



Hanna Pitkin

A Conversation with Hanna Pitkin

Hanna Pitkin¹ and Nancy Rosenblum²

¹Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720

²Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138;
email: nrosenblum@gov.harvard.edu

Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci. 2015. 18:1–10

First published online as a Review in Advance on
March 2, 2015

The *Annual Review of Political Science* is online at
polisci.annualreviews.org

This article's doi:
10.1146/annurev-polisci-092514-012354

Copyright © 2015 by Annual Reviews.
All rights reserved



Watch a video of this interview online

Keywords

representation, democratic theory, conceptual analysis, collective action, Wittgenstein, Machiavelli, Arendt

Abstract

An interview with Hanna Pitkin took place at the University of California, Berkeley, in the spring of 2014. What follows is an edited transcript; a video of the entire interview can be found at www.annualreviews.org/r/hannapitkin. Prof. Pitkin is the author of books well known to scholars and students in political theory and political science: *The Concept of Representation* (1967), *Wittgenstein and Justice* (1972), *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Machiavelli* (1984), and *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (1998). Her influential articles include the two-part essay “Obligation and Consent” (1965). Hanna Pitkin is winner of the 2003 Skytte Prize in Political Science “for her groundbreaking theoretical work, predominantly on the problem of representation.” In this interview, she discusses with Prof. Nancy L. Rosenblum her work on representation, Machiavelli’s republicanism and the study of gender, early conceptual analysis in political theory, political advocacy and organization, and the personal: her childhood and early influences, and the course of her academic career.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Prof. Nancy Rosenblum: Hanna, let's begin with a question of origins.

Prof. Hanna Pitkin: I was born in Berlin, the child of Jewish intellectual left-wingers, in 1931. It was not a good place to be born out of that background, and in 1933 my parents got us out of there. No doubt I would be dead now if they hadn't. (I'm pretty old; actually, I might have been dead by now anyway.) We went first to Oslo, Norway, because my father was a Freudian psychoanalyst, and he had trained some Norwegian analysts who had gone back to Norway to practice. They, no doubt seeing the circumstances in Germany, had invited him to come to Oslo and start a study group there.

And so we went there, but for various reasons my parents wanted to get back to the continent, and two years later we moved to Prague, where there were a lot of German-Jewish refugee analysts. I think that by the time we went back to Prague my parents knew that that was temporary because everyone was waiting to see when the Anschluss would be, Germany taking over Austria. Besides, Austria had anti-Semites of its own. So my parents began applications to come to the United States, and when I was six, almost seven, we came to Los Angeles—where there were also lots of Jewish refugee analysts. Each time we moved, my father was invited—I don't know the details—I suppose they guaranteed him some income for a period or something.

NR: What were the early influences either from your family or a school that foreshadow your life as an intellectual?

HP: Well, I suppose the first and obvious influence is the refugee status itself—the change in languages, and the question (which I was old enough to ask at least in Prague if not before) why do we keep moving like this? I knew that there was this person called Hitler, and so forth. My parents explained at my level as best they could, so an interest in world politics and an interest in languages surely go back to that.

My parents were some sort of Marxists, not Party members ever, but what came to be called Fellow Travelers, and I had an aunt who was a Party member who lived with us for a time in Berlin before we left.

NR: So you were surrounded by political conversation.

HP: Yes. Now, I'm sure there were also things not discussed in front of me, which I learned about later.

NR: Your work turns on language and words, and you've said you have an idiosyncratic pleasure in words. You've just given one explanation, that is the shift of languages, but I'm wondering whether your father, who was the famous psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel, who was part of the heroic early years of psychoanalysis. . . .

HP: Third generation. He was not analyzed by Freud himself. I don't know about "heroic." Maybe. And he was a teacher, so he may have seemed heroic to many analysts. Eventually he wrote an important teaching book.

NR: That's right—*The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*. So was that an influence? I would imagine that psychoanalysis had some effect on your attention to words.

HP: It must have. It was part of my parents' more general interest in words and ideas. My mother, for instance, was very interested in pedagogy. She was for a time a nursery school teacher, and some psychoanalysts, including my father, were interested in how to bring up children in ways that do not make them so neurotic. Also, they were both very playful people, and readers, and so

there were lots of word games, discussions of books, reading aloud to each other, reading aloud to me, of course, making up stories and poems, first for me, later also with my participation.

NR: Do you remember any early books that affected you most from childhood?

HP: Well, sure. There was an alphabet book. I very much wanted my parents to teach me to read, because I saw them reading all the time. I thought I was like them, as small children do, and I wanted to be more like them. But my mother felt that she herself had been forced to learn things and to behave properly much too early, and as a result had not had a happy childhood. She wanted me to have a carefree childhood, so she refused to teach me to read. When I first was put into nursery school I didn't like it, so I promptly got sick, and while I was sick in bed I asked her, "Why do I have to go to this school?" And she said "Well, you go to school. You learn to write and to read. You want to learn to read, don't you?" Instead of answering, I just asked her to hand me the alphabet book. By the time I got over my cold or whatever, I had taught myself the alphabet. My mother was nice enough to find me a better nursery school. There's an early influence for you.

NR: When then did you decide on an academic career? How old were you and did you always know that it would be in something like political theory?

HP: Good God, no! I always did well in school, and I kept getting boosted along in the educational process because I'd been doing well. And I don't know that I ever decided I wanted an academic career. I certainly can remember, in the rigors of graduate school and dissertation writing, seriously considering some other career instead. So I was not committed to that. I was certainly committed to intellectual enterprise. That was in many respects my inner life.

NR: What was your first job?

HP: My very first job was probably tutoring a younger child in math and other classes—so, teaching from very early. Actually, I have a much earlier story than that, but it's not a job: For a time my mother ran a nursery school in her own living room, which I was part of. I guess I was still a toddler or barely beyond, and at some point I apparently took a handkerchief and went around to all the other children and had them blow their noses. So, if you consider that a teacherly role, I had learned quite early from my mother.

NR: From the start you saw this career—once it became a career—as being as much about teaching as it was about writing.

HP: Yes, I did quite a bit of informal and other teaching before I ever got to teaching-assistant status as a graduate student. But then, I also wrote things from early on, as well.

REPRESENTATION

NR: *The Concept of Representation* was your first book. Karl Friedrich reviewed it I think in the *American Political Science Review*. He wrote, "A masterly treatment of which I can say that I would be proud to have done it." That book has had a very long life. It's still on my students' bookshelves. What led you to that project?

HP: During my first year of graduate work, at UCLA, I was in a seminar with Thomas Jenkin, and T.D. Weldon's *Vocabulary of Politics* had just come out. It was just the beginning of an interest in political concepts as a subfield of political theory. And so, he had us choose from a list of political science concepts and write our seminar paper on one of them. And, for no good reason, I chose representation.

I came to Berkeley, I worked for a while. I applied to go back to graduate school in political science, because that was the only field in which I felt I could get a fellowship because that was my undergraduate major. In Berkeley I had met Stanley Cavell, who later joined the Berkeley faculty in philosophy. He introduced me to the work of J.L. Austin and ordinary-language philosophy, as it's sometimes called.

And I remember asking Sheldon Wolin, who was to chair my dissertation and for whom I had been a teaching assistant, whether I might write a dissertation on some concept and use those techniques somehow. I didn't really know what I was talking about. But Wolin said, "Why not?" And I chose the concept of representation, because of that paper that I'd written. I had no idea where the inquiry was going to go, really, and therefore it took me a very long time of futzing around with what eventually became only the first chapter—years.

NR: Now I have to ask you a question that a graduate student of mine wanted me to ask: Looking back now at that book, is there anything you would change or do differently, or have new things happened either in institutional design or psychology or something to make you rethink anything you wrote?

HP: As so often when I'm presented with a question I want to say both yes and no. No, in the sense that I stopped thinking about representation after I published the book and that's a general pattern for me. The syndrome is almost—was it Woody Allen or Groucho Marx? I'm not sure—"Any club that would accept *me*, I wouldn't care to be a member of." I always feel that anything on which I've written is not really worth much attention. I tend to drop things cold once I've finished a piece of work on them, and so I dropped representation. But then I got the Skytte Prize for that book, and they demanded in order for me to get the prize that I present a paper on that topic. I said, "I haven't touched it for decades," and they said, "Doesn't matter." So I thought about it, and found that indeed there was something I had not considered in that book that I should have considered. So I wrote a little essay about whether there really can be such a thing as democracy by means of representation, or whether maybe those two concepts are somewhat at odds or in tension.

NR: Well, that's a terrific segue to the next question I was going to ask you. A great deal of democratic theory today—people writing in our field—are ambivalent at best about representation, and you've said a couple of things. You've said on the one hand—and this is from the book—that representation, delegation, coordination, federation, and other kinds of devolution are compatible with democracy, but you've also expressed the thought that they're in an uneasy alliance. So talk a little bit about that, maybe going back to the essay that you just spoke of.

HP: Democracy is one of those all-purpose words, but if by democracy you mean something like the *demos* governing itself or the *demos* governing the state or the *polis*—the ambiguity is already built into "*demos*." Do you mean the *demos* as distinct from some other class or segment of society ruling the whole of society, or do you mean everybody ruling themselves and each other jointly?

I'm inclined to the latter reading when I call myself a small-d democrat, and if you take that reading then there's great difficulty about having democracy in any large collection of people at all, because they can't all meet together and talk to each other. Even if they had email or Facebook or whatever, there are limits to how many peoples' entries you can listen to or look at. When we're trying to decide whether a particular state, or government, or organization is democratic, what we're really talking about is whether there's something like popular self-government going on there or not. And there can be hundreds of criteria for that, and ways of measuring those criteria, and weighting them, which you somehow total up to an overall decision. Democracy is never perfect, always a matter of degree. And that's one reason why the term's so slippery.

Representation can make a large society governable in a relatively democratic way, but it also, obviously, will not be as democratic as a small polity can be. It's a matter of judgment.

NR: I think these thoughts and your book in particular are especially relevant for democratic theorists today who are thinking of all kinds of imaginative designs. Sometimes they're actual experiments, like these citizens' juries that have been tried, and sometimes they're imaginative things like having a litocracy. But in all of those cases the question of what makes them representative—why can they stand for or act for—

HP: What makes them representative or what makes them democratic? Related, but not the same point.

NR: Right. This is very live in democratic theory today.

HP: I know that, and I believe that's why that book got the prize that it did. It's not the book's merit, really.

WITTGENSTEIN AND CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

NR: The conceptual approach that you took in *The Concept of Representation* really became the focus of your work on Wittgenstein. I'm going to read something: "Since human beings are not merely political animals, but also language-using animals, their behavior is shaped by their ideas. What they do and how they do it depends on how they see themselves in their world, and this in turn depends upon the concepts through which they see."

And so you concluded that Wittgenstein's contribution to political theory was awareness of concepts, sensitivity to the theorist's use of language. I'm wondering—today this seems evident to us. When you wrote was it not—what was political theory like at the time that made this, in a sense, a manifesto?

HP: Political theory was just beginning to have an active interest—and that was with the appearance of Weldon's book as far as I know. In a way, of course, insofar as political theory has always involved textual analysis it has always involved attention to words, and the changing meanings of words, and interpretation of ambiguous concepts. But to make it an explicit focus and almost a technical methodology—that was new.

And of course that has its dangers because if it becomes a technical methodology it's likely to lose contact with the substance of what's being studied. More energy goes, as it were, into the methodology than into the substantive issue.

NR: Do you think that's happened to people who do conceptual analysis today—that what started out as a very careful and distinctive approach has lost its edge?

HP: No, I didn't mean to say that and I'm not sure that I am sufficiently up on reading people who do conceptual analysis today to make any such judgment. I think it's a constant danger with any new way of proceeding in an intellectual field: You want to teach other people how to pursue this productive mode of thought, and so, for instance, you teach a course on it. But that course takes up time, which could've been spent on some other course, maybe with a more substantive content.

NR: You're still teaching graduate courses. Is this the sort of thing you do in your courses today?

HP: Yes, it is. I have all along from time to time done things that involved conceptual analysis. It's been quite a while since I devoted a whole course to the methodology, as it were. If I'm using it in a course, I have to teach some of it to the students.

MACHIAVELLI AND FEMINISM

NR: Let's turn to your study of Machiavelli's republicanism and its connection to heroism, and militarism, and its denigration of the private and the household. You probed his anxiety about being sufficiently masculine—his concern over what it means to be a man. And you brought manliness to the forefront in terms that earlier studies of Machiavelli and virtue and fortune really had not. This was in a relatively early work of what I'll call feminist studies—canonical thinkers that became a cottage industry later on.

HP: I don't know about the "cottage."

NR: Well, all right—a mass industrial-level manufacturer. Talking about Machiavelli you said that gender violence and domination and his relation to the feminine as corrosive and dependent added up really to misogyny. And I'm wondering, what brought you to this? Were you always—did you always have a gender consciousness in reading these books as a reader and interpreter?

HP: No. That's an interesting question. I was in a period when it had been a long time since my last published book and I was getting increasingly nervous about that. What's going to become of my career? It's been so long since I wrote anything. Meanwhile, I was teaching a basic undergraduate course on the history of Western political thought, and I gave one of my ordinary Machiavelli lectures, which had a short section about Machiavelli's conflicted conceptions of manhood. On the one hand, the clever fox he was sort of identified with, and, on the other hand, the great leader who would rally people for republican self-government in Italy. I gave this lecture and there was a student in the class—I think maybe he was Italian by extraction—who came up after the lecture, very impressed and excited, and said that this was terribly important to him, and so forth. And in my anxiety about my own publishing of writing I went home and thought, well, it is true that I've never read that anywhere. That is my own. Why don't I just write a short, simple article about it and publish that? It seemed like something bounded that didn't require a lot of investment of myself.

And I was going along doing that when it suddenly crossed my mind—here you are writing about this guy's conflicted concepts of manhood—you, a woman—and you don't know anything about what was going on in the family at the time and what his own family situation was. And I thought I should have a footnote on that, and so I pulled a couple of books off the shelf that seemed likely to have the information I needed—Burckhardt, *On the Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, and Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*.

And, by God, they contradicted each other, so I didn't know what to put in my footnote. So I went up to the library and began to research it. And then I can remember some months later having lunch with Norman Jacobson in this department and saying to him, "I've got the makings of an article and it's got a footnote that is longer than the rest of the article. What shall I do?" That was when it became clear to me that I had a book going. So it was not out of feminism that that book began, nor did my feminism grow out of it, really.

In one way, my feminism came from my mother. She fought those battles when she was a girl. She went to university when it had barely begun to be possible for a woman to go to university in Germany. In all sorts of ways she was a professional woman, and she and my father I think shared an unquestioned assumption that of course women could think like men, and should raise children together with men, and so on. So it was not a big issue for me. It was taken for granted at home, and I took it for granted too.

But, on the other hand, I was made aware of what the situation was generally like for women in the university by my graduate students, when I was fairly far along in my career. Title IX was enacted and there began to be a more widespread feminist movement in America, sort of like

the feminist movement of which my mother had been part in Germany before, though of course the conditions were different. And from listening to my women students—whom I had of course always considered as students independently of their gender—about their learning conditions, what teachers had said to them, and what their parents expected of them and said to them, I discovered the difficulties that most women had at that time in academia and as intellectuals. I don't know if I became a feminist, because I don't know if I'm entitled to that laudatory classification, because I'm not really for women's liberation as such or women's rights. I'm for all people's rights and liberation.

NR: Well, a fair definition of feminism, although not a radical one, just is equal rights.

HP: Well, then why call it “feminism”? Why not call it rights? It is a problem. . . . I'm certainly not hostile to feminism on the whole.

NR: Going back to the Machiavelli book for just a second, was a psychoanalytic framework something you used in doing that work?

HP: I think a psychoanalytic framework is something I use in all my writing. It wasn't as visible in my work before the Machiavelli book, and then of course the Arendt book. It was part of the household outlook in my childhood and I was in analysis as a child. I sucked my thumb until very late, and I guess my parents thought that I was too shy and bookish and not really the, kind of, free child that my mother had imagined raising. So they sent me to an analyst for years. I used to lie to her. For me the analyst was an ally of the grownups, and if I was going to have any privacy, a life of my own, I wasn't about to confide everything to her. I confided some things, but I also lied and it was only later on as an adult when I got into difficulties and undertook analysis as it were in my own name that I got past that.

ARENDT AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

NR: Let's turn to *The Attack of the Blob*, which is a close study of Hannah Arendt's idea of the social, and “blob” evokes the science fiction sense of a collective life out of control. And the book really is—if I'm reading it right—a critical attempt to explain how and why Hannah Arendt didn't entirely acknowledge the tension between depicting us as helpless on the one hand and as having agency on the other. And you pointed out that this is not an idiosyncratic problem of Arendt's—that it's a problem of political theory, that is, how to reconcile cause and necessity on the one hand and effective agency on the other.

So although this is a study of Hannah Arendt you, towards the end, really do speak in your own voice and take up the conditions that inhibit us—inhibit the capacity to control the consequences of our actions—inhibit initiative or launching worthy projects or political action altogether. And you have a wonderful phrase I think, which is “the absence of politics where politics belongs.” And I wondered, do you see that today—this absence of politics where politics belongs?

HP: Well, if you read the last chapter of the book you know that I do. I do indeed. It's worse now than it was when I wrote it. Emphatically, yes.

NR: Talk a little bit about that—about people experiencing our own activity as overwhelmingly alien. Where in particular do you see. . . ?

HP: Well, the most obvious thing that first comes to mind is that people correctly see, but maybe in some way misconstrue, the fact that as individuals they are powerless over all of the terrible conditions. People live disagreeable lives and by and large if you take us collectively we're

imposing what's disagreeable on ourselves. The ecological global warming problem is the most obvious physical version of that.

We all know that we're doing stuff which is going to destroy mankind and possibly life on earth and we keep doing it and we have to keep doing it because people's jobs depend on it and people's children's lives depend on their having jobs. We don't know how to reorganize ourselves, so we're doing it to ourselves.

NR: Really, this question of initiative and action, especially collective action, is never more crucial than in what I call world-historical, world-altering conditions. And nuclear weapons is clearly one—I almost said “was,” because it's been, in a sense, overshadowed by the question of climate change. What is political theory's role in explaining to us our incapacities or inhibitions and in addressing the problem, and in really teaching us our responsibilities in some way? Do you think political theory has that kind of explanatory and didactic purpose?

HP: I'm skeptical about whether political theory can do that. I don't know anything that can do that at this point, but I'm an old woman in a country whose world power may be declining and so I'm likely to be pessimistic in places where others younger, stronger, and better situated see possibilities. It makes the teaching difficult, to be so pessimistic. You don't want to talk like that to young people, but if that's what you see, that's sort of what you have to say.

UNIVERSITY AND “SCHOOL”

NR: This leads directly to asking about universities in the 1960s and '70s, which really were sites of political radicalism—how effective it was and in what areas we could talk about, but they were the sites of political radicalism. Were you here [at Berkeley] then and were you a participant? And then let's compare it to what's going on in universities today.

HP: I was not here then. During the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, '64, '65, '66, I was in Wisconsin, and it hadn't hit Wisconsin yet then. Wisconsin had its own form of student radicalism, but it was in the form of groupie followers of left-wing professors, particularly in one department, which is nothing to do with what was happening in Berkeley in the '60s. But I came back in summer '66 and so I was here for the Anti-War Movement and the continuation of events from the mid-'60s and the specific Berkeley developments out of that that maybe were not nationwide. There was a—I believe it was called “reconstitution” effort of the University in say '68, '69—something like that—and a reaction against it in 1970. I think if we are trying to account for the student movement of the '60s it had a lot to do with the Civil Rights Movement's early beginnings in the summer of 1964 in Mississippi, in which a number of students from various parts of the country participated. Then they came back to school in the fall.

That was certainly how the Free Speech Movement got going in Berkeley was that those people wanted to continue their organizing activities in the civil rights field, and the University wanted to keep its campus clean of political involvement.

NR: Let's compare that to the Occupy Movement or the movement to have universities divest of investments in fossil fuels. How do they compare and is there anything to be hopeful about in universities as sites of political organization?

HP: Certainly there is. Certainly there is insofar as there's anything to be hopeful about at all. That's where you'll find it, yes. And it has something to do with young people's age, which is to say they're not yet habituated to accepting the mess that has been made for what it is or as inevitable. They are likely still to have feelings like “I don't want to live like my parents. They obviously are not enjoying their lives!”

So there's that, and then if they get good teachers, the university experience does invite them to think and to make new discoveries, to put together the ideas that they have gathered and that have been offered to them by their upbringing up to that point, put them together in new ways just as the DNA is recombined in each of us from two sources. So they come to university and they make new combinations of ideas, and they meet a lot of people who are different from them and they talk with them in discussion classes and over coffee—or, I guess, now they tweet each other.

NR: Are they as interested in politics as the students you remember from the past?

HP: No, I think not. I think those students were more hopeful about politics than the students are now, and I think that's partly because politics isn't as hopeful now as it used to be then.

NR: Let's end by talking a little bit about the future of political theory. What is going on in the field, if anything, that particularly interests you?

HP: I don't keep up with the field. I've been retired for quite a while. I've been teaching my own course, but I don't have a whole lot of energy anymore and so I mostly teach the same course again, which is in itself bad, but there it is. It's better than not teaching at all. I enjoy the teaching so much. I kind of regret that not many people do the sort of conceptual analysis that I do. I'm trying still to write something about the concept of authority. I've been trying to do that for maybe a dozen years and I'm not sure that I will finish it in my lifetime or after.

NR: Hanna, I've described you as a distinguished scholar and teacher—one of the Berkeley school of political theorists. Is that a correct representation?

HP: I'm glad you came back to that because I know that there is this idea circling about and written on by some people that there was something called the Berkeley school of political theory and I don't really think there was. There was, of course, a group of political theorists and it was one of the best things of the whole of my life that I got to be a part of it. It was a marvelous experience, but I wouldn't think of it as a school. We really did very different things.

There were personal tensions among us, although we all respected each other's work. Of course many members of the group were already there before I joined the faculty, or when I was still a student studying with some of them. But Sheldon Wolin's writings on the nature of political theory and on the nature of politics are ascribed, by some of these interpreters who think there was a Berkeley school, to all the members of the group. And in fact, they don't correspond to what Norman Jacobson wrote about.

They don't correspond to what Jack Schaar wrote about, although Sheldon and Jack wrote some things together and agreed about many things. They don't correspond to what Mike Rogin wrote about. They don't correspond to what I wrote about very much—maybe here and there, since I was a student of Sheldon's. In the end, because of the Berkeley student politics, we were all of us somehow more or less of the left, but that was an end point. Michael, and Jack, and I were the only ones who had any earlier background of leftish politics at all. Sheldon and Norman were radicalized, if they were, by their students and by what happened to their students. So not a "school." There was no central figure, guru, leader, and not even much overlap of scholarly interests.

NR: You teach graduate students still. What encouragement do you give them or what caution would you give them?

HP: Well, the encouragement is the pleasure of thinking together with other people who are enjoying thinking. And *thinking*, not just puzzle solving or something like that, but thinking about

the things that really matter to you, discovering what things really matter to you and how they connect with conditions in the real world. And discovering that you are not alone in what matters to you and in what might be done about it.

NR: Thank you, Hanna.

HP: Thank you.