisms of social control, Benhabib seems to overlook the fact that Arendt shed light on how statistical meaningfulness of population has been used in terms of socially acceptable, asocial, or abnormal behaviours when she says that

It is obvious that every increase in population means an increased validity and a marked decrease of 'deviation'. Politically, this means that the larger the population in any given body politic, the more likely it will be the social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm (1998: 42-43).

This is where Arendt establishes a link between large numbers of people and their inclination towards despotism or majority rule. Moreover, it is this aspect of the mass society that we can reflect on the rise of the social as an administrative phenomenon. As for the third meaning of the social, Benhabib investigates the concept of 'sociability' as quality of civic-associational life. Commenting on Arendt's understanding of how society equalizes under all circumstances (Arendt, 1998: 41), Benhabib (1996: 27) asserts that it is not only about political and legal equality but also 'the equalization of tastes, behaviour, manners, and life-styles'. For Benhabib, the social does not mean the national housekeeping activities of the market economy nor does it mean a mass society of like-behaving



consumers. Rather, it means sociability consisting of ‘patterns of human interaction; modalities of taste in dress, eating, leisure, and lifestyles generally; differences in aesthetic, religious and civic manners and outlooks; patterns of socializing and forming marriages, friendships, commercial exchanges’ (Benhabib, 1996: 28). This realm of social as sociability differs from economics, politics and any administrative structure. It is more close to what Nobert Elias termed as ‘the civilizing process’.

Although Benhabib’s account fails to see the above-mentioned three meanings of the social as interconnected phenomena and evaluates them independently of each other, her emphasis on sociability is another significant contribution that shows other side of the coin in view of Pitkin’s analysis of the social as denial of human agency. Benhabib’s interpretation gives clues about the possibility of seeing the social as in-between space in which the political in Arendtian terms could be actualized. This means an affirmative and inclusive social in terms of recovery of the public space. Benhabib (1995: 17-18) asserts that new members of newly emerging society create bonds that culminate in the idea of friendship through conversation and communication, as exemplified in the 18th century German high society or *salon* that was ‘a curious space that is of the home yet public, that is dominated by women yet visited and frequented by men’. Spatial atmosphere of the *salon* offers the outsiders opportunity to express their distinctiveness (Benhabib, 1995: 17). In that sense, bond of friendship is not totally an apolitical or pre-political phenomenon in Arendt. Rather, it has the potential to create the political as long as the world is the object of the discourse.

Conclusion

This study tried to offer a reading of Arendt’s idea of the rise of the social through elaborations on the meaning of the social put forward by Hanna Pitkin and Seyla Benhabib. The first part introduced an outline of *Human Condition*’s chapter two where Arendt evaluated the rise of the social. It was stated here that Arendt’s fear of the social is based on her idea that the rise of the social has brought about the loss of freedom, which makes action impossible, which in turn destructs the political. The second part evaluated different meanings of the social as asserted by emi-



nent Arendt critics. The study defended that, among different meanings, Pitkin's idea that linked rise of the social to the denial of human agency and Benhabib's analysis of the social as sociability best expressed the meaning of the social in terms of showing both the destruction it caused and the possibility it held to construct an alternative public sphere and re-invent politics, or both the root of the problem and the hints about the solution.

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Özet: Hannah Arendt, *İnsanlık Durumu* adlı eserinde, özgürlük, aksiyon ve siyasal kavramlarının birbiriyle ilişkili doğasını tahlil eder. Ancak 'toplumsal' kavramı kitaptaki en karmaşık temalardan biri olarak belirir. Bu makalede, ilk olarak Arendt'in kitabında toplumsalın ortaya çıkışını anlattığı ikinci bölüm üzerinde durulduktan sonra, ünlü Arendt yorumcuları Hanna Fenichel Pitkin ve Seyla Benhabib'in Arendtçi 'toplumsal'a dair farklı yorumları değerlendirilecektir. Burada, Pitkin'in toplumsalın ortaya çıkışını insan iradesinin yadsınmasıyla irtibatlandırmasının ve Benhabib'in toplumsalı sosyallik olarak yorumlamasının, toplumsalın getirdiği yıkım ve alternatif bir kamusalık oluşturma/siyasalı yeniden keşfetme ihtimalini sunması bakımından toplumsalın en doğru yorumu olduğu savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kamusal alan, özel alan, toplumsalın ortaya çıkışı, insan iradesi, sosyallik.

