

***Whoever You Are, You May Be a Polis:***

**The Political Theory of Hannah Arendt and the Political Practice  
of Saul Alinsky**

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Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply "blah, blah, blah," and practice, pure activism.

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*

... the predicament of the poor after their self-preservation has been assured is that their lives are without consequence, and that they remain excluded from the light of the public realm where excellence can shine; they stand in darkness wherever they go.

— Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*

The only way the poor are going to get what they need is through strong, militant organizations of their own.

— Saul Alinsky

This struggle may be a moral one or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did; it never will.

— Frederick Douglass, speaking in Canandaigua, NY, 3 August 1857

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### **Introduction: the Theorist and the Rebel**

Hannah Arendt and Saul Alinsky probably would not have liked each other. Arendt thinks of herself as a political theorist from “the tradition of German philosophy” (*Jew as Pariah* 246) wary of political identities and ideological labels, who shied away from commitments, which “can easily carry you to a point where you do no longer think” (qtd. in Hill 308). Alinsky was a die-hard activist and self-styled rebel who once carried business cards reading “Have trouble, will travel” (*Playboy* 78), a man with little time or patience for highbrow philosophizing and theoretical work. Yet both individuals have created a lasting impression, the former on how we understand, the latter on how we should employ, the concepts of ‘power’ and ‘politics.’ Their works have a number of such striking similarities that when they differ it seems less of a theoretical disagreement than a new way of conceptualizing or reading a shared concern. We can see our concerns or agreements with Arendt present in Alinsky (and vice-versa) to such an extent that by reading their respective accounts of politics and power, we shed new light on what exactly we find troubling, encouraging or enlightening in the first place.

This project proposes to lead the reader into the thick of it by reading Alinsky through Arendt, and Arendt through Alinsky. This will not only complicate and challenge their respective accounts of the meaning and place of politics in our lives, but will enable us to understand what we should indeed value in politics, and then what we should do about it. We have been blessed with two thoughtful and engaged individuals each at the top of their field, with similar concerns over the state of the American democracy but with *very* different perspectives, *very* different commitments. It is up to us to decide how to implement their teaching, and by reading Arendt and Alinsky simultaneously, we can open up new spaces in which to think about the role of political action and thought.

Briefly, Alinsky shows the ability of Arendtian political theory to be embodied and successfully utilized even in a politics that refuses to give up the "commitments" Arendt distrusts. However, Arendt anticipates some of the difficulties Alinsky encountered, and provides theoretical solutions that augment his organizing method. Both writers are motivated by a concern for everyday people to become engaged in politics, and rally against the loss of a dynamic public realm. Indeed, their diagnoses are nearly identical, pegging the problem at a perceived inability to create change, to act in public to change the world. Thus, their solutions find common ground in devising a politics of action and conflict, eschewing the notion of consensus and the alienating effects of procedural politics, while retaining a civic-minded spirit. Their politics are both agonistic, a term that comes from the Greek *agon*, a public celebration of games or the contest for the prize at those games.<sup>1</sup> The game for Arendt and Alinsky is the explosive, contentious action of politics itself; the prize is our very freedom. For both authors, only within a dynamic public realm where action and conflict prevail, will we be able to recover our "lost treasure" (*On Revolution* 215). For Arendt, this treasure is the triumvirate of action, politics and freedom, the use of which gives the fullest embodiment of the human condition. For Alinsky, our lost treasure is the democratic spirit as practiced in the illustrious history of American radicals who lead a life of justice fighting for the Have-Nots of their day.

This is not to say Arendt and Alinsky are always in agreement. Indeed, Arendt insists that politics cannot take place where necessity is present, while Alinsky argues that politics is the only way in which necessity will be overcome. Arendt professes a love for the world, and Alinsky a love for the people of the world. And yet read through and in conversation with each other, their differences provide a productive tension in which we can understand their mutual teachings. Enough said. Let's let them speak for themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 4 April 2003 <<http://www.oed.com>>.

## Part One: Hannah Arendt

### (I) Arendt on Politics, Action and the Public Realm

Arendt's agonistic politics can be understood by paying close attention to the role of the ancient Greek notion of the polis as the site of citizen's revelatory speech and action. The polis under Arendt is not a physical space, but rather:

the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. "Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*" ... expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. (HC 198)

The polis is simultaneously the space of political action and speech as well as the expression of the public realm that arises when political action takes place. The polis is where "men exist not merely like other or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (HC 198-199). For Arendt, the polis is a space unique to human beings, and provides the ability to disclose who one really is.

The polis pays tribute to the unique "human condition of plurality" (HC 7) that is "the basic condition of both action and speech" (HC 175), the foundation of politics. In the polis, we are given the ability to engage in action that simultaneously discloses and gives birth to the actor. Disclosure happens when we take action in the polis, "the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were" (HC 41) and gives rise to the political actor herself, for "with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth" (HC 176). This second birth that takes place in action, "the political activity par excellence," corresponds to "the human condition of natality" (HC 9). As the "new beginning inherent in birth," natality is thus "the central category of political... thought" (HC 9). In the polis we take action that expresses both our individual natality and our group plurality of uniqueness, the condition of humanity that "we

are 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" (HC 8).

Yet we must maintain togetherness despite the diversity component of human plurality in order to act, for Arendt writes, "only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others" (HC 23). Indeed, the very "'products' of action and speech," writes Arendt, depend "entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence" (HC 95). Dana Villa accurately points out that for Arendt, "plurality is not just a condition, but also an *achievement* of political action and speech" ("Postmodernism" 717). Action can only happen in concert with others, for others must be present to view the disclosure of the actor, as an audience is necessary to view a performance. The political actor must be seen and heard in order for her actions produce their goods, that is, to maintain "the fabric of human relationships and affairs" that constitutes the public realm (HC 95).

Arendt's definition of power similarly depends on human plurality in the public realm. Arendt writes that power "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (*Crisis of the Republic* 143). Arendtian power "corresponds to the condition of [human] plurality" (HC 201) and thus "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (HC 200). It is from power arising "wherever men come together, in whatever numbers," as their "public interests come into play," that then "the public realm is formed" ("What Remains?" 22). While the public realm is constituted through action and speech, it is power that keeps the public realm, "the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence" (HC 200). When political actors come together in action and speech, they give rise to a human power that, "like action, is boundless" (HC 201). Power takes place in the spaces between acting individuals when they act together "to establish relationships and create new realities" (HC 200). Power is the

collective force that gives rise to new beginnings, and what gives action the ability to give birth to the actor.

Since "action is the political activity par excellence" (HC 9), we can understand politics as a constant disclosure of the individuality, the very "who-ness" of the citizen, as unveiled through action. Moreover, without this unveiling activity of the citizen, action is no longer political. "Without the disclosure of the agent in the act," Arendt states, "action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others" (HC 180). Thus "speech and action" in the ancient Greek conception that Arendt privileges, "were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind" (HC 26). Action, which always "has the closest connection with the human condition of natality," is the ability to make itself felt in the world through the beginning of something new (HC 9). This newness carries with it the disclosure of the acting agent and is exemplified by public speech. Together, these qualities of action and speech are the foundations of the *humanness* of our lives. For "a life without speech and without action... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men" (HC 176). Arendt wrote in *Men in Dark Times* (hereafter *MDT*) that as the world "lies between people" (*MDT* 4), without speech and action the individual never enters into these in-between spaces and cannot be said to truly live. Again, Arendt returns to the criteria that a human life is one lived among others in the space of action and appearance.

The necessity of maintaining the public realm, "as the common world" which "gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other" is the very necessity of maintaining the conditions under which we can lead a human life (HC 52). The public realm was "reserved for individuality" (HC 41) that is, the expression of the uniqueness of each human life. Thus action, which only takes place in the common world of the public realm, is also alone "the exclusive prerogative of man" (HC 23). Here Arendt's agonistic account of politics comes into focus. We must

maintain the public realm in order to enter the space of action and appearance that is unique to our human species. But in order to maintain it, we must press ourselves into taking the kind of action that creates this space. It is only through action and speech, the basic components of participation in agonistic politics, that we can maintain the public realm.

However, Arendt's conception of politics is best understood as a reaction against her greatest fear: the rise of the social. What is the social? What is its relationship with politics and action? Often overlooked, Arendt's concept of the social is where her politics, alive with action and conflict, really begins. Moreover, Saul Alinsky maintains nearly identical concerns over the problems Arendt details in her theorization of the social. The concept of the social is the *raison d'être* for both Arendt's theorization of an agonistic political theory and Alinsky's agonistic political practice. Arendt's theorization of the social provides a lucid account of the motivations of both herself and Alinsky and is a problem we must investigate.

## **(II) The Problem of the Social**

### **Equality and the Danger of the Social**

Arendt's insistence on agonistic political action is most deeply motivated by what she calls "the rise of the social" (HC 38). "The social" is the name given by Arendt to the perceived loss of the human capacity for political action, that although people possess the ability to act, they cannot (or will not) do so. Action, associated with the political sphere, is squelched when the public and the private realms are subsumed by the social. The rise of the social, which "coincided with the emergence of the modern age," has "not only blurred the old borderline between private and political" but altered the very meanings of these terms (HC 28, 38). The social is our collective impotence to enact the changes we need to take in the world, and as Hannah Pitkin points out, constitutes "a collectivity of people who... conduct

themselves in such a way that they cannot control or even intentionally influence the large-scale consequences of their activities" (Pitkin 16). This impotence takes place despite Arendt's teaching that "we are always already free-to-become-free" (Pitkin 282). The social is Arendt's diagnosis of the problem that "people *are* power without *having* it" (Pitkin 282).

What is the social exactly? Where does it come from and how is it different from what we had before? These questions are difficult to answer, as Pitkin rightly notes that the social is worth exploring because "the concept was... radically at odds with her most central and valuable teaching" of a realistic, employable understanding of "human agency and freedom" (Pitkin 4). Clear examples of the social are hard to find even in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt delineates between the three spheres of the public, the private and the social. Indeed, when writing about the social, Arendt "never defines her terms" (Pitkin 11). As Pitkin points out, the closest we ever get to an example of the social in *The Human Condition* is where Arendt likens "the rise of society" with "the rise of the 'household'... or of economic activities to the public realm" (HC 33).

In "Reflections on Little Rock" Arendt describes the social as the realm of one's vocation, and implies that schools and neighborhoods are also part of the social ("Reflections" 237). After the rise of the social, we can envision the social the blurring of the public and the private, a space where discourse regarding private needs (food, housing, and other basic necessities) improperly take on a public character. In a panel discussion, Arendt argued social problems, such as the need for housing, should be kept distinct from political ones, such as integration:

Let's take the housing problem. The social problem is certainly adequate housing. But the question of whether this adequate housing means integration or not is certainly a political question. With every one of these questions there is a double face. And one of these faces should not be subject to debate. There shouldn't be any debate about the question that everyone should have decent housing. (qtd. in Hill 318)

According to Arendt, the social needs of each individual are the basic necessities for life. They should not be subject to political debate, and when they take on a political character, pollute the public sphere. Social issues must be kept distinct from the desire to end discrimination, which she argues is not a basic need for everyday life. A human life, under Arendt's rubric, can be fully lived despite discrimination, and in order to contest *political* issues such as discrimination, one must react to them politically. In the collection *The Jew as Pariah* (hereafter *JAP*) Arendt wrote that the Jew subjected to anti-Semitism "who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position" as well as "the blot on mankind which it represented" (*JAP* 77). To become a rebel, the "conscious pariah" enters "the arena of politics, and translates his status into political terms" (*JAP* 69, 77). Arendt makes a clear distinction between the basic needs of life, the social questions which have objective answers that should never be politically contested, and the decisions of groups to discriminate. Indeed, when social problems find their way into the public realm the ability to secure the social goods necessary for basic life (housing, in this case) can be lost in the ensuing political struggle. Similarly, it is a political question with regard to housing segregation, and it damages the chances of securing what should be an uncontested need for adequate housing when this need is conflated with integration. When the state, a political body, chooses to discriminate, as in the case of "the law which makes mixed marriage a criminal offense" it is obviously "outrageous" and unjust, but in the social question of *actual* mixed marriages the Supreme Court should not feel "compelled to encourage, let alone enforce, mixed marriages" ("Reflections on Little Rock" 236). Arendt stresses the need to avoid conflating political and social struggles, for as they blur they confuse which faces of a given question should be subject to debate with ones that should not.

Arendt wrote about the political movement for desegregation in her controversial essay "Reflections on Little Rock." Desegregation is a political battle

because "segregation is discrimination enforced by law" ("Reflections" 237). However, this purely political struggle cannot legislate actions in the social realm, and desegregation "cannot abolish discrimination and force equality upon society," but must instead "enforce equality within the body politic" ("Reflections" 237). The Supreme Court must strike down the laws barring mixed-race marriages, but cannot enforce racial harmony within society. What is different between the realms of the public and the social is how equality is a precondition for the former, but conspicuously absent in the latter. Arendt writes that "equality not only has its origin in the body politic; its validity is clearly restricted to the political realm" and it is "only there are we all equals" ("Reflections" 237). In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes that the public realm "knew only 'equals,'" and contrasts it to the realm of the household, "the center of the strictest inequality" (HC 32). We all participate in this realm, but not as equals, meaning that in the social realm we carry with us our unequal economic, racial, gender and sexual markers. Yet these markers must fall away once we enter into the public realm, where politics creates equality by definition. In the public sphere each individual has the same capacity for speech and action, the ability to act in public and upon the world despite their social standpoint.

Society, on the other hand, is "that curious, somewhat hybrid realm between the political and the private" where we are driven by our economic needs ("the need to earn a living") and where, opposed to the commitment to "personal distinction" in the theatrical public realm of unique spontaneous action, "like attracts like" ("Reflections" 237). This is not the deeply problematic "conformism" of modern mass society that Arendt attacks in *The Human Condition*, but the freedom of individuals to join groups, organized around interests, and "this kind of organization has to do with a relation to the world," critical to prevent alienation and a feeling of worldlessness ("What Remains?" 17). This relation is not based on conformism which

“allows for only one interest and one opinion” (HC 46), but in fact can prevent *widespread* conformism with the maintenance of differences between groups.

The social realm, according to Arendt, is founded on inequality and discrimination just as the public realm is founded on equality (“Reflections” 237). We witness how the inequality of our social standpoints invariably leads members to “belong to certain groups” whose very “identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups in the same domain” (“Reflections” 238). With the inequality of social positions readily visible, the social realm is the space where individuals seek to exist amongst their own kind, and where they become unable (or unwilling) to step away from their social standpoint to create the equality of the public sphere.

The social realm finds individuals drawn to their social peers, forming groups that in order to create a collective group-identity, must reject the membership of others. For Arendt, this is not necessarily a problem, for “without discrimination of some sort, society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear” (“Reflections” 238). Free association is no doubt a critical component of democratic politics, but is not the end, nor the goal, of politics. For Arendt, politics must include the ability of each individual to express, through speech and action, their uniqueness, the fact that each individual is never “the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live” (HC 8).

“Personal identity,” the unique fact of the human species, writes Arendt, “has its source beyond the social realm” (“Reflections” 238). This fact is ignored in the social sphere, as our attention is directed towards the social positions of class, race, gender, sexual orientation and other identifying traits with normative connotations in our hierarchical society.

However, Arendt also defends the social as a space in which people can utilize their civil liberties of association. The benefit of the social realm is that it gives people the ability to discriminate and resist conformism. Conformism, which is a

characteristic of "every society" as each individual in a social group conforms "to the general traits of difference which keep the group together," becomes truly problematic given the rise of mass society "which blurs lines of discrimination and levels group distinctions" ("Reflections" 238). Arendt writes that conformism is "the assumption that men behave and do not act with respect to each other," and begins on a mass scale when the social is no longer confined (HC 41-42). With the rise of mass society men have "become social beings and unanimously [follow] certain patterns of behavior" (HC 42) and thus mass society is a danger "to society as such," that is, to the positive effects of the social realm's space of discrimination and group identification ("Reflections" 238). Conformism of individuals is a necessary condition for a formation of a social group, but this social group is also a site of resistance to the society-wide conformism present in the rise of mass society. To resist conformism on the large scale, Arendt promotes small-scale groups founded via the right to free association/discrimination. By keeping discrimination "confined within the social sphere, where it is legitimate" we can prevent its trespass "on the political and the personal" spheres, "where it is destructive" ("Reflections" 238). Otherwise, conformism and the leveling of distinctions will calcify into "an absolute and a substitute for national homogeneity" ("Reflections" 238) and obscure our human plural uniqueness for good.

The great difficulty of the social is to maintain it in its limited scope, to allow the right kind of *social* discrimination and prevent it from seeping into *political* discrimination. This task has become all the more difficult in the modern world where the private realm of the household and the public realm of the polis "constantly flow into each other like waves" and we have lost the "gulf between the private and the public" realms (HC 33). Additionally, the distinction between the public and the social realms has also become "much less distinct" and now "politics is nothing but a function of society" (HC 33). According to Arendt, in the modern epoch the social

realm has gotten completely out of hand, and in taking over the public realm the social attempts to destroy what is uniquely political. In her "Reflections," Arendt envisioned a social realm that was controlled and useful, with predictable outcomes that actually *furthered* politics and resisted widespread conformism. But in *The Human Condition* she notes how the "rise of society" and the "admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm" has shown that the social has "an irresistible tendency... to *devour* the older realms of the political and the private" (HC 45, my emphasis). What was once controlled has been let loose to wreak havoc; what was once useful for human beings has turned against them. The social-out-of-hand is best understood as Hannah Pitkin does, as metaphorized into an alien Blob that appears as a theoretical construction granted full agency, and is able to consume, devour and destroy at will. It is to her work that we now turn.

### **The Social as the Blob**

In her full-length account of the problem of the social with the rather bizarre title *The Attack of the Blob*, Pitkin provides an insightful, if flawed, history of Arendt's problem of the social, connecting Arendt's personal and intellectual growth to the changing nature of "the social." Pitkin argues that to understand Arendt's conception of the social, we have to view it as an all-devouring alien entity, like "the Blob" of 1950's science fiction film fame (Pitkin 4). It is important to note from the outset that Pitkin, as her title suggests, limits her study to the social-out-of-hand and completely ignores Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock," and thus her view of a positive (albeit limited) social.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, Pitkin's analysis of the *problematic* social is what is needed, for the social we are now confronted with is not the limited one promoted by Arendt's "Reflections" but the one that, like mass society, serves to "threaten humanity with extinction" (HC 46).

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Peter Baehr's review of Pitkin (*Times Literary Supplement* Feb. 5, 1999) for raising the issue of this striking omission.

Pitkin writes that the confusion surrounding the social stems from the “most basic structural paradox of *The Human Condition*” where the social appears to come from outer space, “debilitating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us” while Arendt continues to stress our ability to engage in spontaneous action, thought and speech (Pitkin 4). However, even before we arrive at *The Human Condition*, Arendt had already begun to develop her idea of the social. Pitkin begins her story with Arendt’s biography *Rahel Varnhagen*, where society is connected with an “entire system of status hierarchy” where pariah people have the option of becoming parvenus, social climbers, by assimilating themselves into the social hierarchy and internalizing the values of the very system that designated them a pariah (Pitkin 32). In *Rahel Varnhagen* the social affects individuals, and they have to choose a course of action, to either follow the (sometimes successful, but severely limiting) parvenu path, or remain a (constrained) pariah. This is far from the social of *The Human Condition*, with its mass character and loss of agency.

In *The Jew as Pariah* the social plays a critical role in the extreme pariahdom and persecution of Jews under Nazi rule. Arendt cites Kafka as stating “the basic truth that ‘society is a nobody in a dress-suit’” and updates it with a quote by Proust who characterizes (French) society as “a masquerade with a death’s head grinning behind every mask” (*JAP* 82). What used to be a somewhat harmless social hierarchy is now a lethal dance involving the whole mass of the pariah population. Pitkin correctly views that the change in Arendt’s conception of society has “shifted from empty foolishness to lethal fanaticism” and moreover, has “enlisted the resources of the state” as witnessed in Naziism (Pitkin 52). The new image of society is one that has the ability to permit gross humanitarian disasters, and where resistance looks grim. Arendt views the Nazi camps as exemplifying the new lethality of the parvenu strategy of assimilation, which will end in the destruction of the parvenu herself, as well as the mass of non-assimilated pariahs (Pitkin 56).

The lethal nature of society is explored in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where the social is transformed from “a tool for understanding Jewish assimilation” during the Nazi era to “the key to understanding anti-Semitism itself, Naziism, the holocaust” (Pitkin 70). In these pages Pitkin successfully uses her image of the Blob to explain Arendt’s linking of the social with the dangers of totalitarianism. The nature of totalitarianism, Pitkin writes, “consists in actively depriving people of their autonomy,” the same quality the parvenu had chosen to give up, but now becomes a dangerous “inexorable process” that “acquires a will and purpose of its own” (Pitkin 70). Totalitarianism, with its intentional destruction of individuality, takes a new form of bureaucratic government that hides the leader of the movement with a series of “circles or spheres” (Pitkin 89). This lethal form of government is no longer even political, and indeed will soon gain the title “the most social form of government,” where the “rule by nobody” can become one of the “most cruelest and most tyrannical versions” of government (*HC* 40). With a rule by nobody (and “not a benevolent nobody” at that), Arendt remarks we “cannot hold anybody responsible for what happens because there is really no author of deeds and events” (qtd. in Hill 327). Moreover, the lines between those who have power and those who are subjected to it begin to blur, as in the concentration camps where the totalitarian process is most evident, “the guards eventually come to resemble the prisoners” and soon the “camps are no longer needed” as “the system rests on everyone’s apathetic obedience” (Pitkin 93). This is the idea of the Blob explicitly stated, and although its name is “totalitarianism” and not “society,” it becomes hard to argue with Pitkin after reading *The Human Condition* that they are not in fact the same thing.

### **The Social-as-Blob in *The Human Condition***

As Arendt’s most fully-detailed exploration of “the social,” *The Human Condition* argues that for the ancients, economic matters were hidden from the public realm, but with the rise of modernity, society, and its problems have emerged

“from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere” (HC 38). This has detrimentally affected our understanding of the private and the public spheres, and the social has “blurred the old borderline between private and political” and almost fully destroyed the meaning of these terms (HC 38).

The household, which formerly pertained “to the private sphere of the family,” has now “become a ‘collective’ concern” as wide as the scope of politics (HC 33). Distinctions are obliterated and terms are obscured beyond recognition when the social realm, “neither private nor public” (HC 28) but the “curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance that we call ‘society’” (HC 35) overtakes the political sphere to enact a “gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping” (HC 28). This is a metaphorical government based not on politics and public life per se, but on the necessity of the private lives of individuals. This precludes the ability of citizens to take part in political action, action that expresses their plural uniqueness. For action is excluded from the household, as individual “family units” are absorbed “into one society,” that suppresses uniqueness and spontaneous action (HC 40, 41). For Arendt the “household,” unlike the polis, was not a space of equality, and “within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist” (HC 32). It is with the rise of the social that inability to take action in the household destroys the public sphere.

The household was where activities “related to the maintenance of life” took place and its “distinctive trait” was how “in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs” (HC 28, 30). In *On Revolution* (hereafter OR) Arendt writes that the maintenance of life is related to the “biological process” itself, and unless we maintain a private realm to fulfill our biological wants and needs, poverty will “impose its inherent necessity upon us, and overawe us” (OR 59). For Arendt, poverty, the condition of necessities that cannot be fulfilled, “puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies” and clouds the ability to take civic-minded public

action (OR 60). Therefore necessity is “a driving force whose urgency is unmatched” and although it prevents “apathy and disappearance of initiative,” it must be kept in the private realm, and cannot seep into politics where actors, despite their best efforts, will only follow the dictates of their bodies and ignore the civic interest (HC 70). Thus it was only when a person had secured the necessities of life in the household could she have the “condition for freedom of the *polis*” (HC 31). The notion of housekeeping is Arendt’s metaphor for the blurring of the public and the private lives of individuals, and the demeaning of politics to nothing more than the fulfilling of the biological process. We see this in the tendency of modern regimes to focus on the doling out of services and resources while giving scant attention to the creation of a political space for citizen action and debate.

As a corrective, Arendt resurrects the ancient Greek notion of the opposition of political life and the life of the household, calling it a “simple historical fact” that the “foundation of the *polis*” could take place only after the “destruction of all organized units of kinship” (HC 24). This allowed the polis to exclude “everything merely necessary or useful” (HC 25). Similarly, the social is opposed to the private realm. According to Arendt, “modern privacy,” “the social realm” and “the political” are all “sharply opposed” (HC 38). While the Greek polis had opposed to it the private household *oikia*, which hid the private affairs of individuals, the rise of the social has allowed these private affairs to leak into the public realm with public discourse over our private and economic lives. Arendt writes that “since the admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm,” the social has had “an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and private” (HC 45). The “private realm of the household,” once the “sphere of necessities of life,” (HC 45) has found its champion in the social and has colonized the public realm.

For Pitkin, the social calls out for politicization, and opens up the ambiguity that we “are right now both unfree... and free-to-become-free” (Pitkin 196). By imagining the social as the Blob, it “both expresses and hides the difficulties” of the paradox of our collective (un-) freedom (Pitkin 250). As opposed to action in the political realm, the social is the realm of behavior, which is according to Pitkin “action *manqué*,” the lack of action and politics where they are needed. Thus the social is “inherently tied” to “missed alternatives, unrealized possibilities, what we can do, or what we could do if circumstances were changed” (Pitkin 240). What we need to do, argues Arendt and Pitkin (as well as Saul Alinsky), is change these circumstances.

Pitkin writes that the social without the “mythology” of the Blob image is simply “the absence of politics where politics belongs,” where “the large-scale outcomes” of citizens’ activities “happen as if independent of any human agency, as if these people had been swallowed by some Blob” (Pitkin 252). The mythology of the Blob allows us to see how people “for whatever reason... cannot, or at any rate do not, direct or even intentionally influence the large-scale resultants of what they are doing,” and have become agents that act “*as if*” they had been devoured by the Blob (Pitkin 201-202, her italics).

### **Necessity, Mass Society and the French Revolution**

What are we to make of the Blob? Pitkin is surely right that Arendt envisions the social as a critical problem for us to address, and the image of the Blob serves to illuminate the difficulties in soliciting solutions for this ailment. Moreover, the Blob image creates theoretical bridges between the rise of totalitarianism in *The Origins* and the rise of the social in *The Human Condition*. It also helps us understand what Arendt would make of bringing so-called “social” demands of housing and human welfare into the public realm. However, it refuses to yield any easy answers, and we must address two other aspects of Arendt’s thought to come to terms with the problem of the social.

The first is mass society, which Arendt associates with the rise of the social, and the second is the public/private split where politics and necessity are opposed. For Arendt, the household is the space where the life of the family takes place, and where "one is supposed to tend to one's personal biological needs" (Pitkin 13). With the rise of the social, "all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a 'collective' concern" (HC 33). Thus we can understand Arendt's association of behavior with the role of the family, and as Pitkin notes "for Arendt... society seems to be bent on making us behave, as an irritated parent might impose rules of conduct on children in the family" (Pitkin 14).

With the rise of the social, politics as heroic action is destroyed, and the distinctions that allow the "who-ness" of each individual are no longer witnessed, for "the social realm... made excellence anonymous" (HC 49). Indeed, the rise of the social "after several centuries of development," has finally "conquered the public realm" and now "distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual" (HC 41). With the entrance of necessity and the biological process into the public realm, these overwhelming desires solidify into public conformism and rote behavior. We become nothing more than cogs in the bureaucratic machine. Looking to the political realm and the state to solve our biological needs, politics devolves into simply arguing over the dispensation of resources. Lost is the separation between fulfillment of base needs and public display of the uniqueness of individuals. The social ruins the public unveiling of difference and disclosure and now "behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship" (HC 41). The uniqueness of action, its spontaneity and unpredictability, has been replaced by rote behavior now that the social has blurred the public and private realms.

With the rise of the social the organizational model of the household has taken root in the public realm. As a result, mass society emerged, and we learn that the social realm had finally "conquered the public realm" (HC 41) while perverting

the private realm as well. On the one hand, the public realm has been destroyed and “all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family” where each individual possesses the same “perspective of his neighbor” (HC 58). Without the public realm “men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others” (HC 58). Yet on the other hand, Arendt writes how “mass society not only destroys the public realm but the private as well” and “deprives men” of their “private home, where they once felt sheltered against the world” (HC 59). Without the shelter from the world, we lose a “tangible, worldly place of one’s own” (HC 70) from which to step out into the public realm. Private discourse is lost with the rise of the social, and with it goes “the only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity” (HC 71). Mass society destroys the space between participants provided by the private realm so necessary in the public world of plurality and disclosure. Under mass society, the world between individuals has “lost its power to gather them together, to relate and separate them” (HC 53).

The condition of “mass society, where man as a social animal rules supreme,” threatens “humanity with extinction” (HC 46). The condition of human plurality, exemplified by “distinction and difference,” after the rise of the social has “become private matters of the individual” (HC 41). The obliteration of the public viewing of excellence and human plurality by the social will eventually dissolve what is uniquely human. Because we have “entirely blurred” the “dividing line” between the public and the private, we have impoverished our conception of the private life so critical to maintaining the public sphere. What we need to recapture, according to Arendt, is the ability to maintain these two distinctly different spheres.

Luckily, we still possess this ability. We have not lost our innate capacities for political action, for foundings and revolutions, for changing the way things are. Indeed, Pitkin notes that Arendt isn’t an average mass society theorist, with their

fatalistic outlook that "human progress has come to an end" (Pitkin 171). Rather, Arendt "explicitly envisions an alternative" and insists that it is still within reach despite her vision of "the social as a Blob rather than as a condition that we are even now continually generating" (Pitkin 171). The Blob serves to remind us that while mass society is a human creation, and thus open to change by humans at any time, we have become so mired in it that we are unable to view it as such. Rather, the Blob-esque imagery in *The Human Condition* lays out the great difficulty in understanding mass society as something open to change. What Arendt does is remind us that we can still fight the Blob, and gives us an analysis of its creation by human hands so human agents can begin to take it apart.

The second aspect of Arendt's theorizing of the social addresses the problem of the disintegration of the public/private distinction, where the body and its needs take over the space of politics. The social realm is where "the life process has established its own public domain" and relentlessly encroaches on the truly political public sphere (*HC* 47). The French Revolution, Arendt argues, was unable to succeed as the American Revolution did, because it could not limit itself to purely political ends as social concerns spilled over onto the public stage. The demands of the poor ruined the political emancipation of the French Revolution with the need to fulfill the private, biological demands of the body.

Arendt writes that during the French Revolution the poor, "driven by the needs of their bodies" came and into the public sphere to secure their private biological needs (*OR* 59). Unfortunately, when they "appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them" and "freedom had to be surrendered to necessity" (*OR* 60). Necessity of the private life trumps freedom when it encroaches into the public sphere, for under the conditions of poverty men are "under the absolute dictate of their bodies" (*OR* 60). Freedom was usurped by "the urgency of the life process itself" and the revolution "aimed no longer at freedom" but at the

new, immediate goal of fulfilling the want of the starving mass, or as Arendt calls it "the happiness of the people" (OR 60-61).

For Arendt, necessity and inequality have a place in the private realm, but worry her when they creep into the public realm, normalizing public debate and leading citizens into mass conformity. "The realm of the social" writes Arendt, has "finally... reached the point where it embraces and controls all members of a given community equally and with equal strength" (HC 41). This is the opposite of the *limitation* of the Greek polis that "knew only 'equals'" (HC 32). Social equality isn't the same as political or economic: "the victory of equality in the modern world is only... that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual" (HC 41). The social makes the unequal equally mundane and unable to engage in the politics that disclose the individual's plural uniqueness hidden behind social position. The polis accepts only those free individuals who can step out of the security of their private lives and into the public sphere, those who have private property "in the sense of a tangible, worldly place of one's own" (HC 70).

How can we use the concept of the social-as-Blob to understand Arendt's insistence on agonistic political action? Pitkin provides an understanding of Arendt's concept of the social as a kitschy, pop-culture reference. We must decide if Pitkin's construction of Arendt's "social" as an alien Blob that destroys human agency is helpful to understanding Arendt, her fear of the social realm, and her valorization of politics, speech and action. Is the Blob a useful metaphor for Arendt's writing on the social? Or does it obscure more than it answers? Moreover, what directions does this rhetorical invention point us in grappling with Arendt's very real fears?

### **The Utility of the Blob**

Firstly, Pitkin has been justly criticized by some reviewers as relying on misguided attempts at depth psychology and psychoanalytic speculation. These are accurate criticisms, and Pitkin leaves herself open to them, writing that while she

rejects the idea of a "psychohistory" and rather views her book as a "genealogy" (Pitkin 18), she does support a "psychobiographical approach to political theory," when it is "in Arendt's case" (Pitkin 36). This leaves open the obvious (and unanswered) question of what the difference between a psychohistory and a psychobiography might be, if there is a distinction at all. Undaunted by this apparent self-contradiction, Pitkin devotes a sizeable portion of the book to biography and psychoanalytic speculation in attempting to explain how Arendt arrived at her Blobbish description of the social. The "psychobiographer" in Pitkin declares there is "no doubt that the image of the Blob is a regression fantasy, a fearful vision" of the "'bad mother' of infantile experience" (Pitkin 230). These parts of her book do nothing to further thinking about Arendt's problem of the social. The "bad mother" psycho-speculation casts doubts on Arendt's motivations behind her theorizing of the family, disrupting the ability to see her work in its conceptual unity and theoretical power. In fact, Pitkin's regression into depth psychology seems to actively hinder our attempts at devising solutions to the problem Arendt has elucidated. If the social-as-Blob is based in Arendt's need to process her childhood experiences, we are at a loss of how to follow Pitkin's *good* advice to understand "the social unmythologized... as the absence of politics where politics belongs" (Pitkin 252).

Instead of viewing the social-as-Blob as a product of Arendt's emotional and personal past, we should take it as a real problem that needs a solution. As Peter Baehr accurately states in his favorable review of *The Attack of the Blob*, "the main point to be made about this psychological interpretation is not that it is pitifully weak, though it is, but that it is unnecessary" (Baehr). There is enough in the *texts* of Arendt to provide us with a well-rounded understanding of the social without relying on tenuous speculation about personal motives informing her intellectual life. I agree with Leah Bradshaw when she states that "Arendt does not strike me as someone who remained unconscious about much, or as someone who had a hard

time growing up into an autonomous adult" (Bradshaw). Arendt's Blobbish social shouldn't be understood as a "regression fantasy" (Pitkin 230-232) that helped her process the events in her personal life, but should be taken at face value as a serious problem that calls out for solutions.

Luckily, the non-psychologist in Pitkin believes this as well, and provides ideas for overcoming the social-as-Blob. It is in her solutions that the literary construction "the Blob" becomes a useful tool and not just an eye-catching book title. Beyond Pitkin's commendable, if not very novel, solution to the Blob that we should reorganize civic institutions to avoid the Blobbish effects found in bureaucracies and markets (Pitkin 256), Pitkin also mentions a promising strategy she calls the "Just Do It!" path (Pitkin 280). According to Pitkin, we need a "political approach" that "must include not just thinking *about* action but thinking *as* an actor," as a citizen who's human powers of action and speech can still take place even under the oppression of the social-as-Blob (Pitkin 281, her italics). It is true that "the only 'policy' that can help bring about free politics is to start enacting it" which is always possible because "action can never be ruled out" (Pitkin 281, 282). "We are always free-to-become-free," writes Pitkin, and taking action is the only way to battle the Blob once we see the social as obscuring how "people *are* power without *having* it" (Pitkin 282). Trapped within, if we struggle mightily from inside the Blob, we can overcome it; we can put politics back where it was absent. The Blob serves as a convenient reminder that within the social, if we feel unable to act, to *be* power without *controlling* it, it is the ideology of a bad science-fiction movie that we are subscribing to, not the reality of the human condition. The construction of the Blob is helpful because it is an obvious metaphor, an easily understood fabrication that makes clear when we feel our power to be annulled by the social, we are doing nothing but lying to ourselves. The imagery that Arendt employs in describing the social is outlandish, otherworldly and fantastical. With Pitkin's construction of the Blob, we give full agency, as well as

a silly name, to an abstract concept that, as human made, can be humanly overcome. What it takes is participation in the real, concrete world of politics, using our ability to act to reconstitute the (obscured) public realm.

Thankfully, the ability to take action never leaves, even during the dark times of our absorption by the social. Arendt writes that public realm "can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere" because "the capacity for action... is still with us" and it is action itself that is "the one activity which constitutes" the public realm (*HC* 198, 323). Each initiative contains "an element of action" which is "inherent in all human activities" in such a way that each individual, "the newcomer" to the public realm created by action, "possess the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (*HC* 9). The social is ripe for politicization, for dynamic public action. It is a bad metaphor, a nightmare vision grotesquely distorted that calls out for the real world of human political action to take initiative and end the dream. Trapped in the grip of the social, a condition that we have created ourselves, Arendt distorts it into an other-worldly Blob to remind us that in fact the social has no *real* power over us, and we must take action to take back control of the social, and return it to a manageable size.

The thrust of Pitkin's last pages is that we need to take action to "resist the seduction of the Blob" (Bradshaw). According to Bradshaw's review of Pitkin's book, Pitkin "wants us to revitalize the lost treasure of action that appeared so promising in *The Human Condition*, before it was swallowed by the Blob" and *The Attack of the Blob* is really "an attempt to rehabilitate the principle of action in *The Human Condition* in ways that Arendt herself thought not possible" (Bradshaw). While I agree fully with Bradshaw that this is Pitkin's intent, the second part of this statement is actually an indictment of Pitkin, for as we have seen Arendt refused to give up on the principle of action as the key to overcoming the social. Arendt did *not* think it was impossible to take the necessary action that will return the social to its

proper size. The human capacity for action may have been swallowed up by the Blob, but it has yet to be fully digested. The rehabilitation that Bradshaw views Pitkin engaging in has in fact been explored by other writers as a distinctly Arendtian version of political agonism, that is, of a kind of politics that puts action and conflict at its core. Indeed, Arendt does not need Pitkin to save the principle of action from Arendt's own problem of the social, rather, Arendt has *provided* us with a solution to the social-as-Blob in the form of agonistic political action. By looking to the work on the agonistic side of Arendtian political action, and specifically with Dana Villa's work on Arendt and Nietzsche, we will come to understand Arendt's own solution to the problem of the social, her agonistic politics, and how activists such as Saul Alinsky can utilize it. The social is a critical problem because it elucidates the currently existing conditions that require citizens to take agonistic political action, theoretically developed by Arendt, and politically practiced by Alinsky.

### **(III) Arendt, Nietzsche and Agonistic Political Theory**

Dana Villa in *Politics, Philosophy, Terror* (hereafter *PPT*) writes that "for [Arendt], the identifying mark of the modern age is the loss of a robust sense of the public realm" (*PPT* 122). Arendt's theory of political action is intended to restore this robust sense, and thus it is deeply agonistic, that is, based on deeds, action and conflict. This can be summed up by Arendt's characterization of the criticism employed by the writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and serves as a touchstone for Arendt's own understanding of politics: an "incessant and continual discourse" about the world, "its affairs and the things in it" (*MDT* 30). The polis, writes Arendt, as the site of political action among equals, is "permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit" (*HC* 41), a "passionate drive" to "show through unique deeds or achievements" that one is "the best of all" (*HC* 194, 41). By constructing a politics with a "fiercely agonal spirit" Arendt gives her blessing to action that is spontaneous and unpredictable.

"Action and speech" writes Arendt "create a space between the participants" that can take place "almost any time and anywhere" (HC 198). The social can obscure only the *feeling* that we have lost the ability to act, it cannot destroy this ability altogether.

Agonistic theorists, as characterized by Dana Villa, promote an engaged and passionate citizenry in order to advance a "radical democratic agenda" (PPT 108) that presupposes no one singular end. This dovetails nicely with Arendt's polemic against conformism and the rote behavior found in contemporary public life. An agonistic politics reminds us that "the public sphere is as much a stage for conflict" as "a set of procedures" leading to consensus (PPT 108). Arendt provides a valuable resource for these theorists, as she shows through her example of the social how we have forgotten our ability to create a dynamic public sphere. Politics, for Arendt, isn't the least bit bureaucratic ("the most social form of government" [HC 40]), but instead is the space of incessant contestation.

Bonnie Honig presents Arendt as a theorist of agonistic, performative politics that provides "resources" for the politicizing of the public/private distinction (Honig 136). Honig claims that even Arendt's public/private distinction is in fact open to dispute when reading Arendt through her agonistic account of politics. Honig writes that "resistibility, openness, creativity and incompleteness are the sine qua non" of Arendtian politics that stresses identity as produced by the performance of action (138). To wit, Honig and Villa both agree that Arendt is indebted to Nietzsche for much of the performative agonism in her politics. Villa reads Arendt as "self-consciously *aestheticizing* action," and taking a Nietzschean turn in understanding action only "in terms of *performance*" ("Beyond" 276, his italics). Honig writes that for Arendt, in terms of political action, "there is to be no 'being' behind this doing... the doing, the performance, is everything," a direct paraphrase of Nietzsche (Honig 138). Where exactly does Arendt borrow from Nietzsche, and where do they depart?

### **Arendt and Nietzsche**

Arendt follows Nietzsche in structuring action at the heart of politics. Moreover, for Arendt "the *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action" (*BPF* 146). Her politics is based in the performative action and speech of the citizen, where stepping into the public realm to act simultaneously creates and expresses freedom. This is much like Nietzsche's conception of those strong actors in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (hereafter *GM*) for whom "there is no 'being' behind the doing... the doing is everything" (*GM* I:13). For Nietzsche, those who are strong enough (read: able) to take action, this action must take place without separating the expression from the actor. Otherwise, Nietzsche writes:

To demand of strength that it *not* express itself as strength, that it *not* be a desire to overwhelm, a desire to cast down, a desire to become lord, a thirst for enemies and resistances and triumphs, is just as nonsensical as to demand of weakness that it express itself as strength. (*GM* I:13)

The fallacy of the demand to hide the expression of strength is exemplified in Nietzsche's parable of the lambs and the birds of prey, who the lambs label hateful as they hunt, to which the birds reply "we do not feel any anger towards them, these good lambs" but insist that "we love them: nothing is more tasty than a tender lamb" (*GM* I:13). For Nietzsche, the problem was when "popular morality" demands we separate "strength from the expression of strength as if there were behind the strong an indifferent substratum that is free to express strength... or not to" (*GM* I:13). The demand that natural strength should attempt to hide itself is as patently ridiculous as the lambs applying the notion of hate to the birds of prey who are following their biological path, indeed fulfilling what makes them who they are. Nietzsche reminds us that as we tend to apply moral labels to the expression of what is biological we begin to shy away from the natural conflict that takes place within the public realm. We avoid conflict in our search for political consensus, and thus label improper those strong enough to give full expression to their desires. All true

action is agonistic, according to Nietzsche, the expression of strength and the attempt to fulfill desire. For Nietzsche, the creation of popular morality has allowed the lambs to claim that "*the strong one is free to be weak*" and has given the lambs the right "to hold the bird of prey *accountable* for being a bird of prey" (*GM* I:13, his italics). In the contemporary political scene, we shy away from conflict in order to smooth out our differences, ask the strong (or the justly angry) to be weak (or satisfied with their lot), and emasculate our public realm into a space of procedure and rote behavior. The dynamic public realm, where political actors can give full expression to their political nature, is destroyed by the move away from "incessant conflict."

Arendt, while she shares much of this sentiment, distances herself from Nietzsche's acceptance of "strong" political action in non-political life when she writes of the need for action to simultaneously take place *in* and as well as *create* the public realm (*HC* 198-199). Action, the "one activity that constitutes" the public realm, only takes place in the "space between the participants" of action, the polis (*HC* 198). Unlike Nietzsche, Arendt brings us back to the polis as the only site for *political* action, and reminds us that one "can only act in concert" (qtd. in Hill 305).

Honig and Villa have differing views as to how to approach this Nietzsche-inspired agonism in Arendt. Honig posits Arendtian action as the "self-surprising" performance of the "acting, multiple self" (Honig 140-141). Honig insists on an internal agonistic character of the autonomous self that, trapped within a univocal body, highlights the negotiability of the public/private distinction. Honig argues that the body can become a pluralized site of Arendtian action, as the rival performances of labor, work and action as explored in *The Human Condition* are read as an account of the internal agonal character of the body (Honig 144). Honig reads a *political* struggle over the appearance in the private or the public realm that shows the possibility to agonistically contend this extremely rigid public/private distinction.

Honig unveils an “augmented and amended” Arendtian agonistic politics which seeks to engage the Arendtian public/private distinction agonistically to “identify sites of political action” in the private realm (Honig 160, 147). By viewing the public/private split as contentious and politically contingent, Honig uses Arendtian action as a disruptive performance intended to unsettle distinctions and give rise to new kinds of political action, even the once-restricted zone of the private realm.

Honig’s agonistic Arendtian politics is a theory of “action in concert that is riven [*sic*] by differences (both within and among the agents of action)” (Honig 160). For Honig, these differences are critical to maintain, for they reflect (rather than obscure) the condition of human plurality, and point to the power of “concerted action as a practice of (re-)founding, augmentation, and amendment that involves us in relations not only ‘with’ but also always simultaneously ‘against’ others” (Honig 160). Honig takes Arendt as promoting an agonistic politics that, full of contestation, can be turned back upon her own categories of the public and private realm. Arendtian action, for Honig, can take place in any realm, at any time. While Arendt says as much herself, it is Honig’s argument that by applying the human ability for spontaneous speech and action to contest the very Arendtian distinction between the public and the private realm, we will expand the sites for Arendtian political action.

Villa argues that Honig does respect the *selective* appropriation of Nietzsche that Arendt performs, and in going too far in developing the Nietzschean aspect of Arendt, Honig in effect argues that “Arendt is blind to her own insight” and Honig must “save Arendt from herself” (*PPT* 117). According to Villa, Honig’s deployment of agonistic political action in contesting the public/private split goes beyond the limits that Arendt has set upon the agon and will unleash upon the public realm an amorphous “democratic flux” which “radically underplays the extent to which Arendt envisions agnostic politics as a function of a ‘relatively permanent’ public sphere” (*PPT* 119). For Villa, an attempt to disrupt the public/private split with Arendtian

means is "Nietzscheanizing" Arendt to an extent she herself would refuse, one that "turns a deaf ear to the most thought provoking aspect of Arendt's agonism... her insistence on public-spiritedness," (*PPT* 125, 8) an insistence which we will return to shortly. Indeed, *contra* Honig, Villa is correct to point out Arendt maintains rigid, politically uncontestable distinctions between what is public and what is private. Given the problems associated with the rise of the social, the blurring of the public and the private *par excellence*, there is much cause for concern that Honig's proposal to unseat these distinctions will create more of the problems found in the rise of the social. Indeed, Villa is correct that what is needed is not a political blurring of lines, but more truly *political* action to recreate the public realm where debate and contest can take place. For it is *within* the public realm that we debate what is truly public and truly private. By taking political action to create the polis, we begin to constrain the social back into a manageable size and give ourselves the space of contest and debate necessary for questioning the public/private distinction, its benefits and its drawbacks.

Villa reads Arendt as promoting an agonistic politics where plurality is institutionalized in the polis as "the condition... of all political life" (*HC* 7), thus promoting a "politics of difference" in the public realm where everything is open to debate as a matter of course (*PPT* 116). The public sphere is happily the space of continuous contention; moreover, it will vanish as soon as plurality (and its associated agonistic character) disappears. In the words of Villa, for Arendt "debate, not consensus, constitutes the essence of political life" ("Beyond" 298).<sup>3</sup>

For Villa, Arendt is also promoting a public realm based on disinterested, theatrical political action. This involves an "agonistic subjectivity" where the

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<sup>3</sup> Saul Alinsky agrees: "you'll find consensus only in a totalitarian state, Communist or fascist" he once stated, and asked the rhetorical question "How do you have consensus before you have conflict?... there has to be a rearrangement of power and then you get consensus" (*Playboy* 170; qtd. in Sanders 61).

theatricity of political action is aligned with “the hostility of truth to politics” (“Postmodernism” 718). According to Villa’s reading of Arendt, truth is wrapped up in the corporeal “what-ness” of the individual, and opinion in the theatrical “who-ness.” Indeed, Arendt in *Beyond Past and Future* (hereafter *BPF*) writes that “opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power” (*BPF* 233). For Arendt, power is made out of the opinions of *actors* rather than the truth of individual *identities*. For Villa, it is this impersonal stance that actors must take in politics that “tames” the agon. Villa writes that all “agonistic, virtuoso political action threatens to fragment the polis” (“Beyond” 294). What Arendt does is “cultivate an ethos whereby actors are more committed to playing the game than to winning” (“Beyond” 294). Arendt states her concern for multiple perspectives in political judgment when she insists that “political thought is representative” by which she means that we ought to form opinions, those prerequisites of power, by “considering a given issue from different viewpoints” and “thinking in my own identity where actually I am not” (*BPF* 241). This kind of thought translates roughly into “putting oneself in another’s shoes” (Pitkin 270), and according to Villa, maintains a critically needed distance from the destructive effects of agonistic political action by those who are fully committed to a single outcome.

While both Nietzsche and Arendt have individualistic accounts of agonistic politics, Arendt promotes an impersonal stance by political actors who have left their private concerns behind them in stepping out into the public realm. Villa shows that while Arendt and Nietzsche both agree that freedom “is not found in the choice not to act, nor is identity something that precedes or is separable from action” and “only the performing self knows freedom,” Nietzsche’s agonism goes too far for Arendt in that “it divides performer and audience, rendering the latter virtually superfluous” (“Beyond” 282, 291). For the agonistic bird of prey that is Nietzsche’s ideal political subject, “what does the creator of new values, fresh illusions, care for the

spectator?... There can be, as a result, no meaningful talk of a *shared* world of appearances" ("Beyond" 291). This shared world is critical to the Arendtian polis, where "the human condition of plurality" is the "condition *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm" (HC 220). The public realm is maintained with the activation of human plurality, that is, the public speech and action of diverse equals. Without a shared concern for the public realm, a politics of agonism will find actors willing to ignore other viewpoints and essentialize their opinion as the only truth that counts. When this condition exists, the public realm fragments and the ideological demagogue takes political action to an extreme that shuts down the space of politics, reducing public discourse to partisan bickering and threatens to turn us all "if not into Carl Schmitts, Rush Limbaughs" (PPT 109).

Villa stresses Arendt's distinction of public/private and social/political as intended to focus attention on the impersonality and self-distance of the Arendtian political actor. With her "focus on the impersonal qualities of political action," Arendt intends *not* to "promote the idea of selflessness," but rather to "highlight the distinction between the public and the private self" (PPT 140). When acting in the polis, which "knew only 'equals,'" (HC 32) Arendtian subjects "leave behind the private self of needs, drives, and a diffuse interiority" (PPT 118). According to Villa, Arendt's public/private distinctions are intended "not to exclude groups of agents from the political sphere" as one might think, but to "point out the dangers inherent in certain mentalities or approaches to the public realm," mentalities that do not include a concern for maintaining the shared world of appearances (PPT 118). Arendt's "democratic political life" is "agonistic, often raucous, and passionate in its moral commitments" but is "importantly limited to *public* issues and terms of discourse" (PPT 118, 119).

The truly public nature of Arendtian politics, and Arendt's consistent use of "theatrical metaphors" leads Villa to argue that Arendt "is trying to teach us a

lesson about the nature of *worldliness*" (PPT 128, 130, his italics). Our lost capacity for worldliness is for Villa how Arendt expresses the vast differences in our contemporary "attitude toward the world" from other "more political (read: worldly) cultures and times" (PPT 130).

Villa cites Arendt's description of Lessing in *Men in Dark Times* as an example of our lost worldliness. In that work, Arendt wrote that Lessing, despite living in the "dark times in which the public realm has been obscured" (MDT 11) that characterized the early years of Nazi Germany, "was concerned solely with humanizing the world by incessant and continual discourse about its affairs and the things in it" (MDT 30). Arendt, according to Villa, reads Lessing as willing to risk death rather than "face the prospect of an *unworldly* existence" (PPT 133, his italics), one that would force him to suppress his desire for worldly engagement. Villa argues that this commitment to worldliness is apparent in Arendt's political theory as an insistence on "theatrical/agonistic action" (PPT 135).

Indeed, we can see the theatrical component to politics in *The Human Condition*, where Arendt claims that the polis is the "space of appearances," and that in the public realm "appearance... constitutes reality" (HC 198, 50). This stage-like "space of appearances" that is the public, also "signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (HC 52). The public is an "in-between" that "relates and separates men at the same time" (HC 52). Thus to maintain the public realm, we must have a commitment to acting in it *qua* actors; Arendt's quest for an agonistic politics of the "sharing of words and deeds with others" shows the "vanished dimension of worldliness in its most intense, theatrical and political form" (PPT 154). For Villa, true Arendtian political action maintains the worldliness of the public realm when understood as action theatrically performed on the stage of the polis, not a gloss on glorified heroic action as some of Arendt's critics have contended.

Citing the public/private dichotomy posited with such force throughout *The Human Condition*, Villa points to how Arendt requires the political actor distinguish between their "civic/political selves and the self driven by material and psychological needs" (PPT 118). Political life for Villa's Arendt only concerns the public, non-private interests of self-alienated political actors on the stage of the public realm (PPT 119). "Arendt's distinction between the social and the political" writes Villa, exemplifies that "one cannot value the 'play of the game' if winning the game is crucial to the sheer survival of oneself or one's group" (PPT 123).

Against Honig's proposal to deploy Arendtian agonism to explode Arendt's own public/private distinction, Villa highlights the Arendtian claim that political action is only taken in a defined theatre of the public realm by an actor who dons the mask of private disinterestedness/pure public interest. Villa finds Arendt's politics as more impersonal and theatrical than Honig allows. In her drive to make an Arendtian agonistic account of politics the site of contention between the *homme* and the *cityoan*, Villa argues that Honig loses the Arendtian concern for politics as "love of the world" (HC 324; PPT 120). Without this concern, "the demands for social justice and recognition of emergent identities... do little to promote an agonistic ethos that rises above interest group politics" (PPT 120). Honig's agon is untamed, and in her challenge to the public/private split she loses the commitment to maintaining the shared space of appearances. Indeed, a "genuinely" Arendtian "agonistic ethos" presumes "plurality in Arendt's sense: a diversity of (distanced) views on the same object or issue" (PPT 126).

Villa's stress on the *civic* (disinterested) character of the Arendtian actor is found in her equation of the "meaning of public life" as knowledge of the "significance... that everybody sees and hears from a different position" and the very reality of the public realm as this space of a "simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects" (HC 57). Such a space requires at least a minimal amount

of self-distance from one's own perspectives and positions in order to understand one's compatriots. Here civic life beings in earnest when "things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity" and we "see sameness in utter diversity" (*HC* 57). This is the life based in the human condition of plurality, "the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (*HC* 7).

Villa concludes that the "reactive" character of Honig's Nietzsche-inspired calls for continual agonistic conflict, and her charge against the "normalization" of politics and culture, is what ultimately limits her view of the role of politics to rebellion and resistance (*PPT* 125). The agonist politics of Villa's Arendt goes beyond the reactive rebellion of the contemporary agonist's attack on categories and boundary lines (public/private, political/social) by maintaining the *homme/cityoen* distinction in order to free the public realm from concerns of the *homme* and allow it to take the unmitigated risks of the independent, self-distanced action of the *cityoen* (*PPT* 127). Politics will devolve into simple back-and-forth conflict over private and social needs without the "humanizing" effects of the self-distanced citizens—who are "the friend of many men, but no man's brother"—engaging in "incessant and continual discourse" about worldly affairs (*MDT* 30). Arendtian agonistic politics is careful about who is allowed to participate in politics because political action is such a dangerous business, without end and possibly quite disastrous (*HC* 233).

If the public world is to have any reality for us, writes Villa, we have to maintain some distance between it and our private lives (*PPT* 123). Villa claims that Arendt's distinction of the public world as the only space where we can experience the "agonistic play of perspectives" serves to animate her concern that one must be free of the "most pressing concerns of life" in order to appreciate the play of politics without desiring to win at all costs (*PPT* 123). Arendt understands "very process of opinion formation" (and opinions are the currency of politics) as possible only under the condition of "disinterestedness, the liberation from one's own private interests"

because “the very quality of an opinion, as of a judgment, depends upon the degree of its impartiality” (*BPF* 241-242). Freedom from “private interests” and the violence of bodily and social needs is a necessary condition for the theatrical play of politics that Villa valorizes. Indeed, the combination of “initiatory energy, but detached judgment” is for Villa at the heart of Arendtian political action (*PPT* 124).

However, we can be justifiably concerned that under Villa’s strict reading of Arendtian political action that requires distance from one’s own views, those with pressing needs will not be able to “rise to her standard, to forget their rage at what they have suffered” (*PPT* 125). Where Arendt could be charged with promoting elitism in the public realm, Villa claims that Arendt “doesn’t expect” victims of injustice to forget their injury, or “want them excluded from the public realm” (*PPT* 125). We must read Arendt, argues Villa, as emphasizing “the possibility, open to virtually everyone, that political action—debate and deliberation—can cultivate a public-spiritedness which is not limited by group affiliation or interest” (*PPT* 125). Beyond the troubling “*virtually* everyone” (my emphasis), with no comment from Villa on who would be left out, Villa appears to dodge the question more than answer it. We are to believe that all groups, even the most wretched, are entitled to public-spiritedness, but not allowed to bring their concerns into the public realm. Perhaps once given Villa’s point that for Arendt “*public* issues are not set in stone” and democratic politics by definition involves “debate over what issues are, in fact, of public... concern” (*PPT* 119, his italics) we can find solace that the oppressed can enter the debate with an ethos of public-spiritedness to move their private (economic, racial, gender, etc.) concern to a public concern. One must suppose that this will retain the public/private distinction that Honig seeks to destroy, but nevertheless address injustice and the oppression of individuals, all the while in a spirit of self-disinterest. I find this unlikely at best, at worst a dangerous proposition, rife with elitism that will exclude the oppressed from politics. Later in this project we

will see how Saul Alinsky rectifies this problem with a similar concern for public-spiritedness while refusing to give up private concerns during political action. But there is a kernel of truth in Villa's account, and his analysis of the Arendt's rigid public/private split is worth exploring.

### **Villa, the Public/Private Split and the French Revolution**

Attractive in Villa's account is the nascent ability to appropriate Arendt's insistence that social problems (such as racial or gender oppression, malnourishment, or a lack of housing) cannot creep into the public/political lives of citizens as a battle cry for solving them. While Arendt herself is ambivalent on this point, and refuses to support an activist politics committed to social justice, for the contemporary advocate of material equality (*i.e.*, Saul Alinsky) reading the inability of the public realm to take place when private needs are present supports a theoretical justification along Arendtian lines for the elimination of social oppression and economic want. Given the rigid distinction between the private and public realms, the precondition of equality in the former and the relegation of inequality to the latter, this distinction is a call for social justice. For Arendt, because "poverty forces the free man to act like a slave," ownership of private wealth is "a condition for admission to public life" (HC 64, 65). For the Greeks, writes Arendt, "public life, obviously, was possible only after the much more urgent needs of life itself had been taken care of" (HC 65). If we desire a public realm of universal scope, where all peoples are allowed to enter—which I would argue is nothing less than the true meaning of the "public realm"—Arendt makes it clear that poverty and biological needs must first be fulfilled.

Unfortunately, this is not the argument Villa supports. While Villa is correct that Arendt doesn't want to exclude oppressed persons from the public realm or ask them to forget their pain and anger, his argument that Arendt responds to these downtrodden with the emphasis on the always-present ability to join in a "public-

spiritedness" that "values a plurality of opinions on the same issue" seems rather problematic (*PPT* 125). He is precisely correct that this pertains to a kind of "independence of mind" that contemporary interest-group politics, with an emphasis on the self, cannot accommodate (*PPT* 125). However Arendt seems to point out with her discussion of the French Revolution that politics *as such* is unable to take root in conditions of mass poverty and need.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt describes the French Revolution as a parable of the failure to keep the public and the private realms separate. When confronted by the biological concerns of the masses, revolutions cannot create the "artificial institution" of the polis, where "because men were by nature... not equal," the polis "would make them equal" (*OR* 30-31). Poverty, one example inequality, is for Arendt "more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery... poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictate of their bodies" (*OR* 60). The biological dictate that poverty forces upon citizens is at odds with their ability to engage in politics, and as we have seen, to enter the public realm one must be able to leave private concerns at the door of the household. Therefore, "it was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution" seeking respite from their destitution, but "when they appeared on the scene of politics, necessity appeared with them" (*OR* 60). Arendt writes that "freedom," the ability to engage with equals in the polis, "had to be surrendered to necessity, to the urgency of the life process itself" (*OR* 60). Politics-as-freedom could not happen when there were political actors held under the "absolute dictate of their bodies." Instead, the "goal of the revolution" changed to "the happiness of the people," the fulfillment of their bodily needs (*OR* 61). This was an inevitable process once the inequality of the private realm had entered the limelight of the public sphere. A pure civic politics of the disclosure of human uniqueness is precluded when biological necessity must be fulfilled. We can take this lesson a step further and posit

that we must solve these needs before the Arendtian political utopia of agonistic, but civic and disinterested, politics can take place.

This is reading is exemplified in the other case study presented in *On Revolution*, the story of the American Revolution and founding of the republic. In this case, "absent from the American scene were misery and want" and the American Revolution "was not social but political, it concerned not the order of society but the form of government" (OR 68). However, Arendt qualifies this claim extensively, writing how "abject and degrading misery was present everywhere in the form of slavery and Negro labour" (OR 70). Yet the important difference was that this could be hidden in the private realm, as the social question of slavery "whether genuinely absent or only hidden in darkness, was non-existent for all practical purposes" (OR 72). Politics-as-freedom could take place during the American Revolution because the social question could be hidden, and politics failed in the French case as the subjects of the social question "driven by the needs of their bodies, burst onto the scene" of politics (OR 59).

These two parables underscore the extent to which Arendt requires the public life of the individual political actor to be free from desires and commitments, even compassion, "the most devastating passion motivating revolutionaries," when entering the public realm (OR 72). That worldly politics and social necessity are opposed is clear from this story. But the question remains if Arendt is proposing a *contemporary* politics that ignores the social questions of today. I think not, because that would radically undermine her conception of the social-out-of-hand as bringing these social questions into the public light. To attempt to ignore these questions would ask that political actors, far more than to act in a theatrical or disinterested manner, put on blinders to the real world that surrounds them.

The critical difference to maintain is that during the French and American Revolutions the social had not yet achieved the status it has in the modern age, and

where necessity *could* be hidden, it is now *always* publicly discussed. The French Revolution ran aground because the unexpected arrival of the multitude of the poor on the scene of politics. Today, the poor are readily visible, and impossible to ignore, as Arendt herself remarked that “no amount of speeches and discussions and debate... will be able to solve the very grave social problems which the big cities pose to us” (qtd. in Hill 317). What is needed is a politics that can “just do it” from within the social to solve these problems that destroy pure political acts such as revolutionary political foundings. Once we cure the social ills that plague us, then we will be able to create the space of pure politics. We cannot still ignore these social problems, as the “social question” was ignored during the American Revolution. The rise of mass media and mass society points to the fact that we are within the social, and the private life of the household has gained a public status such that we cannot ignore the biological concerns of the populace. What we need, therefore, is a politics that can address these problems while maintaining a respect for a lively public sphere and representative political judgment. Saul Alinsky, towards whom we will now turn, provides just this kind of politics. Alinsky addresses the rise of the social with an Arendtian agonistic politics that does justice to her conception of the public sphere while paving the way for creation of the true realm of freedom, a public sphere open to all individuals, a polis writ as large as humanity.

## Part Two: Saul Alinsky

### (I) Alinsky, Power and Politics

The second titular character of this project comes not from the realm of political theory, but from the deeply public world of the community organizing movement. Saul Alinsky, in his two major works *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals* (hereafter cited as *Reveille* and *Rules*) explores a conception of politics that is surprisingly akin to that of Hannah Arendt. It is surprising because Alinsky, *contra* Arendt, insists on the need to put citizens' social and economic concerns into the limelight of the public realm. By exploring Alinsky's conception of power and politics, we will achieve two major goals. First, Alinsky's writings give needed practicality to Arendt's agonistic method of politics and provide a lucid description both of the problem of the social and how political action can overcome it. Second, Alinsky's commitment to political action that includes social and economic justice issues, yet must "never go outside the experience of your people" (*Rules* 127) gives rise to a new reading of the Arendtian polis, where Alinsky shows the powerful ability to use Arendt's theorization of the public/private split for social and economic justice.

Alinsky and Arendt have a remarkably similar commitment to power as *activity*, that is, power arises when individuals act together in the public realm, and disappears when they dissipate. For Arendt, "power is always... a power potential" that "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" (*HC* 200). Alinskyian power, like its Arendtian cousin, is the power to take action, the "ability, whether physical, mental, or moral, to act" (*Rules* 50). It is also a power potential, and although it always exists in the world, it takes coordinated action on the part of individuals to yield it. Alinsky writes, it is "impossible to conceive of a world devoid of power" (*Rules* 52). For Alinsky, "power is the very essence, the dynamo of life" which people "to a significant degree live

for" (*Rules* 51). Power is an always-active part of the human life, "an essential life force always in operation" (*Rules* 51). "The only choice" Alinsky writes, is "between organized and unorganized power" (*Rules* 52). For power will always be in play, either "changing the world or opposing change" (*Rules* 51).

However Arendt and Alinsky differ on one of the vital components of contemporary politics: money. Alinsky believes that "power comes in two forms— money and people" (*Playboy* 74). So the poor, who "haven't got money" must understand that the only thing they have "as far as power goes is their bodies"; for the poor, their "own fellowmen" are their "only source of strength" (qtd. in Sanders 33, 75). For those without money to gain power, they must rely on their power of numbers.

Arendt believes that money is destructive to politics and argues for a relegation of household economics and personal wealth to the private sphere, and the problem of the social testifies to the necessity of this separation. Indeed, we have seen "the rise of economic activities to the public realm" only "since the rise of society" (*HC* 33). Yet to enter the public realm, the individual needs a minimum amount of private wealth, that is, she must be economically secure and free from biological need in order to maintain the *civic* character of political action. Thus private property is for Arendt a precondition for entrance into the public realm where politics, and thus the power of action in concert, can take place (*HC* 64-65). However, Arendt makes a sharp distinction between private property, "a tangible, worldly place of one's own," that is, the very site of the private sphere, and wealth, the individual's "share in the annual income of society as a whole" which when exposed to the light of the public realm gives rise to the social (*HC* 70, 61). As in the case of household economic matters, to "guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity" one must possess "private property, a privately owned place to hide in" (*HC* 71). For Arendt, it is private property that constitutes

the private realm which shelters from the public the personal matters of wealth and money. When these matters enter into the public realm, politics is polluted and the social takes over.

However, Alinsky points out that money, in modern politics (which, as Arendt has pointed out, is marked by its "social" character), can be utilized to make political change. The poor, who only have the ability to *outnumber* those with money, cannot create social change without organizing their numbers, creating mass-based groups. Alinsky states that citizen-activists must learn how to "organize for power: how to get it and to use it" (*Rules* 10). Unorganized power cannot promote change:

change comes from power, and power comes from organization. In order to act, people must get together. Power is the reason for being of organizations... Power and organization are one and the same. (*Rules* 113)

Only when we understand that power appears when people are organized and coordinated have we recognized "the world as it is" and grasped the first and most basic requirement for politics (*Rules* 12). To expect lasting change from unorganized action on the part of individual citizens, no matter how personally empowered or passionate, is political fantasy. For "change can only be effected through power, and power means organization" (*Reveille* 223). Arendt agrees with this link of power and organization when she stated "real political action comes out as a group act... and whatever you do on your own you are really not an actor—you are an anarchist" (qtd. in Hill 310). At its finest, political power for Alinsky is "the power of active citizen participation pulsing upward, providing a unified strength for a common purpose" (*Rules* 51).

That Arendt and Alinsky share a vision of power as action in concert reflects their dissatisfaction with democratic politics as based in a set of procedures or rules. Both want a return to a political culture that values the action of individuals united together to make their mark upon the world. For Arendt, action "is the political activity par excellence" (*HC* 9), and is equated with freedom, "the *raison d'être* of

politics" (*BPF* 146). For Alinsky's political organizer who creates the conditions where power exists and change may take place, "life is action" (*Rules* 79). Alinsky stresses that life itself for the politically engaged subject is dependent on the ability to take actions.

For Arendt, action has the qualities of an "inherent boundlessness" and "inherent unpredictability" (*HC* 191). The consequences of action "are boundless, because action... acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction" and thus "action has no end" (*HC* 190, 233). By acting in the political realm, we utilize our power to change the world, and once this power is unleashed, everything in the public world, as created by human actions, is liable to be changed.

For Alinsky, action that creates change must be understood akin to action without end. The social and political change that Alinsky wants to take place requires organized action, action that is "purposeful, deliberate, designed not as an end in itself but to generate new action in developing a program" (*Reveille* 228). Alinsky, like Arendt, understands that political action once taken, is something unpredictable and unique. "Every time you resolve a problem," Alinsky once stated, "you create others in the process of resolution" (qtd. in Sanders 59). Action taken through the harnessing of political power by organized individuals is intended to change the world, and sometimes the consequences are unknown until after the fact. The "wise man of action" writes Alinsky, "knows that frequently... whole new and unexpected ends are among the major results of the action" (*Rules* 45). Action opens up new possibilities for change previously hidden; action not only creates change, but unveils new opportunities.

What Alinsky and Arendt share in their theorizing of power and action becomes all the more interesting given Alinsky's motivations for political action. Alinsky, like Arendt, wants a return to the American tradition of revolutionary action, as exemplified by "American radicals" such as Tom Paine and John Brown (*Reveille*

13-14). Similarly, Arendt calls for a return of "the revolutionary spirit" exemplified in the American Revolution (*OR* 232). While Arendt proclaims the need for agonistic political action and speech to reclaim our "lost treasure" (*OR* 215) and fight the social's "irresistible tendency... to *devour* the older realms of the political and the private" (*HC* 45, my emphasis), Alinsky responds that we must "recognize the world as it is" (*Rules* 12) and work within its confines to devise a politics that will secure social and political gains for the "Have-Nots of the world" (*Rules* 8). This means recognizing that "the masses of people" that "are the substance of society" are currently "inarticulate, apathetic, disinterested, forlorn and alone in their abysmal anonymity" (*Reveille* 192-193). In the world as it is, the people "no longer believe that they have a voice or a hand in shaping the destiny of this nation" (*Reveille* 193). By invoking the proud memory of the American Revolution, Alinsky calls for a political "reveille for radicals" (*Reveille* 204).

Both Arendt and Alinsky imagine the world today as in a crisis. Arendt's is named the "rise of the social," and as we have seen is characterized by a widespread (false) feeling of powerlessness. Alinsky agrees. However, he not only wants to redynamize the political sphere, but as Machiavelli showed "the Haves... how to hold power," Alinsky intends to show "the Have-Nots... how to take it away" (*Rules* 3).

The Have-Nots are the ones saddled with social and political problems:

[The Have-Nots] are chained together by the common misery of poverty, rotten housing, disease, ignorance, political impotence, and despair; when they are employed their jobs pay the least and they are deprived in all areas basic to human growth. Caged by color, physical or political, they are barred from an opportunity to represent themselves in the politics of life. The Haves want to keep; the Have-Nots want to get. (*Rules* 18-19)

For Alinsky, the problem is more than a feeling of powerlessness. There are real, physical signs of distress in our society, and it is up to us, the next generation of American radicals, to "create mass organizations to seize power and give it to the

people" (*Rules 3*). Only then will we "realize the democratic dream of equality"

(*Rules 3*). This entails:

justice, peace, cooperation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the creation of those circumstances in which man can have the chance to live by values that give meaning to life. (*Rules 3*)

Yet this is no utopian political end game. Alinsky understand that the struggle for this democratic dream is one that never ends, for the Have-Nots, once they gain power, become the Haves, and "thus the revolutionary cycle goes on" (*Rules 22*). This struggle to give power to the powerless is a "climb up a mountain... with no top" (*Rules 21*). Politics, for Alinsky, is a never-ending struggle, but one that can make life better for the Have-Nots of the world. For we "see the 'real' top ahead of us, and strive for it, only to find we've reached another bluff, the top still above us. And so it goes on, interminably" (*Rules 21*).

Alinsky, unlike Arendt, names specific social justice struggles as one, but not the only, purpose of politics. This is an appealing notion to political activists who might be dissatisfied with Arendt's refusal to allow economic struggles into the forced equality of the polis. And yet Alinsky and Arendt share so much, and worry over common problems, that perhaps we can use Alinsky to better understand the place of such problems in Arendt. However, before we examine how to use Alinsky to amend Arendt, we must look at their shared concern of mass powerlessness and their shared solution of agonistic politics.

## **(II) Alinsky, the Problem of the Social and Agonistic Politics**

### **Alinsky and the Social**

Much like Hannah Arendt, Saul Alinsky sees agonistic political action as a response to the problem of perceived powerlessness. As we have seen, Arendt labels this problem "the rise of the social" and her description of agonistic political action is the foundation for a "just do it" theory of politics. Alinsky theorizes society as based

in a continual conflict for social and economic goods, but agrees that modern conditions have created a similar sense of widespread political impotence. His solution to this problem is a never ending *social* struggle, one that inspires citizens to take action but refuses to leave commitments of justice and material gain at the door of the household when stepping into the public realm. Rather, Alinsky points to a new way of understanding agonistic political action as a never-ending struggle for social justice that rectifies the problem of the social, “the absence of politics where politics belongs” (Pitkin 252).

Alinsky believes that “the only way the poor are going to get what they need is through strong, militant organizations of their own” (qtd. in Sanders 48). This takes the form of local citizen-activist groups he calls People’s Organizations. These are mass-based citizen groups that organize communities together to create a shared political agenda. The People’s Organization “is a conflict group,” and Alinsky writes:

this must be openly and fully recognized. Its sole reason for coming into being is to wage war against all evils which cause suffering and unhappiness. A People’s Organization is the banding together of large numbers of men and women to fight for those rights which insure a decent way of life. (*Reveille* 132)

This war against suffering and injustice is “an eternal war,” a war “against poverty, misery, delinquency, disease, injustice, hopelessness, despair, and unhappiness” (*Reveille* 133). The political struggle that the People’s Organization engages in will never end. Moreover, it crosses over boundaries of political and social struggles to engage “every element and aspect, whether it be political, economical, or social” that effects the life of individuals (*Reveille* 36). Any mass organization “must be built on many different issues—housing, jobs, schools, consumer prices, representation and power at the decision-making centers, health, crime” and every other issue that affects the lives of the poor (qtd. in Sanders 49).

However, this struggle is lacking vitally needed participants. For Alinsky, the problem is that on the one hand, political institutions lack the ability to create civic engagement. "Institutions of the people," writes Alinsky, have failed "to solve basic issues" and there has been a "stifling of opportunities for mass participation in America" (*Reveille* 200, 194). On the other hand, the people themselves are culpable. For they have harbored:

not only [a] jealous isolation from one another but... the same mental isolationist policy concerning their objectives. They have forgotten that there is no such thing as a single problem, that all problems are interrelated, that all issues are part of a chain of human issues, and that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link. (*Reveille* 200)

The people, argues Alinsky, have lost their public-spiritedness and commitment to social justice. To wit, social issues, writes Alinsky:

have been displaced by selfish interests. The people no longer think as Americans for America. They no longer speak as Americans for America. They speak for their interest cliques. The welfare of their narrow groups completely overshadows any thoughts of national welfare. (*Reveille* 194)

Thus, "the job ahead is clear," and we must make "every conceivable effort" to "rekindle the fire of democracy while a few embers yet glow in the gray ashes of the American dream" (*Reveille* 196). Alinsky's People's Organizations, and the tactics they employ, intends to do just that. By creating opportunities for effective social change, Alinsky's politics provides citizens with the chance to take the necessary actions that combat the devouring effects of the social, reviving the political sphere while securing the private economic needs necessary for a wide-spread Arendtian public-spirited, theatrical and civic-minded politics. Alinsky not only addresses the private economic problems of citizens and inspires them to take political action, but also connects the problem of mass powerlessness, that is, the rise of the social, with a devaluation of public-spiritedness.

Alinsky's politics are no doubt agonistic, and further evidence is supplied by Dana Villa description of political agonism as providing a "welcome return to the

repressed essence of democratic politics: conflict" (*PPT* 108). Alinsky's People's Organizations utilize conflict as the founding principle of political action (*Reveille* 132). Moreover, Alinsky's politics have a commitment to the democratic public spirit that Villa would applaud, despite harboring reservations surrounding Alinsky's utilization of the private needs of citizens to mobilize them in his People's Organizations. Villa's insistence on Arendtian political action as concerned with "the spirit in which it is undertaken" (*PPT* 118) is reflected, albeit imperfectly, by Alinsky's drive to eliminate "interest cliques" and press citizens into thinking "as Americans for America" and for the "national welfare." Where Alinsky and Villa find common ground on their promotion of political action with a public spirit, Alinsky, *pace* Villa, refuses to demand that citizen-activists "focus on the distanced or disinterested quality" of political judgment and action (*PPT* 124). Alinsky claims that one can in fact value the "play of the game" despite the very real costs of losing, because in playing the game of political actions, the democratic ideals and the legacy of American radicals are resurrected.

Alinsky's polemic against American "mental isolationism" and political apathy contain two important aspects of Arendtian political theory. First, we see that Arendt's concern that "society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action" (*HC* 40) is apparent in the powerlessness of the unorganized and divided populace. The society that we now live in has, according to Alinsky, eliminated our means of political participation. We cannot create political change as individuals in society as it now stands. Secondly, Alinsky points out that citizens have lost their concern for the Arendtian notion of representative thought. As discussed above, for Arendt, "political thought is representative" and in regards to political matters, we must consider "a given issue from different viewpoints" and begin to think "in my own identity where actually I am not" (*BPF* 241).

### **Alinsky and Agonistic Politics**

The former concern, that mass society, failed institutions, or “the rise of the social” has created a sense of powerlessness is taken up by Alinsky as the *raison d’être* of an agonistic politics that stresses action and conflict. In turn, participants in this kind of politics will engage the public sphere with renewed interest, a feeling of empowerment. Alinsky writes:

the tragedy would be if we viewed a crisis as a plight; as an inevitability of life, like death; as a happening to which one is resigned. *This has always been the prime task of the organizer—the transformation of the plight into the problem.* The organizer must be able to communicate and convince the people that, if they find a way to join together, they need not fatalistically accept their plights but will have the power to affect the shape of their world. It is then that a people... begin to act with anger, purpose, and hope. (*Reveille* 209, his italics)

The organizer must be the catalyst for change, by organizing people, creating the conditions where citizen groups can wield power to make change. The organizer must fight against the “state of civic-sclerosis” that “sets in” when “a people resign their citizenship” because the individual, “though he may desire to take a hand, lacks the means to participate” (*Rules* xxvi). The lack of means of political participation is apparent when the “citizen sinks further into apathy, anonymity, and depersonalization” (*Rules* xxvi). The organizer must encourage “the endless responsibilities of citizenship” through the creation of organizations that gives people the power to make change as well as offers a site for coordinated political action (*Rules* xxv-xxvi).

This demands an Arendtian politics of agonistic speech and action, reflecting Alinsky’s belief that “conflict is the essential core of a free and open society” (*Rules* 62). In practice, Alinsky recommends tactics that are explosive, confrontational, and take place in public, where the media will broadcast one’s actions. Any organized group of citizen-activists can take this kind of action, from a large organization that can “parade... visibly before the enemy and openly show your power,” to a small one that will “conceal the members in the dark but raise a din and clamor” that makes

“the listener believe... [the] organization numbers many more than it does” or even a miniscule group, “too tiny for even noise,” can still utilize an olfactory reaction if they “stink up the place” (*Rules* 126). In terms of political practice these tactics serve to reinforce the fact that “power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have” (*Rules* 127) and also gives citizens the much-needed outlet for public action.

Alinskyian political action utilizes Arendt’s theorization of the polis as “that space of appearance which is the public realm” (*HC* 220). The Arendtian polis is “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men... make their appearance explicitly” (*HC* 198-199). When Alinskyite groups take political action, they not only show their power to “the enemy” but also allow citizens to take part in the space of appearances that constitutes the public realm, where they can be seen by others and recognized as empowered individuals acting in concert. For Arendt the polis, created by action in concert, is the space where men and women can appear as they are in their individual uniqueness. Alinsky utilizes the space of appearances for the group goals of his People’s Organization and gives participants the chance to express their uniqueness. However, as we will later see, Alinsky’s intentional exclusion of “the enemy” from this space of appearances to utilize the Arendtian polis for economic and social justice struggles creates difficulties.

However, before turning to an Arendtian reading of Alinsky, we should take time to consider the second similarity of Alinsky’s political action and Arendt’s political theory: the concern for representative thinking.

### **Alinsky and Representative Thinking**

While Arendt’s concern with representative thinking is based in the desire to keep the public realm (and the attitudes of those that participate in politics) “worldly,” Alinsky argues that to be an effective political organizer one must be open-minded, willing to adjust when contrary evidence appears. This puts the

organizer in “an ideological dilemma,” for he “does not have a fixed truth—truth to him is relative and changing; *everything* to him is relative and changing” (*Rules* 10-11). The effective organizer is “a political [*sic*] relativist,” willing to “recognize the world as it is” which means giving up the “strangely unreal picture of a static unchanging world, where one remains firm and committed to certain so-called principles or positions” (*Rules* 11, 12, 31).

The organizer must understand that “in the politics of human life, consistency is not a virtue” (*Rules* 31). A static ethics must fall by the wayside. “The most unethical of all means” writes Alinsky, “is the non-use of any means” (*Rules* 26). Therefore, the “man of action” views means and ends “in pragmatic and strategic terms” (*Rules* 24). The political subject committed to real change must ignore societal notions of morality in regards to means and ends, and ask “of ends only whether they are achievable and worth the cost; of means, only whether they will work” (*Rules* 24).

For Alinsky, the public sphere is not a realm of ethical purity, and our worries over corruption in politics have no grasp of political reality. “The real area” of politics “is corrupt and bloody,” writes Alinsky, and “to say that corrupt means corrupt the ends is to believe in the immaculate conception of ends and principles” (*Rules* 24). The “means-and-end moralists” are simply “non-doers” who, argues Alinsky with a rhetorical smirk, “always wind up on their ends without any means” (*Rules* 25). Simply put, in politics “he who fears corruption fears life” (*Rules* 25). Moreover, these tender-minded souls are in fact a detriment to the struggle for social justice. For while “constantly obsessed with the ethics of the means used by the Have-Nots against the Haves” these non-doers are in fact the “passive—but real—allies of the Haves” (*Rules* 25). Alinsky’s politics is not only agonistic, but also nearly barbaric. He paints a picture of politics with no-holds-barred, where only the transference of power to the powerless is what counts. While I believe that Alinsky’s insistence to

include a democratic public-spiritedness in his conflict-based political action saves his politics from devolving into “simply conflict” (*PPT* 127), it does buttress the problematic friend/enemy distinction found in the Alinskyian polis that undermines the long-term effects of his People’s Organizations to maintain a concern for social justice. This tension will be explored a little later on.

For now, we see that Arendt, under the reading provided by Dana Villa, insists on a theatrical political sphere, replete with an insistence on self-*dis*interest of the actor. Alinsky, on the other hand, understands our concern with the ethical normativity of political means (a hindrance to real change) as naturally opposed to our own self-interest. The first basic rule of means and ends in the politics of the real world, argues Alinsky, is that “one’s concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one’s personal interest in the issue” (*Rules* 26). Means and ends only get in the way of a politics that will bring about the democratic dream and give power to the powerless. The organizer, for her part, must have a passionate commitment to this struggle, a “belief that if people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions” (*Rules* 11). Thus, while Arendt focuses on a politics with a *disinterested* character, Alinsky shows that the political organizer must give up a concern with the “ethics of means and ends” to maintain her *continual interest* in the life-and-death struggle of politics. The continual interest of the political organizer (who is for Alinsky the political actor *par excellence*) creates a very similar kind of representative political thinking. The consequence of the commitment to mass-based politics is that the organizer:

is ever on the hunt for the causes of man’s plight and the general propositions that help to make some sense out of man’s irrational world. He must constantly examine life, including his own, to get some idea of what it is all about, and he must challenge and test his own findings. Irreverence, essential to questioning, is a requisite. Curiosity becomes compulsive. His most frequent word is “why?” (*Rules* 11)

While Arendt points us to an irreverence that is based in a commitment to maintain one's distance from the goals of a current struggle in order to maintain the public sphere, Alinsky gives a counter-reading where the commitment to finding solutions to social problems induces the organizer to perform the same sort of continual questioning Arendt proposes we do through representative thinking. The Alinskyian organizer must put herself in the shoes of others to find "what it is all about." The organizer is in a constant search for meaning by looking in the world as it is, which is a world in constant flux. The organizer is "driven by a compulsive curiosity that knows no limits" to a search "for a meaning to the life around him and its relationship to his own life" and this search "never ends" (*Rules* 72). Married to this curiosity for the organizer is a strong ethos of irreverence. Alinsky once remarked that he has "never been sure I'm right but I'm also sure nobody else has this thing called truth" (qtd. in Sanders 27). A good organizer will "look at life in a flexible, fluid way" ready for new opportunities and new avenues for change (qtd. in Sanders 27).

Alinsky's view of public life is based around this kind of constant questioning and critique. He believes that "irreverence should be part of the democratic faith because in a free society everyone should be questioning and challenging" (qtd. in Sanders 56). Alinsky's "religious symbol" would be "the question mark" the very image of "a plowshare turned upside down" that would plow your mind "so that thoughts and ideas grow" (qtd. in Sanders 56-57). This requires a commitment to constantly learn about people and the world, to involve oneself in "the tediousness, the listening" (qtd. in Sanders 50). In fact, organizing requires you to learn about other people so much that "actually you do more organizing with your ears than with your tongue" (qtd. in Sanders 50).

The organizer "detests dogma, defies any finite definition of morality," and yet her irreverence is based in a deep reverence for "the enigma of life, and an incessant search for its meaning" (*Rules* 73). The organizer will not let go of some

basic commitments central to her work of creating power where there was none before, among them a "reverence for others, for their freedom from injustice, poverty, ignorance, exploitation, discrimination, disease, war, hate, and fear" (*Rules* 73). This Alinskyian notion of public-spiritedness is still tied to the need for the organizer to maintain a "free and open mind, and political relativity" begetting "his own identity" that "has no need for the security of an ideology or a panacea" (*Rules* 79). Because of the organizer's "curiosity, irreverence, imagination, sense of humor, distrust of dogma" he becomes a "flexible personality" that "is unlikely to disintegrate into cynicism and disillusionment, for he does not depend on illusion" (*Rules* 79). The contemporary age is one in which changes happen so quickly that any rigid ideology will not only become rapidly obsolete, but hinder the ability of the organizer to make effective change. The organizer, according to Alinsky, "should never have an ideology more specific than that of the founding fathers: 'For the general welfare'" (*Playboy* 150). Alinsky argues that with this, and only this, commitment to 'the people' will the organizer find direction in an ever-changing world.

Arendt agrees with Alinsky's basic premise that the world is always in flux, and the public sphere must respond accordingly. Arendt believes:

Life changes constantly, and things are constantly there that want to be talked about. At all times people living together will have affairs that belong in the realm of the public... What these matters *are* at any historical *moment* is probably *utterly* different... what becomes public at every given period seems to me utterly different. (qtd. in Hill 316, her emphasis)

For Arendt, what is worthy of political discourse (that is, what is not a social or private issue) changes as the world itself changes. What is appropriate to the political realm is always in flux. We can see this reflected in Alinsky as the search of the organizer to find "what it is all about" without relying on a dogmatic ideology, such as Marxism.

However, Alinsky's search centers on people, Arendt's on the public sphere proper. The motivation behind Alinsky's organizer is that she has a "love for people" (*Rules* 98), while in Arendt's political universe actors are motivated by Arendt's original title for what became *The Human Condition*: "*amor mundi*," the love of the world (Young-Bruehl 324, 327). The Alinskyian reading of political thinking points to a new way to understand how individuals ought to approach politics. Alinsky proposes an engagement with politics based on an understanding of the constant flux of the political world, while Arendt derides personal commitment to a specific issue, for Arendt believes that "commitment can easily carry you to a point where you do no longer think" (qtd. in Hill 308). Instead, with representative political thinking, "the more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue... the more valid my final conclusions, my opinions" (*BPF* 241).

Yet how different are these two perspectives? It appears that we can utilize Alinsky to read Arendt, and her position of representative thinking is implicitly motivated by the same goals as Alinsky explicitly states. Given the human degradation Alinsky writes about, perhaps we should update Arendt's *amor mundi* to an Alinskyian *amor plebs*, or at least an *amor populi*. This substitution of a socially concerned and activated political subject is most definitely at odds with Arendt's argument that "action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other" (*BPF* 151). The Alinskyian method of action is nothing unless it has an intended goal and a predictable effect. Yet Alinsky also understands the unpredictable effects of action, and the dangers of political action as simply self-expression. The difference is that Alinsky wants politics to engage "the world as it is" and not the world as it should be. Arendt, on the contrary, wants a return to a more worldly, more political time, before the rise of the social and the destruction of the public and private realms. Alinsky indeed would

welcome such a return, but gives a better expression to the necessity of agonistic politics *within* the social, the need to “just do it” and return politics to a sphere where it has been lost.

But what of the dangers Arendt describes of such commitments? Will Alinsky’s organizer, or moreover, the population of the People’s Organization, fall into the trap of a commitment to “the people” that will obscure the ability to think representationally about political matters? This Arendtian charge, I think, can be diffused with a look at the way Alinsky understands the organizer’s ethos of irreverence while maintaining a “reverence for others” (*Rules* 73). This is best illustrated by returning to Nietzsche, where Arendt and Alinsky share much. We will see that Arendt’s “selective appropriation of Nietzsche” (*PPT* 109) leaves out a critical Nietzschean point that Alinsky resituates. We can use Arendt to understand the power of Alinsky’s politics (and specifically his novel use of the *polis*) while using Alinsky to overcome Arendt’s insistence that we leave our commitment to social justice at the door of the private household when stepping into the public realm.

### **Nietzsche, Arendt and Alinsky**

What Nietzsche teaches is more akin to an Alinskyian need to gain experience by maintaining constant engagement with the public sphere, rather than an Arendtian need for representational thinking. While Arendt claims that her notion of representative thinking is indebted to Kant (*BPF* 241), it was Nietzsche who rallied against our common notion of “objectivity,” implicitly critiqued in Arendt’s notion of representative thinking. Nietzsche states that we should understand objectivity:

not as “disinterested contemplation” (which is a non-concept and absurdity), but rather as the capacity to have one’s pro and contra *in one’s power* and to shift them in and out: so that one knows how to make precisely the *difference* in perspectives and affective interpretations useful for knowledge... There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our “concept” of this matter, our “objectivity” be. (*GM* III:12, his italics)

Dana Villa, who quotes much of the above, but with a different translation, notes that "Arendt wants to pose a parallel norm for political judgment" akin to Nietzsche, but selectively appropriates him and maintains her insistence of representative thinking with a "focus on the distanced or disinterested quality" of such thinking (*PPT* 124). For Villa, Arendtian representative political judgment contains *not* the Nietzschean argument against "disinterested contemplation" (which Villa leaves out of his citation), but rather "Nietzsche's definition of a praiseworthy, life-enhancing form of intellectual 'objectivity'" as quoted above (*PPT* 124). While Villa refrains from stating this explicitly, this appears to be a prime example of Arendt's "selective appropriation" of Nietzsche. However, Nietzsche seems to be against representative thinking as a purely intellectual activity, for then it is inherently "disinterested contemplation," the absurdity of objectivity. The question remains if we agree with Villa's claim that Arendt selectively appropriated only the "life-enhancing form of intellectual" objectivity and utilized it in a "distanced or disinterested" kind of representational thinking without finding conflict with Nietzsche's self-same polemic against "disinterested contemplation."

Indeed, Villa is asking a lot from Arendt. Villa insists that Arendt has placed the boundaries of distance, disinterest and theatricality to her Nietzsche-inspired political agonism, while retaining a Nietzschean edge to her theorization of political judgment that still somehow bypasses Nietzsche's contention that the *problem* of objective thinking is a disinterested character. If Villa is correct that Arendt does appropriate Nietzsche, and I think he is, while maintaining an ethos of distance and disinterest in political thought, which she does, then Arendt has attempted to split Nietzsche where he cannot be divided. She has attempted to take Nietzsche's solution to objectivity while re-inserting the problem. This is no longer an appropriation of Nietzsche's theorizing of objectivity, but a bastardization of it.

But we are in luck. Alinsky's view of political judgment does not corrupt the Nietzschean conceptualization of objectivity, and yet retains a similar understanding of the necessity of a wealth of perspectives upon which to draw from in making political judgments. Alinsky reads the problem of the claim to objectivity in politics, however false it may be, as a way for citizens to either maintain their social position or opt out of the political struggle. Alinsky writes:

Objectivity, like the claim that one is nonpartisan or reasonable, is usually a defensive posture used by those who fear involvement in the passions, partisanship, conflicts, and changes that make up life; they fear life. An "objective" decision is generally lifeless. It is academic and the word "academic" is a synonym for irrelevant. (*Reveille* ix)

The lifelessness of an "objective" decision is for Alinsky at odds with the ability to take political action and create real change, and Alinsky shares a concern with Nietzsche for the impossible demand of objectivity. Moreover, Alinsky agrees with Nietzsche that it is only through perspectives that people gain understandings, for "people can make judgments only on the basis of their own experiences" (*Rules* 98). Alinsky proposes a commitment to a continual engagement with the struggles for social justice combined with an insatiable irreverence to create understanding through experience, through the gathering of more and more perspectives. Alinsky's point is that to gain true understanding, and to make accurate political judgments, one must be engaged with real politics and real experience, not distanced from the scene of the agonistic struggle with academic representational thought. Otherwise, the non-engaged political thinker falls into the category of the "Non-Doer" who is too concerned with the ethics of an action rather than its achievement. For "one's concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one's distance from the scene of conflict" and as we have seen, those who place too much of a concern with these ethics become the "passive—but real—allies of the Haves" (*Rules* 26, 25).

Alinsky points to a more Nietzschean reading of problems of objectivity and the value of multiple perspectives in politics, one that stresses that disinterest and

objectivity are nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to hide from the "scene of conflict." Alinsky follows through with the Nietzschean argument against disinterest with his commitment to the never-ending political struggle for our democratic ideals, as we must continue climbing Alinsky's metaphorical mountain-with-no-top. This keeps us engaged in a world that has constant flux and allows us to serve the cause of social justice while returning to us a "robust sense of the public realm," Villa's characterization of Arendt's specific goal (*PPT* 122).

Once in the public realm, Arendt also understands the necessity to allow the "things" of the world to be engaged by multiple viewpoints simultaneously (*HC* 51). Not only is this view deeply Nietzschean but also Alinskyian. But Alinsky is no neo-Nietzschean, for he insists on a decisively Arendtian reading of power as action in concert, a claim Nietzsche would detest. But perhaps Villa is correct, and Alinsky, like other proponents of Arendtian agonism are "Nietzscheanizing" Arendt too much by "stressing the boundary-blurring force of 'boundless' political action" (*PPT* 125). To this point we now turn.

### **An Arendtian, Not Nietzschean, Alinsky**

Villa worries that the contemporary agonists rebel "against the very idea of boundary drawing and an overly stabilized distinction between public and private" and that "unlike Arendt" they "take the broad constitutionalist separation of public and private completely for granted" (*PPT* 126). This leaves the contemporary strain of agonistic political theory to be "necessarily parasitic upon its 'texts'" (*PPT* 126). For Villa, Arendt "transcends this problematic" with her "limits and qualifications" of "public-spiritedness, independent judgment, and self-distance" to her agonistic reading of politics (*PPT* 127). With these limits, Villa claims that Arendt's politics maintains "at its core a care for the world, a care for the public realm" and does *not* devolve into a politics that "is *simply* conflict" (*PPT* 127, his emphasis). The task, then, is to see if this critique of Honig can be successfully deployed against Alinsky.

It cannot, I argue below, when we understand the way in which Arendt informs Alinsky much more than Nietzsche. For it is not only their shared conceptions of power, but also through their mutual disdain for an view of agonistic action that what Villa calls is simply “*expressive action*” (PPT 120) that Arendt and Alinsky find common ground. Additionally, both writers want to retain the public/private distinction, even as Alinsky wants to engage a politics of social concern. This last aspect of the public/private split in Alinsky will be addressed in the next section. Instead, let us focus our attention on Villa’s polemic against expressivism.

Villa understands Arendt as opposed to the neo-agonist Honig in that Arendt’s commitment to representative thinking and the theatrical nature of political action maintains a “stipulation that action and contestation must be informed by both judgment and a sense of the public if they are to be praiseworthy” (PPT 124). Not all political action meets these criteria. Indeed, Villa writes that the “mere expression of energy in the form of political commitment fails to impress [Arendt]” (PPT 124-125). Where does Alinskyian political action fall on this strict rubric of action? On the one hand, Alinskyian politics is anything but disinterested. On the other, Alinsky himself is nonplussed with purely expressive political action that creates no real change in the world. For example, Alinsky derides the “confrontations” that many activists engage in that are simply “crises as ends in themselves,” and are not “actions but a discharge of energy which, like a fireworks spectacle, briefly lights up the skies and then vanishes into the void” (Reveille 228). Real actions are those that create social change, and these come from strategic organization to gain power. The expressive actions of individuals without organization have no lasting political comport for Alinsky, and fall outside of his criteria for true political action.

Indeed, it is only through organized mass action that real political change can take place. Alinsky returns us to the very Arendtian notion of power as something that “springs up *between* men when they act *together*” (HC 200, my emphasis).

Alinsky, like Arendt, deplores purely expressive political action because “confrontations” do not represent the human capacity for creating true power, a power that is action in concert. For Arendt, this kind of power “is what keeps the public realm” (*HC* 200), and for Alinsky, it is the only kind of power that the Have-Nots can use to create change. Again, their similarities remind us to the extent that Alinsky’s political activism is based in Arendtian notions. Alinsky is no neo-Nietzsche as Villa’s rubric would have us believe, but Arendtian to an extent that we might contest Villa’s theorization of the Nietzschean component in Arendt.

However, Villa does provide some accurate readings of the problems of Bonnie Honig’s agonistic politics, and we should question whether Alinsky is more akin to Honig than Arendt. Alinsky, following his (perhaps unintentional) path as an Arendtian, does not fall into the same trap as Honig. For while Honig seeks to use a ‘Nietzscheatized’ Arendtian agonism to destroy the public/private split, if we look closely at Alinsky, we understand he maintains the Arendtian notion of the polis as a realm of created, forced equality (and opposed to the private realm) that Honig would disrupt with her account. With this perspective we come closer to understanding how Alinsky utilizes Arendtian political theory for social change in the “world as it is.”

### **Alinsky, the Polis and the Politics of Experience**

The organizer is by nature a mobilizer. While Alinsky maintains a need for a constant engagement in understanding the world, the organizer must be able to effectively communicate in order to gather people together to create power. Because “people can make judgments only on the basis of their own experiences” (*Rules* 98) it is incumbent upon the organizer to find a way to either undergo the same experience, or communicate on the basis of some other shared experience. Thus for Alinsky, political judgment and thinking not only necessitates an irreverence and worldly curiosity, but is imbedded with a deep respect for the power of experience. If

Arendt would have us *think* in the place of another, Alinsky would have us *walk* in their shoes for a while.

Alinsky writes that "people only understand things in terms of their experience, which means that you must get within their experience" (*Rules* 81). Arendt theorizes experience in the same way. "What is the subject of our thought?" she once asked rhetorically, "Experience! Nothing else!" (qtd. in Hill 308). Indeed, in an interview, Arendt remarked "I do not believe that there is any thought process possible without personal experience" ("What Remains?" 19). Experience is the foundation for our political thoughts and judgments, but we cannot remain only within our own experiences if we wish to communicate or act politically. Thus Alinsky understands the importance of different personal experiences as the foundation of communication. For example, Alinsky writes:

If the organizer begins with an affirmation of his love for people, he promptly turns everyone off. If, on the other hand, he begins with a denunciation of exploiting employers, slum landlords, police shakedowns, gouging merchants, he is inside their experience and they accept him. (*Rules* 98)

The organizer must be able to communicate within the experience of those she organizes. This skill is even more critical in times of political action, as Alinsky's second 'rule' of politics states "never go outside the experience of your people" while the third reads "whenever possible go outside the experience of the enemy" (*Rules* 127). When you go outside of the experience of a people with a political "action or tactic," the result "is confusion, fear, and retreat... [and] a collapse of communication" (*Rules* 127). This should be exploited against one's enemy for here "you *want* to cause confusion, fear and retreat" (*Rules* 127, my emphasis). Alinsky's books are full of examples of disruptive political action that is effective because of how it goes outside the experience of the status quo, which reacts in predictably irrational ways to the advantage of the organizer. For instance, Alinsky often tends towards political actions that ridicules the ruling class, as in a flatulent disruption of a

symphony, the deployment of “3,000 blacks” eating watermelon in a metropolitan downtown (preying on a common stereotype) or the plan for a coordinated occupation of all the bathrooms in the O’Hare airport that would create utter chaos with “the nation’s first ‘shit-in’” (*Rules* 139-148). Alinsky spoke of one action where members of a People’s Organization “piled rats on the steps of City Hall... [Mayor] Daley got that message” and another “filled an old truck with garbage and dumped it on an alderman’s lawn. They got better garbage pickups after that” (qtd. in Sanders 75). Successful political action is one that differentiates between actors and audience by being based in a common experience. Alinsky’s actions are premised on the idea of the differences between those who create the political action and those it targets. All of Alinsky’s tactics require understanding the experience of the political actors (in order to stay within their experience) and the audience (to go outside their experience).

What makes Alinsky’s actions powerful is the sense of equality they foster among the participants through acting within a shared experience. Combining this with going outside the experience of the target overturns the power dynamics of the Haves and the Have-Nots. The equality that is temporarily created within the space of the political action is radically different than the experience of *inequality* the Have-Nots experience in their everyday private lives. By creating a public space of equality for the participants, Alinskyian action provides the Have-Nots with a view of what a real, democratic public realm would feel like. This is the necessary understanding citizens need to become involved in the public realm, to drag themselves out of the social.

In effect, Alinsky is utilizing the Arendtian categories of public/private life and the polis to create political action that brings citizens into the public realm out from their mire in the social. Arendt theorizes the polis as “the bottom of our political existence,” that is, what we are implicitly referring to when we use the word

"politics" (*MDT* 204). In other words, the idea of the polis is always present whenever we label an action "political." Arendt helps us understand that the polis is where politics takes place, and whenever politics takes place we create the polis. This is the meaning of her insistence that "wherever you go, you will be a *polis*" expressing the Greek "conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere" (*HC* 198). This is what Arendt wants us to recapture, this is our "lost treasure."

Arendt characterizes the polis as the space of forced equality, opposed to the inequality of the private realm where economic matters prevail, and created by the self-same action that maintains the public realm (*OR* 30-31; *HC* 32, 198). The polis is the space of appearances where actors appear to each other in the public light and disclose their uniqueness and plurality that can win them "immortal fame" (*HC* 197). The polis can spring up anywhere, anytime—and as Alinsky teaches, by anyone—as the "organization of the people" the polis "arises out of acting and speaking together" (*HC* 198).

Alinsky's political action is the utilization of the Arendtian polis, the creation of a space of equality and appearance for participants that visibly reflects the lack of equality in the social and private realms. Alinsky's political action utilizes Arendt's "twofold character" of human plurality: "equality and distinction" (*HC* 176). The forced equality of the polis becomes explicitly apparent when it is the Have-Notes that take action to create the polis, for when they exclude the Haves from the polis by maintaining action outside of their experience, it is one of those very rare moments when wealth cannot buy acceptance. The activists that disrupt a shareholder meeting, stage a sit-down strike, or take to the streets armed with watermelon slices create the polis by their actions while marking its boundary with their shared experience. The shock of finding oneself, or one's values, ridiculed in the harsh "light of the public realm" (*OR* 69) is a reminder that public action cannot be a

disinterested search for civic truth until experiences can be shared without regard to one's economic or social position. That is, until we solve "the very great social problems" and freedom can flourish because we have conquered necessity.

Alinsky demonstrates that by keeping inside of the experience of the group of participants with a political action that goes outside the experience of "the enemy," the effect is the revelatory and affirmational effects of agonistic political action that clearly delineates the lines of equality found in the polis. The effectiveness of Alinsky-style action is found in the shock of the "enemy" in their *exclusion* from the polis created by the demonstrators. The chance for heroic action within Alinsky-style political action is limited to the participants of the action, those who's experience the action maintains. This simultaneously secures a public realm of equality *within* the class of the socially needy, and throws back their previous exclusion onto "the enemy." While this rigid friend/enemy distinction does wonders to bring citizens out of their mire in the social and into the public realm, there are troubling costs. It is to this tension we now turn.

### **(III) Evaluating the Alinsky Method**

#### **Inspiration for Action and Self-Removal from the Social**

Without a doubt, Alinsky provides important resources for citizens to take coordinated political action despite all the negative effects of the social. Alinsky self-consciously styles his confrontational and explosive political tactics in order to remove citizens from their stagnant and non-political lives, lived in the slum and the social, and bring them into the public realm where action and politics take place. The "first thing" Alinskyian organizers must do when they enter a community is "rub raw the sores of discontent" to "break down... justifications for inertia" (*Playboy* 61, 72). Indeed, the "biggest obstacles" of Alinsky's organizing "were the apathy and despair and hopelessness of most of the slum dwellers" for "when injustice is complete and

crushing, people very seldom rebel; they just give up" (*Playboy* 72). To break people out of their mire in the social where citizens feel powerless and hopeless, Alinskyian organizers create an impetus for action by reminding them "look, you don't have to put up with all this shit" and "there's something concrete you can do about it" (*Playboy* 74). Alinsky counters the inertia and perceived powerlessness of the social by agitating the citizenry, pressing them towards a righteous anger at their social position, and providing an outlet with participation in a mass-based People's Organization.

Even in the middle class, Alinsky believes "the despair is there; now it's up to us to... galvanize them for radical social change" (*Playboy* 61). Inspiring the middle class to remove themselves from the social and participate in coordinated political action (indeed a harder task than mobilizing the poor) will:

give them a way to participate in the democratic process, a way to exercise their rights as citizens and strike back at the establishment that oppresses them, instead of giving in to apathy... We'll not only give them a cause, we'll make life goddamn exciting for them again—*life* instead of existence. We'll turn them on. (*Playboy* 61, his emphasis)

Alinsky counteracts the social with his agitation and coordinated action. The alternative he proposes to citizens is a life more exciting, dynamic, and full of the human capacity for action than their atomized "social" experience. This new life is dedicated to "radical social change" and the promotion of the democratic ideals, and participation in the eternal war against social problems of hunger, poverty and oppression.

The Alinskyian social shares the Arendtian characteristics of hopelessness, perceived powerlessness and apathetic inertia. The middle class suffers from these problems, but the poor and discriminated have the additional difficulties of their economic situation as well as prejudice and bigotry that restrict liberty and happiness. The important point to be made is that Alinsky teaches that citizens can *do* something about both of these problems by taking dynamic and expressive

political action. Citizens join a People's Organization to recover their individual "lost treasure" of a "life instead of existence." Alinsky effectively teaches citizens their own power for self-removal from the social, and moreover, a removal that involves the overcoming of social and political problems affecting their lives.

This was where Alinsky was most effective and his organizing method best utilized. In *Crisis in Black and White*, Charles Silberman gives an extremely positive analysis of the Alinsky-organized Temporary Woodlawn Organization (TWO). The difficulty of creating these kind of organizations, writes Silberman, is that "slum dwellers are incapable of acting" until "suppressed resentments and hostilities are brought to the surface where they can be seen as problems—*i.e.*, as a condition you can do something about" (Silberman 334). The organizer's job is "to persuade the people to move" and "develop and harness the power necessary to change the prevailing patterns" (Silberman 335). The crucial factor in the TWO is "not what the Woodlawn residents win, but that *they* are winning it; and this makes them see themselves in a new light—as men and women of substance and worth" (Silberman 346). Thus for Silberman, "TWO's greatest contribution" was winning victories for residents, by residents: the TWO "gives Woodlawn residents the sense of dignity" necessary to be politically engaged actors (Silberman 348). No longer mired in the social, Woodlawn neighborhood residents now have the dignity and self-worth, moreover the *organization*, necessary to understand and control their power to change their plight.

However, Silberman adds a caveat that takes on great importance given the later developments of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC), the first group Alinsky organized. Silberman writes:

Alinsky's methods unquestionably carry a fairly high degree of risk. Militancy can become an end of its own, and power can be misused and abused... Alinsky freely admits the dangers. Anything that is worthwhile, he argues, carries a calculated risk; and we can be sure that any time we solve one problem we will create new ones in the process. The only assurance he can

give, he tells groups interested in his approach, is the assurance that comes from a faith in the democratic process... (Silberman 356)

When Alinsky refuses to set the agenda of the People's Organizations he helps create, he runs the danger of groups using his organizational model and effective analysis of power for objectionable goals, even ones that contradict the earlier egalitarian standpoint these organizations take during their founding. While the creation of People's Organizations relies on communities and individuals coming together for mutual support, the organization can easily turn reactionary, and work to prevent perceived threats to the neighborhood interest. This is exactly what happened in the case of the BYNC, once an egalitarian organization that turned reactionarily conservative and fought to prevent their neighborhood from being integrated. Does Alinsky's assurance of the democratic process fall short? Or is there another problem lurking in his organization model? To these questions and the case of the BYNC we now turn.

### **Troubling Developments in the Back of the Yards**

The most damning critique of the Alinsky method and legacy ironically comes from the very first community he organized, and points to some theoretical failings of the Alinsky model. Alinsky's first People's Organization was the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) organized in Chicago, in neighborhoods Alinsky referred to as "the slum across the tracks from across the tracks" (qtd. in Sanders 31), also the setting of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. In 1939 Alinsky organized the community, creating the neighborhood council that soon became the official voice of residents. The BYNC was created despite the ethnic rivalry among the various Eastern European immigrants and the religious intolerance between Catholics and Protestants. The BYNC made impressive gains for their residents with Alinsky's militant tactics of sit-downs, boycotts and the like. The BYNC, according to Marion Sanders, who interviewed Alinsky for Harper's Magazine, won "major concessions

from City Hall and at the same time mounted a self-help program which transformed the area into a model working-class community" (Sanders 8). However, much to the disappointment of Alinsky and progressives interested in this model program, during the 1960's the BYNC took their organizing skills and structures provided by Alinsky to pursue a segregationalist agenda.

Robert Fisher, in *Let the People Decide*, a book on the successes and limits of neighborhood organizing in the U.S., faults Alinsky for a lack of political education and ideology in his organizing model. Fisher argues that the conservative drift of the BYNC is due to the absence of antiracist ideology when the Council was organized (Fisher 57). Alinsky "consciously deemphasized ideology, antifascist or otherwise" and this approach "backfired in the Back of the Yards" as the BYNC "was able to win victories and power" while no one had "put forth a clear antiracist ideology for members to respond to" (Fisher 57). Moreover, the conflict that is such a hallmark for Alinsky was downplayed when it occurred within the organization. Fisher remarks that "conflict between 'us' and 'them' was encouraged" but "conflict among members of the organization... over difficult issues like race" was "regarded as destructive" by Alinsky (Fisher 57). Alinskyian agonistic politics, according to Fisher, ended when it turned towards the internal processes of the organization.

This was a problem not ignored by Alinsky, but the answers he provides are problematic. Alinsky believed that it is often necessary to avoid certain divisive issues during the early stages of the building of a mass-based People's Organization that would splinter the group. An organizer in a racist or segregated neighborhood populated by whites shouldn't "start out right off the bat by saying, 'Racists are banned from this organization, and we're going to fight for the right to bring blacks in here'" (qtd. in Sanders 71). Clearly, this would drastically limit the number of participants willing to join the organization, either because of their personal anti-segregation views or from pro-segregation pressures. "So you avoid the race issue"

writes Alinsky, "you leave it alone" (qtd. in Sanders 71). That is, you let it rest, knowing "that once you have [residents] organized on other issues, the situation will change." To wit, "this is not just theory" argues Alinsky, but part of the physics of mass-based organizations, for "sooner or later, even the low-income whites in a black-hating community find out that in order to get things they want... they've got to make a deal, they need support" from black residents (qtd. in Sanders 71). It is striking and problematic that when interviewed in 1969, Alinsky pointed to this phenomenon operating "ever since the early days of Back of the Yards" (qtd. in Sanders 71). However, even in 1959 Alinsky was well aware of the "BYNC's growing racist reputation" but at that time refused to speak out against the BYNC's anti-integrationism (Horwitt 367).

In 1969 Alinsky did speak out against the BYNC, but eschewed moralizing against their racism, and described their current anti-integrationist standpoint as a matter of historical inevitability. Although the "community's unwillingness to accept racial integration during the 1960s" was, according to historian and Back of the Yards native Thomas Jablonsky, "a reaction typical of Chicago in general" (Jablonsky 150), the community's new racism was at odds with its past success at overcoming ethnic strife among the white immigrants. Asked in 1972 if he viewed the BYNC as a failure, Alinsky responded:

No, only as a challenge. It's quite true that the Back of the Yards Council, which 20 years ago was waving banners attacking all forms of discrimination and intolerance, today doesn't want Negroes, just like other middle-class white communities. Over the years they've won victory after victory against poverty and exploitation and they've moved steadily up the ladder from the have-nots to the have-a-little-want-mores until today they've thrown in their lot with the haves... Last time I was in Back of the Yards, a good number of cars were plastered with Wallace stickers; I could have puked... This is why I've seriously thought of moving back into the area and organizing a new movement to overthrow the one I built 25 years ago. (*Playboy* 76)

Alinsky's characteristic bravado notwithstanding, this response highlights the extent to which Alinsky views the change of attitude of the BYNC as part of the never-

ending political and social battle, and not stemming from a lack of ideology or strong antiracist presence. According to sociologists Donald and Dietrich Reitzes in *The Alinsky Legacy*, a survey of contemporary Alinskyite organizers, the BYNC failed to maintain "a strong independent organization able to defend local interests and broaden citizen political participation" and devolved into "a very narrow and parochial interest in perpetuating itself and serving white ethnics" (Reitzes & Reitzes 73). This took place when Alinsky moved on to other projects, and his dream of "encouraging residents to get involved in the broader social, economic, and political life of the community, city, and nation" floundered when he left (Reitzes & Reitzes 73). Yet for Alinsky, this "eternal problem" where advocates of "humanism and social justice... falter and succumb to the materialistic decadence of the prevailing status quo" such as in the BYNC, "isn't cause for despair" (*Playboy* 76, 78). Alinsky, in his belief that when organizing for social change "there'll be setbacks, reverses, plenty of them, but you've just got to keep on sluggin'" reiterates his philosophy that "all life is warfare, and it's the continuing fight against the status quo that revitalizes society" (*Playboy* 78). "The struggle itself," according to Alinsky, "is the victory" (*Playboy* 78, my emphasis). Life is nothing more than "a series of revolutions" that slowly bring society "closer to the ultimate goal of *real* personal and social freedom" (*Playboy* 76, his emphasis).

Yet in a powerful critique, Fisher charges that the conservative turn by the BYNC, exemplified but not limited to the integration issue, comes part and parcel with Alinsky's commitment to capitalism. Alinsky's organizing method, according to Fisher:

offers no critique of the political and economic system inside or outside the neighborhood, no analysis, other than "powerlessness," of what causes and perpetuates poverty in the neighborhood, no solution to neighborhood problems beyond "getting power." Alinsky ultimately possessed a strong faith in the ability of liberal capitalism to resolve these problems. (Fisher 58)

Alinsky's belief that American democracy and American capitalism could coexist, once citizens had powerful People's Organizations under which their interests would be represented, is a problem for addressing underlying structures of power. Alinsky holds fast to the belief that capitalism can spread its rewards to everyone, including the working and non-working poor. Similarly, Benjamin Marquez, exploring the failure of an Alinskyian group to win structural change in power dynamics, writes that although Alinskyite activists:

deliver a withering critique of economic inequalities, they do not believe that such things as chronic unemployment or low wages are an integral part of free market capitalism. Their critique of the market is not that profits are privately appropriated but that not enough people share in capitalism's bounty. (Marquez)

Alinsky and his school of thought propose not a radical restructuring of the economic system, but increased class mobility among the poor. This is the goal of gaining "power" in the Alinsky sense, teaching the Have-Nots how to use the power of their multitude to become the Haves. Indeed, implanting a critique of capitalism into the People's Organizations that Alinsky developed might have helped assuage some of their later conservative drift. But this was not Alinsky's mission, and he was deeply wary of instituting a personal politics or philosophy in the organizations and communities in which he worked. For Alinsky it's "the organizer's job to provide the technical know-how, not to impose his wishes or his attitudes on the community; we're not there to lead, but to help and to teach" (*Playboy* 74). If the organizer *lead* the People's Organization, the community would "grow overly dependent on us and the moment we moved out the situation would start to revert to the *status quo ante*" (*Playboy* 74). The lack of ideology in Alinsky's organizing is intentional and strategic. Without giving communities the practice of self-determination and the ability to choose their agenda, the organizer fails to create a political structure that can defend the community's gains and pursue social justice over the long run. Alinsky maintains

this commitment despite the example of the BYNC and its choice to pursue a conservative, reactionary agenda.

In sum, Alinsky is aware of the limitations of his approach, and chalks it up to inevitability. Alinsky refuses to “glorify the poor” because “too often I’ve seen the have-nots turn into haves and become just as crummy as the haves they used to envy” (qtd. in Sanders 53). The only alternative Alinsky saw was a New Left revolutionary socialism, something he wanted no part of. Indeed, Alinsky was dissatisfied with radicals that want to destroy the system, charging that the “student activists who refuse to be realistic are so far left that they’re out of the [political] arena” and therefore cannot create any positive change (*Reveille* 230).<sup>4</sup>

Alinsky incites and organizes communities to create revolutionary change, to upset the balance of power through agonistic, explosive, and confrontational action. But Alinsky’s revolutions are *pragmatic*, because in the world-as-it-is, “real revolution is a long, hard process” where “you’re not going to get instant nirvana—or any nirvana, for that matter” (*Playboy* 76, his emphasis). Short of overthrowing the system in a *coups d’état*, “the only answer is to build up local power bases that can merge into a national power movement that will ultimately realize your goals” (*Playboy* 76). Thus for Alinsky the BYNC wasn’t a failure, but part of the historical process that “every major revolutionary movement” goes through, “proceeding from virginal purity to seduction to decadence” (*Playboy* 76). Organizers, radicals, and social-change advocates can’t become disillusioned by this process and expect a monumental instantaneous revolution. Instead, the activist must learn “to be

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<sup>4</sup> “It would be great if the whole system would just disappear overnight,” said Alinsky in 1972, “but it won’t, and the kids on the New Left sure as hell aren’t going to overthrow it. Shit, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin couldn’t organize a successful luncheon, much less a revolution. I can sympathize with the impatience and pessimism of a lot of kids, but they’ve got to remember that real revolution is a long, hard process” (*Playboy* 76).

realistic in... expectations," and the organizer should "go on using the probables in the eternal struggle to achieve the improbable" (*Reveille* xii).

Alinsky's goal isn't to end each and every plight of the communities he organizes, but to allow communities themselves to wage the never ending struggle for our democratic ideals of justice and equality. This requires dragging people out of their civic paralysis, mobilizing them to take action that proves they *can* create effective change. "I knew when I left Back of the Yards in 1940 that I hadn't created a utopia," Alinsky remarked, "but people were standing straight for the first time in their lives, and that was enough for me" (*Playboy* 78). Alinsky is most effective in bringing people out of their entrapment "the social" where citizens have the latent power potential for political action, but are too atomized and paralyzed by events seemingly beyond their control. Alinsky knows this method has costs, and is willing to accept them, while his critics are more dubious. What is missing from this discussion is a theoretical perspective as to *why* Alinsky organizations seem to falter. Arendt, I argue, can lend this perspective.

### **The Friend/Enemy Split**

One of the crucial components to Alinsky's effectiveness in inspiring citizens to take political action despite the debilitating effects of poverty and the rise of the social is Alinsky's "thirteenth rule" of political tactics: "pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it" (*Rules* 130). Alinsky writes:

the opposition must be singled out as the target and "frozen." By this I mean that in a complex, interrelated, urban society, it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil. There is a constant, and somewhat legitimate, passing of the buck... [the target] must be a personification, not something general and abstract such as a community's segregated practices or a major corporation or City Hall. It is not possible to develop the necessary hostility against, say City Hall... (*Rules* 130, 133)

By choosing a single target to focus on, citizens can be roused into enough indignation and anger to take action. But abstract targets don't work. Indeed, the best targets are individuals: CEO's, school superintendents, city council members

and mayors (*Rules* 133-134). The individuals are demonized as “the enemy” and the focus of the organization’s attacks and actions. “Let nothing get you off your target,” writes Alinsky, for “all issues must be polarized if action is to follow” (*Rules* 133). The individual focus of the attack helps polarize the issue, necessary because “one acts decisively only in the conviction that all the angels are on one side and all the devils on the other” (*Rules* 134). For Alinsky, this is not manipulation, but the facts of life in the dirty game of democratic politics.

This friend/enemy dichotomy extends beyond the individual target and into the Alinskyian polis. As detailed above, the power of Alinskyian political action is in the creation of a space of equality among the destitute while excluding the affluent from the space of appearances that allows the poor and the oppressed to express *who* they are as individuals, not just *what* they are as social statistics. When the poor take political action in concert with their peers, they reverse the status quo, and cement the friend/enemy distinction to use the (often irrational) reaction of the status quo against them, a practice Alinsky called “mass jujitsu” (qtd. in Sanders 43). This is all done in order to gain economic security and social justice, the kind of private wealth that for Arendt is a requirement to fully enter the public stage with enough disinterest to focus on political actions that have the public realm and public spirit at heart.

The irony of the Back of the Yards is that when low-income white ethnics (discriminated against in part because of their ethnicity in a city dominated by an Irish political machine) secured the private economic status that would allow them to “play the game” of politics without fear of losing, they lost their public-spiritedness and egalitarian flavor. Not only is a problem for Alinsky, but also seems to be one for Arendt.

However, I think Arendt provides some solutions to this problem. First, Arendt would criticize the lack of agonistic speech and action within the BYNC and other

People's Organizations. Second, she would criticize the rigidity of the friend/enemy distinction Alinsky deploys so successfully. What unites these criticisms, and serves as the locus of possible solutions to the problems of the Alinsky method, is in Arendt's theorization of the tendency of pariah people to band together and suppress dissent.

In *Men in Dark Times* Arendt argues that fraternity and impenetrable solidarity rises "among persecuted peoples and enslaved groups," and this kind of "humanity" is "great privilege of pariah peoples" (*MDT* 13). Yet this "privilege is dearly bought; it is often accompanied by so radical a loss of the world," by which Arendt means the loss of a permanency of the public space, the shared common world (*MDT* 13). The public, a term that "signifies the world itself" is a space that acts like an "in-between" that "relates and separates men at the same time" (*HC* 52). This becomes lost for pariah peoples when, "under the pressure of persecution" the persecuted move "so closely together that the interspace which we have called world... has simply disappeared" (*MDT* 13). Thus "the pariahs of this world enjoy the great privilege of being unburdened by care for the world," a care for the public realm where individuals come together as equals (*MDT* 14). The results of this attitude are the hardening of the friend/enemy distinction as pariah people bond together and the loss of the public space of agonistic action and speech within the category of the pariah peoples themselves. One is either for or against the pariah, and to debate and question the pariahs themselves is seen as giving support to the enemy. Just as the social devours the public and private realms and wreaks havoc, the loss of the public "in-between" space among pariah people induces conformity and kills public debate.

Richard H. King in *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* applied this Arendtian perspective with great theoretical success to understand the rise and subsequent limitations of black power ideology. King writes that lacking the "in-between" that

separates and gathers people, "individuals in the pariah group find it difficult to accurately assess their oppressors or to get any distance on their own world" (King 164). Under King's reading of Arendt, when a people:

conceive of themselves as a unified oppressed group... disagreement, should it arise, is easily branded as betrayal... communities in which political debate can take place are hardly compatible with communities of (erotic) solidarity. Among the oppressed *qua* oppressed, the tendency is for there to be no open, public debate, only agreement or exclusion. (King 164)

For King, this explains the rise a separatist black power ideology and the eventual "visions of black unity and totality" that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was to assume (King 165). King's Arendt-inspired solution was to support "small-group, grass-roots deliberation" within the movement and organizations such as "freedom schools and SCLC's citizenship schools" that would have been "important touchstones of political community and political freedom" (King 165). These groups would make decisions and take actions based on collective agreement, but "such agreement would have to be created rather than assumed" (King 165). The loyalty of blacks would have been to these institutions that guarantee "the space of debate and action rather than to 'black people' per se" (King 165). King suggests the creation of small democratic groups in which to pursue the civil rights struggle to combat the conformism and squelching of debate in the pariah phenomenon.

King's solution sounds suspiciously like Alinsky's People's Organizations, where citizens have loyalty to their neighborhood organization and not the plight of low-income people, or oppressed people per se.<sup>5</sup> Yet these groups are not immune to the squelching of internal debate and hardening of intra-group loyalty. Alinsky's rigid friend/enemy distinction and the personalizing of enemy "targets" reinforces group solidarity where to question and critique is seen as "destructive." Internal criticism is

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, at a meeting in Detroit where Stokely Carmichael and Saul Alinsky shared a speaking platform, the audience persisted that Carmichael give a real, concrete example of Black Power. Thus pressed, Carmichael cited FIGHT, Alinsky's Rochester, NY People's Organization (Horwitt 508).

shunned as the enemy becomes demonized and the neighborhood interest is valorized. However Alinsky's People's Organizations are mass-based "organizations of organizations" based on "co-operative relationships" between its "various agencies" that serve the various social groups of the neighborhood (*Reveille* 86). In other words, the erotic solidarity of the pariah people does *not* exist among the neighborhoods Alinsky enters. The neighborhoods are atomized and divided along various ethnic, class and racial lines. Alinsky employs the friend/enemy distinction in part to give neighborhood residents a target for their anger but also to bring them together, to form solidarity and a feeling of mutual pariah-status. The People's Organization rests on the *construction* of a pariah identity based on geography rather than race, class, gender or sexuality.

This all to say that I believe Alinsky's People's Organization, while they have succumbed to the trappings of the pariah phenomenon, have the privilege of taking the friend/enemy distinction only as far as is necessary to galvanize communities for coordinated political action that removes individuals from their entrapment in the social without *necessarily* falling into the traps of pariah people's organizations based on race, gender, or religious demarcations. Alinsky's People's Organizations need to combat the negative effects of the friend/enemy distinction by continuing on their path as Arendtians and including a commitment to internal agonism, the institutionalizing of debate and dissent over the difficult issues, not the least of which would have been the issue of segregation and integration. This would resuscitate the other missing piece of the Arendtian political puzzle: the concern for representative thinking. Without internal debate, the People's Organization *qua* organization never has to engage in the kind of (or rather the various kinds of) representative thinking that Arendt's political actor and Alinsky's organizer engage in. Without the space of debate among equals existing *within* the organization of the low-income and oppressed, their organizations lose a concern for the Nietzschean gathering of "the

more eyes, different eyes" with which to view from (*GM* III:12), the Arendtian concern for "thinking in my own identity where actually I am not" (*BPF* 241) and the Alinskyian "hunt for the causes of man's plight" (*Rules* 11). Any and all of these types of representative thinking are available to citizens and the People's Organizations themselves, and as we have seen they do not necessarily imply a self-disinterested stance.

Thus the friend/enemy dichotomy and the exclusion of the affluent from the polis of the poor are best seen as tactics to rouse citizens out of their mire in the social and start them on a course of coordinated political action. In the case of the BYNC the loyalty of citizens to their neighborhood precluded the internal agonistic debate, but this loyalty was constructed in a way other pariah peoples' organizations can take for granted. Arendt and the BYNC serve as warnings for Alinskyite organizations to remain open to the process of internal debate and agonism. Indeed, this is where politics *cum* freedom is developed: the disclosure of unique individuality among one's peers.

This does not preclude the ability for organizers to follow Alinsky's good advice to leave ideology at home when entering a community. Not only will an ideological stance hinder the ability to give citizens the opportunity for self-determination that is a hallmark of participatory democracy, but will in fact hinder the ability to rouse citizens out of their entrapment in the social. Alinsky is explicit about the problems of gathering community support for a pre-ordained political agenda, as well as the need for communities to have agency in the organizing process. Alinsky stresses that any successful organizing campaign will proceed in such a way that when it is all said and done, "the people themselves" will really feel "that they had diagnosed their own problems" (*Reveille* 104).

Thus, on the one hand, the fact that Alinsky organizations take reactionary and conservative turns later in their lives is disagreeable, even deplorable perhaps,

but not a cause for renouncing the Alinsky method entirely. Arendt herself was awkwardly ambivalent about integration, as in her "Reflections on Little Rock" she rallies against *de jure* segregation as an unjust political law, but rallies to support the social need for discrimination when she opposes the *enforcement* of integration ("Reflections" 234-237). The point to be made is for Arendt, *de facto* segregation of neighborhoods might be an acceptable use of social association and discrimination. On the other hand, the Alinsky organizations that start with clearly delineated egalitarian aims that devolve into a reactionary conservatism once they have won economic security points to a problem in the Arendt of Dana Villa, who requires a modicum of private wealth in order to free one for entrance into the disinterested, theatrical public realm where the "play of the game" matters more than winning.

The solution, I argue, is in the ability of Alinsky-style groups to utilize the Alinsky method and the friend/enemy distinction to bring communities together against a common target while retaining internal debate and agonism. While organizations take action based on some sort of collective agreement, the value of representative political thought can still be institutionalized among the membership and in the organization itself. The individual and collective "hunt for the causes of man's plight" should take paramount position within the ranks and the leadership of any People's Organization.

### **Conclusion: A Productive Marriage**

"The beauty of Alinsky's legacy" writes Reitzes and Reitzes, "is that it is not prescriptive, it does not dictate a narrow or rigid set of 'steps' to develop community organizations" (Reitzes & Reitzes 251). I couldn't agree more. The enduring success of Saul Alinsky is in the method and ethos he offers, eschewing a program or system of organizing. "Instead," Reitzes and Reitzes continue, "Alinsky's legacy is best used in a more suggestive manner to excite and stimulate interest in community organization" (Reitzes & Reitzes 251). Indeed, the excitement of Alinsky is

contagious; his passion that everyday people, the poor and the oppressed, should organize and win the power they deserve is palatable in his books and interviews.<sup>6</sup> His love is clearly small-"d" democracy, and his commitment is to the poor and the oppressed, the Have-Nots whomever they are.

Arendt is similarly passionate, but her concern is to know what power is, how it operates, and how to keep the public world, our shared space of appearances, alive. Arendt's *amor mundi* motivates her to a politics of action and freedom ready for utilization by the Have-Nots, who, with only their bodies at their disposal, are in need of a freedom unconnected to material wealth. Alinsky's method and ethos connects the two together, and provides the Have-Nots with the opportunity to experience freedom-as-politics in the course of their struggle for social and economic justice.

Both writers address the foremost problem of the modern age: perceived mass powerlessness, the collective inability to control the events of the world we have created, leading to a loss of a dynamic and lively public realm. They both offer solutions, as Arendt provides the theoretical blueprint and Alinsky provides the passion, experience, and realism. Thus Alinsky's method is best understood and critiqued under Arendtian terminology. In turn, this allows Alinsky to provide Arendt with a new understanding of "representative thinking" as Arendt provides Alinsky with a diagnosis and solution to the "BYNC-phenomenon." So perhaps the two would have liked each other after all.

Contemporary theorists would profit from an examination as to how Arendtian theory can be embodied by Alinskyite groups, and contemporary social justice activists can learn from Arendt's theoretical resources. The gifts these two writers

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<sup>6</sup> At the opening session of Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation organizer training institute, Alinsky remarked: "just think of all the hell we've kicked up around the country with only four or five full-time organizers... Things will *really* move now" (*Playboy* 60).

offer are vast, the angles of analysis many, and reading them in conversation raises more questions than answers. I have attempted to look at their shared motivations and their shared solutions, hopefully giving the reader a glimpse into the theoretical and practical richness of such a project. There are more solutions to the classic political question “what is to be done” than can be answered here. But with the perspectives of Saul Alinsky and Hannah Arendt, we gain an invaluable look into the wealth of possibilities *her* theory and *his* practice, once married, offer.

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