

**Interpretative Methodologies and Methods Group @ APSA
2020 Grain of Sand Award**

Citation

Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, The University of California at Berkeley (Emerita)

This award is presented to a political scientist in recognition of longstanding and meritorious contributions to interpretive studies of the political and to the discipline itself, its ideas, and its persons. It draws combined inspiration from the opening lines of William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" and Wisława Szymborska's "View with a Grain of Sand." Echoing Szymborska's "We call it a grain of sand," the award underscores the centrality of meaning-making in both the constitution and study of the political; drawing on Blake's "To see a world in a grain of sand," the award honors the capacity of interpretive scholarship to embody and inspire imaginative theorizing, the intentional cultivation of new lines of sight through an expansion of literary and experiential resources, and the nourishing of a playfulness of mind so necessary to the vitality of social science.

To: **Hanna Fenichel Pitkin**, The University of California at Berkeley (Emerita)

From *The Concept of Representation* (1967) to *The Attack of the Blob* (1998), Hanna Pitkin's work has elucidated the multiple meanings of concepts and the implications ordinary language use analysis holds for revealing how we think and act in the world. Inspired in large part by the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hannah Arendt, Pitkin's fine-grained analyses of terms such as representation, justice, judgment, and membership have operated, as the sand metaphor suggests, as an irritant within the academy, perturbing conventional modes of thinking—challenging us all to unsettle existing assumptions, as she did, and to view our tacit knowledge critically.

Pitkin's philosophical sensibility and her focus on language have allowed her to explore new possibilities for emancipatory politics, most directly in *Wittgenstein and Justice* (1972; 1993). There she demonstrates how techniques of semantic analysis, an attention to etymology, a focus on terms that generate conceptual puzzlement, and research into ordinary language use offer a kind of self-knowledge, attuning us to "something in the world of which we are not exactly ignorant, but which we have a stake in not knowing" (ix). The liberatory and empowering aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophizing for political thinking are not, she stresses, simply "individual and neurotic, but also the widely shared and social, collective rather than idiosyncratic blind spots" (x). Language, while revelatory of impediments to human flourishing, also generates openings for thinking and doing otherwise—of "forming new habits of thought"

in concert with others (1). Stressing the importance of ordinary ways of speaking “as themselves appropriate data for philosophical study,” (5) while paying attention to conceptual problems that arise with abstract contemplation, Pitkin hopes, like Wittgenstein, to “clear the fog,” bringing clarity to issues of abiding concern to political life. Insisting on the importance of language as activity, Pitkin’s analysis of context, iteration, and world-making make *Wittgenstein and Justice* an especially rich work for scholars of interpretive social science.

While *The Concept of Representation* focused on the vexed term “representation” and *Wittgenstein and Justice* showcased issues of justice and judgment, both underscored the importance of considering how key political concepts have paradoxical connotations, and how we use and live with those paradoxes in a variety of contexts. Recognizing paradoxes, contradictions, and tensions, not for the purpose of reconciling them, but because they tell us something important about how we think and interact in the world is fundamental to Pitkin’s own interpretive style. It informs her trenchant articles on social contract theory, her study of the conflict between Machiavelli’s concepts of *virtù* and *fortuna* in *Fortune is a Woman* (1984), and her account of Arendt’s controversial vision of the social in *Attack of the Blob*. In all of these works, Pitkin looks for what is problematic and what is revelatory, with the flaws themselves being part of what also illuminates. Machiavelli, while primarily committed to republicanism, demonstrates tendencies toward cynicism, militarism, and autocracy which betray an ambivalence about masculinity and autonomy. Arendt’s worries about “the social” as a monstrous blob resonate with contemporary experiences of powerlessness. But Pitkin also points out that scholars’ tendencies, even Arendt’s in this instance, to emphasize forces and logics end up reproducing the very sense of powerlessness the diagnosis was meant to address.

Whether she is dissecting Locke’s notions of citizen obligation or detailing the seductions of Bentham’s utilitarianism, Pitkin treats political theory as a window onto our complex world, inviting us to examine our existing commitments—with all of their incoherencies and countervailing attachments. Rather than signing up for a rigid, unambiguous order, Pitkin embraces the political possibilities of self-knowledge, fragmentary though they may be. She gives us insight into our conventions, an awareness of human plurality and of the need to appreciate multiple perspectives. She attunes us to our political responsibilities and the pleasures of listening and of reciprocity.

Pitkin’s approach to mentoring and training graduate students has yielded a number of well-regarded political theorists and scholars of comparative politics. She was an extraordinary advisor, known for her willingness to read multiple drafts of dissertation chapters while attending to students’ prose with line-by-line edits. For Pitkin, language was never simply a matter of style. Her corrections attuned students to the ways in which confused writing often signals muddled thinking. As someone who discouraged taking the easy way out and disdained careerism, Pitkin

fostered risk-taking and imagination while also insisting on careful, philosophically sharp, reasoned and rigorous argumentation.

Throughout her years as a scholar and mentor, Pitkin modeled what it means to be a scholar of integrity. She galvanized her manifold interests in language in a sustained effort to think through our human capacities for freedom. Her meticulous attention to what we say and its relation to meaning, her sense of humor, and her willingness to upend seemingly self-evident positions inspired her students to work hard—with a fidelity to what language and other symbolic systems can tell us. For those of us who undertook ethnographic projects, this meant learning the relevant languages and spending the time needed to appreciate the contexts in which people created, reproduced, and challenged their own processes of meaning-making. For Pitkin, human actions were ultimately “dual,” composed both of what “the outside observer can see and of the actors’ understandings of what they are doing” (1993: 261).

For these reasons, Pitkin’s corpus has been and continues to be an inspiration to interpretive (and other) scholars pursuing research in the social sciences. Her lucid, politically engaged, analytically sharp writings are themselves instances of world-making. They invite us to go against the grain of conventional thinking while acknowledging, even embracing, the past—think Nietzsche’s *amor fati*. Her work helps us conceive of human plurality without settling for liberal versions of difference, demanding instead a capacity to play with multiple standpoints. And it sets an example—through her elegant writing, clear thinking, creativity, courage, and intellectual honesty. Her gift to us all lies in her profound love of the world, and in her willingness to think so hard about how language, in particular, offers clues both into what is wrong and how we might make it better.

Selection Committee

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