# The Social and its contemporary relevance

**Name: Menno de Groot**
**Student number: 1172174**
**Supervisor: Thomas Fossen**
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**Introduction**

Modernity has had a strange effect on our ability to act and change our surroundings. On the one hand, our understanding of how the world works and how it may change has never been greater, on the other our ability to change this same world that we helped create feels more and more beyond our control. The economic freedom that corresponds to the scientific progress and high degree of productive efficiency in modern times may seem to open the way to greater political freedom, yet the reality is that conformism and economic rather than civil, political or democratic logic dominate contemporary politics. Our ability to act as political animals is diminished by this conformity and subjected to economic, rather than political utility. Modernity, in short, has broadened our world immensely yet has made us ever more lost within it.

What can humans be expected to do in modern society and why may modern society cause such conformism? What are fundamental human activities and how do they relate to modern mass society and economy? Why may these activities be restraining rather than liberating? These are questions central to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, in this book she seeks to investigate 'What we are doing'. This should be understood as an articulation of the activities that are within range of every human being in modern times (Arendt 1958: 5). She argues that there are three fundamental, distinguishing human activities: Labour, Work and Action.

These three concepts relate to another important topic discussed by Arendt in *The Human condition* namely that of *The Social*. The Social is a kind of force within modern mass society which demands conformity of the individual, reducing our ability to act as distinct human beings. It demands that we pursue necessity, efficiency and the general good rather than using the public arena for our own thoughts, ideas and action. Societies and social relations (e.g. the household or the family) always demand conformism in one form or another; but the type that we deal with in modern mass society is different in that it's so encompassing. There is only conformity and no space for action. The Social normalizes people to the point that the public arena, which should be the place of individualism and where our uniqueness manifests itself, is reduced to one where people 'behave' in scientifically predictable ways (Arendt 1958: 38-50).

This concept of The Social seems, as most Arendt's work of great contemporary relevance. The issue with The Social is however that it is quite vague; Arendt discusses many aspects of The Social, but never gives a clear-cut definition. This is quite strange in the context of *The Human Condition* as the book seeks to provide clearly defined definitions of human activity 'from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears' (Arendt 1958: 5). If there is an element in modern society whose impact is as far reaching as The Social, it seems crucial to have it clearly defined in order to understand our modern condition.

This essay seeks to investigate this issue by answering the question: *What is Hannah Arendt's notion of 'The Social' and what is its contemporary relevance?* I will answer this question in three chapters. When referring to the Arendtian concept of The Social I will capitalize the term to distinguish it from the 'regular' use of the word social, as well as terms such as society. In answering this question, I will relate the issue of The Social to the modern human condition. I will attempt to show how and why The Social is something we should take very seriously in understanding contemporary human societies.

In the first chapter, I will discuss and analyse how Arendt describes The Social in *The Human Condition* and how it relates to labour, work and action and define these ideas concisely. I will also briefly discuss Arendt's ideas on freedom. Then I will go on to analyse the manner in which Arendt defines The Social and how it relates to the private and public spheres of life. Finally, this chapter will also discuss Arendt's *On Revolution*, in which The Social is dealt with in the context of revolutions.

In the second chapter, I will analyse other contemporary accounts of The Social most notably Hanna Pitkin's *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's concept of The Social*, which is the most extensive contemporary account of The Social.  I will also discuss other author's perspectives on this issue and argue why and how their interpretations of The Social may have shortcomings.

In the third chapter, I will argue for my own definition of The Social, which focusses on necessity and the way The Social may not just make the necessary public, but also the political necessary. In this manner, I seek to overcome the issues in other accounts provided in chapter two and refocus our attention. The Social, I will argue, may not be as complex as we may think; after all, Arendt would not write a book to clarify human activities, which would then involve mystifying them. I will then provide an example from contemporary politics in which my account of The Social manifests itself.

Finally, I will provide some concluding remarks and discuss the difficulties in addressing a concept such as The Social. Most notably, that the concept remains opaque and that it should, in the spirit of Arendt's writing always be subject to change and modern interpretation to suit the time it is used in. I will argue however, that obfuscating this issue is against what I feel is the spirit of Arendt's work; she sought to bring clarity and understanding in most of her work and it would be odd if she deliberately left things open.

**Chapter 1: The Social in *The Human Condition***

To understand the way in which Arendt talks about The Social we need to investigate how it relates to its surrounding concepts. If The Social as a concept is hard to grasp, it may be easier to understand within a web of related ideas presented in *The Human Condition*. In this chapter, I will analyse the concepts and argumentation that surround The Social. First, I will discuss the concepts of labour, work and action within *The Human Condition*, these themes are the bulk of the book, but for our purposes, a succinct analysis of what they mean will suffice.  Second, I will discuss Arendt's distinction between the private and public sphere, which are essential in forming the concept of The Social. Third, I will briefly discuss her conception of freedom. Fourth, I will analyse the introduction of the term, the way Arendt defines it and the implications it has for modern society. Finally, I will relate these conceptions to *On Revolution,* a work by Arendt that features The Social prominently.

**1.1 Labour, work and action**

The first question we may ask when we start defining labour, work and action is how they may be distinct at all. Especially for work and labour, since these two words are often used interchangeably. Arendt herself admits that very few people have bothered to properly differentiate between the two. But, she says 'against this scarcity of historical evidence, however, stands one very articulate and obstinate testimony, namely, the simple fact that every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for the same activity' (Arendt 1958: 80). Therefore, it seems reasonable to think, according to Arendt, that these two words may refer to different things (Arendt 1958: 79-93).

Labour then, must be distinguished from work and put into relation to other human activities. Arendt defines labour as 'the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body whose

spontaneous growth, metabolism and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labour' (Arendt 1958: 7). Labour refers to those activities, which are directed to matters necessity, self-preservation and related to the life process. Examples include the production of food, water and reproduction. The things labour creates are fleeting and cyclical in nature. As Arendt phrases it 'after a brief stay in the world, they return into the natural process which yielded them either through absorption into the life process of the human animal or through decay' (Arendt 1958: 96). Labour is never-ending and doesn't leave anything permanent behind; it is the necessary sustainment of life itself (Arendt 1958: 79-109).

Work is distinct from labour in that it provides a 'world of things' (Arendt 1958: 7), the activity of work leaves behind something durable, such as a tool or a house. The sum of the activities of work 'constitutes the human artifice' (Arendt 1958: 136).  Unlike labour, work has a clear beginning and end and isn't involved in an endless cycle of provision of necessities. Work also distinguishes from labour in that it involves an element of violence and interruption into nature. In labour, we may use nature to provide for our necessities but are still subject to the demands that nature puts on us. In work, however, we use nature in order to create something; we subject nature to ourselves rather than the other way around (Arendt 1958: 136-159).

Action finally, is the activity that 'corresponds to the human condition of plurality' (Arendt 1958: 7) it's both the condition without politics cannot exist and from which politics comes. It is those activities which cause us to be 'all the same, that is, human in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live' (Arendt 1958: 8).  In action, we appear to one another as distinct human beings to other and among other men. This disclosure is closely related to, but not limited to, speech and the way in which we express ourselves and it's the only human activity in which speech takes an important role. In action, we can show how we are unique and unpredictable; we can be political, express our ideas, thoughts and those things in ourselves that make us unique, in action, we reveal ourselves to others, we show who we are. In action, we are able to start something new from within ourselves, rather than outsides ourselves as is the case in labour and work (Arendt 1958: 7-8, 175-181).

Action is distinct from labour and work and very important in the sense that it's essential to being human. Arendt argues that we may live a life without labour, as we can force others to labour for us. We may also have a life without work, in that we can simply enjoy the world of things without adding a single thing to it (as many of us do). A life without action however 'is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men' (Arendt 1958: 176). Action is also the only human activity that occurs in a society of men, as it requires the presence of others. For example, political action, say in the form of expressing one's ideals, cannot exist without other people present, a society of men is the stage upon which we act. We need other men in this realm of action to create anything – laws and institutions cannot be made without other men, in contrast to work where we can make things without anyone else. Action is the human activity that most strongly relates to humans, as humans as opposed to anything else (e.g. an animal subjected to necessity/labour) (Arendt 1958: 22-23, 175-192). These three modes of human activity will be central to our analysis of The Social in Arendt's work, to which we will now turn.

**1.2: The *Polis,* the household and (un)freedom**

According to Arendt, The Social is a relatively modern phenomenon; it has been caused by a shift in the way we behave in relation to one another. The question is then, why is it modern? What has changed since ancient times? For Arendt, the root cause of this shift is a change in the relation

between the public and the private realm. I will first deal with the relationship between the public and private for the Greeks and second with the change, that has occurred in modern society.

For the Greeks the division between the *polis* (public realm) and the household (private realm) was natural. Things that were economic, i.e. dealt with the maintenance of one's own life and those aspects of life that are necessary happened within the household or private realm. Within the household, a natural division of functions existed; women gave birth, men provided physical labour. In this private realm, the 'Household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers', ruling over other family members as well as slaves. Therefore, this realm knew relations of dominance, violence and hierarchy in order to pursue the necessities of life; in pursuit of our own survival, we abandon equality in favour of staying alive. As Arendt phrases it, 'violence is the pre-political act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of the world' (Arendt 1958: 31). This way of dealing with other people was pre-political; it was in stark contrast with the liberated political life of the *polis* (Arendt 1958: 22-32).

The *polis* or public realm stands in opposition to the household, it is the sphere of free men, where one can express oneself and be political. Freedom for the Greeks was exclusively located within this political realm. Necessity and the matters of the household only related to this realm as preconditions to act within it, not as essential topics of political discourse. The term *political economy* would be a contradiction in terms as 'whatever was 'economic' related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, was a non-political, household affair by definition' (Arendt 1958: 29). Economics were no matter for the public realm (Arendt 1958: 28-38).

Within the *polis,* you could be equal and free. To be free meant to not be subjected to the necessities of life or to other people as well as being in command of oneself. The *polis* allowed for distinction and plurality free from any necessity of life or what Arendt would refer to as *action*, it was a realm of individuality and distinction. Driven by a 'fiercely agonal spirit', it was the place where one was among equals, but needed to keep distinguishing himself in order to show that he is the best (Arendt 1958: 28-38).

The analysis and distinction of these two realms may at first appear confusing – not only because they are often mistranslated but also because modern society has blurred the distinction between the two in what Arendt calls *the social realm*, not to be confused with The Social, which will we discuss later. The social realm came about with the rise of the modern nation-state and is neither public nor private. This social realm blurs the private/public distinction and modern society, referred to by Arendt as 'the collective of families economically organized into… one super-human family', takes the functions of the household into public life. Matters of necessity often take centre stage in political discourse and are seen as essential tasks of government. This is a radical change from the Greeks as 'politics is never for the sake of life… household life exists for the sake of the 'good life' in the *polis'* (Arendt 1958: 37). The social realm has caused that which was pre-political in both conduct (i.e. violence, domination) and purpose (necessity as precondition for free and equal pluralism within the *polis*) to seep into public life. The public and private realm, in short, are no longer separate in modern society as they were in ancient times (Arendt 1958: 28-38).

Another confusing element of this analysis in Arendt's work is the distinction between what constitutes the private sphere (or 'privacy') and what constitutes public life. The Greeks viewed privacy as a state of deprivation, in which one was denied access to public life and was therefore not fully human. In our modern, individualised world, privacy is no longer this state of deprivation. In privacy, we can be ourselves, express our emotions, create art, write, etc. Modern day privacy or 'intimacy' appears to be a place where we can, in at least a limited manner, express our pluralism

and humanity in a way the Greeks could not. Arendt describes modern privacy as a place where the intimate is sheltered and where we are not bound by society's mores and rules. The private realm or realm of intimacy in modern society is no longer in opposition to the political realm as was the case for the Greeks. According to Arendt – and this is its first proper introduction – it is in opposition to The Social.

**1.3: Notes on Arendt's conception of freedom**

Before we move on to our discussion of The Social, it is important to mention some elements of Arendtian freedom, as they are important in understanding what The Social entails and what it may prevent. The Greek conception discussed in the previous section strongly relates to Arendt's ideas, but I feel a workable definition of Arendtian freedom is necessary to understand what (un)freedom may mean while discussing The Social.  Arendt's conception is quite complex and discussing her entire conception of what freedom means goes beyond the scope of this paper. I will, however, highlight two important elements of Arendtian freedom for our purposes. One from her work *Between Past and Future*, from the chapter 'What is Freedom?' and one from *The Human Condition*.

Arendt's conception of freedom strongly relates to politics and action. For 'action and politics…. are the only things we could not even conceive without assuming freedom exists (Arendt 1961: 146), freedom is the reason for politics and this freedom is in turn experienced in action. This freedom then requires the presence of other people; we only become aware that we are free in interaction with others. The supposed opposition between politics and freedom is a false one for Arendt; politics and freedom go hand in hand, we should not strive to be liberated from politics, rather we should use politics to be free (Arendt 1961: 143-151).

This freedom should be more than mere choice between options; it should be the possibility of starting something new. As Arendt phrases it 'Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other' (Arendt 1961: 151).  Action, in which freedom manifests itself should stem from principles within the actor primarily, rather than calculated expectations/motivations. Arendt does not diminish will or intellect but sees truly free action as something that transcends motives and aims as the primary determining factors. It should be the possibility of injecting your own thoughts and choices into the world, rather than choosing from different ones or just be a decision guided by outcome or calculation. As Arendt puts it 'the faculty of freedom itself, the sheer capacity to begin' (Arendt 1961: 169) freedom stems from within men, in relation to other men. To be free means to act with other men and in doing so, beginning something new stemming from yourself. In this performance in relation to others, we can create a 'reality of our own' (Arendt 1961: 171) – a realm of freedom that only exists when men are in relation to one another and in which we appear to one another (Arendt 1961: 151-171).

A second element that is useful to highlight is the way Arendt opposes freedom to another concept in *The Human condition*. Most notably, freedom is put in contrast with necessity in a similar fashion that the ancient Greeks did. Modern society may give us the illusion that we are no longer subject to necessity. The reason for this is obvious: In contrast to the societies of slaves from the past, our daily realities no longer remind us that our lives are dictated by it. The fact that this is no longer obvious does not mean that we are in fact liberated. The (partial) elimination of necessity as central to our daily lives 'only blurs the line between freedom and necessity' (Arendt 1958: 71).  We may still be subjected to necessity and not realize it because it is hidden; the provision of necessities is not freedom, nor is it liberating. Modern society's ability to present the provision of necessity as such does not make it so. Necessity remains a precondition of freedom – not freedom on its own. The line between these two is one that must be stressed moving forward for two reasons. First, it focusses

our attention on what is to be achieved: true freedom in the sense of starting something new and allowing action. Second, because it is one of the most controversial points Arendt makes in the relations to be discussed, namely the depoliticization of necessary (among which economic) matters (Arendt 1958: 38-50, 68-73, 118-126).

**1.4: Conceptualizing the social: Opposition, behaviourism and economics**

The introduction of The Social happens not as a concept on its own (unlike for example labour or action) but as an opposition to modern privacy.  Arendt does not just drop this term on us from nowhere; she also refers to *society* and *the social realm* in similar context before juxtaposing The Social with privacy. These terms are related, but it is important to distinguish them in a workable manner, so that we may separate them from The Social. *Society* refers to modern society in which the intertwining of the private and public is an everyday reality (Arendt 1958: 29). *The social realm* refers to the realm of life that is neither private nor public, in which both realms flow into one another all the time. It's a 'new' phenomenon in modern times as matters of the public realm have become private and matters of the private realm public, this intertwined state is the social realm. *The Social* finally, is the force that drives our behaviour within these realms – for better or for worse. What exactly this force is in Arendt's work is the question we must now answer.

The opposition in which The Social stands demands closer analysis. Arendt argues that the first person to explore this opposition was Rousseau. Intimacy or modern privacy was not a rebellion against the state, but rather a rebellion against 'society's perversion of the human heart'. It went against the demands of The Social, or what we would later call 'the conformism inherent in every society'. The intimate allowed the flourishing of art and literature, as evidenced by the great works of art in Rousseau's time (Arendt 1958: 39).

An interesting shift occurs subtly in this part of Arendt's description of The Social. Not only does it explicate the first characteristics of The Social, it also shows us the physical shift that occurs between ancient and modern times. The Social and for that matter, modern privacy are no longer bound to a physical space as they were before. Both the household and the *polis* had physical boundaries to which they were confined, at least to a large degree. The Social and the intimate/private reach into every element of life. For instance, art exists in the public space, and governmental rules, regulations and enforcement reach even the most intimate spaces of human existence.

Arendt's description of The Social fits this transcendence of physical boundaries. The Social is first directly described as the result of the integration of the family into society. This integration demands from us similar conformism and domination that the household does. The equality that exists in this society then 'resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head' (Arendt 1958: 40). In other words, we are equals in the sense that we are all subjects; we are still ruled over, so the freedom that the *polis* would have does not exist under The Social. This integration of the family structure into society does not imply one-man rule unlike the household, in fact, the conformism in modern society is enforced by a faceless mob, rather than by one individual. As we shall later see, this is reflected in social sciences and its primary tool statistics as well, as the greater the group, the greater the trend towards unanimity (Arendt 1958: 38-42).

The Social excludes action and it is replaced with what Arendt calls 'behaviour'. Behaviour is something that can be expected; it does not distinguish yourself as a human being, rather it takes external characteristics of your being and formulates expectations accordingly. Where the Greeks

sought to distinguish themselves, modern society seeks to normalize people in the public sphere. Behaviour implies expectations; rather than treating distinctive acts as defining, modern society treats these acts as 'asocial or abnormal' (Arendt 1958: 41-42).

This means that you are classified and assigned behavioural traits accordingly. For example, I am a master student from a well-off background therefore; society expects me to have certain interests, preferences and ways of behaving in society. Whether these are truly my desired actions or not is of no relevance, society demands them of me. If I deviate from these expectations, my behaviour is labelled as 'abnormal' rather than what is most essentially mine. Behaviour defines us on external (or relatively external, such as the groups we belong to) grounds, it ignores our internal defining characteristics. You are defined by and have demands according to your ranking, everything beside that is deviation or oddity that is ignored.

A testament to this behaviouristic expectation is what Arendt calls 'the modern science of economics' which has behaviouristic assumptions. Economics, with statistics as its primary tool could only become 'the social science par excellence' (Arendt 1958: 42) if men behave according to The Social. This is no denial of the validity of statistics or economics, but it does signify a certain problematic trend. In statistics we treat rare events as deviation rather than meaningful. This is a mistake as meaning is 'disclosed not in everyday life but in rare deeds' (Arendt 1958: 42). If we apply statistics to history and politics, we therefore wilfully ignore its most important matter – the rare events in which there is distinction and pluralism (Arendt 1958: 42-43).

The validity of statistics also implies that the more people there are, the more valid statistics are as a determinant and the less deviation there will be. This means that in mass society (with a large population) The Social will dominate over the political, as the large faceless mob demands conformity. Large populations will have a normal distribution and be less likely to be changed by unique actions of individuals as their relative impact is lowered. It is the scientific treatment of society; not as dynamic but predictable where any deviation is treated as just an anomaly rather than a defining moment (Arendt 1958: 43). Think about market economics; any behaviour that is not market conform is treated as a distortion or disruption of markets, rather than a defining event on its own that demands attention. All the while, the events may be more important in determining what will happen in the future.

Another clear indicator of the rise of The Social and the integration of the household into the public realm is how society is defined. We are a society of jobholders and labourers; not one of politicians and actors, in other words we are essentially concerned with necessity rather than pluralism or politics. Within mass society, things done for the sake of life (i.e. necessities) take front and centre stage in the public realm or in modern society, the social realm. This means that what was seen in ancient times as necessary for excellence, the public life in the *polis*, has disappeared (Arendt 1958: 42-49).

Arendt's analysis of economics in this chapter should not be interpreted as a rejection of economics, nor should it be viewed as the endorsement of a political ideal as such. The chief problem that Arendt addresses in her discussion of The Social is the way in which it removes the preconditions for proper political action. There is no single ideal that causes The Social to drive out human plurality, i.e. there is no grand design behind society's conformism. Rather, it is the elimination of the possibility of ideals and distinction; it is the reduction of the public sphere to a place of uniformity, rather than one of unpredictability and distinction.

Arendt's work on The Social should not be seen as a rejection of the mass provision of necessities in modern society either. For obvious reasons, being secure in the necessities of life is a good thing. Even the in ancient times, this was seen as a precondition for the good life in the *polis*. The problem that Arendt addresses deals with is the nature of public life and what function it should have. If necessity and the household characteristics that come with it are central in public life, then there are several essential properties of human life missing. We do not use our public forums to discuss ideas anymore; rather we are concerned with the distribution of economic matters. This does not mean economic provision is bad, but that it is misplaced; it does not belong in those places where humans should be able to express themselves in whatever manner they wish. Necessities are just preconditions of politics; they are not politics in and of themselves according to Arendt.

Now we arrive at the core of our problem once more: What is this thing called The Social, how can we define it, when we summarize the last few paragraphs? Our analysis of Arendt shows it to be quite the umbrella term (or as we may later call it a 'blob') but we can distinguish its most important features given what we have discussed so far.

The Social is a force within society that makes political action impossible, replacing it with conformist expectations and predictable behaviour. The core component of The Social is the integration of relations found in the private sphere of the household into public life. Where within the household we subject ourselves to the household head, we submit ourselves to the demands of mass society and in turn The Social in modern times. In both the household and modern mass society, necessity and the sustainment of life take centre stage rather than political action or pluralism. The Social opposes the intimate as the private opposed the public sphere in ancient times; our pluralism has retreated into intimacy, as the public sphere no longer allows us a place to differentiate ourselves. The Social demands conformity, the intimate allows for distinguishment and pluralism, as evidenced in individualism and art. In short, The Social is a force driving conformism via necessity and opposes any political action, standing in stark contrast with intimacy.

**1.5: The Social in *On Revolution***

An illustration of what Arendt means when she talks about The Social can be found in *On Revolution*. She devotes an entire chapter in this book on The Social and the way it relates to revolutionary action. The book discusses many issues; of which several are similar to those in *The Human Condition.* Most importantly, this book also addresses the issues of the preconditions for political action. In the context of revolutions, this means addressing the question of what the preconditions for a proper political revolution are as well as what the goals of such a revolution should be.

The comparison Arendt draws is between the French and American revolutions in the context of The Social. The French revolution was a failure because instead of seeking freedom (i.e. the ability to act politically) it was fuelled by a type of urgency. The French were motivated by a lack of certain necessities, most notably food, rather than by political action and ideals. The French revolution failed to have a 'historical moment' (Arendt 1963: 61) because it did not concern itself with change that would facilitate the fundamental conditions for political freedom, rather it was concerned with greater abundance of necessary goods. It concerned itself with The Social; necessary rather than political concerns were the main determinants of deeds within the French revolution. This in turn, made the result of the French revolution not one where the possibility of political freedom was provided, rather it was one were the tyrannical relationships remained, as evidenced by the death of the French revolutionaries and the rule of Napoleon. It failed to 'solve the social question' (Arendt 1963: 62), in that it was motivated by things caused by the interwovenness of the private and public

realm. (Arendt 1963: 60-65). The Social question, to be understood as the urgency of the provision of necessary matters, as a motivation for revolution makes the cause for the revolution external rather than internal. If we think back to Arendtian freedom this wouldn't be proper political action because it doesn't stem from an actors' innermost convictions, rather it stems from human misery and a lack of material provision, which are an external condition put upon men. The revolution didn't involve action, it involved labour and work at best (Fehrer 1987: 1-8, Arendt 1963: 59-73).

The American Revolution was different; it was 'not social but political' (Arendt 1963: 68), as it was motivated by political concerns, rather than necessary ones, The Social played no or a diminished role in this case. The American Revolution addressed The Social question because it's primary motivation wasn't necessity, but rather actors' innermost convictions, i.e. there was proper political action in this case. The preconditions for this type of action were met when the revolution started. The people who started the revolution didn't live in misery; in fact, they lived in relative abundance. Due to the motivation being political and there being actual political action in this case, the American Revolution was a success; it addressed The Social question. This was reflected in its results; The American Revolution managed to provide lasting institutions that allowed for political action by the people. In other words, necessity was not the primary or only motivation for revolt, unlike the French revolution. This is what makes the American Revolution so successful in Arendt's eyes; in both its motivation and its outcome, The Social didn't dominate, rather action, politics and freedom did (Arendt 1963: 65-73).

The problem of the French revolution was that the French revolution 'did not change the relationship between rulers and ruled government and nation' (Arendt 1963: 74). If we equate this to household relationships within society, we can easily draw a parallel. If the household head is despotic and demands obedience, then a revolt must remove not just the particular person at the head of the household but change the position of the household head altogether. If another household head steps in who essentially does the same things but allows a little more leeway for his subjects, the revolt is not very successful. A slave does not cease to be a slave because his master gives him more rations; he is only free when his shackles are removed.

I do not think that this comparison means that economic concerns are irrelevant, or that a revolution should not concern itself with necessity at all. Arendt's critique is similar to the critique of Marx in *The Human Condition* where in the chapter on labour she argues that if Marx sees man's primary activity in labour, then we would lose our primary activity in a utopia where labour is no longer necessary (Arendt 1958: 79-126). Labour and necessity aren't unimportant, but there is more to properly being human than just the necessary matters of life. Similarly, if we (temporarily) free ourselves from necessity, this doesn't mean we are free just yet, it just means we aren't slaves to necessity. To be free, we need other people and we need to be able to act in some form of public space.

I agree with Arendt that being primarily motivated by necessity is undesirable. To illustrate, let us imagine what happens when there is a lack of necessity somewhere and there is political unrest. These material shortcomings usually have one of two causes: physical causes, e.g. a failed harvest or drought, or political causes, usually in the form of mismanagement of available resources. In the first case, political revolt would only reflect the frustration of being subjected to nature by the people; it would not help to change the material circumstances, as the resources simply are not there. If the cause is political, then simply gaining material goods is not a satisfactory outcome; the root causes of the people's misery are not addressed and in the long term, fundamental problems remain despite short-term satisfaction of material needs. Think of dictators giving handouts after coming to power

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but failing to structurally address issues within the country. The Social question as primary motivation for revolution therefore never properly addresses the causes of the miserable state that people may find themselves in and is unlikely to alleviate human misery in the end.

The activity that makes us human, that distinguishes us from others is found in political action and pluralism. Defining men as beings that are primarily concerned with necessity reduces them to animals. In similar vein, a revolution that only serves and is primarily motivated by necessity does not help humanity any further in terms of freedom; it only serves to sustain them. The American Revolution did not ignore poverty, nor did it diminish the importance of material well-being. Rather it was not primarily motivated by them and caused change beyond simply improving material circumstances. In France, the destitute situation remained as evidenced by the death of its leaders and the persistence of repressive political structures under Napoleon. The success and presidency of their American counterparts were a testament to the successful fundamental change in American institutions as well as the proper political action that occurred within its revolution.

**1.6: Concluding remarks on The Social in Arendt's work**

In addressing The Social in Arendt's work, a few elements stand out. Primarily, I defined The Social as the integration of the household into public life, leading to a demand for conformism. The implications of this analysis are numerous. Most notably, the way we treat society and what its political implications are. Social sciences are reductionist in diminishing the importance of distinction; the dominance of behaviourism reduces unique acts to anti-social or abnormal. This is clear evidence of the effect The Social has in our society; it demands conformism in all the things we do. This diminishes our capacity to be truly political for distinction is no longer appreciated as essentially human; rather it is seen as undesirable and devious.

The analysis of The Social in Arendt's work, combined with the 'practical example' (for lack of a better word) of the French and American revolutions, we can move forward in our analysis with a rudimentary understanding of what The Social is. The Social remains, as pointed out earlier, an umbrella term for many different effects within society. At the very least however, we can now understand its direction, primary effects and the numerous ways in which it redefines the boundaries of the public sphere.

**Chapter 2: Interpretation of The Social in academic literature**

Arendt is not only one of the most influential, but also one of the most discussed and analysed philosophers of the past 50 years. For our case, this means that there are several existing accounts of The Social that we can compare and analyse. In this section, I will briefly go over some of them and discuss how they relate on the reading of Arendt in chapter one. Most of this chapter will deal with Hanna Pitkin's *Attack of the Blob*, as it is the most detailed account of The Social. I will also discuss a few other authors in section 2.3 and argue that while their accounts may avoid some of the problems in Pitkin's work, they have other shortcomings in their conception of The Social.

**2.1 Pitkin's *Attack of the Blob***

The most detailed modern account of The Social is most likely the one by Hanna Pitkin in her book *Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's concept of the social*. Pitkin analyses The Social from a different point of view, arguing that The Social should be treated as a phenomenon that can be studied. While this is not in direct opposition to Arendt, it is most certainly a very particular interpretation of The

Social. Similar to this paper, she seeks to unravel the concept, as it appears so paradoxical; *The Human condition* seeks to clarify but seems to make everything more complex in introducing The Social. Given that The Social (apparently) has such far-reaching consequences, this vagueness seems extremely troubling (Pitkin 1998: 1-5).

The title of the book refers to a science fiction from the 50s moving featuring a blob, a type of monster that attacks us from outer space and destroys us. Pitkin suggests that these types of movies suggest a kind of helplessness within society; the threat of annihilation as beyond our control, that what will kill us is something we cannot influence. The Social is a similar force in that it may destroy all we hold dear while we cannot do much about it. It also is a reference to the enormous blob of labels that Arendt uses in *The Human Condition* to describe The Social (as well as society, social spheres, etc.), The Social makes for a very lively and very hard to understand 'monster' indeed (Pitkin 1998: 5-6).

The direct problem that The Social addresses according to Pitkin is what she calls 'the paradox of modernity'. It refers to our ever-increasing powers over the world yet our lack of ability to change that very same world. Our increased capacities did not free us, they at best made us realize how little we can do to change our fate. This helplessness in modern society is what Arendt seeks to address with The Social and Pitkin wants to analyse – are we truly attacked by a blob, an external force that imposes destruction without anything we can do about it? (Pitkin 1998: 5-11). This in and of itself is already a quite extreme reading of The Social compared to ours; Arendt herself never uses this type of apocalyptic language in her works, she only warns us of the imminent threats that mass society may bring.

At first, Pitkin conceptualizes The Social in similar vein as our analysis in chapter one. She points to the integration of the household into public life and the problems that modern economics imply. Furthermore, Pitkin stresses that the core problem of The Social is the establishment of a single interest and opinion due to the integration of household structures into society. Finally, she also discusses The Social's opposition to privacy and the strange and confusing manner in which Arendt presents it (Pitkin 1998: 10-17).

The definition of The Social Pitkin argues for in in the rest of the book is different from the one we have discussed in chapter one. Pitkin seeks to argue that The Social 'means a collectivity of people who – for whatever reason – conduct themselves in such a way that they cannot control or even intentionally influence the large-scale consequences of their activities' (Pitkin 1998: 196). She argues that The Social should be viewed as a type of phenomenon that can be studied, rather than some alien force.  Pitkin distances herself from interpretations that see The Social as an opposition to Marxism as well as interpretations that see The Social as 'disciplinary normalization' as both interpretations do not do justice to the enormous complexity of The Social. Pitkin seeks to build her argument by tracing the concept through Arendt's work, both before and after *The Human Condition*. In addition to defining The Social, she also seeks to give examples of and ways around it (Pitkin 1998: 15-18). This is a very particular reading of Arendt since *The Human Condition* contains a lot of criticism on Marx.  In particular, Arendt's analysis of labour, the chapter on labour even starts out by stating: 'In the following chapter, Marx will be criticized' (Arendt 1958: 79).

**2.2 Pitkin's *Blob*: tracing The Social**

Pitkin's book offers a highly detailed genealogy as well as a biographical account of Arendt's concept of The Social. Dealing with the book in full goes beyond the scope of this paper, so I will leave the earlier biographical descriptions for what they are, as I feel they are mostly relevant as introduction to later sections, not as crucial elements in her argument on their own. I will use this section to highlight the most important argumentation within the book, beginning with the 'birth of the blob' and the way Pitkin works towards a definition. At the end, I will summarize and briefly discuss this argumentation, as well as the examples Pitkin uses.

The first 'real' instance of a blob in Arendt's work is found in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* according to Pitkin. Similar to The Social, *Totalitarianism* deals with forces that are beyond our control, destroy individuality and supress distinction/pluralism.  Totalitarianism subjects people to a collective, removes a fixed reality, and in the end undermines human agency.  Like The Social, the totalitarian force is an 'intentional, active force, composed of humans who have lost their human agency – in short, a Blob'. Totalitarianism has mostly died however, but the mechanism (or monster) that pushes us away from agency and towards conformism possibly has not. The more resilient blob may be one that is not enforced by terror and propaganda but one fed by apathy and consumerism. The initial blob is totalitarian, but the lasting blob is social as described by Arendt in *The Human Condition* (Pitkin 1998: 69-98).

To trace this new blob, Pitkin turns to *The Human Condition* and the circumstances under which it was written directly. Pitkin argues that *The Human Condition* sought to 'articulate a general theory of free citizenship'. According to Pitkin, it was a 'political alternative', a positive alternative to conformism that stressed the importance of political agency of everyone.  A vision that addressed everyone's concerns without becoming apathetic. To articulate how this free citizenship and its political agency are achieved, Arendt needed to analyze what stood in the way of achieving such a society, hence The Social (the new blob) was born (Pitkin 1998: 98-114). Pitkin approaches the question of what The Social is, in two different ways. First by putting it in relation to other Arendtian concepts and second by trying to reconcile the conformist Social and the economic Social (Pitkin 1998: 177-178).

The blob then, seems to be any type of ominous force that is beyond our control, or appears beyond our control. We may conquer the blob or force it out, e.g. by banishing out totalitarianism from Europe, or rejecting certain ideologies.  These blobs also appear to be a type of force where there is individual deliberate action, with collectively unintended consequences. Pitkin describes these types of forces as some grand unknown, not anything that takes any particular form directly, hence the 'blob'.

Pitkin analyses the relation to other Arendtian concepts, where she mostly relates The Social to behavior and action. Pitkin analyses behavior because 'what appears alongside The Social, as action appears alongside politics is…. 'Behavior''. If any concept should guide us towards a proper definition of The Social, it would be behavior. Behavior is a strange concept according to Pitkin as it really does not have any particular place in the world in the way labor or work do. It does not create any particular object, nor does it serve a clear goal. Behavior is never desirable or right – it stands in opposition to action in its sameness and the way it dulls people. To understand The Social from this vantage point therefore seems pointless according to Pitkin, as it does not really tell us anything, only that the social produces behavior, which means the lack of proper action and dumbing down of people. It is a result of The Social but does not help us find a definition (Pitkin 1998: 178-183). In

short, Pitkin fails to derive a meaning of The Social from other Arendtian concepts, so she moves on to the conformist and economic Social in an attempt to derive a definition from The Social in a more direct manner.

Pitkin starts out with the conformist Social that she defines as: 'The essence of The Social seems to lie in classifying people into arbitrary, merely conventional categories, ranking them by their classification and treating them in accord with that ranking' (Pitkin 1998: 183). This relates to our discussion of the way there are behavioristic expectations earlier, as it deals with The Social as doing away with plurality. This account of The Social focusses on the way social norms push us into a certain mold. The one doing the pushing is nobody; The Social is again, like pointed earlier, not one person but a faceless force demanding our conformity (Pitkin 1998: 183-186).

This conformist Social should not be read as a rejection of the economic Social, it should be seen as half of a 'dual concept' according to Pitkin. The economic social relates to the integration of the household into society. This is the element of the Social that gives rise to household structures in society and gives rise to modern economics and the free market. This element of The Social may even be more dangerous as it explicates a force with direction. Subjection to economic logic means surrendering to a logic beyond one's control. The conformist social 'only' categorized people and formulated expectations. The economic social has actual direction in its conformity – as a blob, it is set on destroying something instead of just being a menacing force. Both these accounts of The Social do not imply that we cannot go back, but they do create 'false necessities' in that they formulate expectations that we have no reason to conform to. They both falsely deny human agency as relevant in deciding our collective and individual futures. Rather they both force us into a way of life, into a society, together (Pitkin 1998: 186-192).

So finally, let us turn to the definition Pitkin derives from her reading the human condition. Pitkin defines it as follows: 'The Social is Arendt's way of talking about collectivity of people who, though they are interdependent and active, behave individually in ways that preclude coordinated action, so that they cannot (or do not) take charge of what they are doing in the world' (Pitkin 1998: 196). This has elements of both accounts described above in its conformist expectations and lack of human agency. This reading implies that The Social is a group of humans, i.e. modern society is an example of The Social. The Social in this reading is a phenomenon, not a force or blob, as it can be studied as something in the world. The blob is 'excised' by Pitkin in that it at first appears as a type of unknown, unknowable 'black box' kind of influence on our lives, yet it is now a type of phenomenon. This means it should and can be analyzed; The Social then does not explain anything directly, rather it is something that can be studied, and we should strive to find out more about (Pitkin 1998: 196-198).

Pitkin's interpretation is one where Arendt seems to use The Social as a kind of hypothesis. The Social is not a clear-cut definition yet, rather it is a phenomenon that requires further investigation. It is as if Arendt pointed us to a metaphysical phenomenon that is present within society yet remains unexplained. As if The Social in *The Human Condition* is like the first observing of dark matter in space; an extremely influential fact whose essential properties need to be studied. It seems ironic that on this reading Pitkin turns The Social into a prima example of the paradox of modernity. The Social becomes a manmade phenomenon that the more we know about it, the more it seems beyond our control; Pitkin dedicates an entire book exploring all its facets and ends up with more confusion and hopelessness than before.

That treatment of The Social as a phenomenon has problematic implications is something Pitkin admits as well. Most importantly, it seems difficult to study it as a phenomenon, as Pitkin's

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interpretation gives us very little indication of what to look for in the world. If we are to believe that The Social exists in the manner that Pitkin argues it does, then it is this broad, metapolitical phenomenon, which has a huge influence over our lives. However, we are hard-pressed to find any particular instances of its occurrence. While Pitkin attempts to provide examples of The Social occurring at the end of her book, she even admits that these are very questionable and aren't that great to illustrate her point (Pitkin 1998: 251-284).

Furthermore, it seems odd that Arendt contrasts The Social with politics, as The Social implies things beyond our control, but Arendt also claims that in politics many things are beyond our control (Pitkin 1998: 117-203). Some deeds that are clearly political in nature, such as the mob mentality in *Totalitarianism* lead to uncontrollable horrors beyond imagination, like The Social. In politics, we can truly be free; as mentioned earlier, action is the experience of freedom for Arendt and freedom occurs in association between people. This does not mean that this cannot be distorted in certain cases, politics and freedom are strongly related, but political processes can also cause things beyond our control. If Arendt has this view of numerous political processes, then The Social and the political do not appear to be in contrast with one another at all. They appear to be two sides of the same coin in many instances – both have forces that mass society or large mobs of people create, that cause problems beyond the control or influence of individuals.

Finally, The Social if read in this way seems an odd term, as it is completely detached from any conventional notion of society or social we use in regular language. This interpretation of The Social also removes the notion of a blob, as it is no longer a force beyond ourselves; it is a state we are in. The blob has not destroyed us, but rather it has swallowed us (Pitkin 1998: 177-203).

To conclude, Pitkin formulates The Social as a new social phenomenon that needs to be studied. This account is, as she points out herself, very problematic in the sense that it turns The Social in a near useless and very strange concept. We are under the influence of a 'blob' but this blob is not external to us anymore – we appear to have been swallowed completely by its destructive force. The Social causes conformism and absence of politics where politics belong (Pitkin 1998: 252).

The outcomes of people living in the blob are independent of human agency – The Social indicates a society where a destructive force has caused a loss of humanity and ability to act. That it does all these things is (fairly) clear but what it *is* is still very much open on this account. Pitkin's seems to be one where The Social is treated as a discovery like gravity by Newton; it obviously has enormous impact on us, but we do not know what all its features are yet. At best, Arendt, like Newton, has pointed to some of its most basic features, but has not yet grasped its complexity.

## 2.3 Other accounts of The Social

Pitkin's account is quite ambitious and profound, yet it still has major shortcomings. The treatment of The Social as a phenomenon does give us an answer to the problem of The Social's vagueness. If we accept the vagueness on the account of The Social being a new phenomenon, it does not appear to be as much of a problem at all anymore. There are several problems with her account however, as discussed in the previous section. I will now discuss other accounts of The Social in academic literature that do not face these difficulties but do come up short in other areas of their analysis. It should be noted that Pitkin's work is the only lengthy account of The Social and that most analyses of Arendt's work do not go into as much detail as Pitkin does.

The problem Pitkin has surrounding language, namely that The Social is notoriously detached from convenient uses of the word 'social', is one I feel is elegantly addressed by Margaret Canovan. In her,

book *Hannah Arendt: A reinterpretation of her political thought*, she analyses The Social not as a phenomenon but rather a mode of human relations. Canovan argues that society in Arendt's work is not a 'catch-all concept that appears to include everything' (Canovan 1992: 117). Rather it implies a certain mode of human association, which is characterized by 'Social' (my capitals) relations. Social relations are characterized by uniformity and sameness. The Social then refers to human relations that are 'socialised' i.e. made to conform to society's demands. Society's demands are similar in Canovan's account as in Pitkin's or ours – due to the integration of the household, necessary matters dominate (Canovan 1992: 99-118).

Canovan sidesteps the problem of the word 'social' in everyday language because her interpretation allows for normal usage of the word (Canovan 1992: 118-122). For example, a 'Social event' in this account would denote a certain way of living together (i.e. a society in which people have Social relations) and in the capacity of that way of living together, you would have an event. This is quite a complex way of putting that you are related to people in a certain way (in this case, a Social way) and you are going to do things with them.

What I find problematic on this account is that Canovan is very quick in abandoning the article in 'The Social'. She mostly just uses the word 'social' in context of Social relations, rather than putting 'the' in front. This may seem picky, but I think that this is quite a big problem for her argument. Using 'the' in The Social is not a simple stylistic matter; Arendt refers to The Social as an article and a noun consistently. Arendt mostly discusses The Social in a distinct manner and as a thing of its own, not as something that is an adjective for other things as Canovan does. If it is used as an adjective it is used for its surrounding concepts, e.g. 'the social realm' (Arendt 1958: 49). The rise of The Social as a historical phenomenon rightfully implies a type of human relation, which Arendt characterizes by behaviourism. To interpret The Social as only socialized human relationships within society, understood as a specific mode of human togetherness, seem to be reductionist. The Social in Arendt implies many more things than just a certain way of having human relations. It has, perhaps sadly, far more influential than that.

Another interpretation in academic literature is The Social as political orientation. Patrick Hayden in *Hannah Arendt: Key concepts* sees the social as 'the political orientation that cherishes labour over other elements of the human condition' (Hayden 2014: 38). Arguing that the most fruitful way of analysing The Social is by putting it in contrast, but not in direct opposition to the political realm. He argues that we should not view The Social as the opposite of the political, but as the distinction between The Social and the political becoming a matter of 'politics'. The Social and political should be seen as two separate realms of life according to Hayden, which should be kept separate (Hayden 2014: 135-37).

In this interpretation, the biggest concern in modern society is that The Social may overflow into the political because of certain political decisions. This orientation towards labour may diminish our ability to perform other human activities properly. It has the effect 'not of *destroying* political action, but of shrouding it in the 'darkness' associated with 'housekeeping', thereby destroying its public character' (Hayden 2014: 137). Necessity and labour then come to dominate how we interpret our lives, meaning that The Social implies the experiencing of everything in terms of our physical survival, rather than things like pluralism, freedom, action, etc. The Social in Hayden's interpretation causes a meaningless life – it diminishes life to necessity and labour and understates the options of individualism and action. Hayden does not interpret The Social as inevitable, but rather as a bad influence on politics. He points out that Arendt rejects inevitability in her writing and points to several examples in modern history that have proved that individualism and action are still possible (Hayden 2014: 124-137).

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Hayden's endeavour is quite a fruitful one; it turns The Social into something that is more readily analysed and as something that can have varying degrees of presence, depending how oriented we are towards labour and necessity. Furthermore, this interpretation rids us of another problem Pitkin could not deal with, namely the seemingly contradictory inevitability of The Social's destructive influence and Hannah Arendt's belief in the possibility for change and individual action. In Hayden's account, the possibility for change does not disappear; something very clearly evidenced by the real-life political actors that have been successful in changing societies since the writing of *The Human Condition*. The Social does not turn into this all-consuming force, but something we should be wary of in our view of the world.

Hayden's account is quite close to my own account I will present later, but I feel that he fails to address some elements of The Social or even ignores them deliberately. The most important objection is something I have addressed in chapter one: The pre-political nature of The Social. This is not as problematic if Hayden would stick to just contrasting the political with The Social in a similar vein in which we may contrast the household and the public sphere. It does however become problematic in his account if the distinction between the two becomes a matter of politics. When Hayden labels The Social as a political orientation, he implies that The Social is deliberately pursued for its own sake. Hayden even presents examples of this persuasion in the form of bureaucratic regimes (Hayden 2014: 137). Hayden seems right in suggesting that The Social causes us to overemphasize necessity and labour, but I Feel he is mistaken in implying a certain intentionality in this orientation as such. The Social is a side effect of large groups of people each individually acting a certain way, but no single person or institutions acts to achieve something like The Social deliberately.

The Social as presented by Arendt seems to me a result of a collective of people who creates side effects that overtake them. While the actions of each individual in this collective may be deliberate, this does not make the collective side effect of The Social dominating several spheres of life deliberate, let alone an actual political orientation. The Social is more like the 'tragedy of the commons' then an actual political direction. Presenting it as something that may be argued in favour or against off in some sort of realm as Hayden seems to do, then seems mistaken. The Social is an orientation toward labour to be sure, but not a political, deliberate or intentional orientation.

**Chapter 3: Necessity and tribalism**

The discussion of The Social in academic literature has yielded mixed results as evidenced in chapter two. While this is expected for such an idiosyncratic term, it still leaves much to be desired. After all, one of the central problems surrounding The Social remains: How can a concept written by Arendt, who sought to clarify much of our modern condition, be so vague? I am not going to pretend I can fully answer what The Social is, or why Arendt brought the concept into the world the way she did. What I will attempt in this chapter however, is to clarify and provide my own interpretation of The Social, which may turn it into a more workable concept.

To develop this conception, I will first reconsider our analysis in chapter one. I won't dispute what I argued in chapter one, but rather see if analyzing The Social from a different vantage point may be more fruitful. I will begin once again by the integration of household relationships into the public realm, but this time I will put more emphasis on a different aspect of this integration, namely the aspect of necessity. I will then define The Social in terms of necessity primarily, which I will argue gives us a more useful conceptualization. Finally, I will give an example from modern day politics to illustrate that my conception of The Social is very relevant in contemporary society.

**3.1: Necessity and household integration in modern times**

Let us recall once more, what necessity and its function in the world is. We may consider necessity, strongly interwoven with labor work, as those things that we need to sustain ourselves. In the most basic interpretation of the word, this implies things such as food, water and shelter.  Necessities are on Arendt's terms not political, rather they are the preconditions of being political. In necessity and the place, they are achieved (the household in ancient times, the social realm in modern times) relations of violence and domination exist to achieve the common end of sustaining ourselves. This integration is what has caused conformism and a lack of opportunity for political action in the public realm in modern times.

Why would I mention this once more? The reason is that as I see it, there are two elements relating to necessity that have been left out of our discussion so far. First, what necessity is exactly, as it is so essential in causing The Social, whatever it may be. Second, how the centrality of necessity is more than just the economic matters becoming public; it also implies political matters turning necessary.

**3.2: Rethinking Necessity**

When we think of necessity, even in non-Arendtian terms, we think of basic elements of life. However, what these are beyond our most basic needs is strongly dependent on context. In simple examples, these may be different versions of the same basic categories. When you live in Spain the necessities of 'clothing' and 'shelter' may imply different things than for someone living in Scandinavia. Similarly, what constitutes a healthy diet is different for a person in 2018 than it was for a person in 1672.

As long as these broader categories remain roughly the same and can be interpreted as being 'economical' in one-way or another, this context would be of little relevance. However, I would argue that even the broad categories of what is necessary change over time and are open to human interpretation. At several points in our history, we have seen things as essential which we see as ludicrous now; conversely, we see things as essential now that didn't even exist 500 years ago. For example, for the Mayans the sacrifice of animals and people was essential to please the gods and assure their survival. In modern times, we see access to electricity as something indispensable, whereas the use of electricity by people is only a recent invention. Finally, a more recent debate in the western world is whether to have children; increasingly, people choose to forego having them for personal or environmental reasons. This would have been unthinkable up until a few decades ago, as having children was seen as essential in life (The Economist, 2017).

I can imagine that equating animal sacrifice to electricity or a couple's right to choose may appear a little odd. Admittedly, the evidence for animal sacrifice as a way to secure a better harvest is poor compared to the evidence for the benefits of not having children or the practical benefits of electricity. This does not matter for our purposes however. What I seek to address in this comparison is that necessity changes according to human interpretation. A part of necessity (and in turn, what we may gather under the 'labour' denominator in terms of activity) is constructed by the society where we find ourselves.

How necessary things *actually* are is not all that relevant for our discussion of The Social, most importantly we have to keep in mind that things can be framed as being necessary by society, even if they lack 'objective' necessity in the sense of being directly linked to our physical sustainment. There are necessary matters that are related to the life process directly, such as food. There are also matters that are mostly relevant for leading a decent life, such as generous welfare or electricity but will not kill us immediately if their provision stops. What is most relevant for us, is that the framing of

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matters as necessary changes the relationship that we have with them. In necessity and the life process, as pointed out by Arendt, relations of violence and hierarchy exist (Arendt 1958: 31). When things are framed as being necessary, whatever they are, the use of violence and hierarchy in the achievement of these (seemingly) necessary matters is justified. Necessity turns matters into preconditions of politics and allows for pre-political conduct in violence (Arendt 1958: 22-32).

Necessity and economic matters take front and centre stage in our earlier analysis of The Social. The integration of household relationships into the public realm causes conformism and a central role for economics rather than politics, action and freedom. I do not think the role of necessity stops here. To be sure, The Social implies the centrality of economic matters in the public realm, as partially evidenced by the centrality of political economy and basic provisions in public debate and modern-day politics. What it also implies however is that not just the necessary has become public, it also means that the political has turned necessary.  If the public realm is focused on necessary matters alone, political ideas need to be reshaped as necessary in order to appear relevant. Politics needs to adapt to matters of the household because household matters have become central.

Political matters can be necessary for Arendt and often she argues they should be, the necessity of some political matters is not bad in and of itself. For example, in *Totalitarianism* Arendt rigorously analyses the necessity of having a state, as those who are without one can be treated with impunity. They are outlaws per definition and have no legal status, meaning they can be treated badly without it being against the law. For instance, The Nazis took away Jew's citizenship when they left Germany, justifying their mistreatment later (Arendt 1951: 352-380).

The point of analysing The Social as the twofold centrality of necessity in the public realm, i.e. necessity becoming public and political becoming necessary is not that political matters cannot be or should not ever be necessary. The problem is, is that the integration of household relationships into the public realm forces everything to be reshaped into necessity indiscriminately, regardless of its content and its actual necessity. The Social is then the diminishing of the public realm to a realm of necessity, where the only elements of the human condition that are valued are those that are or appear to be necessary.

There are several reasons to assume that this interpretation has merit when reading *The Human Condition*. First, Arendt argues that The Social blurs the line between public and private and that necessity becomes central in the public realm. She also argues that 'In the modern world, The Social and the political realms are much less distinct. That politics is nothing but a function of society, that action, speech and thought are primarily superstructures upon social interest' (Arendt 1958: 33). Politics are in her analysis something that is subjugated to society, understood as being under the influence of The Social, rather than a realm of freedom and pluralism of its own. In this society where necessary matters dominate, politics is then subjected to necessity (Arendt 1958: 28-38).

Arendt also more directly argues for politics becoming necessary when she analyses labour and work. She argues that because many modern political theorists fail to recognize the distinction between things done in private for the sake of the private realm and in public for the sake of the public realm, the distinction between the two is lost. Unjustly, political theorists have ignored the distinction between the private and public. By doing so 'even political activity was levelled to the rank of necessity' (Arendt 1958: 85).  The failure to separate the public and private both in practice and in theory diminishes the role of the public realm as a place for action and distinction as well as the role of political activity as a distinct and important human activity. More dramatically, this diminishes the part of the human condition that is most human; the performance of action. We favour the public realm as a place of necessity (Arendt 1958: 79-93, 175-181).

If we think of contemporary political debates, there are several examples of political ideas that are reframed as being necessary. Take for example the debate on immigration; Trump infamously said that Mexicans were 'murderers and rapists'. The framing of this anti-immigration stance in this manner implies a strong sense of necessity. Achieving its goals is no longer a matter of political dispute or ideological conviction; it is a matter of life and death. The choice is between starvation and nourishment, rather than between ideas in the public arena. In turn, the reframing of political ideas such as these as necessity, whether they are truly necessary or not, then justifies violent and hierarchical relationships. After all, what is seemingly is at stake is our own survival, so we may go further in achieving it.

This twofold degradation of politics also is pointed out by Arendt when she stated that 'the two realms constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself' (Arendt 1958: 33) meaning that there is barely any space left on the stage of the public arena to act. Our appearance to others or our ability to begin something new and to act, in which freedom manifests itself, is diminished. Action as the experience of freedom, as pointed out in section 1.3 should first be you injecting your own thoughts into the world. Motives and aims should not be the primary reasons for acting on the public stage. If everything is reshaped as necessity however, then motives and aims rather than your own thoughts become central. The justification and outcome of an idea then becomes more important than its value as a unique expression of the actor's ideas. We then no longer create a reality of our own, rather we create a reality that is based on the seeming necessity of certain ideas or based on expectation and outcome. Action is forced off the stage in favour of necessity; the space in which we can truly act politically is diminished by The Social in this sense.

To illustrate this point further we can take immigration as an example once more. To properly counteract this type of necessity in anti-immigration, we may also look at the way pro-immigration politicians respond. This is not done by say, philosophical or political debate about the merits of cosmopolitism or the benefits that immigration might bring. Rather, it is done by framing it as a humanitarian disaster, people dying *en masse*; in other words, as something that is necessary in a group's survival. I am not saying that either side of the argument is wrong or that they're both equal. What I am trying to show is that there is a tendency to make everything in the public sphere necessary. If it is not necessary, it cannot compete with things that are. After all, if the debate is seemingly between feeding starving people and having an extra sandwich for lunch, it seems to be no debate at all; feeding the starving will always win due its seeming urgency.

My conception of The Social as the centrality of necessity in the public realm must adequately deal with the issues I have pointed out in other authors, as well as being defined in more detail. My reading of The Social is one that is close to Arendt in several ways. First, I do not deny that The Social is still in opposition to modern privacy/intimacy on this reading. Privacy remains a realm in which we can express ourselves as unique human beings. It is also in opposition to The Social in the sense that in privacy, necessary matters do not dominate, rather individualism does. The place to flee from the public realm in which necessity remains the realm of privacy/intimacy.

Second, the problem of the possibility of political action is adequately addressed on my reading. A problem for authors such as Pitkin was that Arendt seemingly contradicted herself in arguing for the inevitability of The Social on the one hand and the great belief in individuals as catalysts for change on the other. I would argue that human agency, the capacity to act and cause change is still there in individuals, it's just that the space in which we can appear is extremely limited by modern society due to necessity taking up most of the stage. Individual action is still possible, but modern society is a negative force in allowing us to.

The evidence for the possibility of political action in the modern age is everywhere; since *The Human Condition* was written there have been several instances of it. For example, Nelson Mandela, or Martin Luther King, expressed individual ideas on the public stage, which were catalysts for change in the modern age. The alarming thing about The Social is, is that the more we allow it to dominate our public life, i.e. the more we only allow necessary matters to be public, the less space we allow for genuine action such as these examples.

It also addresses the problems in Canovan and Hayden. First, on my reading The Social remains a thing of its own; it is not just an adjective used for a type of relationship between humans. It is something separate that must be defined, similar to the way Arendt uses it. It also overcomes the problem in Hayden of political orientation, as I do not claim that The Social is pursued for its own sake, i.e. there isn't a deliberate movement towards making necessity central in the public realm, but it's an undesirable side effect of a large group of individuals' actions.

Furthermore, we may wonder why we need The Social to make this point at all. If we take our immigration example again, we can also just say that there is a trend toward political polarization or extremism. Why should we invoke a new term in order to understand our political reality? The main reason as I see it is that The Social addresses an undercurrent or more metapolitical phenomenon in the public realm. It is not something that describes the content of politics (say, in terms of ideas or ideologies) as such; it points us towards a tendency towards necessity in mass society. Like I mentioned before, it is similar to societal phenomena such as *the tragedy of the commons*, it is the tendency of large groups of people to each individually behave in such a way that there are collectively undesirable outcomes. We may be very moderated in the content of our politics (as is still the case in many countries) yet still frame all matters in the public realm as necessity. This undercurrent in which there is an urge towards necessity is what The Social and only The Social properly deals with. Even in moderated politics, when framed as necessary, we may see the dreadful relationships of violence and hierarchy that necessity may justify; if middle-of-the-road politics are framed as essential to survival, violence is still legitimized.

If I define The Social as a societal phenomenon, I also need to distance myself from the problems that were discussed in Pitkin. I do so because I do not label The Social as some type of grand unknown, rather it is something that is quite clearly defined. In this case, it is the phenomenon that large groups of people, particularly in modern mass society tend to reduce everything in the public realm to necessity. This phenomenon occurs due to household and economic relations, which are concerned with necessity, entering the public realm. The integration of the household into society is then the core component of this conception of The Social, as it is directly related to the twofold centrality of necessity. Both in the sense that economic matters are central and that political matters can only gain footing when framed as necessary.

This definition is less opaque than definitions given in other bodies of academic literature, it does away with The Social as something yet unknown (as with Pitkin), as reductionist (as with Conovan), or as something that is deliberate (as with Hayden). It redirects our attention to a more central concern for Arendt as well, namely that of how we may act (and be free) and what may allow us or disallow us to do so. This makes The Social part of broader themes within Arendt's work, such as what may allow or prevent political freedom and what the role of society is in facilitating political action. Finally, it also does away with a too complex or overly vague notion of The Social; this makes it more in line with the rest of *The Human Condition*. After all, it would seem odd if a book that is set on clarifying our condition would mystify it in the process.

**3.3: Tribalism**

To illustrate my reading of The Social it may be useful to give an example of the way it may manifest itself in modern day politics. To find such an example, we need to think of instances or trends in modern politics where (seemingly) necessary matters dominate over ideas, action or 'regular' politics. In addition to this, an example of the way The Social may manifest itself needs to be one where ideas and pluralism are clearly pushed out *in favour* of necessity. The reason for this is that showing that necessary matters sometimes dominate politics is not enough; there are good reasons for having necessity be central occasionally. What an example of my reading of The Social needs to show then, is how The Social may manifest itself, by demonstrating how in real life, necessary matters may push action out of the public realm indiscriminately. Additionally, I also need to show how The Social is relevant in explaining this example, as well as demonstrating that my reading of The Social is the best equipped to do so.

A good example of necessity being central may be what is referred to as *political tribalism*, aptly described by Amy Chua in her book *Political Tribes: Group instinct and the fate of nations*. She argues that the political 'tribes' we belong to are increasingly important in determining our identities. Rather than individual thought, our political convictions are determined by the group we belong to. For instance, because I am a white upper middle-class academic, I may be expected to be more liberal.  Similarly, being black in America may mean being a democrat and more left leaning, being white and southern may mean being republican, etc. (Chua 2018: 1-13).

Belonging to groups or identifying with a group you belong to is not a problem in and of itself; it is only natural. Human beings need to and always belong to certain groups. The problem of modern day politics is, is that people increasingly retreat into their groups, due to an increased sense that their group is being threatened. When one of the groups we belong to appears to be threatened, we retreat further into it. Take the family; when your family is threatened, you will act way more unitary then you would under normal circumstances. Additionally, group identity and tribalism become a problem when they then start to dominate over individualism. In tribalism, a kind of 'us-vs-them' rhetoric dominates over individual ideas; either accept the group identity and ideas that come with them, or be labelled as an enemy, we're under attack after all (Chua 2018: 1-13). In this manner, retreatment into group identity erodes to possibility for action and injecting one's own ideas into the world.

When one retreats into a group, several things happen to the person's individualism. Most importantly, people are normalized in-group context. We are more likely to vote, act and choose in the same manner as other group members. We do this not because we believe in the content of these choices, but because other members of the group choose in this manner as well. We tend to conform; if all others choose A over B, we are far more likely to choose A regardless of its implications. When we are asked in privacy, we may choose either, but base our answer on the content of the choices, rather than what others choose (Chua 2018: 100-135). If group identity becomes more important, we thus tend to conform more to our peers because we are more retreated into the group.

The problem with this retreatment into a group or tribe is that it is hard to counteract. We are often unaware of the groups we belong to. For example, people may identify as a 'citizen of the world' which in and of itself is a certain group of people that identifies as such. It has clear members and people that do not belong to it, such as nationalists (Chua 2018: 1-15).  Furthermore, being more intelligent and reasonable does not counteract group identity very effectively either. In fact, it makes

us more likely to manipulate data and facts in an intelligent way to fit our group narrative (Chua 2018: 101-102).

A very clear example of this way of the importance of group identity and tribalism is what we may call *identity politics.* In a broad sense, identity politics refers to 'cultural and social movements based on group identities' (Chua 2018: 177). These types of movements have always existed but have become more polarized in modern politics. Where in the past these movements at least partially embraced group-transcending values, they increasingly only fight for their own group today. There is an increased sense of threat in the language and rhetoric of these movements today. For instance, the rise of white nationalism, framed as a fight against 'white genocide' (Kaplan 2000: 538-540) on the right clearly uses a perceived threat as justification for its existence and a reason to embrace white identity. Similarly, the left's emphasis on all-encompassing inclusivity to the point that people who don't agree are excluded, is also a way to use the seeming threat of intolerance as an excuse to retreat into group identity. Within both respective groups, group identity rather than individualism dominates; after all, you are under attack, so you need to act as a unit to protect your interests (Chua 2018: 165-166, 177-192). This tribalism is a danger to proper political discourse and erodes individuality in favour of group conformity and identity.

**3.4: Tribalism and The Social**

So why does this make a good example of a way in which The Social may manifest itself? Moreover, why is it relevant to understand this type of political tribalism in terms of The Social? In other words, what is the benefit of using The Social here rather than other political concepts? I will argue that this is the case for two main reasons. First, tribalism and group identity becoming more important are prime examples of the twofold centrality of necessity. Second, this demonstrates are broader, underlying trend, i.e. The Social rather than specific political ideologies or surface level trends such as polarization.

As pointed out, group identity and group-related activism have always existed in one form or another. Often, the political goals of these groups were legitimate and necessary. For example, the achievement of proper wages for the working class or the achievement of civil rights by Afro-Americans.  Their achievement often was not without struggle; often they involved riots, bloodshed and sometimes-even war. Similar to what Arendt argues, the necessity of the achievement of these goals was what justified the use of violence and domination. This is not problematic on its if there is still room for non-necessary, non-violent action in the public realm. Sometimes issues may in fact be so pressing, so necessary that they justify more extreme matters by one group or another.

The problem with tribalism and group identity however is that it leaves very little room for any politics outside group survival. If politics are more and more thought of in terms of threat, 'with us or against us' type mentalities then this leads to individualism being pushed off in favour of group activism. This is where The Social comes in; the reshaping of political debate into necessity twofold. After all, the public realm, if group identity is important, is dominated by those matters that are perceived as necessary in a group's survival. This then turns the political debate violent and hierarchical and erodes individualism in favour of group conformity as survival takes precedence over regular political matters. Politics based on group identity as the only mode of political action centres politics around necessity, understood in terms of group survival. This is different from the group-related activism from the past, as in those cases, there was still room for individual action, and not just group identity had the stage, but acting individuals as well. In this sense, necessity is favoured

over action and pluralism. Both economic and political matters that concern these groups are then framed as necessary in the public realm, eroding proper political discourse.

The importance of group identity then poses three problems in terms of Arendtian freedom. First, it removes our ability to inject our own ideas into the world and to appear as individuals to others. If we are forced to choose between groups, which have a determined set of political ideals, we can no longer begin something new, we are forced to choose between existing options. This directly relates to our second problem, it diminishes freedom in the sense of only giving us a choice *between* options rather than creating our own, it is only limited freedom of choice. Finally, it's subjection to necessity disguised as politics; it's not the actual freedom found in action, but rather a subjection to the preconditions for freedom, i.e. necessity.

The reason for invoking The Social in examples such as this is that it points us towards an underlying trend within modern day politics. Tribalism is an effect of this trend, i.e. it is a way in which The Social may manifest itself. Tribalism is attractive because it hands us the type of politics that are accepted in the public realm; those of necessity. Perceived threats make for a good excuse for politics if The Social is present in the public realm; they allow you to frame ideas as necessary. Using The Social as a cause for the dangerous forms that group identity takes in tribalism, doesn't diminish the importance of group identity altogether and doesn't ignore the plight of repressed groups. Rather it points us to the way that these legitimate causes of groups may be perverted if the public realm's focus is on necessity.

The solution to the violence and language in these tribalist politics, such as the Charlottesville riots in 2017, where several people were killed (Bromwich, 2017) or the censorship of conservative speakers in universities (Turner, 2018) then isn't addressing the group alone. The interpretation of these types of events on an account of The Social such as I have presented calls for a 'deeper' solution. We should not address violent, necessary based political groups alone, since this does not address the root cause of these problems. Rather, we should address the impossibility of political action in a society that focusses its public realm on necessity. We need to understand that not just the increased sense of threat forces people into these group politics, but also that society facilitates this type of necessity-based politics better than individualism and action due to The Social. This is why using The Social, rather than just sticking to surface-level analysis in tribalism, polarization, extremism, etc. may provide a deeper understanding of what is wrong with the modern condition and may help us address it in the process.

**3.5: Concluding remarks regarding necessity and tribalism**

To recap, I have attempted to give my own definition of The Social in this chapter, as well as offering a contemporary example of how The Social may manifest itself in modern day politics. I have argued that we should not treat The Social as some kind of unknown phenomena, but rather refocus our attention on the twofold degradation of politics it brings. This twofold degradation should be understood as the necessary turning public, and the political turning necessary. Understood in this way, we avoid the problems in other author's accounts, as well as having a more clear-cut definition of The Social. It also means staying close to Arendt's own belief in the ability of individuals to cause political change.

The contemporary example I have given for this interpretation is based on Chua's *Political Tribes*. I have argued that the increased tribalism in modern politics, which should be seen as the increasing importance of group identities is a way in which The Social may manifest itself. This is not because

group identities are themselves bad; it is just that retreating into them when there are certain perceived threats are present makes political action impossible. It turns the debate into matters of life and death for the group you belong to, i.e. it focusses discourse between groups on necessity, rather than on exchanges of ideas. It erodes individual freedom and removes people's ability to appear to others in the public realm and begin something new. Using The Social is more useful then more 'surface-level' descriptions of society, as The Social points us towards an underlying trend within society, rather than just the surface level manifestation that we may see of this trend.

**Conclusion**

In this essay, I have sought to explore the concept of 'The Social' in the work of Hannah Arendt and subsequent discussions in academic literature. I have also defined The Social in my own manner by focusing how The Social turns the public realm into a realm of necessity in a twofold manner. Finally, I have given a contemporary example of this interpretation in the shape of modern political tribalism. As expected, The Social is a very hard to grasp concept and interpretations strongly differ regarding what it is and what its implications are. I therefore do not pretend that my interpretation of The Social is the only correct one, but I do think that a simpler, clearer version like mine, which does not turn The Social into a type of all-consuming inevitable force, may be fruitful.

The reason being is that I have always read Arendt's work as greatly emphasizing the human ability to cause change. For good or for bad, we should never underestimate our capacity to influence the world in meaningful ways. In *Totalitarianism* or *Eichmann,* the implications of this are quite dark; we are not beyond committing the greatest horrors that man has ever known. We should not underestimate that we too can be violent and destructive if we do not think for ourselves, don't question authority and give into a mob mentality. In my eyes, Arendt never presents these things as inevitable, but rather as things that require human individualism and action to prevent. This may be difficult or dangerous, but we should never make light of our ability to prevent evil, as well as cause it; in the end, we can only save ourselves.

The Social, then presents in similar fashion a dark side to modern society. While it is more subtle and appears less all-encompassing than the totalitarian regimes of the past, it is still a danger that we should confront. Mass society forces us into socialized patterns of behaviour and conformism, diminishing the public realm as a space in which we can act politically. Again, this is a dark side of human behaviour, similar to other types of undesirable behaviour that run throughout Arendt's work. I do not think we should treat The Social as an inevitability or something that is beyond ourselves however. If Arendt's work were to have any consistency at all, it would be odd if she completely diminishes her fundamental belief in human capacity, with a term that is not very clearly defined.

What I wanted to suggest in this essay is then that The Social is something that is very real and very dangerous indeed. However, I have tried to advocate, unlike many others in analysing this concept, that this does not imply helplessness. Human pluralism has not died nor has true political action, yet as in much of Arendt's work, it is severely hindered by society's constraints and demands. Arendt's work is a warning for what we may do to ourselves if we fail to act as individuals – not a helpless cry of a society unable to deal with the consequences of its own actions. Modernity may indeed expose our limited capacity to change things about the world, yet this does not imply that we are not or will never be able to.

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